

A Bit of Both

Life doesn't always tie up loose ends.

Richa Telang



BlueRoseONE.com
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Richa Telang 2025

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7018-717-7

Cover Design: Shubham Verma

Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: May 2025

Dedicated to those who have fallen in... And out of love.



Author's Introduction

Born Marathi, Delhiite at heart. Homemaker by choice. Singer by passion. Author by destiny. This is the way Richa Telang prefers to introduce herself. After penning down four stories on her blog 'wordrazzi', she decided to publish her fifth one as a novel. Richa is graduated in English Literature and is an alumna from Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad. Apart from raising her two lovely daughters, she is fond of reading and likes to maintain a disciplined garden. She lives in Gurugram, India and completely loves her social media community.

Contents

Chapter 1

Know Us 1

Chapter 2

The beginning of re-beginning 7

Chapter 3

When It Still Affects 23

Chapter 4

Let's bridge the gap 39

Chapter 5

First Date and The Gift..... 57

Chapter 6

It's not him anymore 79

Chapter 7

And then we were there..... 107

Chapter 8

Party and its poopers..... 115

Chapter 9

Is It Really 'Us' Now?..... 127

Chapter 10

Under surveillance 151

Chapter 11	
Behind the mask.....	159
Chapter 12	
Chin Up and Move On	173
Chapter 13	
His Book of Revelation	185
Chapter 14	
Even you, my friend?.....	205
Chapter 15	
Unfinished Business	227
Chapter 16	
The Dream or A Dream?.....	241
Chapter 17	
A Bit of Both	249
Author's Note	259
Acknowledgments.....	263

Chapter 1

Know Us

‘Fine. *Toh aa gaye hum mere Gareebkhane mein,*’ Nikhil said with a laugh. Natasha scanned the entire room, a thoughtful expression crossing her face.

It was small but smartly designed—a compact one-room set in an L-shape, the kind you’d see built in the early 2000s. Though, the walls had a fresh coat of paint. Two sceneries hung on opposite walls. Below one was a single bed, and under the other was a three-seater couch, the two positioned to face each other.

One broad wall stood out, dividing the room from the kitchen. It wasn’t empty, though—nearly fifty to sixty small, square photos (4x4 in size) adorned it. Each one had been clicked by Nikhil himself. Natasha curiously wandered to the photo wall.

Watching her, Nikhil flicked on the LED clip lights he’d carefully fixed along its edges. The light brought life to the pictures. Natasha stayed silent, her gaze moving over the first three rows. With every photo she saw, the wonder on her face deepened.

‘For how long have you been on Instagram—and in the mountains?’ Natasha asked, her curiosity blending two questions into one.

‘Well, I joined Instagram back in 2012,’ Nikhil began, his voice calm but reflective. ‘Photography turned into a passion pretty soon after. Then, for personal reasons, I quit my job in 2014, moved here, and, since then, I’ve been living like a nomad.’ He paused, his head nodding slightly, as if recalling the struggles he’d faced. Then, with a warm smile, he added, ‘But I’ve accepted those struggles as part of my life now. I enjoy where I am and what I do.’

Natasha smiled at his perspective, admiring his outlook. Her eyes drifted back to the photo wall.

‘Your work is incredible,’ she murmured softly, her wide eyes filled with wonder.

‘Thanks! I update this wall every month and a half.’ Nikhil’s smile widened as he spoke. Natasha returned his smile briefly, but didn’t linger over the lower half of the wall. Instead, she walked to the window and gazed outside.

It was twilight. Checking her phone, Natasha saw the time—5:45 p.m. Winter was just around the corner, and darkness would take over by six.

‘What are you thinking about?’ Nikhil’s sudden voice behind her startled Natasha. She shook her head lightly, as if to say ‘nothing,’ but inwardly, she wrestled with her worries. Unsure if they were valid, she stayed quiet.

After a pause, she gathered herself and asked hesitantly, 'Are you sure about this? I mean... it might take a lot of your time, and I wouldn't want you to push your other plans aside for a stranger like me.' Her finger pointed towards herself as she spoke the last word.

Nikhil chuckled, turning towards his small kitchen—the kind that barely fit one person at a time. He grabbed a saucepan to wash and said, 'I'll make coffee. Call your friend too.'

Still slightly puzzled, Natasha bit her lip but nodded. She stepped outside to find Mansi. The street lights hadn't turned on yet, but it didn't take her long to spot Mansi pacing between two spots, talking animatedly on her phone. Natasha didn't need to hear the words to know what was happening; Mansi's boss had clearly come up with one of those holiday-ruining plans.

With her mind still swirling with thoughts, Natasha walked downstairs slowly, reaching Mansi as she gritted her teeth. Without hesitation, Mansi showed her phone the middle finger and muttered 'bitch,' clearly referring to her boss. Natasha waited patiently for her friend to finish the call.

Finally, after several 'Sure, I'll do it' phrases, Mansi hung up and let out a frustrated sigh.

'How does she always know when I'm having fun? My night's ruined—I'll have to work when we get back to the hotel.' Mansi spoke in one breath, her irritation

aimed at her boss. She exhaled heavily and turned to Natasha. 'Why are you here? Did plans change?'

'Are you sure about this?' Natasha's voice was timid, her eyes betraying her unease about being in a stranger's house in a strange town. Mansi huffed again, though this time it was aimed at her best friend.

'You're so confused. I deserve at least an *Arjun Puraskar* for tolerating you these past five years. Come on!' With that, Mansi grabbed Natasha's hand and started climbing the stairs quickly.

'Wait!' Natasha stopped her, speaking in a fretful tone. 'I'm nervous... I don't see why we need to do this. Why should a stranger—'

'Shush,' Mansi interrupted firmly. 'A. He might be a stranger to you, but not to his hundred and fifty-six thousand followers. I know him quite well, at least here...' She held up her phone, the Instagram icon prominent on the screen. '...And B. Trust me, you'll feel better after this.'

Natasha sighed, glancing to her left as if searching for clarity. After a pause, Mansi squeezed her hand reassuringly.

'Trust me. Come on!' Mansi said, leading Natasha back to Nikhil's house.

The moment the women arrived, Nikhil stood up from the couch and greeted them with a warm smile. In

front of him was a round stool, neatly set with a plate of coconut cookies and three mugs covered with coasters.

‘Wow, you’ve already made some chai for us!’ Mansi exclaimed, her energy lighting up as she eyed the mugs.

‘Coffee,’ Nikhil corrected with a faint smile.

‘Oh!’ Mansi’s enthusiasm dimmed slightly, and Nikhil noticed the hint of disappointment in her tone. Before he could comment, Mansi candidly said, ‘Well, I’m more of a tea lover, so—’

‘But I sent her downstairs to—didn’t she say it’s coffee?’ Nikhil asked, his expression curious as he glanced at Natasha.

Mansi turned and gave Natasha a pointed look. Natasha’s eyes, silently pleading for cover, darted away as she replied nervously, ‘Well, we got busy talking about something else. But it’s fine—don’t worry. I’ll just have half, and you two can share the rest. If that works?’

‘Yeah, sure... but it’s no problem for me to make tea for you,’ Nikhil said, gesturing towards the kitchen.

‘No, no. Don’t worry. I’ll help myself whenever the tea craving strikes,’ Mansi chuckled, and Nikhil joined in. Their laughter eased the atmosphere slightly, but they both turned their attention to Natasha.

Natasha, visibly nervous under their gaze, forced a small, awkward smile. Mansi took her hand, gently guiding her to sit on the couch, then handed her a coffee

mug. With a serious tone, Mansi said to Natasha, 'I think you can start now.'

Nikhil settled back down, his coffee mug in hand, and fixed his attention on the pair. Natasha's gaze lingered on the photo wall, the images pulling her thoughts into the past.

Mansi and Nikhil waited patiently. Breaking the silence, Natasha cleared her throat and asked hesitantly, 'Do you want me to start from the very beginning... or from where it all went wrong?'

'It's your story,' Nikhil said gently, 'so it's your choice.'

Natasha nodded, her face shadowed by a thoughtful expression. Taking a deep breath, she began to narrate the story that had unsettled her life.

Chapter 2

The beginning of re-beginning

‘So... uh... it all started in April this year. Amid the swirl of spinning disco lights, darkness, and pounding music, I saw his face. He looked different—a thick beard and a trendy new hairstyle set him apart. At first, I was surprised. Then, my shock turned into anger. Before I knew it, my feet were moving towards him. But just as I reached the crowded spot where he stood, he was gone.’

‘Frustrated, I returned to Mansi and dropped into my seat, holding my head in my hands. She was completely absorbed in her phone and her drink, oblivious to my turmoil. That only fueled my irritation.

‘I’m going home,’ I announced loudly, downing my drink in quick gulps before standing up.

‘What? Why so early?’ Mansi asked, startled by my sharp tone. She set her phone on the table and checked her watch. It was only 10:30 p.m., and we were still on our first drink.’

‘Headache,’ I muttered curtly, avoiding her gaze as I walked off.

‘A few steps later, guilt hit me. Mansi hadn’t done anything wrong. She’d been my best friend for five years, always standing by me through everything. She didn’t deserve my misplaced frustration, which wasn’t even about her.’

‘I turned back to look at her. Our eyes met, and we both shared the same expression—annoyance. The only difference was that Mansi was upset with my abrupt behavior, while I was seething at someone else entirely.’

Natasha finished the introduction to her story and glanced at Nikhil. He seemed deeply interested, eager to hear more. Shifting her gaze, she looked at Mansi, who smiled warmly, offering silent support. Encouraged, Natasha continued.

I reluctantly sank back into the couch, my eyes fixed on my phone screen, trying to avoid any eye contact. But I could feel Mansi’s gaze burning into me. She was watching me closely, waiting. When it became clear that my silence wasn’t going to crack anytime soon, she broke the ice.

‘Do you mind telling me what just went wrong?’ she asked, her tone even, her question genuine. But I remained silent.

‘Natasha, yaar...’ Mansi sighed, her voice heavy with exasperation. ‘I’m so tired of this guess-who-spoiled-my-

mood game of yours! Even crossword puzzles are easier than figuring out your stupid reasons for being upset.'

Her jab made me smile, just briefly, and I let out a faint snort. But anger is a stubborn enemy, and it still held me back from speaking.

'Alright then. Get up. Let's go home.' Mansi's patience had worn thin. She stood up, grabbed her handbag, and tossed her phone into it with an annoyed flick of her wrist.

Her reaction softened my anger. I realized then that I wouldn't feel any better unless I talked to her. So, we started walking towards the exit. Mansi strode ahead of me, while I trailed behind, still fumbling for the right words.

It took us at least a minute and a half to weave through the crowded pub. Finally, as we reached the exit, I muttered a single word.

'Akul.'

Mansi stopped in her tracks and turned around, her face a mix of surprise and confusion. 'Wh—what?'

'I saw him,' I said quietly, pointing towards one of the distant rows. My eyes darted up, left, and forward, reflecting my conflicting emotions—anger and grief. Mansi followed my gaze, trying to spot him in the direction I had indicated, but it was no use.

'You saw Akul there? And... did he see you?' she asked cautiously, wanting to be sure.

‘Before I could get to him, he disappeared,’ I replied, hiding my teary eyes behind the palm of my hand.

‘It’s okay, Natasha... it happens.’ Mansi reached out and rubbed my shoulder gently, her voice soothing. ‘People run into their exes all the time. It’s normal. Don’t dwell on it too much.’

I wiped my tears and said, ‘Yeah, you’re right. Bygones are bygones. Let’s go. It’s Monday tomorrow.’ And with that, we exited the pub.

On the way back home in the cab, I opened Facebook. With barely a 0.1% chance of finding him there, I typed ‘Akul Tripathi’ in the search bar. A few profiles with the same name appeared, but none of them were the one I was looking for.

‘Don’t be a social media freak, but at least people should have a profile and update it once in a blue moon,’ I thought as I put my phone away.

Mansi was quietly gazing out her window, lost in the view of the well-lit flyover. Unlike me, she seemed to find peace in the night scenery of the concrete jungle around us. Looking at my calm friend, I felt a pang of guilt for spoiling her evening. It had been a while since we’d gone out for drinks, and my impulsive, emotional outburst had ruined the night halfway through.

Even after reaching home, my mind kept warning me not to think about Akul. After all, it had been five years since I’d last seen him, and that was after the rough breakup during our final days of MBA at Narsee Monjee

Institute. I resolved not to dwell on bitter memories. Plugging in my earphones, I started a playlist, and before I knew it, the music had lulled me to sleep.

The next morning, being a Monday, was predictably busy. But during lunch, the same memory began to nag at me. I searched for Akul on LinkedIn and Twitter, but he wasn't on either platform.

'Fine,' I thought. 'Maybe destiny wanted to pull me back into that world for just a brief moment. If so, I won't pay it any more attention.' Determined, I decided to refocus on my routine and promised myself I'd stick to it, no matter what.

But there's a big difference between curiosity and conformity. Curiosity doesn't care about destiny—it demands answers. So I started calling a few college friends, chatting at length so they wouldn't suspect my real motive. To my disappointment, none of them had been in touch with Akul for years.

Out of ideas, I decided to ask Mansi for a booze night to make up for the one I had ruined earlier. But the plan didn't pan out—Mansi was stuck working late at the office. Left on my own, I turned to Netflix, trying to distract myself and rescue my mind from the zone of bitter memories.

Two weeks passed in much the same way. Akul's face from that pub night would occasionally flash through my mind, but its effect began to fade under the weight

of work and other distractions. Still, as I've said before, one can never quite grasp the games destiny plays.

One evening, like usual, I had planned to head straight home from work. But, on a whim, I decided to check out some new books and made my way to Crossword in Cyber Hub.

I spent about half an hour wandering through the aisles, exploring titles. Eventually, I picked up a book of poetry by Rumi. Feeling content with my purchase, I stopped by a nearby café and treated myself to a quiet cup of coffee.

Once I'd finished, I booked a cab and began walking towards the exit. That's when it happened—out of nowhere, I saw Akul again.

Nikhil's eyes widened at Natasha's last sentence, while Mansi remained calm—she already knew every piece of this story. Natasha took a deep breath and continued, 'I froze for a second when I saw him walking out of Farzi Café with half a dozen people.'

'What timing!' my brain quipped. 'Go on, talk to him,' it urged. Determined not to let this chance slip, I decided to confront him. Anger flared in my eyes as I walked towards Akul's group. But as we got closer, anxiety gripped me. My heart raced, and my feet felt heavy. I couldn't do it. My eyes dropped to the floor instinctively, hoping no one would notice me. Needless to say, I didn't utter a single word.

Akul, so engrossed in conversation, walked right past me.

‘How does he not sense my presence?’ I thought, spinning around to look at him.

‘Flop act... no guts, huh?’ my brain taunted. This time, my pride took over. I clenched my fists, turned around again, and followed him.

‘Akul,’ I called out from behind, my voice louder than I intended.

There was no response. He kept walking and laughing with his group. Frustration mounting, I pushed through my hesitation and tapped his shoulder.

When he turned, for a moment, it felt like time stood still. My heart pounded, and the world blurred, leaving only his face in sharp focus. Anxiety surged through me, making it hard to form words.

With a polite but puzzled smile, he asked, ‘How can I help you?’

‘Uh... what?’ I stammered, startled by his question. ‘You don’t recognize me?’

‘No, sorry. Have we met before?’ he asked, tilting his head slightly, a faint frown forming.

‘I’m Natasha Singh, you asshole! Your ex-girlfriend from Narsee Monjee Institute,’ I snapped, my voice sharp and loud. Years of bottled-up frustration spilled out in that single sentence.

His expression softened, but he raised a hand as if to calm me. ‘Whoa, okay... first off, maybe tone it down a bit. And second, I think you’ve got the wrong guy. I’ve never been to Narsee Monjee.’

A surge of anger overwhelmed me. ‘Stop talking nonsense, you—’

‘I’m Akshay,’ he cut in, his voice calm but firm. Then, with a faint smile, he added, ‘Akul’s twin brother. Didn’t he ever mention me?’

His words froze me in place. Embarrassed, I nodded faintly, my eyes dropping to the floor. For a few moments, neither of us spoke. The silence was heavy, both of us feeling the weight of how awkward this encounter had turned out to be.

‘You forgot basic manners, Natasha,’ my inner voice scolded. ‘Is this how you talk to someone—even if it’s your ex? You could’ve been polite.’

After a moment of silence, I exhaled deeply and said, ‘Sorry.’

‘I’m sorry too,’ Akshay replied, offering me a warm smile. He extended his hand. ‘Hi, I’m Akshay.’

I stared at his hand for a moment, a mix of desperation and embarrassment washing over me. Shaking his hand felt surreal—this wasn’t the meeting I’d imagined. Back in college, I had dreamed of meeting Akul and his family in a formal, traditional setting, with two families gathered to discuss marriage. I had pictured

myself comparing Akul and his twin, marveling at their similarities and differences.

But now, standing in front of Akshay, those dreams seemed foolish. I felt out of place, clumsy, and unsure of what to say. Escape felt like the best option.

Before I could excuse myself, Akshay broke the silence. 'If you've got some time, how about we grab a coffee or a beer?'

I hesitated, and before I could decline, he chuckled and added, 'Let's go for a chilled beer—it might help you cool off.'

'Let's go and find out about Akul from him,' my brain suggested. Without thinking, I followed its advice. Together, we headed into Farzi Café.



Natasha paused, her gaze settling on Nikhil. He looked deeply engrossed, his forehead creasing slightly as though he was picturing the scene in his mind.

'Go on,' he said, his voice encouraging.

Mansi stood up from her spot and asked, 'Anyone for tea?' She waved a hand at Nikhil, motioning for him to stay seated and continue listening to Natasha's story.

'You'll find everything in the left drawer under the stove,' Nikhil called out without moving. 'The milk's in the fridge.'

‘Sure,’ Mansi replied with a nod, heading towards the kitchen.

Natasha took a steadying breath and continued.



After ordering two beers and a bowl of nachos, Akshay glanced at me, catching me mid-stare. My heart skipped a beat as our eyes locked. I looked away quickly, pretending to be lost in thought, but the heat was rising to my cheeks. He smiled – a casual, confident smile that was annoyingly disarming. Before he could say anything, I interrupted.

‘I’d like to pay for my own —’

‘Sure,’ he replied swiftly, his tone light and unconcerned. The promptness of his response threw me off, making me feel awkward. I pressed my lips into a thin line, trying to compose myself, but I could feel my thoughts spiraling. My gaze fell to the table as I wracked my brain for something else to say.

‘You both look so alike that I... couldn’t tell the difference...’ I muttered, my voice hesitant and uncertain.

Akshay burst into laughter. His grin stretched wide, and for a moment, his face looked even more like Akul’s, pulling at old memories I wasn’t ready to revisit. ‘It’s

fine. Don't worry—I'm used to this kind of thing,' he said, his laughter fading into a chuckle.

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair as he continued, clearly enjoying himself. 'You know, it's actually pretty rare for identical twins to look completely alike. Science says we're supposed to start looking different once we're exposed to different environments. But with Akul and me? Not so much.' He shrugged, his tone casual, almost proud. 'Now that we live in different cities, it's easier. But growing up? Man, only our parents could tell us apart. No one else had a clue.'

His words stung in a way I couldn't quite explain, like he was brushing off my mistake as something trivial while I was still reeling from the encounter. I clenched my fists under the table, struggling to keep my emotions in check.

'You two are like Fred and George Weasley,' I said, forcing a smile as I offered the comparison Akul used to make when talking about his twin.

'Exactly!' Akshay's eyes lit up, sparkling with excitement. 'No one can tell us apart on the first try.' He sounded almost proud, but I just offered him a weak, forced smile in response.

We sipped our beers in silence for a moment. He offered me some nachos, but I declined, still feeling awkward and out of place. Meanwhile, he crunched happily, clearly at ease, as if nothing about this situation was odd at all.

“So, was it really that bad?” Akshay asked suddenly, his casual tone catching me off guard. ‘You’re still sulking after all these years?’

‘Excuse me? I’m not sulking,’ I shot back, though I immediately felt defensive. ‘I just saw you and thought I’d say hi to—Akul.’ My voice faltered on his name.

‘Yeah... sure,’ he replied, his sarcastic tone sharp enough to bring back my simmering anger. But I bit it down, refusing to react. As much as I wanted to snap at him, I knew I had no one to blame but myself for this whole awkward encounter. Confronting him without thinking was a mistake, and now I had to deal with the consequences.

‘You’re from Prayagraj, right?’ he asked, stuffing another nacho into his mouth.

‘Lucknow,’ I corrected, keeping my answer short.

‘Ah, the city of *Nawabs* and *kebabs*!’ He chuckled, clearly pleased with his own observation. I nodded silently, unwilling to prolong the conversation.

Just then, my phone buzzed with a call from an unknown number—it was my cabbie. I told him to cancel the ride and hung up, cutting him off mid-sentence.

‘How long have you been in Gurugram?’ Akshay asked next, not missing a beat.

‘Since I finished my MBA,’ I replied shortly. I could have given him an exact answer, but I wasn’t in the

mood to offer details. Sensing he'd only keep prying, I decided to steer the conversation away from myself. 'How's Akul? What's he up to these days?'

Akshay leaned back in his chair, a satisfied look crossing his face. 'Oh, he's doing great. Lives in the USA now. Married with a one-year-old—'

I froze, my breath catching in my throat. My chest tightened, and a cold wave of disbelief washed over me.

'—pet,' he finished with a chuckle, clearly enjoying his little tease.

I let out a sharp exhale, my chest still aching from the panic his pause had caused. 'That's... nice,' I said flatly, refusing to rise to his bait.

Akshay swiped his phone and showed me a photo of a Boxer dog. 'His name's Dobby.'

'Cute,' I said mechanically, my mind still racing. He took a long sip of his beer, seemingly at ease, as if he were spending the evening with an old friend. Meanwhile, I was tangled in a web of emotions—resentment, embarrassment, and confusion – all fighting for dominance.

He didn't seem fazed by my discomfort at all. Every now and then, I caught him glancing at me, as though trying to read my thoughts. The ease with which he handled the situation only made me feel more out of place. How could he sit there so casually while I was unraveling inside?

‘So, are you dating someone?’ Akshay leaned forward slightly, his tone casual but his question direct.

‘No,’ I replied, blinking awkwardly as I shifted my gaze to my phone. My brain immediately labeled him a creep, and I could feel my annoyance bubbling beneath the surface.

‘Neither am I,’ he said quickly, his voice taking on a flirtatious edge. The shift in his tone made me bite the inside of my cheek to keep my irritation in check.

‘Good for you,’ I muttered, keeping my response short as I picked up my phone to book a new ride.

He must have sensed that I wasn’t planning to stick around much longer, because he leaned back and asked, ‘So... would you mind sharing your phone number with me?’

I froze, staring at him, my mind racing.

‘That’s okay,’ he said quickly, as if trying to smooth over the awkwardness. ‘I just thought I’d ask. If you don’t want to, it’s cool.’

Before I could respond, he added, ‘Anyway, here’s my number. If you ever want to catch up, just call... or text.’ He scribbled it onto a tissue paper and slid it across the table towards me.

I didn’t even glance at it. My phone buzzed with a call from my cabbie, and I couldn’t have been more relieved. Standing up abruptly, I ignored the tissue completely.

‘It was nice meeting you, Akshay, but... I don’t think I’d want to meet you again,’ I said, trying to keep my tone polite.

Akshay didn’t seem fazed by my response. He simply nodded and took another sip of his beer, his calm demeanor grating on my nerves. After all his attempts to push boundaries, I had expected at least a flicker of disappointment or regret. Instead, he seemed perfectly fine, and that irritated me even more.

‘Bye,’ I said curtly, turning to leave.

As I walked away, my thoughts churned. Both of them—Akshay and Akul—were exactly the same. The teasing, the smugness, the way they acted like they knew me better than I knew myself. Meeting Akshay by chance had felt surreal, but his behavior had quickly turned it into something infuriating.

Imagine meeting someone for the first time, and they act like you are old friends, casually handing you their phone number. Why the hell would I want it?

I reached home still stewing in my frustration, the encounter replaying in my mind like a bad movie I couldn’t turn off.

Chapter 3

When It Still Affects

‘So, here’s the thing about girls,’ Natasha began, her voice light but deliberate. ‘When we share a deep story with a best friend, we make sure she knows every single detail—and that she’s updated on every twist and turn. That’s just how it works.’

She shifted slightly on the couch, glancing at Nikhil, who listened intently. ‘Five years ago, when I first moved to Gurugram, I was looking for a friend. That’s when I met Mansi, my new roommate, who’d already moved in a week before me. Our landlord couldn’t stop raving about her on the way over—how nice she was, how lucky I was to have her as a roommate. And let me tell you, only after moving in did I truly get what he meant.’

From the kitchen, Mansi let out a chuckle as she poured tea through a sieve. Natasha smiled, her tone softening. ‘Within two hours of unpacking, I realized we just... clicked. You know? Our vibes matched completely. By the time we were done settling in, we’d already shared so much about ourselves. And of course, I told her about my breakup with Akul. It was still so

raw then. She could see it in my eyes, the way the pain lingered.'

Natasha paused, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the rim of her mug. 'Mansi didn't push too hard, but over a cup of her handmade tea, she asked me if I was okay. That's when I knew I could trust her. So, I told her everything—right from the beginning. From that day on, she wasn't just my roommate; she became my best friend. Sure, we don't always agree on things—our opinions clash constantly—but that's what makes us... us.'

'Enough with my introduction,' Mansi interjected from the kitchen, her tone teasing. '*Ab mudde pe aayein?*'

Natasha shook her head, laughing softly as she turned back to Nikhil and picked up where she'd left off.



'Meeting Akshay... it just felt like meeting Akul,' I said, letting out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. 'I mean, in the beginning, Akul used to tease me the same way.'

Mansi, perched comfortably on the kitchen counter while sieving her tea, glanced my way. 'I don't know any twins, but yeah, they tend to have similar habits—hobbies, mannerisms, stuff like that. I don't think he meant to tease you. It's probably just how he talks,' she said matter-of-factly, brushing off my concerns.

I chose not to push the subject any further. The truth was, I didn't want Akshay to take up space in my thoughts. So, we shifted to safer topics—work calls, dinner plans, the mundane distractions of life. Eventually, we retreated to our rooms for the night.

The next morning, I mindlessly opened Facebook during my commute and froze. A friend request stared back at me: Akshay Tripathi. Without a second thought, I ignored it.

Later, a message pinged on Messenger: *There must be your acquaintances and colleagues added to Facebook. Right? So why can't you add me as well?*

'Creep,' I muttered under my breath, rolling my eyes. I wasn't about to dignify that with a reply. If anything, I hoped the silence would sting his ego.

Wo ladki hi kya jo pehli baar mein baat maan jaye? 😊

An hour later, I received this message. Honestly, who even sends that kind of a message? I screenshotted it and sent it to Mansi with a caption: *this guy is crazy?*

Her reply was almost instant: *Maybe he is crazy about you. :D*

I groaned, tossing my phone onto the desk. Mansi's teasing only fueled my irritation. My mind spiraled again. Was Akshay really like Akul? As much as I'd known Akul, he would never have crossed boundaries like this—not even with someone vaguely connected to me, let alone his own brother's ex. And yet, here was

Akshay, brazenly hitting on me. What was he playing at?

With those questions swirling in my mind, I found myself drifting back down memory lane. It was outside the Fun Republic Mall in Andheri West, Mumbai. That's where Akul and I first met.

I'd finished watching a movie with a friend from Narsee Monjee Institute. We were standing outside, waiting for a taxi, when two guys approached us. One of them greeted my friend—it turned out they already knew each other—so I ended up locking eyes with the other one. We exchanged a polite, fleeting smile.

When the taxi arrived, all four of us piled in. Introductions were made, and that's when I learned his name. Akul. He was part of the same batch at Narsee Monjee, and as fate would have it, his PG building was just 20 meters away from mine. That realization filled me with an inexplicable sense of happiness—one I kept to myself that night.

But I couldn't stop thinking about him. That brief encounter stayed with me, replaying in my head like a song stuck on loop. It was love at first sight.

At college, I dropped hints—subtle glances, lingering smiles. Our eyes would meet across the classroom, a silent *hi* exchanged through fleeting smiles. I prayed every day to sit near him, or at least close enough to watch him from afar. Whether it was the campus or the cafeteria, my eyes always searched for him.

His balcony was visible from mine, and every morning, I'd watch him work out. Inspired—or perhaps obsessed—I started doing yoga at the same time, hoping he'd notice me.

It didn't take long for him to pick up on my feelings. With a little help from our mutual friends, Akul figured it out. To my delight, he started reciprocating. Three months into our college life, he proposed. That day remains etched in my memory as one of the happiest of my life.

We were inseparable. Everywhere we went, we were together, talking about everything—our careers, our families, even marriage. People said we were head over heels in love. And we were.

But then came the final semester. Slowly, things began to shift. Akul grew distant. I felt it, every day, in the way his attention wandered, his calls became sporadic, and our conversations lost their spark. Whenever I brought it up, he'd chalk it up to the pressure of campus interviews. 'It's nothing,' he'd say. 'I just need to focus right now. Maybe we should spend less time together—for both our sakes.' Reluctantly, I agreed.

When campus recruitment ended, Akul had a job with HSBC Global, and I was placed with American Express. Everyone celebrated—our friends, our group, even the two of us had a private celebration. But the distance between us remained.

The breaking point came when I tried to embrace him in public, only for him to push me back. ‘Come on, Natasha. You know that I don’t like PDA,’ he said sharply. It wasn’t just the rejection that stung—it was the way he brushed me off in front of juniors who smirked at the scene, as if they knew more than I did.

Eventually, the truth came out. Akul was two-timing me with a junior named Simran. The fallout was dramatic—screaming matches, tears, accusations flying back and forth. It became the talk of the college. Within a week, everything between us was severed, and I made sure to act indifferent, as though I didn’t care anymore. But deep down, it shattered me.

Those memories hit me like a tidal wave as I walked into the office, carrying the weight of emotions I thought I’d buried long ago.

For two weeks, there was radio silence from Akshay, but the meeting at Farzi Café replayed itself in my mind like a stubborn film reel. I couldn’t help but wonder why destiny had aligned our paths—and more importantly, what it was trying to tell me. Unsurprisingly, I found no answers.

Then, on a Thursday afternoon, my phone buzzed with messages on Facebook Messenger:

My colleagues have ditched. I have two extra passes for a stand-up comedy show.

Could you please join me at Canvas Laugh Store in Cyber Hub?

It's a one-hour show; begins at 5:30.

I stared at the screen, startled. Truth be told, I didn't want to be the one to initiate contact; it would feel desperate. At the same time, there was a small, lingering curiosity—an itch that hadn't quite been scratched. Part of me had hoped we'd bump into each other again somewhere, organically, without effort. That felt like the right way. But here he was, making the first move. And honestly, I hadn't been to a comedy show in ages. After a moment of hesitation, I typed a one-word reply: *OK*.

When I arrived, Akshay greeted me with his usual confidence. 'Good to see you,' he said, his smile easy and unaffected.

I managed a polite smile in return. 'It's been a long time since I've gone to a comedy show, that's why...'

'Or maybe you came to see me, along with the comedian,' he teased, his grin widening.

But this time, I was prepared. I kept my expression blank, a practiced poker face that gave him nothing to work with.

'How much do I owe you for the ticket?' I asked flatly, cutting through the small talk.

'I offered. So, this one's on me,' Akshay replied, still smiling. Then, noticing the tension in my posture, he added quickly, 'Come on, Natasha. It's okay. This is just how we can—'

‘—No, we can’t. And we shouldn’t.’ I interrupted, my voice cool and deliberate. His smile faltered for a moment as he mumbled, ‘Alright.’

Then, almost casually, he held up his phone to show me the payment details—a mistake he probably didn’t realize he’d made. My eyes flicked to the end of the message screen and caught a glimpse of the text delivery time. The tickets had been booked just an hour ago.

Anger surged through me, quick and unforgiving. He had lied, and for what? Pretending this was some casual opportunity when he’d clearly orchestrated it all felt manipulative. I wanted nothing more than to walk away right then and there. But the crowd around us held me back. The idea of Akshay calling out my name as I stormed off—making a scene for everyone to witness as unbearable.

So, I stayed. I forced a smile and sat through the show, though I didn’t enjoy a single second of it. My mind was elsewhere, stewing in frustration. Every joke, every punchline washed over me without effect. Meanwhile, Akshay glanced at me repeatedly, no doubt sensing something was off. But he didn’t ask; instead, he kept laughing and clapping as if everything were perfectly fine.

By the end of the evening, I felt drained. My seat had been a waste, the comedy had been a waste, and frankly, the entire encounter had been a waste.

‘So, when did you buy these tickets?’ I asked, my voice sharp and pointed as we stepped out of the hall.

Akshay smiled, his charm on full display. ‘Just before the show.’

‘Hmm.’ The anger bubbling inside me threatened to spill over, but I swallowed it down, forcing myself to stay calm.

‘See, I was really looking forward to this artist’s show,’ he said, his tone casual, as though he were explaining something simple. ‘But I didn’t want to go alone, so I thought I’d ask you. And... well, I kind of knew you’d say yes.’

