

ASHWINI PARMAR

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Angle



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## Ashwini Parmar

Ashwini Parmar is a physician, born and brought up in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. She studied Ayurvedic Medicine in Bhavnagar, Gujarat. She went to the US for further studies in healthcare management and lived in Los Angeles, CA for nine years before returning to India. Currently, she works for an MNC at Hyderabad .

Ashwini is an ardent art-lover. Music, Movies, and Books are her favorite art forms. Being a graduate in Indian Classical Music, Ashwini sings, plays the guitar and the keyboard .

Books have played a major role in Ashwini ' s life. Reading is not her hobby, but a necessary tool to evolve. She has read books ranging from autobiographies of world leaders to novels from different international writers. Russian and Bengali literature influence her more deeply than any other culture. She has a very curious eye toward the world around her. Her vast exposure to different cultures and people has given her a unique perspective of life. She started writing short stories in 2015 . The characters of her stories are relatable and at the same time compelling. Her captivating stories keep the readers hooked .

She has learned to strike the perfect balance between being a content corporate employee and a passionate writer. She doesn ' t support the notion that all nine-to-five employees who choose the career in writing do so because they hate their corporate jobs .

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*Novel*  
Ashwini Parmar

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*Dedicated to the people of Ahmedabad ,  
the city I call home .*

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## Preface

I have always been an enthusiastic reader, always hungry to absorb the wisdom that our great writers have generously left behind for us. I never considered creative writing as a potential career option but I was always drawn toward using writing as a tool to express myself. I started scribbling my juvenile and whimsical thoughts in a journal at the age of ten and I started writing poems during my teenage years .

Writing came to my rescue during the most difficult phases of my life . There was a time in my life when I was convinced that the universe was conspiring against me. I had reached the state of mind where I was engulfed by endless negativity and hopelessness. Despite my desperate efforts to pull my life back together, I seemed to have no control over it .

To reinstate my faith in life, I decided to create a world that was full of hope and possibilities. I wanted to create an empowering story that

could vanish the negativity from my mind. I wanted to create characters who, despite their flaws, could inspire me to do the right thing in the worst of situations. Through this story, I wanted to garner courage for me to fight my battles .

“ The Third Angle ” became my savior. Writing this story became a part of my defense mechanism. During the writing process, the negativity and hopelessness couldn ’ t stand a chance against the power of this story .

By the time I finished this book, I was filled with an immense sense of power and positivity. I was free from the demons of my mind. A thought of publishing this story had not occurred to me during the writing process, however, this newfound freedom compelled me to share this story with the rest of the world. As Maya Angelou has said astutely “ , there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you ”. I could not hold this story with me any longer and decided to publish it for the world to read it .

I have borrowed a boundless volume of courage and optimism from a lot of great writers throughout my life. This book is just a small way of paying back that debt to the world .

## [Contents](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Chapter 20](#)  
[Chapter 21](#)  
[Chapter 22](#)  
[Chapter 23](#)  
[Chapter 24](#)  
[Chapter 25](#)  
[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 3 4](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 3 7](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)

## **Chapter 1**

On a lazy and quiet Sunday afternoon, Vikram flipped through the photo album. At thirty-five, Vikram had accomplished everything he had aimed for on the professional front, and was now living a laid-back life .

He stopped at a picture of his college friends, taken during their first picnic. It had been seventeen years since. Vikram looked at his innocent eighteen-year-old face in the picture “ . Wow! This guy has no idea what ’ s going to happen to him in the next four years of college ”. Vikram laughed a little .

“ Today, it seems almost insignificant but this picnic was a major turning point of my college life ”, Vikram recalled, thinking of the day when he had proposed the idea of this picnic to the class .

“ OK, so who wants to go for a picnic ”? Vikram announced in the classroom after the last class was over .

“ Me! Me! Me ”! Came the response, one of which was Nidhi ’ s voice .

“ OK, then let ’ s work on the logistics ”, Vikram clapped and picked up the chalk to scribble on the blackboard .

Vikram was hoping that he would be able to tell Nidhi how he felt about her during this picnic. He had managed to be a part of her friend circle, but so far, she had treated him like any other friend in their group .

“ Can you stop staring at her ”? Mayank told Vikram in the bus, breaking his trance. He had caught him staring at Nidhi for the seventeenth time. They were on their way to the picnic spot and Nidhi was sitting two seats across from them .

“ I am not staring at her ”, Vikram said, defensively .

“ Dude! I know what ’ s going on here. You can ’ t hide your thoughts from me ”, Mayank said. Vikram and he had been friends since high school and Vikram knew that Mayank could break into anyone ’ s mind like hackers hack into computers .

“ I hope this goes well. I want to tell her about my feelings today ”. Vikram dropped his defenses and confessed .

“ Are you nuts? What is the matter with you ”? Mayank smacked Vikram ’ s head and said “ , First, find out if she is interested in you at all. Don ’ t try to be a hero ”.

Vikram thought for a moment and said “ , Yes! Of course, you are right! How do you do this? How can you be right every time ”?