‘You mean you were playing on a 50% probability,’ I shot back, my voice laced with irritation.

‘Maybe.’ He shrugged, his grin widening. ‘But who cares? It worked out in my favor, didn’t it?’

His cheerfulness only added fuel to the fire, and I stared at him, silent but seething.

‘What’s your problem, Natasha? It was such a good show, but you clearly didn’t enjoy it. And now you’ve got that frown back on your forehead. Why, Miss Judgmental?’

‘Oh, I’m judgmental now?’ I snorted, shaking my head as I tried to keep my tone steady. ‘I hope you remember who I am and why we met the other day.’

‘Yeah... so?’ he replied, his expression annoyingly unaffected. ‘I mean, you and my brother broke up. How does that mean we can’t talk?’

I let out a deep, deliberate sigh, turning my gaze away to avoid looking at him. The anger inside me was boiling over, each breath heavier than the last.

‘It’s not how you’re seeing this,’ I said firmly, my voice edged with frustration.

‘Of course it is,’ Akshay countered, his tone calm yet exasperated. ‘You’re reading way more into this than I ever intended.’

I stayed silent, biting my tongue.

‘Look, Natasha,’ he started again, his voice softer now, ‘I don’t have many friends here. When we met the other day... I don’t know how you’ll see this—I liked you. I thought we could hang out sometimes, you know? Because there’s this... link between us. I’m not thinking beyond that. Not about you and my brother. And honestly, it’s a bygone. All of it.’

He finished speaking and waited, his gaze locked on mine as though willing me to say something.

I had plenty of arguments swirling in my head. I wanted to demand answers—why had he asked me about my relationship status last time? Why was he checking me out if he was only looking for friendship? But instead, I stayed quiet. He could see the stubbornness in my eyes, the refusal to budge.

‘Alright, Natasha. I’m sorry,’ he said finally, his tone apologetic. ‘I should’ve been honest about the tickets. My bad for spoiling your mood.’

I didn’t respond.

After a long pause, he sighed and said, ‘Fine. I’ll take your leave. Have a nice weekend.’

He turned and started walking away, his footsteps steady and determined.

‘Yeah. Just like your brother,’ I called out from behind him, the bitterness spilling over in my words. ‘Immature, irresponsible, and you don’t even think before leaving things unfinished.’

Akshay froze, his back stiffening. Slowly, he turned around, his face etched with irritation. He took steps back in my direction, and to be honest, his return sent a ripple of unease through me.

‘When did I ever behave irresponsibly with you?’ he asked, his voice low but firm.

Before I could respond, he cut me off. ‘Forget it. You know what? It’s you who’s dragging Akul into this. He’s happy now—with someone else. And YOU need to do the same. Be happy. With or without someone. But for God’s sake, STOP SULKING.’

His words hit like a slap. He didn’t wait for my reaction and without another glance, he walked away. Soon, his figure disappeared into the crowd. But his last sentence echoed in my head, each word chiseling itself

into my thoughts. Maybe he was right. It had been five years since my breakup with Akul, but I still wasn't over it—not completely. Most days, I felt fine. My life was moving forward like it was supposed to. But every now and then, when I saw couples deeply in love, I found myself drifting back into memories of us.

Does every heartbroken person sulk? Or was it just me who couldn't move past one sour relationship? That was the truth—Akul still affected me.

Yash, my colleague at Amex, had once had a crush on me. Maahi and Anuj, my friends at work, couldn't stop talking about it. According to Maahi, I should've considered myself lucky—a stud like Yash was showing interest, and I was wasting an opportunity. Soon, Yash began dropping hints.

But I couldn't do it. I wasn't ready to open my heart again—to invest my feelings in someone new. When Yash asked me out on a date, I turned him down.

A few months later, I heard he was dating someone else—a woman from a neighboring office. The news brought mixed emotions. On one hand, I felt relieved. But on the other, I couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment. Why hadn't Yash waited for me?

I reasoned with myself—it was unfair to expect him to wait when I didn't have feelings for him to begin with. And so, I chose to be happy for him. He had found someone, and that was all that mattered.

But even as I tried to rationalize it, the truth lingered. Akul still had a hold on me, no matter how much I tried to move forward.

In fact, Mansi had once tried setting me up with one of her school friends, and it had turned into an awkward disaster. I refused straight away, telling her I wasn't ready for dating—not then, not casually, not in any way. That wasn't me. If I ever got into a relationship, it would be serious, meaningful—or it wouldn't happen at all.

But stubborn as she was, Mansi went ahead and committed me for a date with him anyway. She sent me off, practically shoving me out the door, just to keep her word. I, on the other hand, dug my heels in deeper. Instead of meeting him, I spent the evening at a café, alone, sipping coffee and scrolling aimlessly on my phone.

Apparently, he waited for me for two hours, texting Mansi once he realized I wasn't coming. When she confronted me later, she lashed out hard. For two full days, she wouldn't speak to me.

As I recalled these moments on my way back home, they stirred up a familiar realization: no matter what, I always ended up circling back to Akul. He was the root of it all. The one who cheated. The one who had moved on—married, living his life. And here I was. Still stuck. Still sulking.

Akshay's words from earlier kept replaying in my head, louder each time. I reached home with these

thoughts swirling in my mind, unable to untangle them into any kind of resolution. Then another question crept in—should I apologize to Akshay?

After hours of deliberating, etiquette won out. Half-hearted as it felt, I sent him a message on Messenger: *Sorry about today.*

His reply came a little later: *It's fine.*

That night, while Mansi experimented with new nail art on me, I narrated the entire incident to her. She listened quietly at first, murmuring the occasional 'hm.' Finally, she spoke.

'He's right. You shouldn't have mentioned Akul,' she said, glancing at me briefly before returning to her work.

I narrowed my eyes. 'How can you *not* be on my side?' I demanded annoyingly.

'Look,' she said, her tone measured, 'making up a story about those tickets was childish, I'll admit. But his intention—at least from what I can tell—was simply to spend time with you. Nothing beyond that. You could've just casually asked about the tickets. Confronting him wasn't your only option.'

Her words didn't sit well with me. My ego stubbornly insisted that what I had done was right. But doubt resurfaced, creeping into my thoughts. Mansi must have sensed it because she continued, her voice softer now.

‘You’re still looking at him as *Akul’s twin brother*. But he’s not. He’s his own person. Treat him like someone new. Separate the twin thing, okay?’

Her words made me pause. For the first time, I genuinely pondered the idea.

‘Last thing,’ Mansi said as she packed up the nail polish bottles. ‘Now that you’ve apologized and he replied properly, I’d say—keep it minimal from here. Don’t go asking for a date yourself.’

‘DATE? Why the *hell* would I want to go out on a date with him?’ I said loudly, making sure she understood my stance.

She shrugged. ‘I’m just saying. You know... it happens. Sometimes, texting an apology doesn’t really clear the air. People end up asking to meet face-to-face to bury the hatchet properly. But from my experience, guys can misinterpret it, especially if a girl makes the first move. That’s why I suggested holding back. If he wants to hang out, he’ll reach out. Test him. And if you two do meet, here’s my advice: observe his body language, keep the conversation light, stick to common topics, and *do not* step out of your comfort zone. Most importantly, stand your ground if things get weird. Got it?’

‘Understood, Dr. Mansi *Freud!*’ I snorted, raising my brows in mock submission.

She laughed, scooping up her supplies and disappearing into her room. Alone again, I looked down

at my freshly painted nails, tracing the glossy finish with my fingertips.

‘Why would I want to go on a date with someone who reminds me of bitter memories?’ I muttered to myself.

Then, louder, I called out, ‘Thanks, Mansi! They look great!’

She didn’t respond. But her words—the idea of seeing Akshay as a separate person, not *the twin*, kept bouncing around in my head.

Chapter 4

Let's bridge the gap

A week went by, then another, with no word from Akshay. The silence stretched longer than I anticipated, and every time I thought about initiating contact, unease settled in. I couldn't even think of a topic to start the conversation. Eventually, I gave up and decided it was all over—no unresolved feelings, no lingering connections. My life had simply returned to its normally boring rhythm.

But then, one evening, as I stood waiting for my shared cab, my phone buzzed with a message on Facebook Messenger: *Looking good in red!* 😊

It was Akshay.

The unexpected, flattering message immediately warmed my heart. A tiny smile crept onto my lips as my eyes instinctively scanned the surroundings, searching for him. I couldn't spot him anywhere. Just then, my cab driver called, asking where exactly I was waiting. Moments later, the cab pulled up, and to my surprise, my co-passenger was none other than Akshay himself.

‘Hi,’ I said, peeking into the window, my face betraying a mix of surprise and amusement.

The driver asked for the OTP, confirming Akshay was my co-passenger.

‘So, you planned this or—’ I started, but Akshay interrupted with a playful chuckle.

‘—Destiny and I, *both* wanted to meet you,’ he said, his grin teasing and self-assured.

I raised my brows, trying to play it cool, though my silence spoke volumes about the mix of emotions swirling inside me—a bit of happiness, a touch of confusion, and a lot of apprehension. To bury my unease, I asked, ‘So, you saw me from the cab itself?’

‘Yep,’ he replied easily. ‘I saw you from the red light, so I pinged you real quick. I figured if you replied, I’d keep chatting with you till I got home. But, well, destiny had other plans—it wanted us to talk face to face.’

I couldn’t help but smile briefly at his charm, even as the mischievous edge in his tone put me slightly on guard. Then, casually, he added, ‘By the way, please confirm your phone number,’ showing me his phone screen.

Before I could respond, he revealed with a sheepish grin, ‘The cab driver called you to ask for your location, so I copied the number.’

He looked so proud of himself, like a student who'd cracked the toughest puzzle, while I was left wondering how to deal with his audacity.

'Look, I don't even know if we can be friends, so—' I started, trying to create distance.

'I just want to save it as a professional contact,' he interrupted smoothly. 'Don't worry, I won't bombard you with useless messages.'

My brain muttered sarcastically, *Oh, come on, Natasha—stop being so dubious*. And honestly? The surprise meeting had lightened my mood. Half-reluctant, half-okay, I gave him the go-ahead. He saved my number with a victorious smile, and we began talking.

The cab itself had a peculiar charm. Right in the center of the dashboard, where people usually place religious idols, the driver had put up a family photo instead. The image was striking—a middle-aged man (the driver, presumably) standing with his wife, two kids, and an older couple who were likely his parents. My gaze lingered on the photo, curiosity keeping me focused.

'What's so interesting that you're ignoring me?' Akshay asked, catching my distraction.

'That family photo,' I murmured, nodding towards it.

He leaned forward to look, his brows lifting slightly. 'Hmm. Quite uncommon.'

‘I’ve never seen something like it before,’ I said softly. ‘Either he loves his family a lot, or... maybe he misses them a lot.’

Akshay’s expression shifted slightly, a quiet *why-are-we-discussing-the-cabbie?* look crossing his face.

‘So, do you take cabs daily?’ he asked, redirecting the conversation.

‘Mostly. Sometimes I carpool,’ I replied.

‘Why don’t you buy a car for yourself? It’d make commuting so much easier.’

I stayed silent, my poker face firmly in place.

‘Well?’ Akshay nudged, his persistence showing.

‘There’s a story, but I’d rather not talk about it,’ I said, trying to shut the topic down.

But Akshay wouldn’t let it go. Eventually, I leaned closer to him, lowering my voice as I glanced at the driver to make sure he wasn’t eavesdropping.

‘For years now, I’ve had recurring dreams. In them, I’m driving a car down an empty road, and suddenly, this huge truck starts chasing me. It crushes my car every time.’ I paused, letting the weight of my words sink in.

Akshay’s face twisted into a mix of astonishment and confusion.

‘I don’t die in those dreams. I don’t even get hurt. I just... suffer,’ I continued. ‘Every time it happens, I wake up convinced it’s going to come true. That’s why I don’t

want a car—and I definitely don't want to drive one myself.'

As I settled back into my seat, Akshay remained quiet, his shock evident. After a few moments, he groaned dramatically. 'You scared me too,' he said, exhaling deeply. 'You're not making this up, are you?'

His nervous expression made me laugh quietly, though I didn't confirm either way.

For a while, we sat in silence, the weight of my story hanging in the air. Then Akshay spoke again, breaking the tension. 'I took a cab after ages today. My car broke down last night, so I'll be cabbng it for the next three or four days until it's fixed.'

'Okay,' I replied simply, catching the subtle hint in his words. He was suggesting, perhaps not so subtly, that we might end up sharing a cab again soon.



'Wait... so this recurring dream thing—is it real?' Nikhil interrupted, his curiosity evident.

Natasha gave a small nod, her expression serious.

'Interesting,' he murmured, leaning back slightly. 'I mean, I've heard of people having recurring nightmares, but only in movies.'

Natasha said, 'It's not like I see the same dream every single night or anything like that. But every now and

then, out of nowhere, *this* dream comes back to me. It's more of a lingering nightmare—something that refuses to let go.'

Nikhil frowned slightly, as though turning her words over in his mind. 'Hmm... sounds unsettling. But okay, we can get back to your dream later. For now, keep going with your story.'



'By the way,' Akshay said, breaking the comfortable silence between us, 'your *Anarkali* suit is beautiful. I really like it—especially the color.'

'Thanks,' I replied, keeping my expression neutral.

'You must've bought it from your hometown, right?' he asked, his curiosity genuine.

'Of course. Lucknow is famous for its *Chikankari* embroidery,' I said, glancing down at my dress for a few seconds. Despite my composure, his compliment lingered in my mind, and I found myself liking it.

As the conversation drifted, we touched on work and the ins and outs of Gurugram. Akshay shared a bit about his time in Pune, how much he missed the pleasant climate, and why he'd moved to Gurugram. Citibank had given him an irresistible offer, and his parents—still living in Jaipur—had nudged him towards relocating to North India.

‘It’s nice here, though,’ I said, adding my perspective. ‘Sure, Delhi NCR has its share of troubles—the pollution, the safety issues—but somehow this city has grown on me. The weather variations have their own charm. I mean, isn’t it delightful to have *gajar ka halwa* on freezing cold days or chilled mango *lassi* during weather like this?’

Akshay nodded with a quiet ‘Hmm.’ For the first time, I realized I was talking at length, truly engaging in the conversation. His face emoted he was enjoying it, and I couldn’t help noticing moments where his laughter and body language reminded me of Akul. I tried convincing myself that Akshay was different—a new person. But no matter how much I tried; the similarities were hard to ignore.

Throughout the ride, my mind shifted gears rapidly between the past and the present. It wasn’t just my thoughts—it was reflected in my expressions, my sudden discomfort, and even my fleeting smiles. Akshay seemed to notice but chose not to address it, perhaps to keep things as normal as possible.

‘You know, I really like this area,’ Akshay remarked as the cab pulled into my building on Golf Course Road. He stepped out, stretching his legs and casually looking around.

‘Yeah, it’s quite developed,’ I replied, pushing the door open.

‘My broker couldn’t find me a place that matched my preferences when I moved here, but this area gave me great vibes. You’re lucky to live here,’ he said, his voice warm.

I smiled faintly. ‘Where do you live?’

‘Sector 56—not too far from here,’ he replied, his tone relaxed.

I nodded, juggling my handbag and laptop bag, feeling a strange awkwardness about saying goodbye. Should we shake hands? Side hug? Wave? My nervousness must have been obvious, but I decided to follow his lead.

‘Great. Have a good week ahead,’ I said, looking to him for a cue.

‘Sure. You too,’ he replied, flashing his typical smile as we shook hands. Then he climbed back into the cab.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the security guard watching us, his expression unreadable. He’d been on duty in the building for over a year, and aside from Anuj—who often visited with Maahi—he wasn’t familiar with any other guy around me. More than that, I wondered if he’d noticed the hesitation on my face during our goodbye. Was our interaction awkward enough to draw attention?

I climbed the stairs to my apartment, these thoughts still swirling in my mind, unable to shake the feeling that Akshay had unsettled me in more ways than one.

Truth be told, after my surprise meeting with Akshay, I couldn't help noticing a clear shift in myself. Our conversation kept playing on repeat in my head, and his words about taking cabs for the next few days stayed lodged in my thoughts. Somehow, I couldn't stop imagining him as my co-passenger.

I usually carpooled with Anuj and Maahi, but for the next four days, I refused going with them and chose to wait at the exact same spot, hoping to cross paths with Akshay again. I imagined him watching me from a traffic signal, and every time the thought crossed my mind, my stomach tightened with anticipation. My posture became alert, my eyes scanning the crowd, searching for a familiar face.

And if that wasn't enough, I did the strangest thing—I wore my favorite, most stylish formals, wanting to look my absolute best. I could feel my behavior changing, and while I was alone, I didn't mind indulging in the thought. It made me happy, in some fleeting, unfamiliar way.

But destiny, as Akshay had put it, seemed to have other plans. Those four days came and went without a trace of him. He never showed up as my co-passenger again. And though I noticed him viewing my WhatsApp statuses and Facebook stories, as he'd promised, he didn't message me or leave any comments. True to my nature, I deliberately didn't make the first move either.

Then, another week passed, and a WhatsApp message from him appeared on my screen:

Hey Natasha,

I hope you're doing well.

I wanted to speak to you about something.

What will be the right time to call you up?

Akshay, always cheerful and playful, had sent me a message so formal it gave me goosebumps. My first thought was Akul—it had to be about him.

‘STOP THINKING ABOUT AKUL!’ my brain screamed at me, but the thought lingered, refusing to leave. My heartbeat quickened with anticipation. What was this about?

I grabbed my phone and stepped into the building's staircase, knowing it was a safe spot to talk freely. I called him, my nerves buzzing as I pressed the phone to my ear.

‘Hello,’ he said, his voice smooth and steady.

My mind froze. I didn’t know what I was about to hear, and the nervousness rooted me to the spot.

‘Why are you so jittery, loser?’ my brain mocked. I forced myself to reply, ‘Hello.’

After the usual polite questions, he got to the point: ‘Do you know Mr. Sanjay Ahuja?’

‘Yes, he’s our VP—Risk and Marketing Analytics. Why?’

‘Well, he and I are in talks for a position in your company.’

‘Oh. Okay.’

A wave of relief washed over me as my earlier fears dissolved into nothing.

‘Yeah, I’ve been offered a Senior Business Analyst role in his team with a good hike,’ he explained. ‘I’m pretty keen on taking it, so I thought since you’ve been with Amex for so long, you could share some insight on the work culture—and maybe Mr. Ahuja’s style of working?’

‘Sure,’ I said, feeling my tension ease.

We talked about it in detail, and I answered his questions, before returning to work.

Later that evening, Mansi raised her eyebrows as she asked, ‘Wait—Akshay’s going to join Amex now?’

‘Three months from now, if he accepts the offer. He hasn’t finalized yet, but he said he’ll decide in a few days.’

‘And if he joins—are you going to be okay with that?’ she asked, her tone probing.

I hesitated before replying, ‘We’ll be in different teams, so it shouldn’t be an issue.’ But Mansi, always perceptive, saw the unease I was trying to hide.

My brain did some quick math, and I couldn't help but feel anxious about the thought of having Akshay around for 50 hours a week.

'Babe,' Mansi teased, laughing, 'find someone for yourself *quickly*, or he's going to whisk you away.'

'Huh. I'd rather jump onto a rapid metro track,' I shot back, rolling my eyes, as Mansi laughed even harder.

Despite the formality of Akshay's earlier conversation, it had broken the barrier of silence between us. The next morning, his 'Good morning' message popped up on WhatsApp. I wasn't surprised—part of me had a hunch that this would happen. What I couldn't decide was whether to reply instantly or wait.

'It'll look wrong,' my brain reasoned. 'Just answer him. Be polite.'

My fingers typed out, *Good morning*, automatically.

From there, our chit-chat picked up naturally, and over the next few days, we exchanged messages on and off during work.

One night, at around 1:30 AM, as I lay scrolling on my phone, his message popped up: *Haven't slept? What happened?*

I was doing office work... and now I'm just too awake to sleep.

And why are you still awake? I asked.

Thoughts about someone special aren't letting me sleep... 😊

HAHAHA. *Happy thinking!* I replied quickly, adding a thumb-up emoji before deliberately putting my phone away. My phone chimed with a notification, and for a while, I kept debating whether to check his response right away or wait until the next morning. As the minutes ticked by, the pull of sleep finally won. The next morning, I opened WhatsApp to find just one emoji: smiling face with heart eyes. Honestly, I had expected more than that.

‘Didn’t he want to talk further?’ My brain posed a question.

*‘na bhi karta, haan bhi karta, dil mera deewana
Dil bhi saala party badle, kaisa hai zamaana
Phone lagaa, tu apne dil ko zara
Pooch le, aakhir hai kya maajra
Are pal mei fisalta hai, pal mei sambhaltta hai
Confusion karta hai... bas kya!’*

Mansi was busy making tea while the FM played ‘*Ae Kya Bolti Tu?*’ in the background. The song’s lyrics made me laugh—I had found my answer in their playful absurdity. Confusion, after all, is practically a girl’s middle name. Because here’s the thing about most of the females: we know exactly what we want, but we can’t help overthinking it. Why do we want it? When’s the perfect time to go for it? How should we approach it? The endless stream of questions keeps spinning in our minds, turning simple decisions into elaborate puzzles.

Honestly, we're masters of procrastination, and maybe—just maybe—we secretly enjoy it.



‘Oh, I’ve been there, done that. The way my ex used to handle things—it was traumatic!’ Nikhil interjected, shaking his head dramatically, his tone carrying a mix of exasperation and humor.

Natasha and Mansi exchanged a quick, surprised glance, caught off guard by his sudden and candid confession. It took a beat before Natasha, who had been passionately explaining how women tend to overthink every situation, burst into laughter. Mansi joined in, shaking her head in amusement.

‘And those monologues from *Pyaar Ka Punchnama*? I relate to them on a spiritual level!’ he added, which only made the girls laugh harder.

But then, as if realizing he’d derailed the conversation, Nikhil raised his hands in mock surrender. ‘Okay, okay, my bad. Back to your story, Natasha,’ he said, leaning back.

Natasha took a moment, letting the laughter settle and the relaxed mood linger, before continuing from where she had left off.



Later that day, Akshay messaged: *Where had you suddenly vanished last night?*

I had been to my ghost friend's birthday party, I replied, smirking at my own sarcasm.

LOL.

So how about having lunch together this Sunday? Do bring your ghost friend along!

A mix of curiosity and hesitation bubbled inside me. There was a warmth in his tone that I wanted to embrace, yet there was also a faint edge of discomfort in being so openly invited into a space I wasn't sure I belonged.

Are you asking me out on a date, Akshay? I posed a direct question.

Um... Yes, Natasha! 😊

My heart fluttered as Akshay's response came through, straightforward yet carrying an undeniable warmth.

Well... Lemme think and get back to you.

Okay. But how long will you take to say Yes? 😊

I chuckled at his playful persistence and deliberately set my phone aside, resisting the urge to reply too quickly. Inside, I was undeniably happy, but I wanted him to wait, to keep guessing, to wonder if my answer would be a yes or a no.

‘Date... Mm hmm... So, he’s finally making his move,’ Mansi commented, her tone dripping with mock analysis as she sipped her tea.

‘Whatever,’ I said, trying to sound indifferent. ‘I’m not even thinking about it right now.’

But Mansi wasn’t buying it. She caught the smile I was trying to hide, the one that had escaped my lips and settled in my eyes.

‘LIAR!’ she yelled, narrowing her eyes at me.

‘Alright, fine,’ I admitted, throwing my hands up. ‘Yes, it’s a yes from me. But I’m not replying until after nine.’

I glanced at the clock. The hour hand hovered between seven and eight, and the minute hand pointed to nine. There was still an hour and fifteen minutes left before Akshay would get his answer.

‘You don’t have to calculate the timing for a simple reply, you know. Just go with the flow,’ Mansi said, rolling her eyes at my overthinking.

I shrugged. ‘Whatever.’

And then, out of nowhere, she leaned forward with a mischievous glint in her eye. ‘Okay, forget your yes or no. I have a serious question for you.’

I groaned, picking up a cookie. ‘What now?’

‘So... I haven’t seen you go on a date in the last five years, which means this is kind of a big deal. Like, your

first date in forever,' she said, her words dragging out dramatically.

'Get to the point already,' I said, frowning at her theatrics.

'Okay, fine. If you guys kiss, will you tell me? I mean, I'm your best friend. I deserve to know,' she said, grinning wickedly.

'Direct kiss, huh?' I muttered, throwing my half-eaten cookie at her face. She burst into laughter, completely unfazed.

'Oh man, how did I never think about this before?' she said, laughing so hard she could barely speak.

I rolled my eyes. 'I can already tell there's something even more ridiculous coming.'

'This is like the rarest opportunity a woman can have, babe,' she said, her eyes wide with exaggerated excitement, her laughter still bubbling.

'What?' I asked, exasperated.

She tried to compose herself, but her words came out in broken bursts. 'So... imagine... you and Akshay... are, you know... having sex... and you don't even have to close your eyes to imagine Akul. Because... because... the face in front of you – or the man on top of you, or you on top of him, whatever—looks exactly the same. Wow!'

‘Since you are my best friend...’ I spoke, pretending to be furious, ‘I will not chop your body into pieces... but... can I at least I murder you for saying that?’

My reaction only made her laugh harder.

Her laughter was so relentless, so shameless, that I, after a prolonged attempt to glare at her, couldn’t help but laugh along with her.

‘Someone, please save me from this dirty mind,’ I said, looking up at the ceiling as if asking for divine intervention. But by then, I was laughing just as hard as she was.

Chapter 5

First Date and The Gift

‘Help me pick a dress,’ I said to Mansi, standing in front of my open closet. She examined its contents like an auditor inspecting annual reports—serious, focused, and annoyingly thorough. After what felt like forever, several debates over my outfits, and even a few of her own dresses brought into the mix, she finally pulled out a floral midi dress from the furthest corner of my wardrobe.

It was from Zara’s new collection, something I’d bought a few months ago but never had the occasion to wear. The moment she held it up, my eyes lit up—it had been waiting for me all this time. But no sooner had that initial excitement hit me than my overthinking brain decided, *not today*.

I hesitated, glancing at the clock. ‘You’ll be late if you keep obsessing over a stupid outfit,’ my brain scolded. In a moment of panic, I grabbed a checked shirt and jeans instead. ‘Let’s keep it cool and casual. It’s just a Sunday brunch,’ I said, trying to justify my choice.

Mansi raised an unimpressed eyebrow. ‘Are you going out to buy groceries with your *bade bhaiya* or what?’ she quipped, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

I immediately regretted asking her for help. Ultimately, I gave in and wore the floral dress she had chosen. To her satisfaction, I also let her spritz me with her favorite Gucci perfume—a small price to pay for peace.

I arrived at Cyber Hub on time and dialed Akshay.

‘I’m in the parking lot. Just a minute,’ he said before hanging up.

I scanned the lot, waiting. A few minutes later, I spotted him walking towards me. I waved, and as he got closer, something about his outfit caught my attention.

He was wearing a blue-and-white checked shirt. My heart sank as recognition hit me like a punch to the gut—it was identical to the one I had gifted Akul on his birthday when we were at the height of our relationship.



‘Ahh. Interesting,’ Nikhil remarked, his eyes lighting up as the twist in Natasha’s story unfolded. Thrilled, he leaned forward and urged her to continue.



‘Akul,’ Natasha began again, ‘was the kind of guy who never hesitated to compromise on necessities for his flamboyant indulgences. One weekend, we went to Palladium Mall, and he spotted a shirt at a designer store. It caught his eye immediately—he loved it at first sight. But it came with a hefty price tag, and he was tight on budget. We both were, being students, and it didn’t seem wise to splurge Rs 12,000 on a single shirt.’

She paused for a moment, her gaze flickering as the memory resurfaced. ‘Growing up, my dad taught me to be cautious with money, always saving for the essentials. My pocket money was barely enough to get by, so asking my parents for extra wasn’t an option. But Akul loved that shirt, and his birthday was coming up. I decided, no matter what, I’d find a way to gift it to him.’

Natasha smiled faintly, the warmth of that moment mingling with the lingering ache of what came later. ‘I managed to save half the amount on my own and borrowed Rs 2,000 each from three friends, promising to pay them back little by little from my pocket money. Sweet friends—they saw how much I loved him and didn’t hesitate to help.’

Natasha glanced briefly at Nikhil, as though gauging his reaction.

‘When Akul opened the gift wrap, he was stunned. ‘Is it the same shirt we saw at Palladium?’ he asked, his eyes wide. I nodded, and without another word, he pulled me into the tightest hug.

‘But how did you—?’ he started, but I shushed him before he could finish.

He didn’t stop smiling, repeating ‘Thank you’ and ‘I love you’ over and over. The joy in his voice, the warmth in his embrace—it made everything worthwhile.’

For a fleeting second, my breath hitched as another memory intruded. Seeing Akshay in that same shirt had brought back that sweet moment, but it also reopened old wounds—the bitterness of what had come later.

When Akul and I broke up, he was furious—his ego wouldn’t let him reconcile, even though our friends tried their best to make him understand. He returned everything I had given him, every gift, without a shred of emotion. I left the carton of items outside his apartment, hoping he’d soften and pick it up. But it stayed there for two days, untouched.

When the carton finally disappeared, I felt a fleeting sense of relief—maybe Akul had taken it inside, maybe we’d talk again. But that evening, I found out it was his roommate who had brought the stuff in and shoved it in a corner of their shared room.

That realization shattered me. Our relationship had run its course, and I knew his ego had played the most significant role in its downfall. I had loved him deeply, but love wasn’t enough for him.

I took a deep breath, anchoring myself in the present. Akshay was only steps away now, his casual stride bringing him closer, and my mind raced.

‘This has happened before, Natasha,’ my inner voice chided. ‘He lied about the show tickets earlier, and now he’s wearing this shirt? Is he hiding something? Is there something you need to know? Don’t keep it inside—ask him, clear the air. Don’t waste time.’

In less than ten seconds, my thoughts spiraled, colliding with one another, and then Akshay was there, standing in front of me.

‘Hi,’ I said, my voice overly bright, too cheerful to be genuine. Even Akshay must have noticed, but he played along, grinning.

‘You look nice in this shirt,’ I blurted out to cover my awkwardness, biting my lower lip in anxiety.

Akshay chuckled softly, his charm as effortless as ever. ‘Thanks. But, you know, it’s usually expected for men to compliment women first.’

‘Uh... Yeah, it is,’ I replied hastily, fumbling for words. ‘But I believe in speaking my mind.’

My explanation felt unnecessary, unprepared, and painfully awkward, but Akshay didn’t seem to mind. He chuckled again, his expression amused as he caught the unease written all over my face.

We walked into the restaurant, and as we made our way to the table, my mind raced with how to bring up the shirt. I couldn’t find the right words, couldn’t figure out how to frame the question without sounding absurd.

Akshay seemed to pick up on my nervous energy almost immediately.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked, his gaze steady on me.

I nodded quickly, hoping it would convince him, though my heart was far from calm. Sitting down, I realized that wasting time worrying about this shirt was pointless—I needed to ask him now.

‘Is this your shirt?’ The words slipped out abruptly, without the polish or tact I’d intended. My breaths came short and quick as I waited for his response.

‘Yeah,’ Akshay replied, his tone measured, but his expression betrayed mild confusion at my strange question.

‘Okay.’ His answer left my brain in a freeze, unable to process further. I broke eye contact and shifted awkwardly in my seat, trying to appear composed. My lips felt dry, so I reached for the water glass, but even then, I could sense Akshay’s eyes following my every move.

As I set the glass back down, my hands trembled faintly, and goosebumps ran down my arms. I couldn’t understand how I was supposed to spend the rest of this meal with him, and the silence grew heavier by the second—until he spoke again.

‘Actually, I borrowed it from my brother,’ Akshay said, pausing briefly before adding, ‘No, actually he offered it to me. Told me I could keep it.’

His clarification hung in the air as I nodded vaguely, unsure how to respond. I focused on my half-empty water glass, hoping it would anchor me somehow, but Akshay wasn't done.

'So... is there a story behind this shirt?' he asked, his tone curious yet gentle.

I swallowed hard, feeling the pressure rise in my chest, and nodded slowly.

'Do you mind... sharing it with me?' he prompted, leaning slightly forward.

I opened my mouth to speak but hesitated, drawing in a deep breath as my gaze wandered to the far corner of the room.

'Let it be. Let's order,' I replied, deflecting his question entirely. I couldn't bring myself to recount the story—not the sweet moments tied to the shirt, and certainly not the bitterness that followed. Sharing those details about Akul, his twin brother, felt far too personal, almost ridiculous.

I buried my face in the menu card, avoiding Akshay's eyes altogether. But then, unexpectedly, he stood up.

'Natasha,' he said, his tone calm, 'I'll leave the decision to you. Order for both of us, I'll be back in five minutes.'

'What... where are you suddenly going?' I asked, bewildered by his abrupt move.

‘I’ll just be back in five minutes,’ he said, offering no further explanation before walking away.

His departure left me agitated, unable to focus on the menu in front of me. My mind replayed the last ten minutes on an endless loop, each moment sharper than the last. I set the menu down and decided to wait—but only for five minutes. ‘If he doesn’t return by then, I’m leaving. Enough of this dating drama,’ I promised myself.

But those five minutes dragged on endlessly. I glanced around the restaurant, restless. A waiter approached twice to take my order, and both times I dismissed him with a curt shake of my head. I considered using the restroom to calm myself, but my brain warned, *what if Akshay comes back and doesn’t find you here?* Reluctantly, I stayed seated.

And then, finally, Akshay returned—wearing a black T-shirt from Uniqlo.

‘Did he just buy that?’ my brain questioned, and Akshay caught my puzzled look.

‘We can have a good meal now, I guess,’ he said with a casual smile.

My lips pressed into an apologetic smile as guilt, awkwardness, and unease swirled inside me. I wanted to explain myself, to apologize for my earlier behavior.

‘Um, Akshay... I didn’t mean to—’ I began, but he interrupted me.

‘Oh no, no,’ he said, waving away my concern. ‘I was anyway planning to check out their new collection. And today, well, *you* became the reason. So, thanks!’

He smiled broadly, his easy charm softening the tension. Despite my lingering guilt, his gesture left an unexpected impact. I felt myself relax, deciding to let go of everything that had been bothering me and focus on the date.

The waiter returned, and this time we ordered our mutual favorites. As we ate, the conversation flowed naturally—from work and career goals to the banking industry, Indian politics, world politics, Bollywood vs. Hollywood, even the rivalry between 4G and Wi-Fi to how one day this world will be taken over by artificial intelligence, and then finally both of us burped on *why isn’t Akshay active on social media?*



‘Yeah, why isn’t he active on social media?’ Nikhil’s abrupt question startled Natasha, pulling her out of her narrative. She found him to be curious enough as his head was slightly tilted while waiting for an answer.

Natasha paused, briefly thrown by the shift in topic, but quickly composed herself. ‘Well,’ she began, her tone thoughtful, ‘it’s not like he hates social media or anything. It’s just... he’s never been particularly interested in it. He told me once that it doesn’t feel

meaningful to him, sharing bits of his life with everyone just for the sake of it.'

Nikhil raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued.

'He said that the people who really matter to him—his close friends, his family—he'd rather spend time with them in person, face to face. He doesn't see the point in keeping up with acquaintances around the world while the people who are important are right here,'

'Interesting,' he added after a beat, nodding lightly as though filing the thought away.

Natasha smiled faintly, sensing Nikhil's wheels turning. 'Anyway,' she said, breaking the quiet moment, 'where was I?'

'Right—go on,' Nikhil urged, leaning forward with renewed interest in her story.



I had decided I'd suggest splitting the bill, but before I could express it, the waiter arrived with the bill, and Akshay instantly quipped, '*Bill to madam dengi*,' pointing at me with a teasing grin.

The waiter froze, visibly confused, clutching the bill book without handing it to either of us. My hand darted into my bag to grab my wallet, and just as I opened it, Akshay stopped me.

‘I asked you out on a date, so it’s my turn to pay,’ he said, his tone firm yet playful.

‘But we can split,’ I offered politely.

He shook his head, shushing me as he placed cash into the bill book.

As we stepped out of the restaurant, he turned to me. ‘So, do you want to have some ice cream?’

‘Well, who can say no to ice cream?’ I replied, flashing him a grin.

‘Cool. What flavor?’

‘Black currant.’

A few minutes later, he returned with two cones of black currant ice cream. We strolled side by side, enjoying the sweetness of both the dessert and the moment.

‘You look beautiful today,’ he said suddenly, his voice calm yet sincere.

His words caught me off guard, and my stomach did a little flip. I’d put in extra effort to get ready for this date, something I hadn’t done in what felt like forever, and he was just now noticing?

‘Wow, you realized that so quickly. Thanks,’ I quipped, masking my reaction with sarcasm.

‘Well, I observed. Properly. And then I gave my verdict,’ he replied, smirking.

‘Oh,’ I mumbled, feeling a mix of flattery and awkwardness.

‘Besides,’ he continued, ‘if I’d said it right away, you might have thought I was just another creep with rehearsed lines for a date.’

‘Hmmm.’ His reasoning made sense, and I nodded in quiet agreement.

For a moment, we walked in comfortable silence, licking our ice creams. But then Akshay broke it with an unexpected question. ‘So... do you want to tell me about this shirt?’ He’d been holding it in his hands ever since we left the restaurant.

‘I think I should’ve gone for chocolate flavor,’ I said, deliberately dodging his question.

‘I can get you chocolate if you want,’ he offered, pausing and pointing back towards the ice cream parlor.

I stopped walking and looked at him. His expression gave him away—he knew I was avoiding the question. But, instead of pressing me, he let it slide.

‘No, it’s fine. I like black currant too,’ I replied softly and started walking again.

When we reached the parking lot, Akshay asked, ‘Shall I drop you home?’

Mansi’s advice from earlier flashed in my mind: *If everything goes well and he offers to drop you, just say yes.* So, I nodded and agreed.

We settled into his car, and as we drove, he casually switched on the FM.

*'masoom chehra neechi nigaahain
Bholi si ladki bholi adaayein*

Akshay joined in, singing along with Udit Narayan's voice on the radio. I kept my eyes fixed ahead, quietly savoring my ice cream, but I could feel it—the weight of his gaze on me, unbroken as he sang. It was as if every note was directed at me.

*Na apsara hai na wo pari hai
Lekin ye uski jadoogari hai Deewana kar de wo
ek rang bhar de wo*

With every 'wo,' Akshay tilted his face towards me, adding playful emphasis to the moment. I kept my gaze fixed ahead, my lips pressed tightly together, struggling to keep my shyness in check. But no matter how hard I tried, my resolve crumbled. A smile escaped, betraying me. I quickly turned to the window, hoping to hide behind the glass, but it was pointless—Akshay knew his charm had done its magic.

Sharma ke dekhe jidhar.

As the flute music played softly, Akshay turned to me and asked, 'Are you a 90s music fan?'

'Absolutely! More than blood, these songs run in my veins,' I replied with a dramatic flair.

Akshay laughed at my statement, shaking his head lightly. 'And who's your favorite singer?'

‘Um... honestly, almost all of them. But if I had to choose, Sonu Nigam’s pop albums are my absolute favorite,’ I said, grinning.

‘Of course, of course! His cute looks and unmatched singing skills are—’

‘Class apart,’ I interjected, finishing his sentence.

‘I agree,’ he nodded.

The conversation flowed effortlessly. But even as we talked, the incident with the shirt lingered in the back of my mind. Every now and then, the thought would resurface, bringing with it a wave of frustration. Why hadn’t Akshay asked me about it again? Why was he acting so normal, as though nothing had happened? Whenever silence fell between us, I found myself angry—not at him, but at my own inability to let go of the emotional weight.

As the car pulled into my building’s driveway, Akshay pressed the brakes, and we both turned to look at each other at the exact same moment. The air felt heavy, loaded with unspoken thoughts, but before I could utter a word, he spoke.

‘Can you please stay for five more minutes? Please?’

His request didn’t surprise me; I wasn’t ready to leave either. I nodded silently, trying to keep my expression calm, though my heart was racing.

‘But what is it that you want to talk about now?’ I asked cautiously, the shirt flashing through my mind yet again.

‘Nothing special. Just that... *abhi dil nahi bhara*,’ he said, his gaze locked on mine. His words sent a ripple of goosebumps through me, and I folded my arms instinctively. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the security guard watching us again, his interest in our interaction far too obvious.

Akshay leaned back, glancing at the sky. ‘Such lovely weather. I’m glad we chose today for our first date.’

I gave him a small smile in return.

‘Do you want to get down and enjoy the wind?’ he asked, gesturing outside.

‘Sure,’ I replied, stepping out of the car with him. The breeze was soft and cool, wrapping around us like a gentle embrace.

‘You know,’ Akshay began, ‘I’m in awe of your locality. I’d love to live here.’

‘It’s peaceful... and secure,’ I said.

‘Indeed.’

‘But Mansi and I are leaving this area soon,’ I added casually.

‘What? Why?’

‘Mansi and I invested in a property two years ago. We’re finally getting possession next month. Once we do, we’ll furnish it and move in.’

‘Wow. That’s a solid move. Congratulations, girls. Which area?’

‘Golf Course Extension,’ I said, smiling.

‘Nice. Really nice. I’m proud of you both. That’s one of the wisest decisions I’ve heard in a long time. Great job, girls! And... convey my greetings to Mansi too.’

‘Thanks. I will,’ I replied softly.

‘You know, I’d love to meet her someday,’ Akshay said casually, his voice warm.

‘Yeah. Sure,’ I said automatically, but seconds later, I realized he might be hinting at coming over today. My brain warned me, *Opportunity missed*, so I kept quiet.

‘I guess she isn’t home. She mentioned meeting her friends this evening,’ I added clumsily to avoid further embarrassment.

‘Oh, that’s fine. Don’t worry,’ Akshay replied with his trademark smile, his patience unwavering.

I fell silent, feeling like I’d stumbled enough for one day. My gaze drifted to the shirt again, and I inhaled deeply before speaking. ‘You know, this shirt would look good over your tee,’ I said, my voice lighter, as though releasing a burden.

Akshay looked surprised for a moment but quickly responded, 'You think so? Let me try.'

He retrieved the shirt from the car, slipped it on over his tee, and stood before me.

'Perfect!' I said, my voice bright with genuine delight. Then, almost as an afterthought, I added, 'And... I had gifted this to Akul for his birthday.'

I tried to hide the sorrow in my voice, but a hint of it escaped through my rapid blinking. Akshay noticed but kept his response measured. 'Hmm,' he murmured.

'For a long time now, this shirt has been with me, and I like it a lot,' he said, smiling as he met my eyes directly.

'Yeah, the color combination is fantastic,' I replied quickly, keeping my gaze fixed on the shirt rather than him.

'And the fabric is so comfy. Your ex has excellent taste in clothes,' he smirked, clearly enjoying his playful jab.

'Excuse me! Men know *nothing*—literally nothing—about fabrics. It's just the color, the print, and *the cost* that gets their attention,' I countered, realizing I'd walked right into his trap.

Akshay stood casually, one leg crossed, his hands tucked into his jeans pockets, his eyes sparkling with triumph. I gave up on the topic, briefly smiling as I looked away. With that light exchange, I felt a sense of

relief—it was as though the weight of the shirt had finally been lifted.

My gaze shifted to the security guard, who had edged closer and was blatantly eavesdropping.

‘You can freely talk to me... about him, you know. I won’t mind,’ Akshay said, his voice soft, his eyes holding a flicker of hope.

I didn’t respond with words, simply nodding once.

The breeze played with my hair and dress, and I pressed my hand against my calf to keep the fabric from flying up. My fingers brushed my face nervously, hoping to conceal my mixed emotions.

I could’ve invited him upstairs for coffee—I knew he’d accept instantly—but the confusion swirling inside me stopped me. We exchanged glances, brief smiles, and silence, both of us wanting to say more but unsure of what.

Eventually, I decided coffee could wait for another day. ‘I’ll take a leave now. Thanks for the lovely day. Bye,’ I said.

‘Thanks for coming. Bye,’ Akshay replied, opening his arms for a hug.

I stepped forward and hugged him back. His scent, mixed with his natural warmth, stirred unexpected emotions. The hug was polite, almost formal, and then he slid into his car, starting the ignition.

I waved as he drove off, stealing a glance at the security guard. His expressions spoke volumes—he knew exactly what was unfolding between us. I chose not to acknowledge him and walked straight to my apartment.

‘I mean, nobody has ever shown a gesture like this to me, Mansi. I really appreciate it,’ I said, my voice soft but brimming with emotion. The smile on my face hadn’t faded since I’d finished narrating the entire story, ending with the shirt episode.

‘Aww. ‘Admire’ should be the word, lady,’ Mansi teased, leaning forward and locking her sharp gaze on me. ‘The guy shelled out an extra two thousand bucks on a stupid t-shirt, just to keep your calm.’

Her words carried the playful edge she was known for, but her eyes held something deeper—a quiet understanding. She paused for a moment, her expression thoughtful.

‘He cares about you. You know that, don’t you?’ she said softly, her pensive look reflecting an awareness of love, life, and all the complexities in between.

I didn’t answer immediately. There was something about the way Mansi framed the question that made my heart flutter and my thoughts stumble. And then she asked, ‘So... do you like him?’

‘Like means *Like* Like?’ I asked, needing clarification, even though deep down I knew the answer.

‘Yeah,’ she said simply, her lips curling into a small smile as she waited for mine.

‘I do,’ I admitted, my voice steady but laced with quiet honesty. ‘I felt really comfortable with him today. Like, *really* comfortable. But you know, there’s always something about him that reminds me of Akul.’

I looked at her, silently asking for her take.

‘Well, that’s natural,’ Mansi said after a moment. ‘Blame destiny for bumping you into someone you don’t know... yet somehow, you *do* know him.’

‘Hmm.’ I nodded faintly, her words settling into my thoughts, weaving their way through the emotions swirling in my chest.

‘But... do you want to meet him more?’ she asked, smoothly steering the conversation back to its core.

I hesitated for a moment before answering. ‘Maybe.’

‘Maybe?’ Mansi scoffed, rolling her eyes as she stared me down. ‘Try fooling someone else, babe. The answer is *certainly*.’

Her intensity melted away my hesitation, and I couldn’t help but smile—tight-lipped and shy, yet undeniably aware of the truth. She’d said it, and she was absolutely right.

‘And... he’s going to stay. I can see that,’ Mansi added, her voice softer now as she reached out and held my hand for a fleeting moment.

I met her eyes, giving a subtle nod that conveyed everything I couldn't articulate. There was no need for words between us.

For a second, I thought we'd dive deeper into the topic, but Mansi suddenly switched gears, picking up her phone and scrolling casually. I realized then that she was leaving me with the space to soak in this feeling—a long-lost emotion slowly returning to my heart.

Chapter 6

It's not him anymore

Life has a way of pulling you between the rules you've learned and the instincts you can't quite ignore. After my date with Akshay, I found myself in that exact dilemma. I wanted to text him first, to reach out and keep the connection alive. But the whisper of societal norms held me back—*women shouldn't text men first; it's about maintaining exclusivity.*

I tried to follow the rule. But slowly, as Akshay's daily texts started trickling in, the rule faded. We began talking every day, exchanging good morning quotes, memes, jokes —anything that made our conversations flow naturally. Within a month, we'd met twice.

One evening, we decided to meet at Galleria. After chatting over coffee for hours, we headed towards his car. My phone rang as we walked, and I got caught up in the call, distracted by the conversation. I didn't notice the group of teenage skaters speeding towards us until it was too late. They brushed past me so close that I flinched, stumbling backward and accidentally stepping on Akshay's foot.

He reached out instinctively, his hands moving to steady me. In the moment, his grip landed on my waist—and pressed against my bra hooks.

As soon as Akshay realized what had happened, he froze. His hands shifted from my back to my shoulders, helping me regain balance without saying a word.

‘Crazy boys,’ he shouted after the skaters, his voice tinged with frustration. But they were long gone, oblivious to the chaos they’d caused.

Akshay avoided direct eye contact; his face slightly tense. I could tell he was just as flustered as I was. Wanting to ease the awkwardness, I forced a small smile and said lightly, ‘It’s okay. Even we used to be crazy in our teens.’

‘Are you sure you’re not hurt?’ he asked, his voice quieter now, his concern genuine.

I shook my head. ‘Yeah, I’m fine.’

Though I tried to keep my expression neutral, the entire scene replayed in my mind over and over. Ever since my teens, I’d watched countless Indian TV shows with my mom—and in nearly all of them, whenever a woman fell into a man’s arms, their eyes would lock, and sparks would instantly fly.

But this was reality. Akshay and I were real people, and things didn’t work that way.

Well... maybe it would be dishonest to say *nothing* happened. After all, this was the first time we’d

touched—the first time his hands had found their way to me, even if unintentionally.



With this, Natasha glanced at Mansi and then at Nikhil, trying to gauge their reactions. Mansi seemed unbothered – she had already heard this story before—but Nikhil raised his eyebrows, clearly intrigued by the unfolding details. Natasha met his gaze and offered a brief smile, one that hinted at her own amusement at how invested he seemed in her narrative.

‘I hope I’m not being too open,’ Natasha said abruptly, breaking her narration to address Nikhil with slight hesitation. Her eyes darted to Mansi, seeking her take as well.

‘It’s okay. We’re all adults here, don’t worry,’ Nikhil replied calmly. Then, with a shrug, he added, ‘As I said earlier, it’s your story. Share what you want, keep what you don’t—your call entirely.’

Natasha nodded thoughtfully, as if considering his words, and after a brief pause, she continued.



Mansi’s laughter echoed through the room, loud and unapologetic, as she processed the story. ‘Waist... and bra hooks? What are you saying? You gave him one real

jackpot, babel!’ she exclaimed, her amusement spilling over.

I waited patiently for her to finish, knowing she wouldn’t let this moment pass without her signature commentary. Once her laughter subsided, I tried to explain, ‘This felt different, something special. Like, you know...’

‘*Sensual?*’ she interrupted, her eyes gleaming with curiosity – this was clearly her favorite topic.

‘Yeah,’ I admitted, covering my mouth with my fist, as if trying to hide the vulnerability in my voice.

‘And did you feel like touching him again?’ she asked, leaning forward with unabashed interest. ‘Like *deliberately* touch him? Or maybe just hold him tight in your arms and kiss him?’

Her sparkling eyes and relentless curiosity made me laugh. Mansi had a way of turning even the most awkward moments into something light-hearted and oddly comforting.

‘Nooo... I’m not that desperate,’ I said, shaking my head with a nervous laugh. ‘I was way too embarrassed to even think about touching him again, let alone your kiss ideas. But... uh... let’s just say... I can’t seem to forget that touch.’ My voice softened as I admitted the truth, and without realizing it, I started rubbing my collarbone—a subconscious gesture that didn’t escape Mansi’s sharp eyes.

‘Whoa. I can see ONE HUNGRY WOMAN sitting right in front of me,’ she teased, her voice dripping with mock drama. Her words sent us both burst into a laughter, breaking the tension.

Once the laughter subsided, Mansi’s tone shifted back to her usual inquisitive self. ‘So, intimacy is growing between you two. I can see that,’ she said, her gaze steady and probing.

Her words stirred something in me, and for a moment, I fell silent, lost in my thoughts.

‘What’s on your mind?’ Mansi’s voice softened, sensing the shift in my mood.

I let out a long sigh, gathering my thoughts. ‘I need to confess something, Mansi,’ I said, my voice carrying an uncertain mix of hesitation and determination.

Her eyebrows shot up, her expression exaggeratedly curious. It was so comical I couldn’t help but laugh, the moment briefly lifting the weight in the air. She always had that effect—turning even my deepest dilemmas into something bearable.

‘Do you remember,’ I began, ‘you once told me I should see Akshay as his own person and not as Akul’s twin?’

‘Yeah,’ she murmured, nodding as her knowing eyes locked onto mine.

‘So... I think time is changing its course now. Akshay doesn’t remind me of Akul as much anymore. It’s

different.... Like... now I can see him for who he is. I know I'm talking to *Akshay*, meeting *Akshay*. Do you get what I mean?' My words spilled out, my tone tinged with a cautious kind of hope.

'Absolutely, sweetheart,' Mansi said warmly, her fond smile reaching her eyes. 'You know what Dr. House once said to one of his patients?'

I furrowed my brow, puzzled by the sudden mention. 'Doctor who?'

'Dr. House! From the American TV series *House*,' she explained, her face lighting up. 'In one of the episodes, he said, "Time changes nothing. Doing things changes things. Not doing things leaves things exactly as they were."' She paused for effect, clearly pleased with herself, before continuing. 'And now, coming back to you and Akshay—I'd say it's not just time changing its course. It's because you've been making an effort. Your heart is finally letting go of the past and embracing the present. That's why you're feeling lighter, happier, and enjoying this phase.'

I took a deep breath and smiled, her words settling over me like a warm blanket. Leave it to Mansi—and apparently Dr. House—to perfectly articulate what I couldn't quite put into words.

'So, you're saying it's okay to move forward? I don't have to just stay friends with him?' I asked, my voice tinged with curiosity and the need for reassurance.

‘Friends? You two have never really been *just* friends,’ she said firmly, shaking her head. ‘But listen, all I can suggest is this – don’t be afraid, and don’t be confused about whatever you decide to do.’

I must’ve still looked uncertain because she leaned forward, elaborating as only Mansi could. ‘If you’re afraid that getting closer to Akshay might lead to problems, then stop right now. Tell him honestly and save you both the trouble. If you’re confused, take a step back—don’t drag it out, or he might feel like you’re just playing with his feelings. But if you’re positive about this? Then dive in. Let yourself go with the flow—completely, with all your heart.’

Her words hung in the air, heavy with truth and clarity. Standing up, she patted me lightly on the shoulder and took a moment to smell her hair.

‘Tomorrow’s an early start for me. I think it’s time to shampoo my hair now,’ she announced casually, as if she hadn’t just dropped life-altering wisdom.

She called out to our cook, ‘Rupa Didi, soak some *rajma* for tomorrow’s lunch.’ Then, turning back to me, she gave a playful smirk before disappearing into her room.

‘And please make some Maggi for me,’ Mansi called out again, her voice echoing from her room.

‘I’ve already cooked *Dal*, the dough is ready, and I was about to cut the *Bhindi*...’ Rupa Didi’s reply trailed off.

‘Rupa Didi, make Maggi for us,’ I interjected, cutting her off mid-sentence. ‘And boil two spoons of oats separately before mixing them into my Maggi,’ I added, settling the matter decisively.

A moment later, I called out again, ‘We’ll have *Dal ka paratha* for breakfast tomorrow and *Rajma-Chawal* for lunch. Keep the *Bhindi* back in the fridge.’

The sounds of pots and pans shifting filled the air as Rupa Didi adjusted her plans, and I leaned back, waiting for my bowl of Maggi with oats. With my thoughts wandering, I turned my attention to my phone.



‘Natasha, I think it’s late, and I’m absolutely exhausted. We should head back to the hotel,’ Mansi whispered, leaning close to Natasha’s ear. Her gaze flicked towards Nikhil, who seemed to catch on immediately. Natasha glanced at her watch. It was already 9:30 p.m. The mountain night was nothing like the bustling metro cities they were used to. The silence outside was profound, almost eerie, and Natasha nodded in agreement.

Nikhil stood up, stretching slightly, and offered. ‘Come on, I’ll drop you both at the hotel.’

‘Do you have a car?’ Mansi asked.

‘Nope! But I know a good cabbie,’ Nikhil replied with a grin, already pulling out his phone to make the call.

Outside the hotel, as they waited for the cab, Nikhil turned to Natasha, his expression curious. ‘By the way, do you journal?’ he asked, scratching his brow with his thumb.

‘Journal, as in writing a diary?’ Natasha clarified, raising an eyebrow.

Nikhil nodded, his curiosity evident. ‘Yeah.’

‘Not at all. What makes you ask that?’ Natasha replied, tilting her head slightly.

Nikhil shrugged, his gaze steady. ‘It’s just... the way you explain things is incredible. It felt like the entire scene was playing out right in front of me. I was just wondering how you remember every detail so perfectly.’

‘This is nothing,’ Mansi interjected with a smirk. ‘The main incidents are yet to come, but you’ll have to wait until tomorrow for those.’

Nikhil chuckled in amusement. Natasha, however, found herself studying him, searching his expression for something—some hidden thought or intention—but she came up empty. The moment reminded her of something she’d never shared with anyone, not even Mansi. Maybe it had always felt too trivial, or maybe she’d simply forgotten it over time.

She narrowed her eyes briefly, lost in thought, but quickly snapped back when she noticed Nikhil watching

her intently. She forced a small smile, smoothing her features. 'Perhaps the guy was special,' she said lightly. 'That's why I remember it so well.'

Her words lingered in the air as she held his gaze. Nikhil nodded, a faint smile tugging at his lips, but he didn't say anything more. Neither did Natasha. They exchanged polite goodbyes and went their separate ways.

Back in the hotel room, Natasha quickly changed into her pajamas and tucked herself under the cozy blanket, letting the warmth envelop her. Mansi, meanwhile, perched on the bed, scrolling through her official emails, already immersed in work.

Upon reaching his home, Nikhil opened a drawer and pulled out a medium-sized, thick blue diary. He stared at it for a moment before slipping it into his camera bag without a second thought.

That night, the dream came to Natasha again. She saw a truck crushing her car into pieces, yet somehow, she remained uninjured. In the dream, she sat by the wreckage, a helpless woman surrounded by people offering help. But for reasons she couldn't understand, she didn't respond to them. She just sat there, alone, her face etched with devastation.

The scene jolted her awake. She shuddered, her eyes still closed, before finally opening them to see Mansi snoring softly beside her. Natasha reached for her phone—it was 2:34 a.m. She exhaled deeply, trying to

shake off the lingering unease, and pulled the blanket over her head, willing herself to fall back asleep.

The next morning, Natasha and Mansi made their way to Illiterati Café, a spot Nikhil had suggested. Mansi was practically bouncing with excitement, unable to contain her delight. She had seen so many pictures of the café on Nikhil's Instagram, each one framing the cozy book-filled corners amidst the breathtaking mountain views. It wasn't just about visiting this place; Mansi had already made it clear that she expected Nikhil to click her pictures in the café's most picturesque spots.

'This place is so lively. I legit love it,' Mansi exclaimed, her eyes darting around as she soaked in the vibrant atmosphere.

Nikhil glanced at Natasha, who was also quietly taking in the charm of the café. Her expression mirrored Mansi's—a mix of delight and curiosity, though Natasha's focus seemed to linger on the walls lined with books. She had been to many book cafés before, but Illiterati felt different. The surrounding beauty of the mountains added a touch of serenity she hadn't experienced anywhere else.

'I'm sure they'll have a book from you in their collection someday,' Nikhil said, his voice carrying an easy confidence.

Natasha chuckled at the comment, brushing it off lightly.

‘You should write,’ Nikhil added, his tone firmer now.

Natasha’s chuckle faded as she looked at him. Her smile turned formal, almost unsure, and a faint frown creased her forehead.

‘What makes you say that when you haven’t even heard the whole story yet?’ she asked.

‘Well, I told you yesterday—I love the way you tell stories. You have this knack, you know? Take my advice—write it down, share it with people,’ he said.

Natasha tilted her head slightly and nodded, her mind turning over his words.

‘And now,’ Nikhil said, gesturing towards a cozy corner, ‘let’s dive into the upcoming details.’ He led them to his favorite table, a spot he considered perfect, and placed an order he had already decided on. As they settled in, Natasha resumed her story.



Mansi had been right—I needed to understand my own feelings first. Because, truthfully, I was confused. Very confused.

It wasn’t easy, to say the least. Hanging out with someone who looked exactly like my ex—the same ex

with whom I'd had such a painful breakup—was hardly a walk in the park. Misgivings felt inevitable. Was it wise to let myself venture further with Akshay?

The overthinker in me went all out. I created an actual PowerPoint presentation, complete with comparison charts. I even did a personal SWOT analysis, highlighting strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. But no matter how many weaknesses or threats I listed, my gut would counter with a simple, unwavering *ho jayega*.

For two days, Akshay and I had been texting—a neutral middle ground. He called twice during those days, but I didn't answer. I wasn't ready for long conversations, not until I had made up my mind. Texting felt safer, easier.

I buried myself in that presentation, weighing every possibility. But even as I did, a small part of me knew the truth: I was drawn to him. That part of me was begging me to abandon my graphs and charts, my analyses and fears, and just go with the flow.

I picked up my phone and saw Akshay was online. I typed 'Hi,' only to delete it immediately. We'd already exchanged morning pleasantries, after all.

Five minutes later, his message popped up:

What have you deleted?

I hesitated but replied, *Nothing*.

And then, proving I wasn't entirely immune to stupidity, I sent: *I was just asking your birthday?*

As soon as I hit send, I realized the obvious—he was Akul's twin. Of course, his birthday was November 18th. But before I could delete the message, Akshay replied:

Tomorrow! 😊

We can celebrate it tomorrow.

I decided to play along: *Haha... And who all are invited?*

Right now, only you and me. But if you want to add more people, we can do that.

I paused, considering his idea. Finally, I typed: *Do you want to come over to my place? You can meet Mansi as well. And... I'll make a cake for you!*

I saw the blue ticks. But Akshay didn't type anything. He went offline.

Was it too forward? Too desperate? Doubts swirled in my head, but I told myself to wait for his reply before panicking.

Some time later, his message arrived: *Sorry, I got busy. I'd be glad to come.*

I replied quickly: *Great. See you for dinner then.*

The next morning, I bought everything I needed to make an Oreo cheesecake. I prepared it before heading

to the office and asked Rupa Didi not to come in the evening, since Mansi and I had decided to order food.

That evening, I came home an hour early—an unusual move for me—and busied myself with cleaning and dusting. It wasn't often we had guests, and those who did visit—like Anuj and Maahi—never cared much about the state of the house.

As I tidied up, I noticed a shift in myself. I was happy, excited, optimistic in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. My thoughts kept circling back to this dinner, this date at home.

I'd already asked Mansi to come home early. With everything ready, I sat down and waited, wondering who would arrive first—Mansi or Akshay. I wanted to call them both to check where they were, but I resisted. There was something magical about the anticipation, about simply waiting for Akshay.

The doorbell rang at precisely 7:05. I glanced at the clock and assumed it was Mansi, arriving unusually early since she normally came home around eight. But when I opened the door, it wasn't her—it was Akshay.

My stomach fluttered unexpectedly as I took him in. He stood there with a cheerful smile, holding a bunch of untied, colorful roses in one hand and a bottle of rosé wine in the other.

'Hi,' he said, his voice warm and effortless. He extended the roses towards me.

For a moment, I was stunned by his gesture. The roses weren't wrapped or overly polished—they were raw, real, and somehow more special because of it. I smiled, a rush of delight bubbling in my chest.

'Thanks,' I said softly, taking the roses from him.

He stepped inside and held up the wine bottle. 'Well, this is for Mansi.'

I chuckled at that. 'Sure,' I replied, amused by his thoughtfulness.

We both shared a brief laugh, but as the door clicked shut behind him, I felt a familiar pang. Though I had made the conscious decision to move forward and give Akshay a real chance, his presence here pulled at old memories. For a fleeting second, I was back in Mumbai, picturing Akul visiting my apartment. The echoes of the past blurred into the present, making it hard to focus.

Akshay seemed to notice my unease. He tilted his head slightly and asked, 'So, how are you going to celebrate my birthday?'

His light-hearted question broke through my thoughts. I smiled awkwardly and said, 'Um... well... I made Oreo cheesecake for you.'

'Wow,' he said immediately, his enthusiasm catching me off guard. Relief washed over me as he added, 'We can cut the cake when Mansi's here.'

'Yeah, yeah, sure,' I replied quickly. Then, in a clumsy attempt to fill the silence, I asked, 'Do you want

to call any of your friends? You can ask them to come over.'

The truth was, I felt uneasy being alone with him in the house. Meeting outside always felt safer, easier. Restaurants came with distractions—the hum of background noise, waiters handing you menus, the constant interruptions that helped steer the conversation. Here, in the quiet of my home, every word and every pause felt magnified.

He gave a small shrug and said, 'I don't have many friends here.'

His honesty caught me off guard, and I didn't know how to respond. The silence stretched out as I stared at the newspaper on the table, pretending to read the headlines. Inside, my thoughts raced. *Why didn't I plan for this better?* My mind felt like an ancient computer taking forever to process a simple command. I preemptively blamed myself for any conversational missteps I might make.

'Nice house. Pretty clean. How are women so good at maintaining their homes so well?' Akshay said suddenly, raising his eyebrows with a teasing smile.

'Thanks,' I chuckled, relieved by the change in topic. 'But honestly, it doesn't usually look this clean. I came back early to organize it.'

'Oh,' he replied, his smile lingering. But then the silence returned, and the air felt heavier again. I began

to wonder if he, too, felt a little out of place. Perhaps my awkwardness was rubbing off on him.

Finally, I mustered the courage to ask, ‘Do you want something to drink?’

‘Um, sure.’

‘I’ve got beer,’ I said, gesturing towards the fridge, ‘or coffee?’

‘Beer will do,’ he said with an easy nod.

‘Great. I’ll just get it,’ I said, heading to the kitchen.

As I walked away, I realized I was smiling and taking deep breaths—a clear sign of my nerves. But there was something oddly thrilling about this nervousness, a kind of giddy excitement that made my heart race.

In the kitchen, I grabbed two beer bottles and opened the drawer where the bottle opener was usually kept. But it wasn’t there. Frowning, I searched through every drawer, every shelf. It was as if the opener had simply vanished.

The sound of squealing drawers must have reached Akshay because, moments later, he appeared in the kitchen. I was so focused on my search that I didn’t notice him standing behind me. Just as I yanked open a tight cabinet with a little too much force, my elbow swung back and hit him square on the nose.

‘Awhhh!’ he cried out, the pain evident in his voice.

I spun around, startled. ‘Oh my god! I didn’t know you were standing there!’