“ Because I can look beyond just a pretty face, dumbass ”! Mayank scoffed .

The picnic involved a lot of trekking. Nidhi got tired after a while and held Vikram ’ s arm and leaned on him for the rest of the trek. Vikram wasn ’ t sure if this meant anything or she was just really tired. She did appear genuinely tired .

“ Hey Vikram, do you wanna share the plate with me? It ’ s just too much plastic in these plates. Let ’ s not hurt the environment ”, Nidhi asked Vikram during lunch. Vikram was confused again “ . Does this mean she wants to share food with me or she genuinely cares about the environment? Girls can be pretty mysterious in these matters ”.

On their way back from the picnic, Vikram asked Mayank “ , So did you observe anything? What do you think? Does she seem interested in me ”?

Mayank knew what Vikram wanted to hear and how vulnerable he was. He said just the right words “ It ’ s too soon to tell. Give it some time ”.

Mayank was very mature and wise for his age. He knew exactly what mattered in life and what didn ’ t. Vikram ’ s gullible nature bothered him a little but he understood him “ What else can you expect from an eighteen-year-old ”?

That night, Vikram thought about all the moments he had spent with Nidhi that day. The way Nidhi had stayed close to him all day and the way she talked and laughed with him, Vikram was very confident that she also liked him. He decided to talk to her in the morning .

At college, Mayank saw Vikram. In just a fraction of a second, Mayank figured out what he was going to do. He went up to him and said , “ Slow down, my boy! This is not the right time ”.

Vikram trusted Mayank blindly. Vikram knew how sharp Mayank ’ s mind was, and following Mayank ’ s advice had saved Vikram from many disasters in the past. He dropped the idea of talking to Nidhi and just sat with Mayank in the cafeteria .

Soon after that, Nidhi entered the cafeteria with Rohit, a guy in the senior class. Nidhi was so lost in him that she didn't even notice Vikram and Mayank. Nidhi was looking at Rohit so lovingly that it made Vikram's heart ache.

Vikram couldn't bear this. He got up and walked out of the cafeteria.

## Chapter 2

Tanya saw Vikram walking out of the cafeteria. She couldn't stop herself from saying " , Vikram looks handsome in this white shirt and faded jeans, doesn't he "?

Khyati looked at him and said casually " , Any average guy would look handsome in this combination. That's the beauty of it. He would look even more handsome if he rolled up his sleeves a little ".

Tanya scolded herself for blurting out her feelings for Vikram in front of Khyati. But knowing Khyati, and the fact that how poor she was in reading between the lines, she didn't worry about it too much.

She had been attracted to Vikram since day one, but she had a boyfriend back home and everyone knew about it. According to her, another challenge was Mayank. Tanya knew she could tackle the entire class by herself, but Mayank was constantly protecting Vikram. Tanya knew it would be impossible to make Vikram fall in love with her as long as Mayank was around. She also knew about Vikram's affection for Nidhi, but she wasn't much worried about it.

Mayank caught Tanya staring at Vikram while the four of them crossed paths in the hallway " . Yea! That's right. Just keep walking ", Mayank said, looking at Tanya. Tanya and Mayank gave each other the evil eye. Khyati raised her head from her phone and seemed really annoyed by Mayank's comment " . What's his problem "? Khyati asked Tanya, completely unaware of the silent conversation Mayank and Tanya just had

Tanya moved her gaze from the boys and said " , He seems to hate us "

Mayank and Tanya both were skilled in reading and manipulating people ' s minds. The only difference was, Mayank used his talent to protect his friends, and Tanya used it for selfish reasons .

“ She is something else ”! Vikram shared his opinion about Tanya to Mayank “ , Every time I see her, I can tell that she is making some evil schemes in her mind, but I can ' t figure out what schemes ”.

“ You will be able to figure it out.... soon ”, Mayank said as they entered the classroom .

Later, Nidhi entered the classroom after meeting Rohit “ . Hey Vikram, how are you? Nice shirt ”! She said and sat next to Vikram .

“ It ' s an old shirt ”, Vikram said, trying to play it cool. He was upset with her but was trying to hide it .

Vikram couldn ' t understand Nidhi ' s behavior. She was being extra affectionate with him. He had to ask Mayank what he thought was going on. He was sitting on the next bench. Vikram texted Mayank ”???” ,

Mayank texted back, knowing exactly what he was asking “ , Just be cool ”!

Nidhi and Vikram ended up talking for two hours that day after the class. Vikram forgot about the whole Rohit chapter and forgave Nidhi instantly. This became a routine. Nidhi would come early in the morning to talk to Rohit, and then after he left, she would wait for Vikram to come to college and then talk to Vikram in the afternoon .

“ Dude! She is playing both of you. How can you not see it ”? Mayank asked Vikram one day .

“ And how can you be so narrow-minded? I am not one of those possessive-type people. She can talk to any guy she wants ”, Vikram snapped back .