He was holding his nose, his face contorted in pain. ‘Where did you get hurt? Let me see,’ I said, panicked. Gently, I moved his hand away, and my heart sank when I saw a thick drop of blood trailing down to his upper lip.

‘I’m so sorry, Akshay!’ I rushed to the freezer, grabbing an ice pack. ‘This... this will help. Just hold it here,’ I said, placing the ice pack gently against his nose. He winced as the cold hit his skin.

‘It’s okay. I’ll be fine, don’t worry,’ he muttered, though his voice wavered. Another drop of blood fell, and I noticed a tear welling in the corner of his eye. The sight tugged at my chest—he must’ve been in a lot of pain.

‘You should sit down,’ I said firmly, taking his hand and leading him to the sofa. I pressed the ice pack softly against his nose, keeping it there until the bleeding stopped. For a while, he kept his eyes closed, his breathing shallow as he tried to manage the pain.

When his nosebleed finally subsided, I realized we were sitting impossibly close—our faces merely inches apart. He was looking directly at me, his eyes calm yet intense. I blinked nervously, unsure of what to do or say. My focus stayed glued to his injury, pretending it was all that mattered.

But he didn't look away. His steady gaze remained, drawing me into the tension humming between us. My pulse quickened, betraying every attempt to keep calm. The air felt electric, heavy with the weight of unspoken emotions, as if the silence itself were daring me to say something—anything. My breath hitched, and before I could think twice, I looked away, pretending to notice how dim the room had grown.

This wasn't the time to be distracted by emotions. Akshay was still watching me. His presence was overwhelming, a tidal wave of everything I hadn't prepared for, yet there was an odd comfort in it—a strange reassurance that almost made me want to linger there with him.

I shifted my gaze towards the dark kitchen. I knew I needed to turn on the lights, but I was too nervous to move. I bit my lip as if a silent battle was raging within me. I could feel his eyes on me, and then it came—a sudden, reckless impulse that whispered louder than logic or fear: *Just do it.*

I leaned in and touched my lips to his. A nervous flutter, a hesitant touch, and I pulled back, trying to seek an answer in his eyes. His eyes, dark and intense, seemed to say, *I've been waiting for this.*

We tilted our heads, a silent agreement, and the cool touch of his lip against mine sent a shiver of desire through me. The ice pack slipped from my numb fingers, landing with a soft thud on the floor. I settled onto his

lap, my hands, still icy from the pack, tracing the warm curve of his neck. His hands found my waist, holding me close, exploring the contours of my back.

It was a delicious, intoxicating pull, a silent dance of unspoken desires. I didn't want it to end, and neither, it seemed, did he. Then the doorbell rang, loud and sudden. We sprang apart, like magnets violently forced away from each other, a palpable tension lingering in the space between us. The pull was still there, a silent, magnetic force, urging us back together. I wanted to close the gap, to recapture the moment, but he held me back, a silent restraint.

'That must be your friend,' he whispered, and it snapped me back to reality. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart, and got up from his lap. I walked to the door, feeling a little unsteady. Akshay picked up the ice pack, placed it carefully on the table, and sat back on the couch, straightening his posture. I switched on the light, glancing back at him to see if he was okay. He nodded, and I opened the door.

'Hey!' I said, and Mansi walked in. For the first time, I wasn't thrilled to see her. She greeted Akshay warmly, then sat down, facing him.

'What happened to your nose?' she asked, noticing the redness and swelling.

'I bumped into something before I got here,' Akshay said, avoiding my eyes.

‘I gave him an ice pack,’ I added, a little too quickly. Mansi gave me a look, but didn't say anything.

‘Coffee?’ I asked them both.

‘We have beer,’ Mansi reminded us, and the word hung in the air, a reminder of what had just happened.

‘Akshay likes coffee,’ I said, and went to the kitchen. I needed to escape, to process what had just happened. I was a mess of conflicting feelings, wanting more but knowing I had to stop. I imagined hiding away with him, just for a little while. I stayed in the kitchen, listening to them talk, afraid that if I went back, I’d say or do something awkward. My emotions were all over the place.

Then Mansi's phone rang. She went into her room and locked the door. I poured the coffee, brought it into the living room, and looked at Akshay. He pointed to Mansi's closed bedroom door. I put the tray down and quickly kissed him again. This time, it was more intense, like finally getting something I'd been craving. Just as quickly, Mansi's door unlocked and she walked back into the room. We both acted normal, like nothing had happened. It felt like finally eating after being really hungry.

The evening stretched comfortably, filled with coffee, conversation, cheesecake, and a simple dinner. By the time Akshay mentioned he needed to leave, it was nearly 11:30. The earlier kiss, an electrifying moment, had faded into the flow of the evening, replaced by ease and

laughter. But as he stood to go, the memory surfaced again—sharp and vivid. I felt a flicker of uncertainty. How should I say goodbye? A casual hug, pretending it didn't change anything? Another kiss, reigniting the spark? Or something more, building on the connection we'd shared before Mansi's arrival had shifted the mood, turning us from two people exploring something deeper into polite acquaintances.

I decided the easiest thing to do was walk him to his car. He agreed without hesitation—a quiet sign that he wanted to prolong the evening, too. Yet the question of what to say, what to do, hung in the air as we reached his car. For a fleeting moment, I wondered if he'd ask me to go for a drive. I knew I'd say yes without a second thought. But before I could finish the thought, he spoke.

'Today was... amazing,' he murmured. 'But it's late. I should probably head home.' His words surprised me, and disappointment crept in.

'Thanks... for everything,' he said, his gaze locking with mine, the weight of 'everything' unmistakable. Then, without waiting for my reply, he pulled me into a warm hug and kissed my cheek softly. It was brief but lingering enough to leave me speechless. I returned the hug, comforted yet wistful. I didn't want him to leave.

As he got into his car, I leaned against the window. 'I mentioned the conference tomorrow,' I reminded him, referring to something we'd talked about earlier. 'I'll be tied up until five.'

He smiled. 'Okay. I'll call after five then.'

With that, he backed the car out and drove away, leaving me standing in the quiet of the street.

Back inside, Mansi was lounging on the couch, flipping through TV channels. 'So,' she said, smirking, 'you two had your little tête-à-tête before I got home?'

I stared at her, startled. 'How did you know?'

'Darling,' she said, raising an eyebrow, 'are you serious?' Her playful tone made me laugh, and I began narrating how the whole thing unfolded.

'Wow,' she said, her grin widening. 'A bit filmy, but definitely worth it.'

'So, what's your verdict about him?' I asked a bit curiously.

'Well, as a person, he's smart, witty, and decent—a pretty solid mix.'

I nodded, though something else was brewing in my mind. 'I need your advice on something.'

'Shoot,' she said.

'About the kiss,' I began, taking a deep breath. 'It was impulsive. But I felt good about it throughout his stay. And then the cheek kiss when he was leaving... it felt like a dream. But now, back in reality... I'm confused,' I admitted. 'My heart is pulling me in circles.'

'It's pulling you back to your past memories, isn't it?' Mansi said, then continued, 'Natasha, it's not like

you're two-timing the brothers, are you? Akul was there. And now Akshay is here. Do you get that? Destiny brought you together—you didn't plan it. That's called moving on.'

'They're twins, Mansi,' I countered, the weight of the word pressing on me. 'See, it's not like Akul and Akshay are best friends or cousins. If that were the case... let's say... it would've been easier to handle. But they're twin brothers. They share the same blood, they've spent a major portion of their lives together. Bloody hell, they have so many similarities.'

'They're individuals,' she shot back. 'And why would Akshay pursue you if he thought it was wrong?'

'What if he doesn't know everything?' I asked. 'What if it becomes a problem later?'

'You're overthinking this,' she said, then continued, 'Babe, as much as I've observed your actions so far, your main fear keeps circling back to the TWIN part. But here's the thing—more than being developed together in the same womb, they are individual identities. So come out of that constant fear that's boggling you day and night. Just think about this—why would Akshay initiate something with you? He seems like a wise man, doesn't he? Don't you think he must've thought this through before taking steps towards you? If he doesn't feel wrong about having feelings for you, then why do you have constant misgivings?'

Mansi's words left me speechless. She made sense, but another doubt surfaced in my mind. 'I don't know how much Akul has told Akshay about me. Will that be a problem? And what if Akshay hasn't thought about it yet, but it becomes a problem in the future? Don't you think that's possible?'

'Babe, you think too much. Look, you can either keep doubting or simply build trust in the relationship,' she said, pausing for a moment. I stayed quiet, waiting for her to continue.

'Even if he knows everything about Akul and you—which, by the way, is 100% impossible in my opinion—but let's assume he does. Even then, he's the one who keeps making the first move to stay in touch with you. That clearly means he likes you. You never know what the future holds. Maybe you two start dating now and end up hating each other in six months. And as much as I know you, this is your real fear. You don't want to face rejection again, and that's why you're not giving love another chance, no matter who it is. But that's not how you should deal with it. Breakups happen. I've told you so many times—date guys from Tinder and break their hearts. Maybe that revenge will ease you down.'

'Mansi, please. You know I'm not the type for random dating.'

'Yeah, okay, sorry for going off track,' she said, waving her hand dismissively. 'But here's what I'm saying—if Akshay isn't letting your past relationship

with his brother affect him, then you shouldn't let it come between you either. That's in the past, so stop sulking about it. And trust me, men think more about a woman's past relationships than women do themselves. If he's genuinely not doing that, then I think he's worth giving a try. The rest? Follow your gut. It'll never steer you wrong.'

I sat there, pondering her advice as she walked towards her room. Just as she reached the door, she stopped and turned back.

'You know what...' she began, her tone shifting to something more serious.

'We live in a country where a widow is forced to remarry her brother-in-law so the family can run smoothly, and her kids can have a father's name and love. In many cultures, a woman who has been raped is forced to marry her rapist. Do you think they're ever asked for consent before these decisions are imposed on them? Their entire lives change because of this. Think about their problems. Think about how they endure the same situation every single day, just to keep this bloody society quiet. And here you are, stuck over a stupid breakup. Think!'

She tapped her temple twice for emphasis and disappeared into her room, leaving me sitting there, lost in thought.

The thing about human beings is—we always know what's right and what's wrong. Deep down, we do. But

it's in our nature to get tangled in confusion when it comes to choosing the right path. Because, let's face it, wrong choices are easy. They're tempting, effortless, and often come without the weight of consequence. The right ones, though? They demand courage—a lot of courage. And no matter how much you try to convince yourself to follow your heart, to chase what you truly want, doubt creeps in. You start cross-questioning your own instincts, second-guessing every gut feeling. It's exhausting, this internal tug-of-war. But then, when a friend steps in—when they say the very thing you've been struggling to tell yourself—it's like a switch flips. Their words hit you with clarity, cutting through the fog of your own indecision.

That's exactly what happened in that moment. Mansi's lecture wasn't just advice; it was an eye-opener. It was the kind of truth that forced me to confront my fears, to stop running from the choices I knew I needed to make.

Chapter 7

And then we were there

The next day flew by in a whirlwind. The conference was intense, and I had my presentation slotted right after lunch. I was so immersed in work that Akshay barely crossed my mind, not even once. It wasn't until the evening tea break that I finally allowed myself a moment to breathe. I opened WhatsApp and saw a message from Mansi:

Builder called up for the kitchen platform's stone confirmation. I have confirmed him white quartz. But there are still a few tidbits. Can you please visit the site once?

Cool. I quickly replied and scrolled through my chats, almost instinctively checking if there was a message from Akshay. Nothing. Part of me wanted to just drop him a quick 'Hi,' but I resisted. I knew myself too well—one message would snowball into a whole conversation, and I still had a lot to tackle before the day ended.

After the conference, as I stood with my colleagues discussing the event, my phone buzzed. I glanced at the screen—it was Akshay calling. My heart skipped a beat.

After a long and draining day, seeing his name felt like the best thing that had happened all day.

‘Hello!’ I answered, trying not to let my excitement spill over.

‘Hi, Natasha! I’m here to pick you up,’ he said, his voice calm yet warm.

Butterflies erupted in my stomach, but with people around me, I kept my tone composed. ‘Alright. I’m coming downstairs,’ I replied and hung up.

I quickly said my goodbyes, stepped into the lift, and then, just as the doors were about to close, a thought hit me. I rushed out the lift and went to the restroom instead. Grabbing a wet tissue, I wiped my face, reapplied my eyeliner and lipstick, and combed my hair. By the time I made my way to the lobby again, my wide smile probably gave away everything I was feeling. My pace—just short of jogging in heels—was a dead giveaway.

When I reached him, he was leaning against his car, his eyes fixed on the building entrance. He looked so calm, so composed, and yet the sight of him filled me with a kind of joy I couldn’t quite explain.

‘This is such a pleasant surprise,’ I said, smiling and slightly breathless.

His smile widened as he straightened up. We exchanged a quick side hug—appropriate for the public setting—and then slipped into the car.

‘You didn’t have office today?’ I asked.

‘I left a bit early,’ he replied.

‘He wanted to see me,’ I thought, and before I could even process the thought, he said, ‘I wanted to see you.’

His timing was impeccable, and my heart swelled with joy. I couldn’t stop smiling.

On the way, I remembered that I needed to visit our new house to meet the builder guy. ‘Would you like to join me?’ I asked, hoping he’d say yes.

‘Of course,’ he said easily, and my heart fluttered again.

The meeting hardly took fifteen minutes of clarifications and confirmations, but I was happy to have Akshay there with me. He seemed genuinely interested in the place, and I liked how excited he was about the idea of a new home.

When we stepped outside, I leaned against his car while he stood in front of me. The moment felt surreal, like the world had paused just for us. Neither of us spoke, but we both knew what was on our minds.

Akshay moved closer, gently taking my fingers in his. ‘I couldn’t stop thinking about yesterday,’ he said softly, his gaze locking with mine.

My cheeks burned, and I looked down, smiling shyly.

He lifted my hand and placed a tender kiss on my ring finger. ‘I really, really like you, Natasha. And... I’ve

spent the whole day trying to find the right words to explain it, but I can't. It was simply magic,' he said, exhaling deeply. His words, spoken with such sincerity, felt like music to my ears.

I wanted to respond, to tell him how much his honesty meant to me, but my throat felt dry. My thoughts were in a jumble, and I struggled to find the courage.

'Say something,' he urged gently.

'Same here,' I managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

His jaw dropped, and he patted the car roof, exclaiming, '*Same here?* That's it? Natasha, you're so APATHETIC, man!'

'What? No, no! I'm not apathetic,' I stammered, my flustered expression making him laugh.

'I mean... I don't know what to say right now,' I admitted, nervously tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. His laughter softened, and his gaze turned affectionate.

'It's okay. Don't worry,' he said, placing his hand over mine again. 'We can talk about this later.'

His reassurance calmed me, and we spent the next few minutes chatting about work and other things. My phone, however, buzzed relentlessly with calls, reminding me of the day's unfinished tasks. Sensing my distraction, Akshay didn't push for more time.

As he dropped me home, he hesitated before speaking. ‘Natasha... there’s something I wanted to talk about.’

His tone was serious, but before I could respond, my phone buzzed again. ‘Yeah, it’s done. I’ve reached home, and I’ll send you the updated sheet quickly,’ I told my colleague over the call.

I turned back to Akshay. ‘Why don’t you come upstairs? I’ll finish work, and then we can talk,’ I suggested.

He smiled faintly, but I could tell he sensed I wouldn’t be able to focus properly. ‘You seem really busy. Maybe I’ll tell you tomorrow,’ he said.

‘Are you sure?’ I asked, feeling a pang of guilt.

‘Yeah,’ he replied.

‘Okay, I’ll call you. Bye,’ I said as he drove away.

The rest of the evening was swallowed up by work. Akshay didn’t cross my mind again until well past midnight when I finally finished and called him. Our conversation was brief. Neither of us mentioned what he had wanted to say. Exhaustion weighed on me, and I needed sleep, so we hung up quickly.

The next day was chaotic from start to finish. Akshay asked if we could meet, but I couldn’t make the time. I could sense his eagerness—he wanted to spend more and more time together. And the truth was, I wanted that too. Yet this is how destiny toys with us: when I didn’t

want him anywhere near me, life threw every situation at me so that I had no choice but to let him enter my world. Now, when both of us were ready, when we wanted to spend every possible moment together, life found ways to keep us apart.

It felt as though the universe was mocking us, putting obstacles between the very connection we both craved. I felt helpless, utterly powerless against the tug of schedules and responsibilities. That week stretched like an eternity, the separation weighing on me as if we were living in two different time zones for months on end. Desperation—it was the only word that fit.

As soon as Mansi entered the house, she asked casually, ‘Do you have any plans for Friday?’

‘Nothing yet. Why?’ I replied, my focus still on my laptop.

She sank into the couch and called out, ‘Rupa Didi, *chai* please.’

‘Ji,’ came the response from the kitchen.

‘Let’s keep a party at home this Friday,’ she announced.

‘Yeah, sure. Let’s do it,’ I murmured distractedly, my fingers typing away.

‘Invite Akshay too.’ she suggested, and suddenly, I froze mid-typing. My eyes lit up as the idea sunk in.

‘Oh yes, it’s been three days since we met. Superb idea!’ I said, my voice brimming with excitement.

‘Cool. So call Akshay, Anuj, Maahi, and your other buddies. We’ve got ourselves a long-overdue party in two days,’ Mansi said as she kicked off her pumps and reclined lazily on the couch.

Without wasting another second, I grabbed my phone and called Akshay. I eagerly told him about the party, and his enthusiasm matched mine. Knowing he was onboard only amplified my excitement.

‘Oh, and you mentioned wanting to talk about something the other day, right? Sorry, I completely forgot to ask,’ I said, remembering.

‘Yeah, uh... I wanted to let you know I’ve been retained by my company,’ he said, his tone steady but thoughtful.

‘Oh. Okay,’ I replied, curious.

‘They’ve revised my CTC and job grade, so I don’t think switching jobs is the right move at this point,’ he explained.

‘That’s good. Congratulations!’ I said, trying to sound supportive. But internally, I felt a mixed wave of emotions. I was happy for him, proud of his career growth, but a small part of me couldn’t help feeling a pang of sadness.

I had started imagining what it would be like to work in the same office as Akshay—stealing glances across the

room, sharing lunch breaks, and carpooling home together every day. It was a sweet fantasy, one that had grown quietly in my mind. But as much as it stung, I understood his decision. Careerwise, staying put made perfect sense, and I admired his practicality.

Balancing my emotions, I let out a deep breath, knowing we were on separate paths professionally. Still, I couldn't wait for Friday party.

Chapter 8

Party and its poopers

Friday evening couldn't come fast enough. I was buzzing with anticipation, though a small part of me wrestled with a lingering question: should I introduce Akshay to my office friends now, or wait a little longer? My heart whispered, *we'll see what happens*. I was starting to enjoy this new version of myself—the one who didn't procrastinate endlessly but responded to thoughts and decisions in the moment. It was freeing, almost stress-relieving.

When the evening finally arrived, the house quickly filled with friends. Without Akshay, we were a lively group of eleven—myself, Mansi, Anuj, Maahi, Deeksha, Raina, and five of Mansi's friends. Our cozy 2 BHK apartment transformed into something resembling a bustling start-up office, except instead of files and computers, it was packed with booze, snacks, and laughter.

By the time Akshay arrived, the party was already in full swing. Loud music pulsed through the dimly lit room, and small groups had formed in different corners of the house. Anuj and Maahi were seated with Mansi

and her friends on the couch, deep in a discussion about new startup ideas. Meanwhile, Deeksha and Raina were out on the balcony, engrossed in office gossip.

When Akshay walked in, I immediately took him outside to meet the girls.

‘Girls, meet Akshay,’ I said, gesturing towards him.

‘Akshay, this is Deeksha and this is Raina. We work together—Deeksha is my co-worker, and Raina’s from HR. But we’re great friends and gossip every day during lunch,’ I added with a chuckle.

The three of us laughed, but then I remembered something. ‘Hey, Akshay, you must know Raina, right? You were in talks with Mr. Sanjay Ahuja.’

‘Um... no,’ Raina and Akshay replied simultaneously, though their expressions couldn’t have been more different. Raina looked completely unbothered, while Akshay seemed a little uneasy.

‘I haven’t interviewed him,’ Raina clarified.

‘Yeah, I’m meeting her for the first time,’ Akshay added quickly, scratching his head as if trying to recall something. ‘It was some other lady I was communicating with.’

‘It could be Mona or –’

‘Yeah, yeah... Mona. It was Mona,’ Akshay said hurriedly, and we all exchanged glances.

‘So, Mona hasn’t come?’ Akshay asked.

‘Um, no. Mona and I aren’t friends,’ I replied, my eyes lingering on his nervous face.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked softly. He nodded, but his smile felt forced.

Before the moment could stretch any further, Mansi appeared with beer bottles, handing them out to each of us.

‘Why didn’t you bring any friends?’ she asked Akshay.

‘Nobody was free tonight,’ Akshay replied, and we all clinked our bottles together.

‘No worries. You can make new friends here,’ I said, taking a sip of my beer.

‘As long as I have you, I don’t need anyone else,’ Akshay whispered in my ear, his voice low and affectionate. He slid his arm around my waist and gently pulled me closer. Together, we took a few steps back, away from the group.

I blushed, glancing around to see if anyone was watching us. Everyone seemed absorbed in their own conversations, so Akshay leaned in, and we shared a quick, tender kiss.

‘Now, let’s enjoy the party!’ I whispered, leading him back inside to introduce him to the rest of the group.

As the evening unfolded, we settled into a circle of five or six people, including Mansi and some mutual

friends. Before I knew it, Mansi had casually revealed to everyone that Akshay and I were dating. Naturally, this sparked curiosity, and soon, everyone wanted to know how we'd met.

I wasn't in the mood to share the full story—it was too closely tied to my past, and I wasn't ready to open that door. But Maahi, now mellow from the drinks, was determined to get the truth out.

'So, Natasha and I met through a common friend,' Akshay said suddenly, cutting through the tension before I could come up with an answer.

I turned to him, startled. His words caught me off guard, and I had no idea where he was going with this. I glanced at Mansi, who smirked at me, silently urging me to go along with it.

'Yeah,' I said hesitantly. 'Akshay's childhood friend became my college friend... and, uh... became the common link between us.' I kept the explanation as brief as possible, hoping to steer the conversation away.

'Aw. Sweet,' Maahi said, her tone soft and satisfied.

I squeezed Akshay's hand, grateful for his quick thinking, even if it wasn't entirely true. Sometimes, a little improvisation was the best way to keep the peace.

'I want to play a rapid-fire round with you two,' Maahi announced, her voice cutting through the buzz of the room. Nobody seemed particularly enthusiastic about the idea—not Akshay, not me, not anyone else.

But Maahi was determined, oblivious to the lack of interest. She practically dragged us to the couch, grabbed a bottle of wine, and declared, ‘Here’s your *koffee* hamper, lovebirds.’

‘Now answer my questions, and let’s see who’s the better lover,’ she said, grinning mischievously. That got everyone’s attention, and a wave of curious glances turned towards us.

I looked at Mansi, silently begging her to put an end to Maahi’s antics. But Mansi, of course, was thoroughly enjoying the drama. She ignored me entirely, her smirk making it clear she wasn’t going to intervene.

‘Bring it on,’ Akshay said confidently, his voice steady and sure. I stared at him, astonished by his boldness. Reluctantly, I gave in to Maahi’s overly-excited impromptu talk show.

‘Natasha’s favorite color?’ Maahi began, her eyes twinkling.

Akshay hesitated, clearly thinking hard. I was certain he wouldn’t know—after all, we hadn’t been together long enough to talk about such details.

‘I’m torn between mauve and maroon. But I think it’s maroon,’ he said finally.

My jaw dropped. Those were, in fact, my favorite colors. How did he know this? We had never discussed it.

‘Wow! You guys have done your homework, huh?’ Maahi teased, while the rest of the crowd chuckled.

‘Favorite food cooked by Natasha?’ she continued.

‘Coffee. I love her coffee. And cheesecake too. Beyond that, I haven’t had much else cooked by her,’ Akshay admitted with a laugh.

‘Well, Natasha makes amazing *Dal Makhni*,’ Raina interjected, and Anuj, Maahi, and Deeksha chimed in with their agreement.

‘Wow. So, when are we cooking *Dal Makhni*?’ Akshay asked, his tone turning romantic as he looked at me.

‘Soon,’ I replied shyly, avoiding everyone’s gaze.

‘Tell us about her tattoo,’ Maahi pressed, and the room burst into whistles and hoots.

‘Um... I don’t know yet,’ Akshay answered without hesitation.

My stomach flipped. His admission struck a chord, and an unspoken thought stirred within me—a sudden longing to let him in completely, to share every part of myself with him. The realization left me breathless, but Maahi pulled me back to the present with another question.

‘Okay, so which physical feature of hers attracts you most?’

I groaned, hiding my face in my hands. ‘You’ve lost it completely, Maahi,’ I said, my voice loud with

embarrassment. But Akshay only chuckled, clearly enjoying himself.

‘Her long hair,’ he replied smoothly, earning another round of cheers. I felt like I was losing this game, outsmarted at every turn by his quick and confident answers.

‘Alright, describe Natasha in one word: sexy, beautiful, or elegant,’ Maahi prompted, her nose wrinkling in faux- seriousness.

‘A bit of all,’ Akshay said, smiling.

‘You’re being cheesy now, you know that?’ she quipped.

‘I’m just being honest,’ he countered with a shrug.

‘What’s Natasha’s weirdest habit?’

Akshay didn’t miss a beat. ‘Her taste buds are... unique. She eats *Puran Poli* with *Dhaniye ki Chutney* and noodles with *Punjabi Kadhi*.’

‘What the actual—’ someone exclaimed, and the room erupted into laughter and incredulous commentary.

‘That’s nothing,’ Mansi shouted over the noise. ‘She mixes Maggi with oats!’

The hooting intensified, but I ignored everyone, my focus entirely on Akshay. How did he know this? We had never discussed it, yet he spoke as if he’d witnessed it firsthand.

‘Alright, final question,’ Maahi announced, quieting the room. ‘What about Natasha scares you or makes you apprehensive?’

Akshay hesitated for the first time. His expression softened, as though he was carefully weighing his response. The room fell silent, everyone waiting for him to speak.

‘I don’t want to break her trust. Ever. That’s what scares me,’ he said finally, his voice low but firm.

A collective ‘Aww’ erupted from the group, followed by clapping and murmurs of admiration. ‘Your guy is legit awesome, Natasha!’ someone called out, but I barely heard the noise. Akshay’s words echoed in my mind, sinking deeper with each passing second. I knew exactly why he’d said it—he was aware of the wounds left behind by his twin brother.

We locked eyes, the unspoken connection between us more powerful than anything that had just been said.

‘And now, your turn,’ Maahi declared, dragging me out of the moment.

‘No, no, no. I am NOT playing this silly game,’ I protested, but my refusal fell on deaf ears.

‘Here’s your first question,’ Maahi began with a triumphant grin. ‘What’s Akshay’s favorite car?’

Panic set in. I had no clue, but I tried to piece together an answer based on his style and personality. Akshay watched me with a curious smile as I deliberated.

‘Time’s up!’ Maahi declared. ‘Akshay, your answer?’

‘I have a car because I need one. But I don’t fancy them. I fancy bikes,’ he replied casually.

‘Okay, next question,’ Maahi continued relentlessly. ‘Favorite clothing brand?’

‘Um... not sure. But maybe t-shirts from Uniqlo?’ I guessed with a mischievous smile. Akshay chuckled, amused by my attempt.

‘It’s their own little secret,’ Mansi interjected with a wink. ‘Let Maahi carry on.’

‘Tell us the craziest thing you’ve done together,’ Maahi pressed.

I racked my brain, but nothing felt worthy of the title ‘crazy.’ ‘The craziness is yet to come,’ I said simply.

‘Alright. Next question: which superhero character does Akshay remind you of?’

‘Iron Man,’ I said confidently. ‘Because he’s witty and super intelligent.’

‘Wait—does Akshay also have Tony Stark’s ego?’ someone teased.

‘Tony Stark isn’t a super hero, Iron Man is,’ I quipped, earning a round of applause.

‘Final question,’ Maahi declared. ‘What about Akshay scares you most?’

This one stumped me. I hadn't thought about it before, but the weight of the question pressed down on me. 'I don't know. I haven't thought about it till now,' I answered, my voice quieter.

Sensing my unease, I quickly tried to shift the mood. 'Are we done now? Let's get back to the party!' I clapped my hands and escaped to the kitchen, where I gulped down water and tried to calm my racing thoughts.

Akshay followed me, his concern evident.

'All okay?' he asked, gently holding my hand.

'Yeah,' I replied, forcing a smile.

'Don't worry. It was just a fun game,' he said softly, leading me to the balcony.

Once we were alone, he asked, 'Tell me what's bothering you?'

'How do you know so much about me?' I asked, my voice laced with both curiosity and apprehension.

'You already know how,' he said, his steady gaze meeting mine.

I bit my lower lip and confessed, 'Akshay, it scares me. This truth that you know more about me than I can expect from someone I've just started dating... it makes me feel uncertain. Vulnerable.' My voice wavered, and I exhaled heavily, feeling tears prick the corners of my eyes.

He didn't interrupt, just let me speak.

‘I know it’s tough for you. It’s tough for me too,’ he said finally. ‘But when I’m with you, everything feels right. I stop worrying about anything else.’

His words calmed me in a way I couldn’t explain. ‘I understand things might get weird in the future... but we’ll work it out together, won’t we?’

‘Yes,’ I whispered, feeling the comfort I desperately needed. We hugged, the world fading away for a moment, before we returned to the party.

Chapter 9

Is It Really 'Us' Now?

Akshay pinged me on Friday: *When are we making Dal Makhni?*

We? As in you want to help me? I replied, a teasing smile spread across my face.

Well, yes! I can make a good dal too. So, I can easily learn Makhni Dal from you.'

Okay. It has to be soaked overnight. Tomorrow is Saturday. Should we make it then?

Tomorrow is tough. I told you about my day-night cricket match, didn't I?

Oh yes, I forgot, Mr. Kohli! 😊

Sunday?

As you say, Captain Kohli! 😊

So, we'll test your culinary skills on Sunday then!

Cool!

And just like that, Akshay and I got ourselves a plan to cook *Dal Makhni* together.

‘Cooking together is such a sexy thing to do,’ Mansi cheered when I told her about the plan.

‘This guy is so romantic, Natasha!’ she gushed, her excitement contagious. I laughed at her animated face, feeling a little giddy myself.

By Sunday morning, I had already soaked the black gram, planning for three people. Mansi, who had gone to visit her friend, updated me around noon that she had decided to stay over at her friend’s place for the night and had no intention of intruding. With a teasing tone, she made it clear she wasn’t about to interfere with what she called my “special date.” Her parting words lingered in my mind, wishing me well for my first-ever “cooked-together” meal with Akshay. Her words carried just the right amount of sarcasm, and I replied with a fingers-crossed emoji, silently thanking her for the privacy.

It was July, and the monsoon had decided to grace us with a rare, full-day drizzle. For a pluviophile like me, it was pure bliss—especially since rain is a rare treat in Gurugram, even during the season. The streets, of course, weren’t as joyful. Waterlogged highways and endless traffic jams became the city’s unfortunate backdrop.

Even Rupa Didi, our cook, had taken the day off due to the weather. Left to my own devices, I started considering alternatives. If I had to order *naan* or *lachcha paratha*, there was no guarantee the delivery would make it through the rain. *Rotis* wouldn’t do justice

to *Dal Makhni*, and the thought of failed food logistics left me a bit restless.

Just as these thoughts circled my mind, my phone rang. It was Akshay, calling from Delhi, where he'd gone for some work. He planned to come directly to my place afterward.

'The navigation says it'll take another two hours to get there. The traffic is insane,' he said.

I glanced at the clock—it was already 6:30.

'Yeah, I know. I read about it on my news app,' I replied, trying to mask my concern.

'Don't worry. I'll get there. The *dal* might have to wait, but it will definitely happen,' he reassured me, and just like that, his words lifted my mood.

'What sort of bread do you want with it? *Naan*? *Lachchha Paratha*? I need to order in advance given the weather,' I asked.

'*Matar Pulao* would be great if it's possible. Otherwise, *Zeera Rice* works too,' he replied, his voice calm but focused on driving.

His reply unexpectedly reminded me of Akul. He'd loved the same combination. 'Same blood,' my mind murmured before I firmly silenced it. We hung up, and I got to work soaking rice and pulling out the frozen peas.

With a couple of hours to kill, I decided to pass the time by calling my cousins and friends.

Two hours later, the wait was over.

I opened the door while still on the phone. ‘Okay, Maa. Send me the profiles. I’ll look at them and shortlist. But remember, it’s going to be MY decision, okay? My final word,’ I said firmly.

Akshay walked in, quietly observing the conversation, his forehead creasing slightly. I ended the call and turned to him, only to find him frowning.

‘What was that about?’ he asked, his tone careful but clearly curious.

I chuckled, leaning forward to place a quick kiss on his cheek. ‘Was your mom talking about your marriage?’ he pressed, his brows furrowing even more.

‘Yes,’ I replied breezily, heading to the kitchen.

Akshay followed, watching me as I moved around, but he stayed silent. I deliberately didn’t say anything either as I wanted to tease him a little. After a long pause, his patience broke.

‘Natasha, we need to talk,’ he said, turning off the stove burner. ‘Come outside.’

Before I could protest, he grabbed my hand and led me to the sofa, sitting on the floor in front of me, bent on his knees.

‘Why are you talking to your mom about marriage?’ he asked, his voice tight with emotion.

‘Because in Indian society, getting married is considered a good thing. And in my family, it’s pretty much mandatory,’ I quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

‘That’s not what I’m asking,’ he said, frustrated. ‘I’m asking if there’s something between us. Or... is this all just casual to you?’

His words caught me off guard. ‘Of course not,’ I said firmly. ‘You know I’m not the kind of person who gets into flings.’

‘I do. But then why the whole ‘send me profiles, Maa’ conversation? It didn’t sound like a joke to me,’ he said, his voice trembling slightly.

I stared at him, momentarily at a loss for words. Then, taking his hand in mine, I said, ‘Akshay, listen to me. I’m 27, and like most sensible Indian parents, mine want their daughter to settle down. But that doesn’t mean I’m not committed to you.’

‘Then why not tell them about us?’ he asked impatiently.

‘Because I’m not sure about us yet,’ I admitted softly. His expression fell, hurt flashing in his eyes.

‘Do you think I don’t love you? Or that I’m not good enough to be your life partner?’ His voice faltered, breaking slightly at the end of his question.

‘No, it’s not that, Akshay,’ I began to explain gently, ‘I love you, and I’m fully committed to us.... But marriage... it feels like rushing something so beautiful, something we’re still building. This relationship is new, and every moment with you feels incredible—more than I could have imagined. But there’s so much about each other we’ve yet to uncover, so many layers to understand and grow into.’

I paused, searching his eyes for understanding. ‘A lifelong commitment deserves clarity and certainty, don’t you think? Not just certainty—we need to be 500% sure. I just don’t want us to make a decision we’re not ready for and risk losing what we have now. You mean too much to me to let that happen.’

Akshay nodded, but his eyes still held a hint of disappointment.

‘And about the profiles,’ I continued, ‘my parents registered me on matrimony sites—not me. They don’t know about you yet. But I’ll introduce you to them when the time is right.’

‘The ‘right time,’ huh? You sound so filmy,’ he said with a small, annoyed laugh.

‘No, Akshay. I’m being practical. And if you’re so sure about us, why don’t you tell your parents first?’ I countered.

He looked startled but quickly recovered. ‘I will. I’m going to my cousin’s wedding soon, and I’ll talk to them face-to-face,’ he said confidently.

‘Really?’ I asked, skeptical.

‘Yes,’ he said firmly.

‘And what will you tell them? That you’re dating the same girl your twin brother did?’ I blurted without thinking. The moment the words left my mouth, I regretted as I didn’t want to bring up that topic.

‘He was a loser. I’m not,’ Akshay said quietly. ‘I can’t afford to lose you. I love you, Natasha. I love you a lot.’

Hearing him say those words for the first time was like the world shifting on its axis. The weight of the moment pressed around us, the silence humming with an intensity I couldn’t ignore. Slowly, he leaned closer, his forehead resting gently against mine, our breaths mingling, our noses barely brushing in a touch that felt as delicate as it was profound.

And then, we kissed. It was soft but electric, unraveling every doubt that either of us had held onto.

As always, the moment was interrupted—my phone rang. It was Maahi. I answered, but before getting up, I whispered, ‘I love you too’ in his ear. His lips curled into a smile.

Akshay motioned for tea as he stretched out on the floor. I laughed, made tea, and we slipped back into an easy rhythm. Together, we cooked *Dal Makhni*, laughing as Akshay’s eyes watered while chopping onions. Briefly, a memory of Akul cooking Maggi with me flickered in

my mind, but I brushed it aside and focused on the present—the beautiful, messy, joyful present.

Throughout the cooking process, Akshay stayed close. His warm breath brushed against my skin, his cologne mingling with the kitchen spices. We shared stolen kisses and casual touches, a comfortable intimacy building. He prepared *Matar Pulao*, and it was around 11.30 when a super hungry couple started eating. The rain outside intensified, a steady rhythm that underscored our quiet focus on the food. We looked at each other and shared a chuckle at our silent meal.

While clearing the table, my phone chimed with a notification beep. Mansi's message: *Wassup?*

Just finished dinner. I replied.

And dessert will be served in bed? 😊 she shot back.

I laughed silently, not wanting Akshay to overhear.
LOL

Looking forward to hearing your night story tomorrow! she wrote, adding a suggestive GIF. I put my phone away without replying to her.

‘I should probably leave,’ Akshay said with a hesitant look in his eyes.

‘But the rain,’ I countered, ‘and the roads are clogged.’

‘So, you want me to stay?’ he asked, a hopeful glint in his eyes.

I laughed, a little shyly. 'Let's just talk for a while longer.' He took my hand, leading me to the couch.

By 12:10, we were deep in conversation, shifting positions, holding hands, attempting short naps that never quite materialized. Two hours flew by, filled with coffee and random topics. At 2:40, Akshay had his head in my lap, holding my hand. We hadn't kissed in hours, an odd absence that made me acutely aware of the tension between us. My feelings were a pendulum, swinging between desire and uncertainty. What was happening? What *should* happen? How did people navigate these moments?

'You look tired,' he said, sitting up.

'Yeah,' I mumbled. 'We should probably sleep.'

'We have work tomorrow,' he said, though I wasn't sure if he was convincing himself or me. He stood up and put on his shoes.

He's leaving. Stop him. The voice inside me was insistent.

'But the roads,' I said, 'what if your car breaks down?'

'I don't think that'll be a problem,' he said. 'But I might work from home tomorrow.'

'Me too,' I replied, then, with a surge of boldness, 'Would you want to stay? You can sleep in my room, and I'll take Mansi's.' I held my breath, dreading a 'no.'

He looked into my eyes, then nodded. I exhaled, relieved.

‘I’m fine on the couch,’ he suggested. ‘You can take your room.’

I handed him a sheet and pillow, avoiding his gaze. I wanted to kiss him goodnight but hesitated, unsure of myself. As I entered my room, I glanced back and saw him stretched out on the couch. A feeling of awkwardness crept in, but I didn’t know how to fix it.

I locked the door, yet my thoughts stayed outside. Every sound from the living room drew my attention—the rustling of the couch, the faint sound of sports commentary. He was awake, just like me.

Unable to hold back, I got up and unlocked the door. The soft click broke the silence. He heard it but didn’t move, unsure of what it meant. He then heard my footsteps—coming closer, pausing, and retreating. The air felt heavy, filled with unspoken thoughts.

He got up and quietly came to my door. The room was dark, but he could make out the furniture. He couldn’t find me.

‘Natasha, are you okay?’ he whispered.

I stepped out from behind the door. ‘Yeah. Can’t sleep?’

We stared at each other, a silent conversation passing between us. Then, he took a deep breath, grabbed my waist, and kissed me. His grip was tight, a clear

expression of his desire. We kissed, and then went into my room. That night, at 27, I lost my virginity.



As Natasha spoke these words, her voice faltered, and she drifted into the memory, vividly reliving every sensation and thought. Nikhil and Mansi exchanged a glance but didn't say a word. They simply waited, giving Natasha the space she needed. Mansi even suspected Natasha might cry, and for a fleeting second, she nearly did. But she steadied herself, taking a quiet breath, and refused to let the tears fall. She blinked away the lingering traces of emotion and returned to the present, ready to speak again.



We barely slept an hour. When my alarm went off at 7, seeing him next to me felt strangely refreshing. I took his hand in mine.

'I really like your hair long,' he murmured, his words echoing in the quiet intimacy of the morning. 'Especially when it... falls like that.' A blush warmed my cheeks, and I bit my lip, unable to form a coherent reply. It was his first compliment since the night before.

‘Were you... a virgin?’ I asked. He chuckled, a low, knowing sound. ‘I see,’ I replied with a touch of satire in my voice, and shifted closer.

‘So, when was your first time?’ I asked, tracing the line of his jaw. He hesitated, then met my gaze.

‘College,’ he said, ‘last year. Then... a bit of a gap. A short thing with someone from work, but it didn't last.’ A small, awkward laugh filled the silence.

‘And you?’ he asked. I shook my head, closing my eyes as the lingering sensations of the night washed over me. He stroked my back, and I sighed, a mixture of pleasure and contentment. We made love again, a single tear escaping down my temple.

‘I'll order a pack of contraceptive pill,’ he said, reaching for his phone. I didn't object, remaining still as he placed the order. A bit later, the mundane reality of the day—work, deadlines—interfered. I pulled on my t-shirt, searched for a hairband, finding one near the mirror. As I tied my hair back, he wrapped his arms around me from behind. We looked at our reflections, our eyes slightly swollen, our hair a mess, yet a strange, shared freshness in our faces. He kissed my neck, and I smiled at him in the mirror.

‘We look good together,’ I murmured. He nodded. ‘Ak-sha-y, Nata-sha. We even share *'sha'*,’ I said playfully.

Akshay's grip loosened. A faint line of worry appeared on his forehead. I turned to face him.

‘Everything alright?’ I asked gently. He hesitantly took his steps back.

‘Yeah... everything is fine,’ he said, scratching his temple, avoiding my gaze. His voice lacked conviction, and the way he refused to look at me only deepened my unease. ‘I just... remembered something urgent at office. I’ll have to rush.’

‘Have some tea or coffee first,’ I offered, but he declined, quickly scanning the living area for his shoes. The moment he spotted them, he slipped them on hurriedly and left without another word. His sudden departure felt strange, unsettling. We had just been intimate, and now this?

There was no text or call from him afterward. I was left with a concerning unease, trying to rationalize his behavior. Was it insecurity? A genuine emergency? My gut told me something was wrong.

‘*What’s up?*’ I texted, finally pushing aside the nagging doubts. Lunchtime, a sliver of normalcy, and I needed to hear from him.

His reply was immediate: ‘*Out for a meeting. Will call you this evening.*’

‘*Okay,*’ I typed back, the simple word smoothing out the worry lines on my forehead.

Raina, Deeksha, and Maahi were chattering about the party at my place few days ago, and like a switch being flipped, my mind was back in that dark place.

Akshay's unease when I'd introduced him to Raina, his reaction to her mentioning the job offer—they were small things, but they were starting to connect, forming a disturbing pattern.

Why had he bumped into me twice? Why was he so nonchalant about my history with Akul? Why that specific shirt on our first date? And the blank Facebook profile—it was like he was erasing himself.

I tried to shake off the paranoia, but the questions were relentless, a constant, irritating buzz in my head. Was he hiding something?

'He says he loves me,' I muttered to my reflection in the restroom mirror, 'and he acts like it. But then there's this... this undercurrent. This feeling that he's not as invested as he pretends to be.'

I was trapped in a loop of 'what ifs.' If I confronted him, would he think I was suspicious? Would it ruin everything?

And then, a new, terrifying thought surfaced, one that made my blood run cold. No. No, it couldn't be. My eyes widened, my lips pressed together in a silent scream. There was only one person who could give me answers.



'Mansi,' Nikhil interrupted.

‘Yeah, Mansi,’ Natasha replied, continuing her thoughts.



‘You need to talk to Mansi about this. But first, calm down, Natasha.’ I whispered the words to myself, took a few deep breaths, and sent her a message: *Need to talk about something important in the evening.*

After that, I headed back to work, trying to focus. Later, when Akshay called me in the evening, he suggested coming over. It was just a regular conversation, nothing grand, but it did soothe my chaotic mind. All the fears that had plagued me throughout the day dissolved. In the end, none of them were as powerful as the love I felt for him.

‘Such a hectic day. I’m exhausted,’ I said, slumping onto the couch. ‘I’m having a bad headache, and my shoulders feel like they’re going to fall off.’

‘Sounds like someone’s asking for a massage,’ Akshay teased, sitting beside me.

I turned towards him, my exhaustion momentarily forgotten. ‘You’re offering?’

Without waiting for a response, he placed his hands on my shoulders and began massaging. My eyes closed almost instantly, and a relieved sigh escaped me. As he

worked on my tense muscles, I found myself melting into his touch, little moans of gratitude slipping out.

Akshay, evidently, was enjoying this more than he let on. His hands wandered gently, and before I knew it, he unbuttoned my shirt. My breath hitched as I moved closer to him, his hungry eyes meeting mine. We kissed, his touch lingering on my neck, shoulders, and arms, until—of course—the doorbell rang.

Mansi. Again.

We exchanged an exasperated look, already mourning the lost moment.

‘Go on,’ Akshay said, handing me my shirt with a mischievous grin.

‘Coming,’ I shouted for her to hear me.

‘But you didn’t *come*,’ he teased in a whisper and I burst into laughter, quickly slipping my shirt back on and buttoning it as fast as I could while he went to open the door.

Mansi’s expression paused for a split second when she saw Akshay, but she recovered quickly. When her eyes met mine, I could tell she had realized her untimely arrival.

‘Special coffee coming up,’ she announced, heading to the kitchen. Her ‘special’ coffee was her subtle way of giving us time—it took at least fifteen minutes to prepare. She even threw in a not-so-subtle suggestion

that Akshay and I could ‘finish our ongoing work’ in my room, which I deflected with a laugh.

As we sipped coffee, Mansi said, ‘Oh, by the way, Natasha, we still haven’t watched *Kabir Singh*. Everyone is talking about the movie. *Chal naa!*’

‘Hmm... let’s do it next weekend,’ I said, glancing at Akshay.

‘You should join us too,’ I offered, but Akshay looked at Mansi and replied, ‘Actually, I have a wedding to attend back home. I’m leaving two days before, so I don’t think I can make it. You two carry on.’

‘Oh, right. You mentioned that wedding,’ I said, nodding.

‘So... um... will your brother be there too?’ Mansi asked, her curiosity breaking through her casual tone.

Her question caught both Akshay and me off guard.

‘Yeah, hopefully,’ he answered, a fleeting frown crossing his face. I bit my lower lip, unsure of how to respond. Mansi and I exchanged a quick glance, but we didn’t press the topic.

‘Anyway, if there’s nothing else planned, let’s do a movie marathon this weekend. What do you say?’ Mansi suggested, breaking the lull.

‘What genre?’ Akshay and I asked in unison, sharing a chuckle.

Despite the laughter, deciding on movies turned into a challenge. Akshay's taste leaned heavily towards action and thrillers, while Mansi and I were die-hard fans of romantic comedies.

'Dude, *DDLJ*, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kal Ho Naa Ho*... you must've seen these classics, right?' Mansi asked, her voice loaded with disbelief.

Akshay gave her a helpless look before laughing. 'Everyone's seen those movies. But generally speaking, they're not really my thing.'

'Okay, fine. But surely there's *some* romantic movie you like. Maybe *Titanic*?' Mansi pressed on.

Her persistence reminded me of Maahi's rapid-fire game from the party, and for a brief moment, my doubts resurfaced. But I quickly brushed them aside and joined Mansi in waiting for Akshay's answer. His silence was enough to convey his disinterest.

'You're seriously not her type, Akshay,' Mansi declared dramatically. 'Natasha is all about *Govinda*, *Akshay Kumar*, *Salman Khan*. She's the definition of a masala movie fan. And you... well, you're—'

'Okay, okay. Let's just do a Govinda movie marathon like the good old college days,' Akshay interrupted, rolling his eyes.

'I'm in!' I said quickly, eager to end the conversation. 'It's settled. Govinda movie marathon tomorrow.'

‘Done,’ Akshay agreed, checking the time on his phone. ‘I need to make an important call in half an hour, so I’ll leave now.’

I walked him to the parking lot.

‘You want to ask me something, don’t you?’ Akshay said, catching me off guard.

‘How do you do that?’ I asked, startled, smiling a bit hesitantly.

‘I can read your face. So? What’s on your mind?’ he prodded gently.

Taking a deep breath, I asked, ‘The other day, you said you’d tell your parents about me. But... if Akul is going to be there, how will you do it?’

Akshay exhaled, his gaze softening. ‘It’s going to be awkward. Difficult. Different. I don’t have a plan right now, and honestly, I don’t know how I’ll handle it. But I will. Trust me—I’ll figure it out without making a mess.’

His words were earnest, and his smile was reassuring. I squeezed his hand in silent gratitude as we said goodbye. Watching him drive away, I felt a mix of hope and apprehension.

As soon as I walked through the door, Mansi was ready with her question. ‘What was it that you wanted to talk about?’ she asked casually, but her words felt like I had been jolted into another world. The comforting evening I’d spent with Akshay had made me forget all

the doubts and fears that had consumed me throughout the day. But now that he was gone, and Mansi had brought it up, my mind was back in that unsettled place.

It felt even harder to talk to her about it now—I had bothered her about this so many times before. Still, I realized I wouldn't feel okay unless I shared it.

'Mansi, I want to talk to you about Akshay again,' I started hesitantly.

'Let me guess—Akshay still reminds you of Akul,' she interrupted, her expression already showing signs of frustration.

'Um... yeah. But not in the same way as before,' I said, fumbling for the right words.

'What do you mean?' she asked, frowning as she headed to the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of water and leaned against the counter, waiting for me to continue.

'I mean, there have been moments... incidents... where it feels like Akshay isn't Akshay, but Akul.'

'What?' Mansi looked baffled, putting down her glass with more force than necessary. 'Do you even understand what you're saying—or thinking for that matter? Natasha, seriously, you need to see a psychiatrist. Your brain is cooking up stories every single day!' Her tone was sharp, but my silence made her soften slightly.

‘Look,’ she said, lowering her voice. ‘They’re twins. Not just their faces, but their body language, the way they speak—it’s bound to be similar—’

‘No, no, no. You’re not getting my point, Mansi,’ I interrupted. ‘There are specific things—little details—that don’t add up. They’re creating a mystery about his identity. And while I’d be relieved if I’m proven wrong, these doubts... they won’t leave me alone.’

A frown appeared on my face, and Mansi shook her head, clearly trying to process what I was saying.

‘Babe, are you trying to tell me that... there’s no Akshay? That it’s actually Akul pretending to be him?’ she asked, her tone cautious but inquisitive.

‘Possibly,’ I replied quietly.

‘Ooo... so you mean he’s come back for you?’ Mansi’s question startled me, her tone surprisingly hopeful.

‘Mansi, that’s not the point. Why would he hide behind his brother’s identity? That’s the real question,’ I clarified.

‘Hmmm... So how do we figure this out? Do you have his home phone number—parents, landline, anything? We could place a fake call and dig for clues.’

‘No, I don’t have any phone numbers, emails, or even a house address,’ I admitted.

‘Okay... fingerprints?’

‘Are you nuts? Why would I have Akul’s fingerprints? And even if I did, how would we get them checked? That’s something that requires a proper, legal process!’

‘Fair point. That was stupid. Let me think,’ she said, moving back to the couch.

‘Okay, you’ve seen Akul before, but I haven’t. Do you remember anything distinctive—a birthmark, a mole? Something Akshay might have too?’

‘I told you before, Mansi—it wasn’t entirely physical with Akul. If my strict parents had found out that I was involved with a guy like this, they would have dragged me back home and married me off immediately. My career would have ended before it even began. So no, I don’t know of any distinct birthmark or mole.’

‘Anything on the face?’ she asked after a pause.

‘Yeah... I think Akul had a brownish mole near his jawline. But Akshay has a thick beard, so how do we check?’

‘Right. Even if they’re twins, moles can’t possibly grow in the exact same place—they develop later in life. Simple. Ask him to shave. He’s your boyfriend; he’ll follow your command,’ Mansi suggested with a sly grin.

‘And what if he thinks I’m doubting him?’ I countered.

‘Well, then you need to keep your acting convincing,’ she replied.

‘So, he’s coming for the movie marathon. I’ll ask him to shave his beard for me. Maybe even tell him I’ll do it for him,’ I said, already hatching a plan in my mind.

‘Exactly,’ Mansi said, nodding.

That night, I couldn’t stop thinking about Akul and Akshay—their similarities, the unanswered questions. Akshay didn’t have a Facebook account, he wore the same shirt I’d gifted to Akul, he somehow knew my favorite color and my odd food habits. One part of my brain presented these as evidence that he might be Akul, while the other side fought back, calling them baseless assumptions.

Between the battle of thoughts and the uncertainty, sleep felt like a distant luxury. I kept turning the plan over in my mind, desperate for clarity about who Akshay really was.

Under surveillance

On Sunday, Akshay arrived right on time for the movie marathon, and we kicked things off with *Raja Babu* around 9 a.m.

When should we start with the plan? I pinged Mansi from my corner of the couch.

She replied: *Wait. We have the whole day... Show some patience, or you'll blow the cover.*

By the time we finished *Raja Babu* around noon, it was time to pick the second movie. Mansi wanted to watch *Haseena Maan Jayegi*, while I was leaning towards a Govinda-Raveena classic.

'Let's watch *Sajan Chale Sasural*,' Akshay suggested after a quick Google search of Govinda's movies.

'I haven't seen this one,' he added, and I turned to him in disbelief.

'I don't believe this. You're my boyfriend, but you're siding with Mansi? It's a Govinda-Karishma movie!' I exclaimed, throwing a mock glare at Mansi. She raised

her eyebrows at me, clearly trying to signal something, but I was too caught up in my faux outrage to decode it.

Then, Mansi flashed a V sign with her fingers, but again, I was too distracted to understand.

Akshay glanced at her, and she quickly opened her entire palm, pretending to stretch. *Sajan Chale Sasural* also has Tabu, Natasha. Do you even remember the movie? Govinda plays a DOUBLE ROLE in it,' she said, raising her eyebrows again, this time more pointedly.

And then it clicked. 'Oh yeah, now I remember. Tabu's in it too, and I like Tabu,' I said, playing along.

To keep things natural, I paused for a moment before adding, 'Okay, let's watch *Sajan Chale Sasural*.'

'There's also *Dulhe Raja*, *Bade Miyan Chote Miyan*, *Aunty No. 1* – ' Akshay began scrolling through the list.

'That's it! We're watching *Sajan Chale Sasural* now,' I interrupted, putting an end to the debate.

'Fine, but I think you should decide on the third movie now. Otherwise, we'll end up arguing again,' Akshay suggested, trying to avoid another round of indecision.

'Alright. My pick for the third movie is *Bade Miyan Chote Miyan*,' I declared.

'But Raveena hardly has a role in that one. It's all about Amitabh and Govinda,' Mansi argued, winking at me to keep the conversation looking genuine.

‘It’s still a great movie. Amitabh and Govinda both have double roles in it,’ I countered.

‘I think I’ve already seen that one. Didn’t it release alongside *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*?’ Akshay chimed in, momentarily derailing our telepathic plan. When neither Mansi nor I responded, he added, ‘No problem. I can watch it again.’

‘Good,’ Mansi and I said in unison.

‘I’m starving. What’s for brunch?’ I asked, changing the subject.

‘Sunday is usually a pizza day,’ Mansi said quickly, glancing at us. Akshay and I nodded in agreement, and we placed an order quickly.

‘Listen, watch the movie carefully. We might get some ideas on how to confront Akshay... or Akul... or whoever,’ Mansi whispered while we poured Coke into glasses. Her words left me bewildered.

‘You mean we’re going to use movie theories on him? Are you insane? He’s watching these movies with us. Won’t he catch on?’ I hissed back.

‘Silly, if he’s lying, he’ll definitely get anxious during certain scenes,’ she explained, and suddenly, her logic made sense.

We watched *Sajan Chale Sasural* and *Bade Miyan Chote Miyan*, keeping a close eye on Akshay for any signs of discomfort. But to our disappointment, he thoroughly enjoyed both movies. Not a single scene seemed to faze

him—his expressions stayed firmly in the realm of laughter and amusement.

Frustrated, Mansi and I retreated to her room to regroup.

‘This isn’t working,’ I said, feeling hopeless.

‘YOU MORON!’ Mansi snapped. ‘You’re upset because your plan is failing? HE IS AKSHAY. That’s why he’s so chill and enjoying the movies. But you’ve already decided in your head that he’s Akul. STOP ASSUMING NOW!’

Her words hit me, and I stayed silent, mulling them over.

‘But...’ Mansi paused, then added, ‘If you want to do a second test, ask him to shave off the beard. See if that mole is there.’

I nodded, feeling a mix of determination and doubt.

After the movies, Akshay and I were chatting on the couch. I held his hand, absentmindedly tracing circles with my thumb. Seizing the right moment, I said, ‘You’d look even cuter without this beard.’ I smiled affectionately, running my fingers through it.

‘Your wish is my command, Madam! I’ll shave it tomorrow,’ Akshay replied without hesitation.

I was stunned. I hadn’t expected him to agree so easily. I’d braced myself for excuses, for resistance. His instant approval left me feeling both guilty and

uncertain. What if I was wrong? What if I was letting my doubts ruin something real?

For three days, Akshay and I couldn't meet—his workload kept him in the office until late. When we finally met, I noticed he still hadn't shaved. I reasoned to myself that he must have been busy with work, but I couldn't resist asking, 'You didn't shave?'

He paused for a moment before replying, 'Yeah, I thought about it, Natasha. Actually, I want to keep this look for my cousin's wedding. Do you mind if I shave after that?'

His response caught me off guard, though I tried to mask my surprise. I managed a smile and nodded in agreement.

'There's another reason, too,' he added, tugging at his beard lightly. 'It's really thick, and it won't be easy to shave. I'll probably need to get it done professionally at a salon.'

'Oh. Okay,' I replied, fighting the urge to express my frustration. The suspense—or maybe it was the doubt—was driving me mad, and I was desperate for clarity.

Later, I narrated the whole thing to Mansi.

'Hm,' she said thoughtfully, then added, 'Well, you can't push him now. Actually, you shouldn't. He's made his decision, and you have to respect that.'

I exhaled deeply, feeling a mix of irritation and resignation. Sensing my mood, Mansi tried to lighten the atmosphere.

‘His other reason is valid too, you know. Thick hair takes time to manage. Like, we trim our hair *there* before waxing—’ she gestured humorously, ‘—so it’s the same principle, whether it’s growing on a man’s skin or a woman’s.’ She laughed at her own comment, but I stayed quiet, my thoughts still tangled up.

‘Babe, listen... I’d say don’t push him about the shaving anymore. If he realizes you’re up to something, he might not take it well. And since you’re still in the early stages of this relationship, it’s best to let things unfold naturally,’ Mansi advised gently. I remained silent, caught in the whirlwind of my thoughts. ‘But what if...’ I began hesitantly but didn’t finish the sentence. Mansi, however, already knew what I was going to ask. ‘And what if your assumptions turn out to be wrong? You’ll regret letting these doubts get the better of you and ruining something good over baseless worries.’

‘If my doubts are just doubts, I’ll be relieved, Mansi. But right now, that 1% suspicion feels heavier than the 99% trust I have in him. Because if it’s true... you know how quickly everything could spiral out of control.’

She watched me closely, clearly trying to figure out how to help me find peace.

‘Okay, let me ask you this,’ Mansi said after a pause. ‘When you’re with Akshay, and there’s nothing else on your mind—literally nothing—how do you feel in those moments?’

Her question forced me to confront my feelings. I thought deeply, and we sat in silence while I analyzed the answer. Finally, I spoke, ‘When it’s just the two of us in our own little world, everything feels right. He makes me feel special... like I’m the only one who matters. And in those moments, I have no doubts.’

Mansi’s eyes lit up at my response. ‘See, that’s what you need to focus on. That feeling. Hold onto it,’ she said, patting my hand.

We shared a smile, and at that moment, the doorbell rang.

‘Must be Rupa Didi,’ Mansi said, getting up to answer it.

‘*Aaj late kar diya, Rupa Didi,*’ she commented as she opened the door.

‘*Neeche wale ke ghar mei mehmaan aaya hai, toh khana zyada banana tha,*’ Rupa Didi explained before heading to the kitchen.

‘When’s Akshay leaving for his hometown?’ Mansi asked as she returned to the couch.

‘Saturday evening. The wedding’s on Tuesday, and he said he’d be back next Sunday,’ I replied.

Chapter 11

Behind the mask

The nightmare came back, as strong as ever. Same scene, every time. A truck barreling down behind my car, the deafening crunch of metal, the screech of tires. I survived, unhurt on the outside, but inside? I was shattered. The pain felt real, suffocating. I cried, but no sound came out. People were there—helpful strangers reaching out—but I couldn't react. I just sat there, hollow, like a puppet with its strings cut.

And as always, the dream ripped me out of sleep, leaving my chest tight and my mind racing. Only this time, it struck on a weekend midnight, robbing me of the one thing I had looked forward to: a peaceful night's rest. I hated it even more for that.

The girls' day out was supposed to be carefree fun—watching *Kabir Singh* at CP followed by a delightful lunch, and some street shopping. But life doesn't always follow the script. As I admired a pair of junk jewelry earrings, my gaze caught something familiar in the distance. I looked again, harder this time. It was him. Akul. Time hadn't erased his college look—clean-shaven, casual brown shrug over a t-shirt. Beside him

stood a woman in a floral top, her presence unfamiliar and strangely unsettling. They exchanged words briefly, then disappeared into Manyavar's showroom.

I stood frozen, rooted to the spot. *It's him. It has to be.* My thoughts scrambled, memories rushing in. Should I approach him? Should I tell him about Akshay and me? The thought of seeing his reaction—of confronting him after so many years—was an intoxicating pull. But another part of me hesitated. Shouldn't I talk to Akshay first, ask his permission? My emotions collided like restless waves, each crashing into the other.

Mansi bargained zealously nearby, blissfully unaware of my turmoil. I made my decision. Without overthinking, I followed my feet, heading for the showroom. *Just go. Be calm, be polite. What's bygone is bygone.* My heart thudded in my ears as I crossed the threshold, scanning the floor desperately. He wasn't there. Frustration swelled. Then, I spotted him upstairs. He was with the woman, speaking to a salesman, their faces focused on *sherwanis*. My phone buzzed—it was Mansi.

'Akul's here,' I said, my voice trembling. 'Come to Manyavar, first floor.'

From behind a crowd of customers, I watched him. He looked like the Akul I knew, but sharper, polished—stubble framing his jaw, hair styled just so. My nerves rattled. *You can do this. There's no shame in facing someone from your past.* Bracing myself, I approached, only for him

to vanish into a trial room. Seconds stretched into eternity as I waited, his absence amplifying the storm in my chest.

The clunk of the door brought me back. There he was. For the briefest moment, our eyes met, and the world seemed to tilt. His expression betrayed him. Shock, unease—everything I had anticipated.

‘Hi,’ I said, my voice steady despite the chaotic pounding in my chest. He said nothing, recognition dawning painfully in his eyes. This wasn’t like the disastrous encounter with Akshay months ago. This time, I was ready.

‘You haven’t changed,’ I ventured. He gave a nervous chuckle, his smile forced, unsure.

‘How are you?’ he asked quietly, his discomfort palpable. Before I could answer, Mansi arrived.

‘Hi, Akul,’ she said, extending her hand. ‘I’m Mansi, Natasha’s best friend.’

Her presence shattered the fragile rhythm between us. Silence hung heavy as Akul’s eyes darted anxiously, searching for the woman. I forced the next question, desperate to break the tension. ‘When did you arrive in India?’

‘Day before yesterday,’ he replied, his tone distant. ‘Do you live in Delhi?’

‘No, Gurugram,’ I replied, paused, took a long breath, and said, ‘Actually, there’s something I need to talk to you about.’

Just then, the woman returned with a salesman. She held up a selection of *sherwanis*, her voice cheerful, ‘Look, I found more options for you!’ Her gaze shifted to me and Mansi, and she smiled. ‘Hi, do you know him?’

Akul tensed. ‘Sakshi, give me a minute,’ he said, his tone abrupt. Her smile faltered, and I seized the moment. ‘I’m dating Akshay,’ I blurted, cutting straight to the point. Mansi gripped my elbow in silent support.

Sakshi’s expression morphed from surprise to fury. ‘What kind of nonsense is this? Who are you?’ she snapped. Mansi stepped forward to defend me, but Sakshi whirled on Akul. ‘For how long has this been going on, Akshay?’

Her words hit like a thunderclap. ‘Did she just say Akshay?’ Mansi whispered, stunned. My world tilted. The noise around me faded; the ground beneath me seemed to give way. And then everything went dark.

The splash of water jolted me awake, Mansi’s voice cutting through the haze. ‘Natasha. Natasha.’ My eyes fluttered open, but the world around me felt distorted, unreal. Akul stood behind Mansi, his wife Sakshi beside him, their faces etched with concern. The salesman held out a tray of water glasses, and I took one, sipping hesitantly. My throat felt dry; my chest tight.

‘Mansi...’ I clutched her hand, my voice trembling. ‘What just happened? I don’t understand. What’s going on?’

‘You fainted, Natasha,’ she said softly, her face emoting her own shock. I looked at her, then at Akul—or was it Akshay?—and Sakshi. Their expressions mirrored my confusion, but there was something else in their eyes. Something they weren’t saying.

‘You need to come with us,’ Akshay said firmly, his tone soft but insistent.

‘No,’ I replied instantly, panic rising in my chest. My gaze darted to Mansi, desperate for answers. ‘What’s going on?’ I repeated, my voice cracking.

Mansi helped me to my feet, her grip steadying me. ‘Let’s go,’ she said, carrying my handbag along with hers. I tried to pull away, insisting I could walk, but my body betrayed me. My nerves felt like live wires, vibrating uncontrollably. She held my hand again, and this time, I didn’t resist.

Akshay and Sakshi led the way. Mansi and I followed, my mind a whirlwind of questions. Was this a dream? A cruel twist of reality?

‘We’ll come back later,’ Akshay informed the salesman as we exited the showroom.

‘Where are we going?’ Mansi asked sharply, breaking the silence.

‘I’m looking for a place where we can sit and talk,’ Akshay replied, his voice steady but strained.

Mansi scoffed. ‘Do you really think sitting somewhere will fix this? We need answers right now!’ She looked from Akshay to Sakshi, her words heavy with urgency.

Sakshi stepped forward, her face pale but resolute. ‘This is my husband, Akshay,’ she said, her voice trembling. ‘And the one you’re dating... is Akul.’

The truth hit me like a freight train. My knees buckled, and tears streamed down my face. My chest tightened, the air around me suffocating. I couldn’t breathe. My vision blurred, my pulse raced. The panic surged, overwhelming every sense. I clutched Mansi’s arm, gasping for air, my body shaking uncontrollably.

‘This is impossible,’ I whispered, my voice breaking. Sakshi looked at Akshay, who pulled out his wallet and handed me his driver’s license. Washington. Akshay Tripathi. I looked at his photo, his DOB, height, weight—everything. The details blurred as my hands trembled, the vibrations in my body intensifying.

‘See, I told you, Mansi. My instinct was right. It is Akul. He broke my heart again,’ I choked out, sobbing uncontrollably. Mansi rubbed my hand, her touch grounding me, but the panic refused to subside. My breaths came in shallow gasps, my chest heaving as the weight of betrayal crushed me.

Akshay and Sakshi watched helplessly as I spiraled into an anxiety attack. A moment later, Sakshi knelt beside me, her voice soft but urgent. 'I'm sorry, Natasha. I didn't know. I can't imagine how hard this is for you. But please, tell us how we can help.' She emphasized 'we,' her face showing genuine concern. But it wasn't her help I needed. I knew Sakshi and Akshay weren't at fault, yet disgust simmered beneath my emotions.

Akshay joined her, his tone apologetic. 'I found out a few days ago,' he said, pausing briefly. 'I called Akul to inform him we were coming to India for the wedding. Over the call, I sensed he wasn't happy or comfortable about it. So, I called him again the next day, and he broke down and told me everything. He sought my advice, and I told him that if he was serious about you, he couldn't keep this under wraps anymore. But before he could make up his mind to tell you...' Akshay sighed deeply. 'I've already called him. He's on his way. I'd suggest clearing everything up between you two.'

Akshay's words fueled my anger. I stood abruptly, my legs shaky but determined. 'I'm not a fool to talk to him now. Tell him that!' I yelled, grabbing Mansi's hand and storming away. My voice echoed behind me, raw and furious. 'I'm never seeing that bastard's face again!'

The cab ride home was a blur of tears and rage. Mansi tried to console me, but her words felt hollow. Back home, she made coffee while I collapsed on the couch, my head spinning. The tears didn't stop.

‘I gave him enough chances, Mansi,’ I said. ‘But not anymore. He saw me happy, moving on, and he came back to ruin it. He enjoys watching me suffer. But I’m done. I’m not giving him that satisfaction.’

‘At some point, I badly wanted him to come back to me because I loved him so much. I pleaded with him, I fought with that girl, and what not... but he didn’t come back because I wasn’t worth him. Right? And now, when he saw me living my life happily and peacefully, he came back to rip it all apart. Because... because he enjoys watching me suffer. He loves knowing this silly girl is desperate for his love and will do anything to be with him. BUT I AM NOT GOING TO GIVE HIM THAT PLEASURE NOW.’

My eyes burned, swollen and red, as I wiped away the relentless stream of tears. The pain was raw, but beneath it, a flicker of resolve began to grow. I wouldn’t let him break me again. Not this time.

‘We’ll deal with him. Don’t worry,’ Mansi said softly, pushing the coffee mug into my trembling hands. ‘Have this coffee and try to rest now.’

‘Rest?’ I echoed, the word foreign to me in this whirlwind of emotions. I inhaled deeply, staring blankly at the ceiling, tears slipping silently down my cheeks. My mind was anything but calm. Memories of Akshay—no, Akul—kept flashing before me. How had I let myself get so drawn to him, despite all my doubts? How had he so easily broken through the walls I’d tried to build?

Desperate to silence my thoughts, I switched on the TV, although my focus was absent. Mansi's phone lit up, pulling my attention. She glanced at the screen, her expression steady, too steady. Quickly, she typed a brief reply and placed the phone back on the table, almost as if she were trying to hide it. But I knew. I knew exactly who it was.

'What is he saying now?' I asked, my voice sharp as I locked eyes with her. She hesitated, gasping slightly, realizing I had caught on.

'He's standing outside the building,' she admitted reluctantly. 'He wants to meet you, to clear things up. He said he can't call you—'

'Because I blocked his number,' I interrupted, bitterness spilling into my voice.

Mansi nodded. 'Facebook, WhatsApp, email... I've blocked him everywhere,' I added quietly, staring at the TV remote in my hands like it held the answers to my shattered world.

'You don't have to meet him,' I told her firmly.

'I'm not meeting him, babe,' she replied, matching my resolve. Her words brought me a fleeting moment of relief, and I let out a deep breath, switching to a music channel. But the music offered no solace. The familiar melodies only stirred the storm inside me.

My heart felt unbearably heavy. The thought of him—Akshay, no, Akul—standing downstairs, waiting

for me, gnawed at the edges of my mind. I couldn't reconcile with the truth. The man I had loved so deeply, who had left me in pieces, had returned cloaked in someone else's identity, deceiving me yet again. What was real, and what was a lie? How would I ever recover from this a second time?

A tsunami of thoughts threatened to drown me. Just hours ago, I would have been elated to hear he was waiting for me. I would have rushed to him without hesitation. But now... now everything was different. I didn't want to see him. And yet, I did. I wanted to hear his excuses, his defense, even if I already knew I shouldn't. My mind spiraled with contradictions, unable to settle on a single course of action.

'I think I'll take a shower,' I said abruptly, standing up. Mansi didn't protest as I walked to my room, shutting the door behind me. The weight of everything hung heavily on my shoulders, threatening to crush me. The running water offered no escape, but it was the only place I felt I could fall apart without anyone watching.

My gut told me Mansi wouldn't stay put. She'd go downstairs and confront Akul, and that's exactly what happened. I heard her rush out, and it didn't take long before she unleashed her fury on him.

'About time, here we are, Mr. Fraud,' she snapped before he could speak. 'You know what? Ever since you RE- ENTERED Natasha's life, she was torn—skeptical about whether she should even let you in as an

acquaintance, let alone as a lover. And do you know who convinced her to give you a chance? Me. I stood by you, kept telling her to go ahead and trust you. But you've let us both down, and it's better if you stay out of her life now. Because if you don't, I WILL RUIN YOUR LIFE. Trust me.'

Her voice shook with anger as she got it all out. Akul barely managed to respond, desperation dripping from his words. 'I need to talk to Natasha. Please!' he exclaimed, his voice cracking. 'Give me one chance to explain myself,' he pleaded, his neediness palpable. Mansi stared at him, the fire in her eyes momentarily dimmed as she took deep breaths, weighing her response. For a second, she hesitated, but her loyalty to me was unwavering.

'You know what?' she said finally, her tone laced with sharp sarcasm. 'I'm not falling into your emotional trap. I've already seen what you're capable of—your acting potential is Oscar-worthy.' Her words stung, but Akul stayed silent.

'Besides, this isn't even my decision. What you've done has made a complete mess of everything, and I don't know if Natasha will EVER want to speak to you again. That's not for me to decide,' she added firmly before turning her back on him and walking away without another word.

I heard her stomping up the stairs, the echo of her footsteps matching the tension in the air. She stopped

short when she saw me standing by the entrance, waiting.

‘I thought you were gone for a shower?’ she asked, feigning surprise, though she knew perfectly well why I was there.

‘What did he say?’ I asked, my voice raw and hoarse.

‘It doesn’t matter what he wants to say. I’ve shut him out,’ Mansi replied gently, her tone soft and steady, trying to soothe me. I didn’t respond, but a sniff escaped me as tears welled up again. They trickled down my cheeks, and Mansi pulled me into a tight hug. She held me as if trying to transfer all her strength to me.

Then she took my hand, her tone shifting to one of guilt. ‘You know what? I owe you an apology too,’ she said, her eyes searching mine. I blinked at her, confused. ‘It was me who encouraged you to go for this relationship,’ she continued, sitting down on the floor and clutching her hair between her fingers. ‘Why didn’t it occur to me to check his ID earlier? We could’ve avoided all of this. Why didn’t it cross my mind? I’m so sorry, Natasha. I just wanted to see you happy. I had no idea it would lead to this.’ Her voice cracked, guilt spilling out in every word.

‘Stop it,’ I said, kneeling down beside her. ‘Have you lost it? When did this become your fault, huh?’ I reached for her hands, gently pulling them away from her face. ‘And why are we doing this role reversal, huh?’ I quipped, forcing a small smile.

Mansi let out a weak chuckle, pretending to laugh through her tears, and hugged me tightly. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered again, but this time, for the first time since everything had happened, tears rolled down her cheeks too.

'I just need my best friend with me right now,' I said quietly, my voice soft but resolute. 'And I don't want her thinking she's the reason for my pain.' I squeezed her hand reassuringly, and we hugged again, sobbing together in silence. After a while, we wiped each other's tears and walked to the couch.

'Maggi or oats?' Mansi asked after a pause, trying to lighten the mood.

'A bit of both,' I replied with a faint smile. She nodded, returning the gesture, and headed to the kitchen.

Chapter 12

Chin Up and Move On

‘You are strong. Stronger than you think. You don’t owe fear to anyone—not to people, not to circumstances, and certainly not to your own mistakes. What’s done is done. It’s time to stand tall, chin up, and move forward like the force of nature you are!’ The words echoed in my mind as I stared at my reflection in the mirror, willing myself to believe them. My tear-streaked face stared back, but I refused to let it define me. With a sharp inhale, I splashed cold water on my face, washing away the tears that blurred my vision. The water felt like a reset, a small act of defiance against the chaos threatening to consume me.

Determined to avoid Akul entirely, I called Maahi and Anuj to take me to the office with them. The very first thing I did upon arriving was to change my SIM card. I had an alternate one tucked away in my drawer, untouched for years. Every time I saw that small packet, I’d thought about canceling it, but now it felt like destiny had kept it there for this very moment. *Destiny*. The word tasted bitter. Akul’s voice from that shared cab

ride echoed in my ears: *'It wanted us to meet.'* The memory sent a shiver down my spine.

'Stay strong,' I whispered to myself as I inserted the new SIM into my phone's second slot. I avoided answering calls from unknown numbers while waiting for the activation. In the meantime, I updated all my primary contacts and office colleagues with my new number. I had a hunch that Akul can get in touch with Mansi on Whatsapp or call but I had fullest trust in her that she wouldn't give him a single clue about my whereabouts, no matter how hard he tried.

For the next three days, I altered my routine. I left the office early, right after lunch, to avoid crossing paths with him. In the evenings, I saw his car parked outside my building. He'd talk to the watchman, but the instructions were clear—he wasn't allowed in. He even called the office landline, asking for Deeksha, Raina, Anuj, and Maahi, trying to get through to me. But they all declined, standing firm in their loyalty.

Physically, I had shut him out of my life. But mentally? He was still there, haunting me. The human brain is cruel that way—the more you tell it to stay away from something, the more it clings to it. My feelings and reality were at war, an unending battle between my heart and my mind. I didn't know how to navigate this storm.

'You're stupid. You're an emotional fool. You're someone who can be easily trapped.'

'She's trying to be strong. Let her have time.'

‘Once bitten, twice shy. How could she not follow it? How could she trust someone who—’

‘She made that choice because you allowed her to. Don’t blame her. Look at how she’s holding herself together, doing everything without letting anyone see her pain. That’s strength. Stop blaming. Show support.’

These arguments raged within me, day after day, week after week. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t erase Akul from my mind. His memories clung to me like shadows, creeping into every moment—while talking, walking, working, waiting, eating, even in the most mundane moments. My eyes would fill with tears, and I’d spiral into an infinite loop of memories. How could I have been so foolish to fall for the same person’s lies again? The question tortured me endlessly.

Every time I saw a couple together, I swallowed the bitterness rising in my throat and looked away, taking deep breaths to steady myself. But it felt like a sandstorm inside me, relentless and blinding, leaving everything it touched blurry and tainted. Sometimes, I’d catch myself staring blankly into space, lost in the endless cycle of what happened, how it happened... why it happened?

Even at night, despite the betrayal, my mind betrayed me further. I’d find myself replaying that one beautiful night with Akul, the night I had willingly surrendered to my desires. Even now, after everything, it still felt like

the most beautiful memory of my life. And this realization hurts more than anything else.



Natasha's story had finally reached its conclusion, her voice trembling as she let out a long, weary breath. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and every now and then, a stray drop escaped, tracing a path down her face. She sniffed softly, clutching the edge of her shirt as if trying to ground herself.

Mansi, seated beside her, gently rubbed Natasha's knee, offering quiet support.

Across from them, Nikhil sat silently, his gaze unwavering. He studied Natasha intently, observing every subtle movement—her fingers fidgeting with a loose thread on her sleeve, the way she paused to steady her breath, the way her tears shimmered in the low light. His posture was slightly hunched forward, his hands clasped together as though bracing himself for her pain. He was hesitant to speak, afraid that the wrong word might shatter the fragile atmosphere.

Breaking the silence cautiously, he asked, 'And then... you decided to take a break from everything?'

Natasha nodded faintly, her hands tightening into fists for a brief moment before relaxing again. 'Yeah,' she replied, her voice soft but steady. 'It was Mansi who realized I wasn't coping. She saw how I was stuck—

caught between my emotions and this endless spiral of questions I couldn't answer. She knew I needed a way out, something to break the cycle.'

She turned to Mansi, her expression touched with gratitude. 'I wouldn't have had the clarity to see it myself, not back then. She knew I couldn't keep carrying the weight alone.'



'Yeah, sure, aunty. I'm on my way home. I'll make sure she calls you back,' Mansi said as she entered the house, her phone pressed against her ear. The moment she hung up, she turned to me with a mix of surprise and concern etched across her face. 'Your mom called. She's worried—you haven't called her even once in the last ten days.'

Her words lingered in the air, heavy with unspoken emotion. I simply nodded in response, avoiding her gaze, and walked over to the sofa, sinking into its cushions.

'Call her,' Mansi said gently, sitting beside me and placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. Her voice carried an unspoken plea, urging me to break free from the shell I'd wrapped around myself. She didn't need to say much for me to realize how my silence—this aloof, quiet withdrawal—was affecting not just me but everyone who cared about me. My family, my friends—

they all must have been grappling with questions and worries about my sudden absence from their lives. They might have even thought I was being harsh or indifferent without reason.

I picked up my phone and dialed mom's number. For the next half hour, I spoke to her about work, friends, and mundane, everyday happenings. I tried to keep the conversation light, normal. In return, mom told me about a few marriage alliances Papa and she were considering. As always, I dodged the topic, and as usual, mom wouldn't let me off the hook. She lectured me again about why I shouldn't wait any longer for marriage. But I didn't have the energy to argue with her, especially not about this. Instead, I fell silent, letting her words roll over me like waves. Sensing the shift in conversation, Mansi tactfully stepped outside the house and rang the doorbell. I seized the excuse she had created and told mom that a friend had arrived and we needed to go shopping. With that, I hung up the call, feeling both relieved and drained.

'It's a three-day weekend this time,' Mansi mentioned casually later, as we sat down for dinner.

'Hm,' I mumbled, barely paying attention.

'I was thinking... we should go for a trek in Himachal. It'd be a good break from all this boredom, don't you think?' she suggested.

'Yeah,' I murmured, agreeing half-heartedly.

‘And there’s this writer who is amazing at photography, or maybe he’s a photographer who writes beautifully. Anyway, I really want to meet him. Did you know he has more than 150k followers!’ Her eyes lit up as she spoke.

‘You mean he’s a social media influencer?’ I asked, gathering the last few flakes of dal and rice on my plate before finishing with a bite of papad.

‘Um, not sure if he’s technically an influencer since he doesn’t promote brands. But his poetry and photography sway people like me, so yeah—he’s an influencer in his own way,’ Mansi replied, chuckling at her attempt to define Nikhil.

‘But more importantly... he’s like a modern-day agony uncle,’ she added, her voice softening, waiting for my response. I knew what she was hinting at but chose not to comment.

‘So... we’re going, right?’ Mansi asked, her eyes, carrying hope, locked on mine.

‘Sure,’ I said, nodding lightly.

‘Cool! I’m booking the tickets then,’ she exclaimed, her face lighting up with joy as she picked up her phone. I couldn’t help but smile too—a small, lingering smile brought on by the idea of getting away. But deep down, I knew my happiness was surface-level. The void within me felt permanent, immovable. It didn’t want to be filled, no matter how hard I tried.

Mansi got up, gathered our plates, and headed to the kitchen. I let out a deep sigh, closing my eyes in an attempt to imagine the upcoming vacation. But my thoughts didn't linger long. My phone buzzed incessantly with office calls, breaking the brief moment of peace. I dealt with the calls mechanically, my mind elsewhere, before retreating to my room to change into my nightwear.

Standing in front of the mirror, I caught my reflection—a face weighed down by sadness, by questions without answers. ‘Thank God for friends, work, money, and, hell yeah... travel!’ I muttered to myself, a bitter chuckle escaping as I mocked the chaos of my life. The humor was fleeting, but it was all I had to hold onto for now.



‘And that’s how we ended up here—to seek your help,’ Natasha said, her voice steady but carrying the weight of her story as she turned to Nikhil with a fleeting smile. It wasn’t reciprocated. Nikhil remained silent, his expression unreadable as he shifted his gaze towards the window, lost in thought. His prolonged quietness unsettled Natasha and Mansi, who exchanged questioning glances, attempting to decode what might be running through his mind. But neither could make sense of it.

Breaking the stillness, Mansi offered, 'Coffee, Nikhil?' Her tone was light, hoping to pull him back into the room. But he didn't reply. Instead, he turned his face towards Natasha, his eyes solemn as he spoke, 'I have to tell you something.'

His tone held no trace of advice or reassurance. It was heavier, deliberate, as though he had been carrying this revelation for too long. The gravity in his voice made Natasha's knees weak. While she had no clue what was coming, the mental trauma she had endured over the last few months had made her apprehensive, leaving her wary of every unexpected announcement.

Mansi, sensing Natasha's growing unease, stepped beside her and asked cautiously, 'What is it?' Nikhil exhaled deeply, the pause heavy with anticipation. He walked to his bag, unzipping it to pull out a slightly thick, medium-sized blue diary. Returning to them, he held it out, both Natasha and Mansi looking puzzled.

Clearing his throat, Nikhil began, 'I met this guy, Akul, some time ago.'

His words froze Natasha in place. Her breath caught as shock spread across her face. Her gaze darted from the diary to Nikhil, her heart pounding in disbelief. Nikhil's eyes met hers, silently urging her to stay calm as he continued, 'We met right here—at Café Illiterati. He left this with me... his journal.' He held the diary towards Natasha.

Natasha stared at the diary in sheer disbelief. She didn't reach for it, her hands hanging limply by her sides. Nikhil gently lifted her hand and placed the diary into it. Her fingers closed around the cover reluctantly, her movements hesitant. She turned to Mansi, whose lips were pressed tightly together, her confusion evident as she struggled to process what had just unfolded.

'When I listened to your story,' Nikhil said, breaking the silence, 'I realized there were several instances I had already heard, or rather, read—but from a different perspective. It feels like destiny brought me here, connecting me with both you and Akul. His feelings, his thoughts... they're all in here. I think you should read it.'

Mansi, trying to understand, asked bluntly, 'But why did he give his journal to you? I mean... are you two friends?'

'No,' Nikhil replied, shaking his head. 'We met by chance. This spot is my usual place whenever I come here. The staff knows I prefer sitting here. That day, I was already in a bad mood, and when I arrived, Akul was sitting here alone. Frustrated, I asked him to move to another table. My tone was harsh, and though I realized it almost immediately, he didn't react at all, which only made me feel guiltier.'

'I kept watching him from my seat,' Nikhil continued, his voice softening. 'He looked lost, crushed—as if he'd been grappling with unanswered

questions for far too long. Something about him compelled me to strike up a conversation. So, I took my coffee and walked over to his table. We talked about our professions. He pretended to be interested in my social media life, but when I asked about his, he told me he wasn't active on any platforms. He spoke like a man carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Trying to lighten his mood, I recited a few of my poems on self-confidence and healing. He appreciated them, but his smile was strained, almost forced. Then, out of the blue, he took out this diary and handed it to me. He said I could read it and use the anecdotes for my Instagram captions, that my words could turn his experiences into stories people would connect with. And then he left.' Nikhil sighed, glancing at Natasha. 'I couldn't put the diary down once I started reading it. I won't lie—it's left a deep impression on me. But I haven't used it for my own gain because that would feel wrong. It would be unfair to both of you.' His voice softened even further, imploring Natasha once more, 'You need to read this.'

Natasha stood motionless, staring at the diary in her hands. Her thoughts raced, the weight of destiny pressing heavily on her shoulders. She had come to the mountains seeking solace, hoping to unburden herself and find some overdue relief. Instead, Akul's presence had found her here as well, weaving itself into her life yet again. It felt like fate had been relentlessly crafting situations she least expected, tying her closer to Akul even as she desperately tried to let go.

Chapter 13

His Book of Revelation

Natasha's gaze lingered on the diary, taking in every detail of its undeniable beauty. Its deep blue cover was adorned with delicate golden borders, framing the surface with an elegant touch. The cover had a smooth, textured finish, reminiscent of fine fabric, inviting fingertips to trace along its surface. The spine was sturdy, bearing signs of gentle wear, with creases forming where it had been repeatedly opened and closed. Rounded corners softened the overall look, suggesting it had been well cared for. A thin golden ribbon served as a bookmark, tucked neatly between the pages, adding a regal quality to the journal.

Her heart raced as she held the diary, its weight amplifying the tension building within her. She could feel every fiber of her being attuned to the moment, her pulse thundering in her ears. The unknowns it contained filled her with equal parts dread and curiosity. Mustering her courage, Natasha opened the diary, her breath hitching as her eyes fell on Akul's signature scrawled across the first page. The sight of his handwriting sent a wave of emotions crashing over her.

Unable to handle the surge of feelings, she quickly shut the diary, her trembling hands lifting it towards Nikhil as if rejecting the memories it carried. Before she could fully retreat, Mansi gently stopped her, guiding her back to her seat. Her voice was calm, almost soothing, as she urged, 'Read it, Natasha.' Natasha hesitated, glancing down at the diary again. This time, she slowly opened it once more, her eyes settling on the first page, bracing herself for the revelations ahead.

~ **March 14, 2019**

Hello, old friend. It's been a while, hasn't it? I've missed you more than I thought I would. Life got tangled in the chaos of moving, but now that I'm finally settled in Gurugram, it feels like the right time to pick up our habit of daily talks again. There's something comforting about returning to these pages, like coming home to myself.

After five years of hopping between Pune and Bangalore, Gurugram is a breath of fresh air. The city has been kind to me so far—it's vibrant yet calm in its own way. But the move wasn't just about finding a new place to live. It was about staying closer to home, closer to my parents. I've realized how much I value being near them as time slips by.

Akshay, of course, is happily settled in the USA, chasing his own dreams. I admire him for it, but that's not my path. At least, not for now. For the next five years, I'm here, rooted in my country, my home. It feels right.

Here's to new beginnings, new routines, and rediscovering the joy of putting my thoughts into words. Let's see where this chapter leads us.

‘Actually...’ Nikhil interrupted softly, reaching for the diary in Natasha’s hands. Flipping through the pages, he paused at a specific section and handed it back to her. ‘Only read the pages with the upper corners slightly folded,’ he instructed gently. ‘Those are the ones where he wrote about you.’

Natasha’s heart was still heavy with apprehension, but she returned her focus to the diary, her fingers trembling as she turned to the marked pages. Meanwhile, Nikhil leaned towards Mansi and whispered, ‘I folded them last night to make it easier for her.’ Mansi didn’t reply. The tension of Akul’s revelations weighed heavily on her too.

~♣ **April 10, 2019**

The most unexpected thing happened today! I saw Natasha! My silly crybaby!

It’s what I used to call her—five years ago, when things were simpler, and the world felt like it revolved around us. Five years have passed, yet here she is, still in Gurugram. It makes sense, though. Her hometown, Lucknow, is not that far. She got selected at American Express back then, and she’s still here. Stable, determined, thriving—that’s Natasha.

But today... today, we were in the same pub. Why? Was it fate? Destiny’s way of nudging us closer? Or just plain coincidence? Whatever it was, it felt incredible—almost

surreal—to see her after so long. She’s changed, of course, but not too much. Her hair, once grazing her shoulders in college, now cascades down to her waist in beautiful waves, framing her face perfectly. Her smile? Oh, her smile is still as sweet and radiant as ever, and that curious, searching look in her eyes remains unchanged. She’s put on just a little weight, and if anything, it makes her look even more stunning. Prettier than ever. She’s the kind of girl every guy dreams about, the kind who turns heads effortlessly.

Does she have a boyfriend? The thought hit me instantly. And just as quickly, I saw another girl join her, laughing and chatting. Was it a girls’ night out? Or maybe she’s single? Or perhaps her boyfriend wasn’t in town? The questions swirled in my mind, but the answers didn’t matter much. Seeing her brought back everything—the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the heartbreaking.

I wanted to go up to her, to say something, to feel the warmth of her presence up close. But then my mistake held me back. The guilt I’ve carried for years stopped me in my tracks. It was me, after all, who shattered her heart, who caused our relationship to end so abruptly and immaturely. I remember the guilt, the regret, the realization of what I had lost—the loveliest, most genuine thing I’d ever had in my life. And even now, after all these years, the guilt hasn’t left me. How could I possibly face her? I knew she’d be shocked to see me out of nowhere, and I didn’t want to risk causing her pain again. She deserves happiness, and so, I chose to leave the pub without meeting her.

Later, curiosity got the better of me. I googled her name, and her Facebook and LinkedIn profiles appeared. Seeing her

accomplishments, her smiling photos—it was bittersweet. She’s doing so well, both professionally and personally. She’s flourishing, and that made me happy.

The best part? Her office is very close to mine. Could there be a chance we might cross paths again? Or maybe... maybe I could create one.

Natasha turned the page.

~ April 16, 2019

It's been a week now. A whole week since I saw Natasha in that pub. Since that moment, she hasn't left my mind. I couldn't resist searching for her on social media, and now her name lingers in my thoughts, weaving memories I thought I had buried. Memories of Us. The good ones—the way she used to laugh, her little quirks, the way she could brighten even my darkest days.

Her office is so close to mine. And yet, I can't bring myself to walk up to her, not even to say a simple 'hi.' The truth is, I know she would be furious. She has every right to be. I was awful to her. I broke something so beautiful, so precious. How could I ever expect forgiveness?

It's ironic, isn't it? Back when I was in the wrong, I acted boldly, almost arrogantly. But now, when I want to do the right thing, when I want to make amends, I'm crippled by fear. My confidence deserts me. The guilt weighs too heavily, turning every step into quicksand.

I keep thinking about it—about her—but I know there's no point. If I don't have the courage to face her, to take responsibility, then all this thinking, all these emotions, mean nothing. Perhaps it's time to let go... even if letting go feels impossible.

Natasha let out a painful sigh, her fingers brushing against the edges of the page before turning to the next one.

~ April 24, 2019

I still can't wrap my head around what I did today. It started as just another casual outing to Cyberhub with some office colleagues for drinks, but then I saw her again—Natasha. This time, she wasn't in a pub. She was at the Crossword store, flipping through the pages of a book, her focus so effortless, so beautiful. She wore that timeless combination that always suited her best—blue top and white pants. Blue has always been her color, bringing out something radiant in her.

I stood outside the store window, watching her. My colleagues called out to me, urging me to join them, but I waved them off. My thoughts were consumed by one question: Should I go in and talk to her? But what would I even say? The possibility of her reaction kept me rooted where I was. Would she be surprised to see me? Would she be happy or hurt? She looked like she had moved on, like she was in a better place. Why should I risk disturbing that? For a moment, I toyed with the idea of pretending to bump into her accidentally and starting with a casual 'Hi.' But I wasn't confident. I was too afraid to face someone who once knew me so well.

I found myself sitting on a bench, far enough to avoid her noticing me, but close enough to keep catching glimpses of her. I kept replaying scenarios in my mind, wondering how I could possibly initiate a conversation. As I sat there, lost in thought, I saw her move to another book counter. My colleagues called again, but I ignored them. Then a notification popped up on my phone: 'We are at Farzi Café. Come quickly.' I replied, 'Okay, 10 mins,' but my reflexes betrayed me, and I started scrolling through WhatsApp.

That's when I saw the unread messages in my family group. I clicked on it and saw a flood of photo attachments from Sakshi with the caption, 'Yay! He is 1.' I glanced back at Natasha, now talking on the phone and still holding a stack of books, then returned to my phone. Sakshi had renamed the group to 'Happy Birthday Dobby' and updated the profile picture. It was Dobby, the Boxer pup she and Akshay had brought home a year ago.

One photo caught my attention—a group picture of Dobby with Sakshi and Akshay. And suddenly, the most absurd idea hit me... What if I introduced myself to Natasha as Akshay? She knew I had a twin brother, and that knowledge could convince her. Maybe she would talk to me, maybe she'd even open up.

But what if she recognized me? What if she saw through the charade and realized I was lying? It felt risky – deceptive. Yet, the thought that I looked different now, with my beard and a more matured appearance, gave me a strange sense of confidence. She wouldn't know. At least this way, I could learn more about her life without stirring up the past.

I stood up, ready to execute my plan. But when I looked through the store window, she was gone. My pulse quickened, and I rushed inside, determined to make the most of this chance. Nervous but resolved, I searched every corner of the store. She wasn't there. The opportunity had slipped away.

Fate, however, had other plans. We did bump into each other later. And this time, it was Natasha who came up to me. Her expression was furious, and for a moment, panic set in. But

I had already prepared my story, and without hesitation, I introduced myself as Akshay. The lie rolled off my tongue effortlessly, hiding my guilt beneath a mask of confidence.

She agreed to join me for a beer. She seemed both apologetic for her initial reaction and curious about Akul's life. Sitting across from her after so many years—it was surreal. It felt new yet familiar, like revisiting an old, treasured memory.

I noticed how much she had changed. She carried herself differently now, her gestures refined, her confidence shining through. And she was prettier than ever—a presence that still captivated me. I wanted to keep talking to her, to learn everything about her life. But I was trapped behind this lie, hiding under the safety of a cover I couldn't shed. Part of me wanted to confess, to come clean, but I couldn't. The pretense felt safer, less daunting.

She left soon after I mentioned that Akshay—no, Akul—was married now. I couldn't find a reason to stop her. I had missed my chance, and the weight of that settled heavily over me.

Natasha closed the diary, her finger bookmarking the page, and instinctively shut her eyes. The entire scene from that fateful day at Cyberhub replayed in her mind, only now, it unfolded exactly as Akul had described it in his diary. Each word, each detail narrated by him colored the memory in a new, bitter light.

Her thoughts were abruptly interrupted by her own mind, snapping, *'Bloody opportunistic. How easy it was for*

him to toy with your feelings.’ She let out a heavy breath, exhaling the frustration and betrayal that now sat like a knot in her chest. Slowly opening her eyes, she found Nikhil and Mansi watching her intently, their faces taut with anticipation, waiting for her reaction. The tension in the room was palpable, but Natasha couldn’t stop here. She turned her focus back to the diary and continued reading.

~🐣 *I’m back home now, sitting with this growing unease about hiding under this cover and thinking about starting a new chapter in life—with her. But is it even possible? What am I doing? What am I trying to do? Is there any chance this will end well, or am I just setting myself up to make things worse?*

I keep thinking about those movies where the imposter wins over his lady love. But those are just stories. In real life, when the lies unravel, it only gets uglier. And this is bloody real life, not some movie. The risks here are too big. I can’t deceive her again. I can’t break her heart all over again. I tell myself that I’m not the immature fool I was five years ago—that I’ve changed, that I know better now. So why am I even considering this? Why would I walk down this path?

But hey... one good thing I did learn today—she’s single. :)

Natasha’s grip on the diary tightened. Her face burned with anger, her eyes betraying the storm building inside. Both Mansi and Nikhil noticed the shift immediately, her emotions so raw and visible. She closed

the diary with a snap, though her index finger stayed firmly between the pages she had just read. Fixing her gaze on Nikhil, she searched his face for any explanation, any clue as to why he had handed her this account of Akul's thoughts. He remained calm, composed, as if bracing for her fury. Natasha took a deep, steadying breath before reopening the diary.

☞ *It's past 3 a.m., and I'm wide awake. Sleepless. Restless. I don't know what's happening to me. I seriously don't. It feels like I've lost control over my own willpower. My thoughts are consumed—no, ruled—by Natasha. I keep asking myself why. Why is this happening?*

Initially, it was just curiosity. I wanted to know how she was, to make sure she was okay. Maybe, at most, I wanted us to get back on talking terms. But now... now, it's more than that. I can't focus on anything else. She's refused to meet me, but after seeing her today, I can't stop wanting to see her again and again.

I know it's wrong. I know that wearing Akshay's mask is deceitful, but do I even have a choice now? I mean, it was fine for me to meet her as Akshay once. But why did I have to go ahead and complicate it by saying that Akul—me—lives in the USA now and is happily married? I literally swapped our identities. KYA SIYAAPA PAAL LIYA YAAR!!

Meeting her as myself isn't an option anymore. To her, I'm married. Gawd, I've completely screwed this up. How am I supposed to move forward with this lie now? Every step will be

built on deceit, and that terrifies me. But maybe... maybe I don't have to think so far ahead. Maybe I should just take it one step at a time. Today, I met her as Akshay. The meeting was okay—I didn't get much insight into her feelings about relationships, but I think I still have a chance to win her trust. If I handle this carefully, maybe, just maybe, I can take us back to where we left off. And Akshay's identity will help me get there.

What am I even saying? This is madness. She'll never accept me. I'm sure she doesn't even want to see me again.

It's 4 a.m. now. I've taken a leap into the dark. Akshay recently deactivated his Facebook account, one he barely used, and I... I knew his password. So, I reactivated it. For Natasha.

If there's one thing people do after reconnecting, it's adding each other on social media. That's the first step, right? I've tweaked everything—changed the privacy settings, hidden all the past posts, removed all traces of Sakshi and Akshay's photos. I've even switched his DP to a blurry one so his current look isn't clear. The account is basically invisible to everyone... except Natasha. It's been 'illegally' brought back to life for her, and her alone. And then... I sent her a friend request.

Let's hope she accepts it.

Natasha finished the entry and let the diary rest in her lap. Her chest felt tight, anger and disbelief swirling inside her. The audacity, the manipulation—it was too much. Her eyes burned as she looked at Nikhil, her mind

a hurricane of thoughts. He calmly looked at her. Mansi, however, looked visibly uneasy, her gaze darting between Natasha and the diary.

Taking another deep breath, Natasha prepared herself to turn to the next page. She wasn't done. Not yet.

~ April 25, 2019

She hasn't accepted the friend request yet, but at least she hasn't blocked me either. That has to mean something, right? It leaves the door slightly open, enough for me to reach out to her on Messenger if I need to. In a way, it's better this way—staying unconnected on Facebook keeps the risk lower. Even though I've tweaked the settings, hidden posts, and erased traces that could expose the truth, there's always that nagging worry.

When you're doing something wrong, no matter how carefully you plan, the fear of getting caught never really goes away. It's like a shadow following you, waiting for the right moment to pounce. And yet, here I am, holding onto this slim chance, telling myself it'll all work out. Will it? Only time will tell.

~ **April 29, 2019**

Social media has always felt like such a waste of time to me, but Natasha... she seems to adore Facebook. It's almost like her second home. Nine times out of ten, whenever I open Messenger to see if she's online, there she is—online again.

To be honest, I only open it to check on her, to know she's there. But each time, I find myself hesitating, unsure of how to make things happen. How do I start a conversation with someone who knows me so well, yet feels so distant now?

~ May 8, 2019

Today I invited Natasha to a stand-up comedy show. It seemed like a lighthearted plan, something casual, but it ended with an argument—a sharp reminder of just how deeply upset she still is with her ex-boyfriend. She's still stuck there, in the same memories, trying to cope with the heartbreak that blindsided her all those years ago. Watching the anger on her face, hearing the frustration in her voice, made me realize just how much she had bottled up. Back then, five years ago, I didn't give her the space—or the opportunity—to fully vent everything she felt. And now, all of it remains, festering inside her.

She called me an immature, irresponsible guy who abandons things halfway and moves on without a care. Hearing her say that hit me hard. Not because she's wrong, but because her words carry so much pain. The truth is, it means she hasn't moved on. But why hasn't she? It's been five long years. How is it even possible? Surely, someone must have approached her in all this time. People move on. They rebuild. Yet she hasn't. Why?

My heart tells me it's my fault that I hurt her so deeply, left her so broken, that she's terrified of opening herself up to love again. If that's true, if I'm the reason for her pain, then I feel utterly wretched. How could I have done this to her? What kind of person am I to have left her carrying this weight for so long?

But why has destiny brought me back into her life? Is there a purpose to this? I don't know if keeping her in the dark, under this façade, is right or wrong, but if there's even the faintest chance she still loves me, then this is my moment. My chance to

set things right. I want to be the Akul she fell in love with—the person she thought I was before I shattered it all. Even if it means staying hidden behind Akshay's identity... I want to step back into her life and give her the love she always deserved.

I know this plan is messy, and when the truth comes out, it might look horribly wrong. But right now, I don't care about the judgment of the future. All I know is, I can't lose her again. Not this time. This bond... if I can rebuild it... it will be forever.

But where do I begin? How do I take the first step towards something that feels so impossible?

Natasha closed the diary with a forceful thud, her hands trembling as she pressed it against her lap. Her breaths came in uneven waves, the weight of what she had read swirling in her chest like a storm she couldn't control. She turned her gaze towards the mountains, their vast, silent presence offering no answers, no solace. Her eyes brimmed with tears that cascaded down her cheeks, unstoppable and unrelenting. The reality she had stumbled into felt unfathomable, a truth she never thought she would face.

Nikhil and Mansi stood a few paces away, watching her silently, unsure how to console her. Natasha glanced at Mansi, her tear-streaked face briefly locking with hers before she quickly wiped her cheeks. The brief, raw moment of vulnerability was enough for Mansi to reach out for her friend. Quietly, she took the diary from Natasha. Natasha let it go, and as if exhausted by the weight of her emotions, she leaned her head onto Mansi's shoulder. Her eyes fluttered shut, her breathing heavy and audible. It was the kind of breathing that spoke volumes—the type that said, *I'm holding myself together, but only just.*

The café staff stole curious glances at them occasionally, but none dared approach, respecting the invisible wall of grief and intimacy that surrounded the trio.

Breaking the silence, Nikhil spoke softly, 'Do you want anything to eat?' But both Natasha and Mansi shook their heads.

‘We should head back,’ Mansi said after a moment, her voice low and measured, as though afraid to disturb Natasha’s fragile calm. ‘Our bus leaves in two hours. We should get back to the hotel.’ Nikhil nodded in agreement.

‘You can keep the diary,’ Nikhil suggested, his gaze flickering to Mansi as he spoke. He waited for Natasha’s approval, but she seemed lost in her own world, unable—or unwilling—to offer a response. Mansi hesitated, then nodded on her behalf.

‘Alright,’ Mansi said softly. She paused, her gratitude lingering in the space between them. ‘Thank you. For everything.’

Nikhil glanced at Natasha one last time, his expression unreadable. ‘If you ever want to talk,’ he offered gently, ‘you can call me.’ It was a quiet invitation, an acknowledgment of the weight Natasha carried. With that, he bid them goodbye, leaving behind the diary that had opened a door Natasha wasn’t sure she wanted to walk through.

Natasha sat still, her head leaning against Mansi’s shoulder, the diary now a silent companion to the storm raging within her.

Chapter 14

Even you, my friend?

10 days later

Rupa Didi rang the doorbell, hearing the sound of footsteps approaching from within. The door swung open, and Mansi appeared, her eyes glued to her phone. Without so much as a greeting, Mansi moved straight to the couch and sank into it with a distracted air.

‘*Chai bana lo, Didi,*’ she muttered, still engrossed in her screen. Rupa Didi hesitated for a moment, then asked cautiously, ‘*Natasha Didi bhi hai kya?*’ Mansi nodded, though she didn’t bother looking up. The exchange felt mechanical, and Rupa Didi couldn’t help but notice the frown etched onto Mansi’s face, the tight line of her lips. This had been the atmosphere in the house ever since Natasha and Mansi returned from their Himachal trip—a cold, silent tension that seemed to swallow everything whole.

The couch, once the centerpiece of their shared moments, had become a lonely relic. The two roommates now spent their time secluded in their rooms, barely crossing paths. If one happened to occupy

the couch, the other would promptly retreat to her room, as if proximity alone might ignite something volatile.

In the past ten days, Anuj and Maahi had visited twice. The first time, Mansi managed to exchange a few words with them, her demeanor polite but distant. The second time, she saw them upon arriving home, and without acknowledging their presence, stormed straight to her room, slamming the door behind her. The sound echoed through the apartment like an unspoken declaration—Mansi was no longer a part of Natasha's inner circle, and Natasha's friends were no longer hers.

Even mundane routines had shifted. Natasha now left the front door ajar five minutes before Mansi's usual arrival, not out of kindness but to avoid the act of opening it herself. If she was occupied with a call or her laptop, she would mumble for Rupa Didi to open the door, never bothering to do it herself. Their interactions had boiled down to fleeting glances, careful avoidance of eye contact, and an occasional text—short, sterile, replies like 'Yes,' 'No,' 'OK,' or a thumbs-up emoji. The cold war was evident, and Rupa Didi had reluctantly become their messenger at times. Though eager to uncover the cause of their rift, she was equally cautious of their icy demeanors and decided it was safer to observe from the sidelines, waiting for the frost to thaw. The laughter, gossip, endless discussions, even their arguments—all the life that once filled the house—was gone, leaving an eerie silence in its place.

But one evening, perhaps the universe finally heard Rupa Didi's silent prayers. Mansi arrived home and found Anuj sitting with Natasha. The sound of their conversation floated through the apartment, a mix of work-related discussions and casual banter. Mansi placed her lunchbox in the sink, barely looking at them, and Rupa Didi asked, '*Aap bhi chai loge na?*' Mansi nodded curtly and retreated to her room.

Lying on her bed, eyes closed and legs stretched out, Mansi tried to relax, but her ears betrayed her, tuning into the argument brewing in the living room. Natasha and Anuj were debating a presentation—Natasha insisted on shifting certain points from slide 7 to slide 4, and Anuj vehemently disagreed. The noise grated on Mansi's nerves, her face twisting in irritation. When Rupa Didi arrived with tea, Mansi snapped, '*Problem kya hai iska? Sabse jhagadti hai bas.*'

Finally sensing her moment, Rupa Didi asked cautiously, '*Kya jhagda hua hai aap dono ke beech mein?*' The boldness of her question caught her off guard, and she immediately glanced nervously at Mansi, bracing for a scolding. Mansi was silent for a long, charged moment. Just as Rupa Didi turned to retreat back to the kitchen, Mansi exhaled heavily and replied, '*Problem bas ye hai ki ye madam kisi ko trust nahi karti. Inhe lagta hai ki jo ye sochti hain, wohi sahi hai aur wohi sach hai.*'

Rupa Didi listened intently but dared not push further. It was clear this had to do with Natasha's relationship with Akshay—or Akul, as the truth had

revealed. Though Natasha's close friends knew the story, outsiders like Rupa Didi or the security guard were left piecing together fragments, wondering why Akshay—or Akul—was no longer allowed near the building.

Mansi shared nothing more, her thoughts drifting to their return journey from Himachal. She remembered how they had boarded their bus to Delhi, and how she had gently asked Natasha if she wanted to keep reading the diary. Natasha had handed it to Mansi instead, her unspoken request clear: You read it to me. Between the perpetual drone of the bus horn and the low chatter of other passengers, Mansi began to read aloud, her voice soft, almost reverent, as the words of Akul's journal filled the space between them.

~ May 25, 2019

What a day. Honestly, I've started believing in destiny even more after what happened today. It feels like the universe is weaving threads to pull us closer, piece by piece. After that day at Cyber Hub, Natasha sent me an apology over text. I stared at her message, completely unsure of what to say in return. I wanted to respond but couldn't find the right words—it's like my mind had locked itself. And anyway, work kept me tied up, giving me an excuse to delay what I couldn't figure out.

But today... today was something else. My car broke down (thank God for that), and somehow, by some cosmic coincidence, we ended up as co-passengers. I spotted her from a distance—her unmistakable silhouette—and for a fleeting moment, I thought about getting down from my cab and approaching her. But hesitation held me back. After our last meeting, Messenger seemed like a safer option. Less direct. Less overwhelming.

And then, as if destiny wanted to intervene more dramatically, the cab driver dialed her number. His phone was on speaker, and I recognized her voice instantly. That sweet, familiar tone—it sent shivers down my spine. Without thinking, I noted down her number. Just like that, a small favor from fate shifted my mood entirely.

It turns out she was in a great mood too. We ended up having a really pleasant conversation—'good' talking, as I'd call it. Maybe letting out all that anger during our previous encounter had helped her in some way, loosened the emotional knots she'd been carrying.

Her voice was so captivating. Soft, sweet! Every word she said seemed to wrap around me like music. And her hair... God, why do I keep obsessing over her hair? It's long, silky, and when it falls onto her cheeks, it's like watching poetry in motion. The way she tucks her tresses behind her ear slowly... it makes me weak in the knees. I catch myself holding my breath, stealing glimpses when she does it. Is it even possible to fall in love with the same person all over again? Wait... am I saying I'm falling in love?

I wonder if she knows how I feel.

Oh, and now that I have her phone number... should I ask her to carpool with me? It feels like an innocent enough suggestion, but then again, maybe it's too much too soon. She might think I'm desperate—grossly desperate—and that's the last impression I want to leave. So, I'll keep it slow. No texts, no calls—unless there's something genuinely important to say.

Yes, slow and steady. One step at a time.

By the way, there's something about that recurring dream she mentioned. Does it mean she's hiding a fear? Something that's troubling her deep down? Or was she just teasing me? I don't know, and honestly, I don't want to overthink it right now.

For now, I'm just happy. Genuinely, inexplicably happy. Let's see where this road takes us.

~ May 31, 2019

So, I lied to Natasha today. Told her I'd received a job offer from her company—just to see how she'd react to the idea of us becoming co-workers. The truth? I did get a call from her office about six months ago, back when I was still in Pune. But the opportunity slipped away over money discussions, and I didn't pursue it further. If only I'd known then that Natasha was working there... things could've been so much simpler. Being in the same office, getting closer to her—with my own identity—would've been within reach. But now? Now, I'm stuck trying to carve out a path in the most convoluted way possible.

Today's conversation felt like such a gamble. She pretended to be composed, professional, briefing me well, answering every question with ease. I couldn't tell if it affected her at all. Did the idea of spending entire workdays alongside me bother her? Did she feel anything at all? She concealed her emotions so effortlessly, leaving me completely in the dark. Honestly, it feels like today's attempt was a failure.

And now, on top of everything, I'm terrified. What if she checks with her HR team? What if she finds out there's no record of Akshay Tripathi ever being contacted by them? The thought of her confronting me... I don't even know how I'd handle it. One lie leading to another—it feels like I'm just digging myself deeper with every move I make.

Luck doesn't seem to be on my side, and I can't figure out why. Should I talk to someone about this? Get some advice? But then again, what am I even thinking? Who would possibly

support what I'm doing? No one. No one would see this as anything other than deceitful and wrong.

I'm on my own here. A one-man army fighting a battle I don't even fully understand. And honestly, I don't know where this is going to lead me. But I'll keep pushing forward. There's no turning back now.

Natasha raised her hand, signaling Mansi to stop. Her eyes, puffy and bloodshot from relentless tears, reflected her raw, overwhelming emotions. Without a word, Mansi gently closed the diary and reached out, holding Natasha's trembling hand. After a moment of silence, Natasha spoke, her voice cracked but firm, asking Mansi to search for any mention of their first date. Mansi nodded quietly, reopened the diary, and began reading once again.

~ June 07, 2019

*Alright—we're going on a date! Finally, it's happening, and I can barely contain my excitement. I feel like I'm soaring right now in a mix of pure happiness and disbelief. This doesn't feel like it did before—no, this feels so much better, so much more meaningful. This time, it's **Natasha**.*

*I need to focus, though. There's so much to consider, so many things to get right. I need to be careful with my words, my actions—everything about the way I present myself. This isn't just any date; it's with **her**, and I can't afford to make any mistakes.*

But honestly? I feel completely blank right now, overwhelmed by the sheer joy of it all. It's like I'm standing on the edge of something incredible, and even though I'm overthinking every detail, I can't help but feel like I'm floating on cloud nine. This is it—the moment I've been hoping for. Let's see where it takes me.

~ June 09, 2019

I think, all in all, today went well.

But I can't hide the truth from you, diary, so let me confess—I wore that shirt on purpose. It wasn't random. I wanted to see if it would stir something in her, if the memories of Akul still linger in her heart. Selfish? Maybe. But I needed to know. If Akul is still a shadow in her life, then Akshay—the identity I'm wearing—needs to act accordingly.

That said, I genuinely feel awful for hurting her, especially on our very first date. I didn't intend to upset her, but part of me felt like this test was necessary—not for her, but for my own clarity.

Thankfully, I think I was able to make it up to her. I made her smile, not just once, but several times, and that, at least, gave me some relief. We ended up having a good time overall, despite the start.

The best part? Beyond all the small talk and casual chatter, she actually opened up to me. She talked about her feelings for her ex, and in that moment, I realized how much trust she's willing to give. It's rare for her to let someone in like that, and now, I know I can't take that for granted. Moving forward, I'm determined not to make any reckless mistakes. I have to be more genuine, more considerate... and—

‘Shhh—’ Natasha raised her hand abruptly, her voice a mere whisper but sharp enough to make Mansi stop mid-sentence. Natasha’s face was a storm of emotions, her eyes red and swollen from constant weeping. ‘So, he did that on purpose,’ she muttered, her tone filled with disbelief and bitterness. Mansi nodded silently, watching her with concern as she carefully placed the diary back into her bag.

‘Take a deep breath,’ Mansi said gently, her voice steady as she placed a comforting hand on Natasha’s arm. ‘If you want... you could give the diary back to him. Or even confront him directly, face to face.’ Her tone was calm, careful, as she tried to read the emotions flickering across Natasha’s face. Natasha exhaled deeply, her shoulders heavy with the burden of unspoken thoughts. Her jaw tightened, and her gaze drifted to the distance, as though searching for answers in a void that offered none. Mansi waited, watching her intently, hoping she would open up.

‘What is it that you’re thinking?’ Mansi finally asked, breaking the silence. Natasha hesitated, her lips pressed together as she struggled to articulate her thoughts. Then, she turned her piercing gaze towards Mansi, locking eyes with a look so intense it made Mansi’s stomach twist.

‘Do you think everything that’s happened with Akul is just a coincidence, Mansi?’ Natasha’s voice was low but brimming with restrained anger. Her eyes flickered with a fire that Mansi couldn’t decipher.

Mansi frowned, her confusion evident. 'I don't understand,' she said cautiously, narrowing her eyes as if trying to read Natasha's mind.

Natasha let out another heavy breath, her frustration bubbling over. 'I get it,' she began, her voice trembling with a mix of anger and disbelief. 'Destiny brought Akul from Pune to Gurugram. Fine. It was destiny that we ran into each other at that bar. And maybe it was destiny again that we crossed paths at Cyber Hub or under my office building. But do you honestly believe it was 'destiny' that led "both" of us to Nikhil? For him, maybe. But for me? No. It doesn't make sense.'

Mansi blinked, still not fully grasping Natasha's point.

'Why, out of all the counselors in this city, out of all the options online, did I end up traveling all the way to McLeodganj to meet Nikhil? There's an unsaid truth here, Mansi, and I need you to stop wasting my time and just tell me what it is.' Natasha's voice rose slightly, her fury barely contained. Her eyes bore into Mansi, demanding an answer.

Mansi swallowed hard, guilt flickering across her face. She opened her mouth to speak but hesitated, searching for the right words. The silence between them stretched unbearably until, finally, Mansi gave in. 'Just like you, I blocked his number... everywhere. On my phone, on WhatsApp. I didn't want to hear from him either.' She paused, her voice softer now. 'But two days before we

talked about the trip, I received a courier at the office. It was from Akul.'

Natasha's face hardened. Her body stiffened, anger radiating from her like heat, but she stayed silent, waiting for Mansi to continue.

'It was a 'sorry' card,' Mansi explained, her words slow and deliberate. 'With a handwritten note. He said he truly realizes the gravity of his mistakes. That no matter how much he tries, he knows he might never win you back. And then, he wrote about meeting a famous Instagrammer in McLeodganj. He told him his side of the story, and now, he has nothing left to prove his love except for what this guy has.'

Mansi took a breath, her voice trembling slightly. 'After reading the note, I... I melted, Natasha. I couldn't help it. That's why I decided to take you there. I thought you deserved to hear his side of the story. I didn't know what it was—whether it was a diary or something else. I just knew it was unfair not to give him one last chance to explain.'

'Where's that letter?' Natasha cut in, her voice sharp.

'It's at home,' Mansi replied nervously. She couldn't tell if Natasha's tone came from anger or something softer. But within seconds, her fears were confirmed.

'You know what, Mansi? You've crossed a line today,' Natasha said coldly, her gaze piercing. Mansi flinched at the words but didn't respond. 'I always thought that no matter what, you'd be on my side. But today, you've

proved that I can't trust anyone. Not even my best friend.'

Tears streamed down Natasha's face, but her furious expression remained intact. The betrayal in her voice stung Mansi like a slap, and she felt her own anger rising. 'Are you serious right now? Do you even hear yourself?' Mansi snapped, her frown deepening. But Natasha raised her hand, stopping her mid-sentence.

Mansi's chest tightened as she watched Natasha's resolve harden. It was clear Natasha had already made up her mind, spinning the story in her head. Mansi's frustration built up like a dam ready to burst. Her lips quivered, her eyes brimming with tears she desperately tried to hold back. But when one tear escaped, followed by another, she couldn't stop them. They glared at each other in tense silence until Natasha broke eye contact first, turning away. Mansi followed suit, their shoulders stiff as they turned to opposite sides.

The rest of their journey passed in suffocating silence. When they reached home, Mansi stormed into her room, yanked open her almirah, and pulled out an envelope. She marched to the living room, flung the envelope onto the center table, and shouted, 'Here's the letter and card your ex sent! You know why he sent this to me?'

She paused, waiting for Natasha to say something, but Natasha's only response was her short, furious breaths.

‘Because he knew you wouldn’t fucking trust him!’ Mansi exploded.

‘And why the hell should I?’ Natasha shot back, her voice sharp and unwavering. ‘You know my story, Mansi. You know everything. And yet, you’re taking his side? You seriously think I should trust you as my friend?’

‘I’m not taking his side!’ Mansi yelled. ‘For God’s sake, I just thought he deserved a chance to explain himself! You know his truth now. You’ve seen the diary, his handwriting, everything. You know he writes journals. And you know that Nikhil—someone who’s practically a stranger—has no reason to lie. Can’t you just accept that Akul’s methods were wrong, but his intentions weren’t?’

Natasha’s eyes blazed with fury. ‘He lied to me five years ago, and he’s lying now. And I was stupid enough to trust him then—and even you now.’

‘WHAT THE FUCK!’ Mansi roared, taking a step towards Natasha, but in her rage, she stubbed her toe on the table. She hissed in pain, sinking to the floor as tears of frustration filled her eyes. Natasha, still caught up in her anger, didn’t even move to help. Instead, she turned on her heel and stomped to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Mansi sat there for a moment, clutching her toe and seething. Her anger bubbled over, mingling with the hurt Natasha’s words had caused. From that moment,

the distance between them grew—a cold, silent chasm that neither dared to cross.

The scene replayed vividly in Mansi's mind, making her chest tighten all over again. *I was only trying to help. But how do you help someone who refuses to face reality?* She thought bitterly as she stepped out of her room. The aroma of fresh rotis and rajma filled the living room, but the tension in the air was just as thick. Anuj and Natasha were engrossed in their presentation, oblivious to her presence. Without a word, Mansi went to the kitchen, served herself food, and retreated to the solitude of her room once more.

On Friday, Natasha's phone buzzed with a text from Mansi:

Reminder: the interior guy called up. Be there at 7 pm.

The message was curt, almost mechanical, but Natasha knew it carried the weight of Mansi's simmering frustration. Their last two meetings with the interior designer had been canceled in the same week, and Mansi had been quietly fuming ever since. Natasha hadn't responded to the previous reminders, brushing them off lightly, but today guilt gnawed at her. This house was their shared dream, their biggest achievement to date, and she couldn't keep ignoring Mansi's anger.

She typed back a quick *OK* and received a thumbs-up emoji in return.

Do you have the new house keys? Natasha asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

No. Either of us who gets free first should bring them from home.

Natasha read Mansi's reply and felt a flicker of relief. It was such a small thing, but it reminded her of how they used to plan everything together, always finding ways to save each other time and effort. The ice between them melted just a little, and Natasha adjusted her post-lunch schedule to fit in the task of picking up the keys.

By evening, they met the interior designer as if nothing had ever been wrong between them. Their interactions were polite, professional, and devoid of any tension. But as soon as the designer left, the air shifted. Both women pulled out their phones, booking separate cabs without a word. The silence was heavy, and for a moment, it seemed like they would retreat into their respective corners again.

Then, Mansi broke the stalemate. '*Daaru peene chalein?*' she asked, her voice casual but tinged with vulnerability.

Natasha looked up, startled by the unexpected proposal. Their eyes met, and though there was a faint frown on each of their foreheads, their expressions softened. It was clear they both desperately wanted to end the discomfort that had been hanging over them. Alcohol felt like the perfect remedy to mend their fractured friendship.

Natasha let out a deep sigh and rushed towards Mansi, wrapping her arms tightly around her. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered, her voice cracking slightly.

Mansi rubbed Natasha's shoulders gently, and for a moment, silence spoke louder than words. The tension between them dissolved as they headed to their favorite spot on Golf Course Road, ready to drown their lingering resentment in shots and laughter.

The bar pulsed with lively music and the hum of chatter filling every corner. But unlike their usual outings, Natasha and Mansi didn't make their way to the dance floor this time. Instead, they stayed seated, letting the rhythm of the music play around them as they drank in silence.

After four shots, Natasha's guard began to crumble. Tipsy and flushed, she leaned back in her chair, her face breaking into a crooked smile as the alcohol loosened her emotions.

*Ye dil to pehle aisa nahi tha
Kisne behkaaya aisa sapna dikhaya kyu?*

Out of nowhere, she started singing along to the music overhead, her voice growing bolder with each line.

*Ye ankhen meri dekhein usi ko
Soche bina hi usey apna banaya kyu
Jeena to marne se ab hai kahin mushkil
Khud ko jo khoya toh, woh ho gaya haasail
Dus bahaane kar ke le gaya dil – le gaya dil
Dus bahaane kar ke le gaya dil.*

Natasha burst into laughter, clutching her stomach as she turned to Mansi. ‘Remember this peppy song from the movie *Dus*? It was such a rage when we were teenagers! Hell, I never thought these lyrics would one day resonate with my own life!’ She laughed again, louder this time, her voice tinged with both amusement and bitterness.

‘See, this is exactly what that fucker did to me, Mansi. *Dus bahaane* he made, and I couldn’t even tell he was hiding in plain sight. He made it all look so fucking real. What a player he is—so good that no one could see his true colors.’ Natasha clapped her hands together, her exhilaration spilling over.

Mansi forced a laugh, her smile tight, but her heart ached for her friend. She could see the pain Natasha was trying to mask with humor, the raw wounds that hadn’t yet healed. Mansi didn’t add anything to the conversation, choosing instead to nod along, letting Natasha vent without interruption.

~ June 26, 2019

I am in love.

She is in love. I know that with certainty.

We are in love, once again. Our hearts have found each other like they were always meant to. From my side, this time, it's going to be forever.

I've never felt anything so deeply, so profoundly, as I did today. Yes, we kissed. Who would've thought it would happen, but it did—an unplanned, fleeting moment that felt like the universe itself paused to hold its breath. And oh, the way it felt... it was blissful, intoxicating, just as magical as the first kiss I ever shared with her.

Today, Natasha captivated me entirely. Every word she spoke, every glance she offered, wrapped me in a spell I couldn't escape. I didn't want to leave her house. Even when her friend arrived, interrupting the perfect bubble we had built together, all I wanted was to steal more time with her. I wanted to hold her, to wrap her in my arms, and whisper promises I'd never break. I wanted to keep her there, close, never letting go.

As Natasha lay in bed later that night, she read these lines from Akul's diary. They struck a chord deep within her, stirring emotions she couldn't quite articulate. This passage became her favorite—a treasured fragment she could never forget. To her, it wasn't just an incident; it was like a beloved piece of poetry that echoed the beauty and vulnerability of that day. But it also reopened old wounds, reminders of the mistakes she'd made along the way. She had trusted him completely, blindly. Why had she never asked about meeting his friends? Why hadn't she checked his phone or even glanced at his credit card or other things that might have revealed the mask he had been wearing all along? Was Akul truly the orchestrator of this deception, or was it her own destiny playing cruel tricks on her heart?

The diary rested quietly in her lap as the haunting questions surfaced yet again, uninvited and relentless. But this time, Natasha closed the book, sealing away the chaos in her mind along with its pages. She decided she wouldn't read any more entries beyond that one, leaving the rest of Akul's words unread, untouched—a boundary to protect herself from the turmoil they might bring.

Chapter 15

Unfinished Business

On a pleasant evening, as the cool breeze danced through the balcony, Natasha and Mansi sat with cups of steaming tea in their hands. The weather was serene, almost soothing, but the conversation brewing between them carried a different weight. ‘Have you ever thought about Nikhil’s idea—about turning your story into a book?’ Mansi asked.

Natasha stared into her cup, the tea swirling lazily as if mirroring her tangled thoughts. ‘I don’t know,’ she said finally, her tone flat but tinged with skepticism. ‘What’s the point of sharing a messed-up experience like mine with the whole world?’

‘Well, who would know the difference between truth and fiction unless you announce it yourself?’ Mansi countered, pausing to let her point sink in. ‘Besides, Nikhil said that you’re a natural storyteller. You already have the whole thing in your mind. You just need to weave it together, dress it up with the right words, and—’

‘—And what ending do you expect me to give this story?’ Natasha cut her off, her emotions bubbling to the surface. ‘That the girl lived miserably after being duped twice by the same man? Or that she’s moved on... barely... but still clings to fragments of the past?’ Her voice cracked on the last line, and she turned away, fixing her gaze on the distant horizon, shutting down the conversation before Mansi could respond.

Mansi sighed, deciding to let it drop. The air between them grew heavy with unspoken thoughts, and the balcony settled back into silence, punctuated only by the soft rustling of leaves in the breeze.

But Akul’s name returned like an unwelcome guest that weekend. Mansi’s voice rang out from Natasha’s bedroom doorway, louder this time. ‘Babe, Akul might not matter to you anymore, but his memories? They still affect you. Don’t even try to deny it.’

Natasha sat frozen, staring blankly at the wall, the diary she had been reading moments earlier resting in her lap. Mansi stepped into the room, taking a seat beside her. This time, she softened her approach. ‘Why don’t you meet him once?’ she said gently. ‘Just for the sake of closure. Get some clarity and put it all behind you—the haunting, the pain. Just... finish it.’

Natasha shook her head firmly, her lips pressing into a thin line. ‘There’s no point,’ she said in a flat voice. ‘I know him too well. He’ll just come up with another story and trap me all over again.’

Mansi let out a frustrated huff. ‘So, what then? You just want to keep suffering like this forever?’

‘Absolutely not,’ Natasha shot back, the fire in her voice reignited. ‘I’ve already told my mom to start looking for profiles. I’m ready to move on—really move on this time. I told her I need time to truly understand whoever she finds. Even if a proposal comes tomorrow, even if everything clicks perfectly, I’m not rushing into anything. No marriage until I feel fully ready’ She crossed her arms, signaling she was done with the conversation.

It was obvious Mansi wasn’t entirely convinced, but she could see Natasha’s resolve. Pushing further would only build walls, not bridges. ‘Fine,’ she said with reluctant acceptance. ‘If you think this will make you happy, then I’m happy for you too.’

The room settled into an uneasy quiet. For now, the conversation was over, but both of them knew that the story and its unresolved threads was far from finished.

Two months passed in a blur, bringing Natasha and Mansi closer to the New Year. Their routine remained unchanged, albeit with a new addition—frequent visits to their soon-to-be home. With the interior work progressing rapidly, their input was constantly needed, and one of them had to be present to finalize decisions.

One chilly evening, it was Natasha’s turn to visit the house and inspect the stock that the interior guy had ordered. She slid into the cab, only to feel a jolt of

recognition—it was the same cab she had shared with Akul a few months ago. The small, faded photo of the cab driver’s family was still pinned to the dashboard, and in that instant, the memory of that day came rushing back. It was the day everything between Akul and her had shifted, the day that left her world more tangled than before.

Her heart whispered anxiously, ‘Is this some kind of sign?’ But Natasha quickly silenced the thought, shaking her head and shushing the inexplicable emotions threatening to rise. She needed a distraction and turned to her phone, scrolling through social media as her heartbeats gradually steadied.

Her cousin’s Facebook story appeared on her feed:

Two people coming together is destiny.

But two people staying together is all about efforts.

Natasha exhaled sharply, her chest tightening. For a fleeting moment, it felt as if the words had been written for her and Akul. Before she could linger on the thought, she swiped to the next story, which read:

All I wanted to feel was loved,

All you made me feel was stupid.

She stared at the screen, her mind grappling with the juxtaposition of these two truths. The conflicting emotions felt like a tug-of-war inside her. ‘What a conflicted world we live in,’ she murmured under her breath. Shaking her head, she dismissed the train of

thoughts threatening to spiral and escaped into a page filled with mindless memes until she reached the new house.

There, she finalized the stock with Mansi's approval over a video call. Once done, Natasha booked a cab to return home. While waiting for her cab, fragments of the evening's ride replayed in her head like a loop. Her heart tried to drag her back to the emotions she was desperate to bury, but she ignored it, forcing herself to stay present.

And then she heard someone calling out her name. 'Natasha.'

Her body froze, a wave of dread surging through her. Her heart raced as the voice echoed in her ears. Was it real? Or was it just her imagination tormenting her? She wanted to dismiss it as a trick of her mind, but then it came again—stronger, nearer.

'Natasha.'

This time, it was unmistakable. The voice was right behind her. Slowly, she turned, her chest tight and her breath shallow. Her eyes widened, a mix of fear and anger flickering within them as they met his. Akul stood there, his presence pulling her into a moment she wasn't prepared for.

'Hi, can we talk? Please?' Akul's voice was shaky, his desperation evident as he stood before Natasha.

‘Is there really anything left to talk about?’ Natasha replied, her voice trembling, her anger barely contained. She cast a quick glance around, checking for witnesses, but the area was almost deserted except for the society guards and a few passing vehicles.

Akul let out a deep breath, his shoulders sagging. ‘I’m sorry, Natasha. I truly am. I know I screwed up—big time. But believe me, my only motive was to win your trust—’

Natasha cut him off, her voice sharp and unwavering. ‘Win my trust? By drowning me in lies? What were you even thinking, Akul? That this was some cliché Bollywood movie where you’d meet me under a false identity, sweep me off my feet, and we’d magically overcome the truth when it all unraveled? Is that what you thought?’

Akul stood silent, his lips pressed into a thin line as Natasha’s words tore into him. She took the opportunity to lash out further, unleashing the fury she had bottled up for so long.

‘Do you even understand how hard it was for me to convince myself to be with someone who looks EXACTLY like my ex? I constantly questioned myself if it was even right to date my ex’s twin brother? Would Akul judge me if he found out I was in love with Akshay? Those thoughts tortured me, day in and day out. And then you... you ruined me, Akul. Completely. And now you’re here asking for an apology?’

‘No, Natasha,’ Akul said quickly, shaking his head. ‘I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness. I don’t. But trust me, it took every ounce of courage I have to face you today. I know that no matter how much I explain, I can’t win you back. But please... hear me out. Just once.’

Natasha fixed her gaze to the left, refusing to look at him or acknowledge his plea. But she remained quiet, and Akul took the silence as permission to continue.

‘In the beginning,’ he started, ‘I thought I could manage it. I thought things would be fine, and with time, I’d find the right moment to tell you I’m Akul, not Akshay. The guilt and fear were constant—they ate away at me every single day. But as long as luck seemed to favor me, I convinced myself I could handle it. That I could fix things eventually. I was wrong. I realize now I messed up too much, and there’s no reversing the damage.’

‘You know, the morning after we made lov—’ Akul’s voice faltered, and Natasha’s sharp glare stopped him mid- sentence. ‘I mean... after spending the night together, when I saw our reflections in the mirror, something shifted. I knew things were spiraling out of control. I knew I had to tell you the truth. But seeing you happy with me—happy with ‘Akshay’—it broke me. The fear of losing you forever paralyzed me. I couldn’t do it. I thought about talking to my parents, but after discussing it with Akshay over a video call, I realized they would be furious with me for lying to the girl I love. I know I have no one to blame but myself, Natasha. My

careless attitude. My stupid decisions. You've known me long enough to know how impulsive I can be—and how much I regret losing you the first time.'

Natasha listened to him, her expression stoic, her head slowly shaking in silent refusal as she absorbed his words.

'It was destiny that brought us together,' Akul continued, his voice cracking, 'and that same destiny punished me for what I did. It didn't let me escape. I haven't felt normal since the day you met Akshay and Sakshi and uncovered the truth that I should've told you myself. I've been drowning in guilt ever since. At one point, I thought about reaching out to you for an apology, but I couldn't. It felt pointless. I quit everything—trying to contact you, trying to talk to Mansi—because I decided this was my punishment: to stay away from you for the rest of my life.'

'One day,' he paused, his voice trembling, 'in a moment of hopelessness, I gave away something deeply personal to a stranger in McLeodganj.' Natasha's gaze shifted sharply at this confession, but she kept her expression unreadable, refusing to reveal anything.

'When I came back, I realized I hadn't just lost you. I lost everything—the memories I cherished, the life I imagined with you—by handing them over to someone else. I thought about writing you an email, but then I remembered the stupid idea of manipulating you with Akshay's Facebook account...' Akul's voice broke, tears

threatening to spill. ‘So, I left a small note for Mansi about my journal. I wasn’t sure if she’d even care... but it was my only shot. And I guess she didn’t.’

Akul fell silent after his whole confession. Natasha didn’t speak deliberately.

‘Please, Natasha. Say something,’ Akul pleaded.

‘You wanted me to hear you, so I did,’ Natasha said coldly. ‘Can I leave now?’ Her harsh reply left Akul stunned, his breath hitching as he tried to process her words.

‘Alright,’ he murmured finally, his voice hollow. ‘But... can you just tell me one thing? In all those moments we shared... did you ever feel anything for me? Any love at all?’

Natasha’s expression didn’t waver. She concealed her anger and pain beneath a mask of indifference. ‘I was in love with Akshay, not Akul. And since there is no Akshay in this story, there is no love.’

She turned and walked away, her tears betraying the calm facade she tried to maintain. Akul remained where he was, helplessly watching her retreat, the weight of her final words crushing him.

Natasha reached home that evening, her heart heavy with a storm of emotions she wasn’t ready to share. Offering a quiet ‘drinks night’ to Mansi, she masked her inner turmoil with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. For the first time in their friendship, Natasha had

a story worth telling—a story bursting with revelations—but tonight, she chose silence. She wasn't ready. She wasn't sure if Mansi, her trusted confidant, would take her side or, as always, defend Akul instead.

The vodka began to flow, and the two of them drank steadily, the evening tipping towards tipsiness. The liquid courage loosened Natasha's resolve, her thoughts bubbling dangerously close to the surface. Her brain warned her against spilling everything, but her heart ached to unload the truth. She hesitated, then, as if testing the waters, posed a seemingly ambiguous question:

'Is it about the name, the identity, or the person, Mansi?'

Mansi paused mid-sip, raising an eyebrow. 'What do you mean?'

Natasha twirled her glass in her hand, trying to steady herself. 'I mean... the second time around, I fell in love with Akshay, not Akul. So, if tomorrow Akshay becomes Ajay or Atul, or whatever the hell else—will I still love him, or will my feelings change with his name?'

Though Mansi had no idea about Natasha's meeting with Akul earlier that day, she wasn't oblivious to her best friend's patterns. She could see it clearly that Natasha was slipping back into thoughts of her ex. Mansi sighed and leaned forward.

'Name gives someone an identity to trust, so yeah, it matters. But feelings?' she said carefully. 'Feelings are...'

complicated. In my opinion, feelings don't change based on a name or an outward label. They come from deep inside you. They're about the connection, not the surface details.'

It was a thoughtful answer, one meant to reassure, but Natasha simply sipped her drink and stared into the glass, silent as if Mansi's words hadn't reached her.

'I think I've found the ending to my story,' Natasha said abruptly, breaking the silence.

'Wait, what?' Mansi blinked, taken by surprise.

'I've decided. I'm going to write it down,' Natasha continued, her tone almost distant.

'That's... great,' Mansi said hesitantly, sensing an undercurrent Natasha wasn't revealing. 'But why don't you just tell me what happened? I know you're hiding something.'

Natasha stared at her glass, her fingers gripping it tightly. After a moment, she took a deep breath and finally spoke. 'He met me today. He apologized. He explained everything—his side of the story. And at the end, he asked me if I ever loved him.' Her voice cracked slightly before she added bitterly, 'Bloody hell, he made me fall in love with the other version of him. It was Akshay, not Akul.'

Mansi's jaw tightened, her frustration bubbling over. 'You stupid. You moron. I always thought you were

sensitive, emotionally weak—but you’re a real bitch, Natasha,’ she snapped.

‘Don’t call me a bitch,’ Natasha shot back, her voice rising to match Mansi’s intensity.

‘You are so egoistic, Natasha,’ Mansi fired, unable to hold back anymore. ‘You told him you loved Akshay? Have you completely lost it? Do you even remember those days when you were dating ‘Akshay’? How you would constantly look for Akul’s shadow in him? How you kept coming to me for advice on how to overcome Akul while being with Akshay? You’ve forgotten, haven’t you?’

Natasha froze, her face betraying the faintest flicker of guilt, but Mansi pressed on, her voice rising with each word.

‘Do you remember the day you kissed him? Right here—on this very couch?’ Mansi pointed emphatically. ‘And then you spent the entire night dissecting that kiss with me. That was when I knew, Natasha. You didn’t love Akshay. You were still in love with Akul. You just loved the idea of someone giving you all their attention, loving you so madly, and most importantly, making it comfortable for you to imagine living with Akul again. That’s what this relationship was—a comfort zone. It wasn’t love; it was a shelter for your fears.’

Mansi rose abruptly, pacing the room as her anger reached a boiling point. ‘You had the rarest chance, Natasha—the man you truly loved came back to you,

and he loved you wholeheartedly. And what did you do? You turned away. You mistreated your destiny because of your ridiculous fears.'

With a huff, Mansi stormed into the kitchen. The sound of her glass hitting the sink shattered the tense silence, and a moment later, she returned, her frustration still blazing. Natasha sat frozen in place, her face blank, but her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

'And another thing,' Mansi said, standing over her. 'Have you ever thought about how conflicted you *are* as a person? Like the time you mix those weird combos—*Puran Poli* with *Dhaniya Chatni*, or noodles with *Chhole*. Do you know what that says about you? It's not because you like weird. It's because you're always chasing balance. You like the taste of one and the nutrition of the other, so you have to have a bit of both. That's who you are, Natasha.

'And isn't it the same with your feelings?' Mansi's voice softened slightly, though her intensity remained. 'Akul showed you another side of himself—a serious lover, someone deeply committed to you. That's why his memories still cling to you. That's why, instead of feeling lighter after lashing out at him today, you feel heavier. Because deep down, you know that Akul is stupid, immature, a mess... but he loves you. And if someone truly loves you, trust can be rebuilt.'

With that, Mansi spun around and walked to her room, leaving Natasha alone on the couch. Natasha sat

there, unmoving, her hands wrapped around her glass, her tears finally spilling over. A few rolled down her cheeks, but she made no move to wipe them away. She sat in silence, her heart heavier than ever, as Mansi's words echoed in her mind.

The Dream or A Dream?

Mansi and Natasha were at the Crossword Store in Cyber Hub, the air buzzing with anticipation for the evening's book launch. While Mansi engaged in a formal conversation with a guest, Natasha stood in the far corner of the store, where the staff had thoughtfully placed four chairs for them. Her phone was pressed to her ear, her voice low but firm, her expression betraying an adamant tone. Mansi glanced at her wristwatch, noting the time, and walked over to Natasha, gently patting her shoulder. She motioned with her hand, silently asking, 'What's going on?'

Natasha sighed and put the phone on speaker.

'I'm only asking you to book a table at a decent place because I want to meet the groom's family properly. That's it. What's the harm in that?' her mother's voice echoed, firm yet pleading.

'And I'm only saying that my house is a perfectly proper place. Why do you want to—' Natasha began, her frustration spilling over, but Mansi interrupted her.

‘Aunty, everything will happen exactly as you want. Don’t worry—I’ll handle Natasha,’ Mansi said smoothly, shushing Natasha before she could continue.

Mansi turned to her friend, her tone shifting to one of quiet reprimand. ‘Have you completely lost it? Look at where you’re standing, and the event we’re here for. Is this really the right time to discuss all of this?’

Natasha nodded reluctantly, her irritation giving way to guilt. Both women turned their attention to the store’s entrance, where a vibrant poster announcing the book launch stood proudly. Natasha’s gaze softened as she looked at it, her lips curving into a fond smile. Mansi noticed and gave her a proud side-hug.

‘I hope they get here on time,’ Natasha said nervously, checking her phone. ‘The authorities said the launch will start sharp at 7:00 p.m.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Mansi reassured her, glancing at her own phone. ‘They’ll be here in the next five minutes.’

Just as Mansi dialed a number, Natasha spotted two familiar figures entering the store together. Their eyes scanned the room, searching for her. Natasha patted Mansi’s arm, and the two friends exchanged a look of surprise before turning their attention back to the newcomers.

The men approached with wide smiles, their identical faces lighting up the room.

‘Guess which one’s yours?’ one of them teased, his tone playful.

Natasha crinkled her nose and forehead at the question, glancing at Mansi, who was still gaping at them.

‘Hello! This isn’t *Judwaa* or *Ram aur Shyam*, alright? And this is definitely not the time for jokes,’ Natasha said, frowning.

‘It’s not a joke—we know that,’ one of them quipped. ‘That’s why one of us flew all the way from Washington to attend your book launch.’ He grinned mischievously before adding, ‘Come on, Natasha. You’ve got to pick your guy. Tell me—which one of us is Akul?’

Both men laughed, their identical stubble beards making the task even harder. Mansi chuckled, caught up in the playful energy, and encouraged Natasha to make her choice. Feeling helpless, Natasha began comparing their features, her eyes darting between them like she was solving a find-the-difference puzzle.

Just as she was about to speak, a voice came from behind them. ‘I still have your journal with me.’

Everyone turned to see Nikhil standing there, his presence cutting through the playful tension.

Mansi’s face lit up with realization. ‘This one. This one is your guy, Natasha!’ she exclaimed, pointing at the man on the left.

‘I saw how his expression changed when he looked at Nikhil. Only Akul knows Nikhil—Akshay doesn’t,’ Mansi said triumphantly.

The group burst into laughter, their silly game drawing amused glances from the people around them. Ignoring the attention, Mansi warmly hugged Nikhil. ‘About time you arrived, dude! You saved the day.’

The mood lightened instantly. Akshay side-hugged his twin brother and turned to Natasha. ‘He dragged me into this, alright,’ he said with mock exasperation.

Natasha said nothing, her gaze fixed on Akul, who looked victorious after his prank. Akshay leaned closer to her and asked, ‘Are you sure you’re ready to handle this careless idiot for a lifetime?’

Natasha’s laughter was all the answer he needed.

Akul pulled Natasha into a hug, and Mansi joined in without hesitation. Akshay followed suit, pulling Nikhil into the group embrace.

The book launch went off without a hitch. Akul and Natasha’s parents joined the event via video call, as did Sakshi. Once the launch was over, the mothers began discussing their first meeting, which was scheduled for three days later.

But then Natasha’s eyes snapped open, her breath heavy and uneven. The cheer and noise faded into silence as she realized she was lying in her bed,

surrounded by darkness. It took her a few seconds to process the truth—this had been a dream.

‘A dream?’ she whispered to herself, her voice shaky. She checked the time. It was only 1:00 a.m.

Lying back on her bed, Natasha replayed the vivid scenes in her mind.

‘Is this supposed to be a happy ending—with Akul? And everyone around us, happy and carefree, like one of those Sooraj Barjatya movies?’ she murmured.

Her thoughts spiraled further. ‘Is forgiving and forgetting him the only way out for me? Or is there a middle ground—where I forgive him but move on with someone else? Or maybe... maybe I never forgive him and just let time help me forget?’

Natasha searched for clarity, for an answer that would finally bring her peace. But, like always, she found herself stuck, unable to reach a conclusion. The questions lingered, unanswered, as she stared into the darkness.

The next night, the car accident dream returned, haunting her once again. Natasha woke abruptly, shuddering as her heart pounded against her ribs, the rapid palpitations drowning out the silence of the night. She reached for her phone with trembling hands—4:30 a.m. The same time as always.

Sleep had evaded her the previous night, stolen by another dream, and now the recurring nightmare had

come for her again. The scenes played on a relentless loop in her mind, refusing to fade even as she sat upright in her dimly lit room.

‘What if this dream isn’t just a dream?’ The thought whispered through her like a shadow she couldn’t shake. ‘What if that truck is my destiny, and the car is my love life, always crashing, always wrecked?’

Her mind spiraled, searching for meaning in the chaos. ‘What if those strangers who offer me help in the dream are my real-life friends and well-wishers? What if they’re the ones trying to pull me out of my suffering?’

She buried her head in her hands, her breath uneven. ‘What if I don’t have to keep suffering? What if I let them help me? Is there another way to escape this pain?’

Her chest tightened as new questions surfaced, clawing at her already restless heart. ‘Do I really need to forgive and forget Akul to move on? Or is there another way—can I let him go without forgiveness? Can I build a future with someone else while still holding on to the shards of his betrayal?’

Her brain swirled with relentless questions, but somewhere, buried deep beneath the noise, she already knew the answer her mind was trying to give her. And yet, she refused to listen. She had blocked it out ever since the truth about Akul had come to light, sealing it away behind walls of anger and heartbreak.

Now, in the stillness of the early morning, Natasha stared into the void, her thoughts louder than the quiet.

The weight of her unresolved emotions pressed down on her chest, leaving her adrift in a sea of uncertainty. Once again, she was trapped—alone with her questions, and no closer to finding the peace she so desperately craved.

Chapter 17

A Bit of Both

Few months later...

Nikhil had been anxiously awaiting the courier since the day he was told it was on its way. When it finally arrived, he tore open the envelope without hesitation. Inside was a neatly bound manuscript—Natasha’s story. Attached to the front was a small note in her handwriting:

Hi Nikhil,

As promised, I am sending my manuscript to you.

I hope I have been able to write it properly. I need your inputs on this.

Do get in touch soon.

Natasha.

A small smile tugged at his lips as he read her note. Without wasting a moment, Nikhil settled into his chair and began reading the manuscript. Hours slipped by unnoticed as he immersed himself in her narrative, the world around him fading as Natasha’s words took center stage. Somewhere around the three-to-four-hour mark,

he finished the last page and picked up his phone to text her.

Nikhil: *Very well written. Just that I didn't like the ending much.*

Natasha: *Ohk! What is it that you found odd? That the girl moved on with someone else?*

Nikhil: *I want to know the reason why the girl moved on. Was it because of unresolved anger at the guy who returned, explained himself, and apologized—but she was too stuck in her ego to forgive him? Or was it her fear of losing trust in relationships?*

Natasha stared at the message, her heart thumping. She had only expected praise, maybe a bit of constructive feedback. What she hadn't anticipated was Nikhil holding up a mirror to her story—one that forced her to confront questions she had buried deep. A knot tightened in her chest as her brain began reanalyzing everything.

Natasha: *So, according to you, what should the ending be?*

Nikhil: *The story belongs to you, Natasha. If this ending feels right to you, then own it. Don't worry about what others think.*

Natasha: *I want to know how you would have ended it.*

Nikhil: *Well, now we're talking :)*

There was a pause before Nikhil replied again, his words measured and thoughtful.

Nikhil: *As a reader, I honestly can't decide which character is entirely right or wrong. The story has to justify itself. For most of it, I felt like I was reading a heartbroken woman's story. But there's another perspective—the guy's—that you might have overlooked. Shall I share it with you?*

Natasha: *Go ahead.*

Nikhil: *Thanks. So, towards the end, the guy returns to the girl seeking her forgiveness. If he hadn't been guilt-ridden, he could have easily escaped—moved on without looking back even once. The girl didn't know his address or have connections to his friends. He could have just disappeared, like before... but he didn't.*

This time, he confessed his mistakes and apologized. To me, that shows he was genuine. Or let's say, if he were indecent, he could've made things worse for her—showing up at her office, bothering her at home. But when she drew a line, he respected it. He waited. That patience says a lot.

Natasha's hands trembled slightly as she typed back, emotions bubbling under her skin.

Natasha: *Nikhil, I don't know why, but I feel like everyone is trying to make me realize that I'm making a mistake by not forgiving him. Even you are taking his side. Tell me, if someone cheats on you twice, how are you supposed to trust that person?*

Nikhil took his time replying. When his message came, it was firm but compassionate.

Nikhil: *There are some situations in life where intentions matter more than actions, Natasha. When Akul cheated on you*

in college, he was wrong, and you were right to break up with him. But when he came back five years later, he was a changed man. Yes, he chose the wrong path to approach you, but his intentions this time were right.

In my opinion, destiny punished him for his past mistakes, so he could understand the pain of real heartbreak.

Can I say something more?

Natasha: *Go on.*

Nikhil: *I think you're very sensitive when it comes to love. Your problem isn't ego—it's fear. You're scared to trust again. And I get it—you've faced heartbreak twice, which has made you more vulnerable. But you need to change that. In my opinion, the first step towards that change is to forgive him.*

He still lives inside you, Natasha. Otherwise, you wouldn't have spent all this time writing his story. Think about that. Talk to him. Sort out your feelings. He tried to reach out to you, but you didn't let him. Remember, in the story you've written, only the names are different. The feelings remain the same. So, let go of your fear... not your love.

Natasha blinked at the screen, her thoughts swirling.

Natasha: *Love? You mean, I should go back to him?*

Nikhil: *I'm not saying that at all. It's your life, and only you can decide if Akul is still the right one for you. All I'm saying is, as long as he stays in your memories, you won't be able to move forward with anyone else. I said what I felt. The rest is up to you. Take care.*

The conversation ended there. Natasha didn't reply. She sat in silence, her phone resting heavily in her hand as Nikhil's words echoed in her mind. Her heart felt tangled, but for the first time in a long while, it wasn't entirely closed. Maybe this was the beginning of her finding her own answer.

By the end of April, summer had settled in completely. Natasha had come a long way from where she was last July, transformed by the shifts and changes in her life. Between her demanding office hours and the emotional labor of writing her story, she and Mansi had also managed to move into their own house—a milestone that brought them both pride and relief. Most importantly, Akul's name had disappeared from their conversations altogether. Mansi had drawn a firm line, telling Natasha she no longer wanted to discuss that chapter, a decision that indirectly helped Natasha begin to move on.

One day at the office, Raina approached Natasha's desk with a familiar book in hand.

'Here you go. Thank you for lending this to me. It was worth a read,' Raina said with a warm smile, placing the book on Natasha's desk.

'But I told you to keep it,' Natasha replied, a slight frown crossing her face.

'Yes, you did. But I think it should be returned to its rightful owner,' Raina chuckled, giving Natasha a

knowing wink before patting her shoulder. ‘See you at lunch.’ And with that, she walked away.

Natasha stared at the book—Rumi’s poetry collection. She had deliberately given it to Raina, thinking it would help her erase yet another memory of Akul. But now, the book was back, along with the memory it carried. The date flashed in her mind: April 24, 2019. The day she had met Akul at Cyber Hub, the day a fake love story had started between them. Natasha closed her eyes, forcing herself to push the thoughts away, and dived back into her work.

But that evening, her restlessness got the better of her. Before she could make sense of it, her feet carried her to the Crossword store. She wandered among the shelves, aimlessly picking up books she didn’t intend to buy. It felt like an odd sort of release—like someone feeling the first faint relief after a long illness. Once she had lingered enough, she stepped outside and instinctively walked towards the café where she had gone with Akul afterward.

To her surprise, the café had been replaced by a pub. A wry smile tugged at her lips as she muttered to herself, ‘Nothing is permanent.’ She turned to leave but found her feet drifting towards Farzi Café instead. Her mind was replaying scenes from last year as if trying to piece together fragments of a broken puzzle.

When she entered the café, her heart skipped a beat. The table where Akul and she had sat exactly a year ago

was vacant, as if waiting for her. She slid into the seat, ordering two beers and a bowl of nachos. The sight of the beer mugs blurred her vision, the fog of her present life colliding with the memories of her past. She sat in silence, lost in an ocean of thoughts about her tangled feelings and her imperfect journey.

Minutes passed, and then, as if pulled by an invisible thread, someone sat down across from her without asking. Natasha's head snapped up in surprise, her breath catching as her eyes met his—Akul.

Her lips parted, but no words came out, just a deep breath that carried the weight of everything she had buried deep inside her.

'Hi,' he said softly, his tone cautious, pointing to the beer mug on the table. 'Is that for me?'

Natasha didn't respond, her glare sharp but conflicted. Akul hesitated, then picked up the mug, his hand lingering over it for a moment. He glanced at her—not aimlessly, but with intent. His eyes held a quiet question, an unspoken apology, as if waiting for her permission to proceed. Slowly, he raised the mug towards her in a toast.

'Cheers,' he said quietly, his voice carrying a tentative warmth. The gesture was simple, but the meaning wasn't lost on Natasha. It felt like an olive branch, a silent acknowledgment of the mess they were in and a tentative offer of peace.

She said nothing, her lips pressed into a tight line, but her glare softened just slightly. Akul took a small sip, his demeanor calm, yet clearly not indifferent.

‘What do you want from me, Akul?’ Natasha finally asked, indignantly, the frustration bubbling just beneath the surface.

He tilted his head slightly, his expression both earnest and resigned. ‘Nothing,’ he said simply, the weight of the word making her heart tighten.

For a moment, she thought of leaving—standing up, walking away, and closing the door on this chapter once and for all. But her feet didn’t move, her heart refusing to let her escape just yet. The silence between them wasn’t empty; it was thick with unspoken words, shared history, and unacknowledged emotions. Akul’s occasional glances at her seemed to carry the weight of everything he couldn’t bring himself to say. And for reasons she couldn’t yet explain, those glances felt disarming, almost comforting.

Finally, she broke the silence, her voice sharp but quieter. ‘Were you following me? What brings you here?’

‘What brings *you* here?’ he asked back, his tone gentle but searching.

She huffed, shaking her head as the walls she had built around herself began to tremble. Her emotions, too heavy to bear, spilled over.

‘Why couldn’t you just tell the truth that day? Why couldn’t you say you were Akul?’

‘What were you afraid of? That I’d humiliate you in public? Yes, I would have. Because you treated me like shit in college. Even five years later, you didn’t have the courage to own up to your mistakes. Instead, you built this elaborate, fake world around me.’ Her voice cracked, the anger and hurt pouring out in waves.

‘I might have lashed out at you, Akul. Maybe once, maybe twice. But what beyond that? What would I have done to you? I’m not cruel. But you—you made a fool out of me. You insulted my feelings. You ruined everything between us.’

Her voice softened, losing its sharp edges as the fight in her slowly ebbed away. ‘Everyone says I should give you another chance because they think you truly love me. I hope you do. But tell me, Akul—if you were in my place, and I had kept you under constant lies, would you have been able to trust me again?’

She stopped, her breath shaky, her eyes searching his for a response. Akul placed his beer mug gently back on the table, then slid it towards her—just a few inches, a quiet, deliberate gesture. Natasha blinked, startled by the unexpected movement. The simplicity of it caught her off guard, leaving her unsure if it was an act of remorse, humility, or something more.

Akul leaned forward slightly, his eyes meeting hers, the regret in them as intense as the memories they

shared. He didn't rush to defend himself. He didn't argue. He just stayed there, silently acknowledging her pain, his quiet presence saying everything words couldn't.

'Between love and trust,' Natasha whispered finally, her voice almost breaking, 'what would you have chosen, Akul?'

Akul's gaze didn't waver. He leaned closer, his expression raw, vulnerable, and filled with something Natasha couldn't yet name. And then, with quiet conviction, he said, 'A bit of both.'

The words lingered in the air between them, heavy but not oppressive. For the first time, the silence didn't feel suffocating. It felt lighter, as though the unbearable weight they had been carrying for so long had begun to ease—just a little. Natasha didn't say anything else, but her shoulders, once so tense, sagged slightly, and the corners of her mouth softened, almost imperceptibly.

And though nothing was resolved, Natasha stayed. She stayed because, for the first time, the silence between them held not just their shared pain but a fragile, tentative promise of something more—something unknown, yet quietly hopeful.

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

A Bit of Both, to me, is not just a tale—it is a reflection of life's complexities, relationships, and the delicate balance between love, trust, and forgiveness. When I began writing it, I had no idea how much of myself would pour into the narrative or how deeply the characters' struggles would mirror my own moments of doubt and courage. Yet, when I finished the draft, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction with what I had created.

At its core, this story is about choices—those made in moments of clarity and those shaped by fear and vulnerability. Natasha's journey serves as a reminder that life seldom offers perfect resolutions. Her love story isn't meant to provide a definitive answer about what is right or wrong; instead, it's about leaving the door ajar for hope, introspection, and the possibilities that only time can reveal.

I also chose an open-ended conclusion deliberately, because life itself rarely gives us tidy, final answers. My hope is that, as readers, you can step into Natasha's shoes and wrestle with her choices—wondering whether she found her way back to Akul or carved out a new path entirely. This ambiguity isn't about a lack of closure; it's an invitation to reflect on your own experiences with

love, forgiveness, and the pivotal role trust plays in relationships.

While Natasha and Akul's story may take center stage, I personally believe that Mansi's character is one of the strongest in this narrative. What began as a side character gradually grew into something much larger—her role became integral to the emotional depth of the story. A story isn't always, or perhaps I should say, isn't only about its main protagonists. Often, an author's wisdom, perspective, or strength is channeled through the supporting characters, and this is exactly the case in 'A Bit of Both'.

Mansi stands out as the voice of unwavering friendship and resilience, embodying the kind of fierce loyalty and companionship everyone hopes for in their lives. There are moments where she even feels stronger than Natasha, offering clarity and balance. Her opinions and advice may not have always been perfect or right in hindsight, but her heart was always in the right place. She stood as a pillar of strength, a trusted confidant, and a fierce protector. Through her, this story finds its depth beyond just the protagonists, and I am deeply grateful for what her character brought to the narrative.

To those who feel stuck between moving on and holding on—know that you are not alone. Life is full of shades of gray, where absolutes rarely exist. Sometimes, the choices that seem impossible are the ones that lead to the most growth.

This story is for every person who has felt the sting of betrayal, the weight of heartbreak, and the yearning for something deeper. It's for the hopeless romantics, the cautious hearts, and those still navigating the winding paths of their own stories.

Thank you for journeying with Natasha, Akul, and Mansi. I hope their story speaks to you in unexpected ways, leaving you with questions, emotions, and maybe even answers of your own.

With best wishes,

Richa Telang.

Acknowledgments

Ever since the decision was made to launch this story as a novel, I've been looking forward to writing this particular piece—acknowledgments. To me, this is one of the most fulfilling parts of publishing a book as it takes you on a nostalgic journey, back to where it all began and how far you've come, and most importantly, it gives you the chance to celebrate the people who played a part in bringing your vision to life. So, here it goes...

Thank You:

To my parents, for their incredible upbringing and unwavering support. Without them, I wouldn't be here today.

To both my families, for imparting confidence and providing endless encouragement for my creativity.

To Mr. Husband, Sachindra, for seeing the potential in this story and backing me all the way. Your patience and support have meant everything. Thank you for holding down the fort, for caring for our kids during the countless hours I spent immersed in writing. Thank you for our long, meaningful discussions about human behavior, how people perceive situations so differently, and how there's always more than one angle to every story. Above all, thank you for suggesting the open-ended conclusion—I owe that spark of brilliance to you!

To Vishakha, for her insights into the culture at NMIMS, Mumbai. Your input was immensely helpful.

To Prachi, for your thoughtful inputs and meticulous edits. You've genuinely made this story better, and I couldn't be more grateful for you.

To my beautiful friends... You know who you are. Listing all your names would fill pages, and I'd never forgive myself if I missed a name. If reading this brings back memories and puts a smile on your face, you know just how much you've contributed to my journey.

To my social media community, whose kindness continues to amaze me. Each of you, known to me by your handle names, answered my endless queries without hesitation and without a price tag. You have no idea how much your generosity has meant to me—this is why I love social media. People do genuinely help there!

To the incredible team of Mr. Syed Arshad at Blue Rose, for your tireless efforts in ensuring this story reaches my readers. You've been amazing throughout this journey—thank you!

To my wonderful readers on Wordrazzi, especially those who checked in consistently over the last two years, asking, 'When is the next story coming out?' Your anticipation fueled my determination.

To everyone in my life, because I've learned something valuable from each and every one of you. Big hugs to you all—you've made a difference.

Lastly, to those who doubted me, and mocked me when I shared that I was writing a book. Your sarcasm ignited my resolve and made me stronger.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Keep reading, keep sharing, and I hope this story finds a meaningful place in your heart.

With gratitude,

Richa.