“ She is just one of those girls who has to be best friends with all the good-looking guys in the college. You are the most good-looking guy in your class and so is Rohit in his ”. Mayank continued to argue “ , I am sure she would have also tried to be friends with Hemal in the most senior batch if he didn ' t already have a girlfriend ”. Mayank stopped to breathe

and then said “ , Have you ever seen her talking to an average looking guy ”?

“ That ’ s your perception. It doesn ’ t prove anything - ”, Vikram said, unfazed .

“ She failed two of her midterms because of juggling these two relationships. I am surprised how even she can ’ t see it ”. Mayank tried to get him to see the real picture .

“ I am done talking to you about this. I think I can handle this on my own ”, Vikram ended the conversation .

Mayank sighed. There ’ s no way anyone can make a person see the reality if they are in so-called “ love .” Sooner or later, the reality will find that idiot, and then — Bang! Back to Earth !

### Chapter 3

It was becoming unbearable for Tanya to see Vikram talking to Nidhi for hours every day. She so badly wanted Nidhi out of the picture. She tried to approach Vikram before Nidhi could find him. She was thinking about walking up to Vikram when he was parking his bike in the college parking lot. Just then, Arpan walked to her and Khyati and broke her trance .

“ Hey girls, what ’ s up ”? Arpan said with his signature grin. Arpan was the only guy friend of Tanya and Khyati. The three of them were a group. In the initial days of college, Tanya extended her friendship to Arpan, and Khyati tagged along .

“ Hey Arpan, how are you, dude ”? Tanya said, hiding her disappointment .

“ Not good, man. Not good. I have been counting on you to help me but looks like you are not interested ”. Arpan said to Tanya with certain hopelessness in his voice .

“ Counting on me for what - ”? Tanya said trying to play innocent .

Arpan got irritated “ OK. Seriously? Do not pretend like you don ’ t know what I am talking about ”. Arpan liked a girl in their class, Pooja. She was not exactly friends with Tanya or Khyati, but Arpan hoped Tanya could help him by talking him up to Pooja .

“ I know. I know. I am kidding. I have just been waiting for the right moment ”, Tanya made an excuse .

“ No! No! No! No! No! No more excuses!! You will talk to her tonight. Yea, that ’ s final ”. Arpan was impatient now .

“ Tonight ”? Tanya asked in disbelief .

“ Yes, I need to know. I can ’ t wait any longer ”. Arpan declared .

“ OK. I will talk to her tonight. But can ’ t promise you anything ”, Tanya finally gave in .

Khyati was listening to their conversation quietly until now. Then she gave her two cents “ . Dude, she is way out of your league. Just forget about her ”! Pooja was a very beautiful, rich, and high-profile girl .

“ You just shut up ”! Arpan got upset and moved to Tanya “ . Tanya, whatever her answer is, don ’ t tell me over the phone. We will talk about it tomorrow. Deal ”?

“ Deal ”, Tanya said. Obviously, Tanya never went out of her way to help anyone unless there was something in it for her as well. Even though Arpan wasn ’ t friends with Vikram and Mayank, all three of them lived in the same hostel. Tanya ’ s plan was to use Arpan as her spy in the hostel to keep an eye on the two of them .

Tanya approached Pooja that night after dinner in the hostel garden. Tanya, Khyati, Nidhi, Pooja, and Meera all lived in the same hostel. Meera and Mayank were cousins .

“ Hey Pooja, the breeze is amazing tonight, isn't it ”? Tanya started the conversation with a standard weather question .

Pooja was a little surprised to see Tanya joining her for her evening stroll “ . Yea, I love this weather ”, Pooja said .

“ Yea, Arpan was telling me today he also likes this weather ”, Tanya tried to test the water. Pooja didn ’ t respond to it. She had an inkling of Arpan ’ s feelings for her but never paid any attention to it .

When Pooja didn't say anything for a while, Tanya just came straight to the point " . Listen, I think he really likes you "

" Really? Wow! That ' s interesting " ! Pooja said, visibly blushed. Even though she had an inkling about this, this was the first time it was confirmed, and although she wasn't attracted to Arpan, it is always nice to hear that someone is attracted to you .

" Would you consider going out with him some time? What do you think of him? He is kind of adorable, isn't he - " ? Tanya shot the questions .

" Well, yea. He is an acquired taste ", Pooja said after pondering over this for a moment " . But I am sorry, I can never go out with a guy like him. I am way out of his league. Besides, I am getting a transfer to the campus in my hometown "

" Oh, that ' s sad to hear. I will miss you - ". Tanya made her fake sad face .

" Yea, me too. Sorry about Arpan ", Pooja said .

" It ' s OK. I am sure he will understand ". Tanya said and took off. Personally, she was happy that it didn't work out between Arpan and Pooja. She always wanted to be the priority in all her friends ' lives .

Arpan found Tanya and Khyati the next morning at the college " . So did you talk to her " ? Arpan asked Tanya .

" Yes ", Tanya said, trying to figure out how to tell him .

" What did she say " ? Arpan asked, his heart almost in his throat .

" She said that you are cute but she is getting transferred to her hometown, so this won't work out ". Tanya dropped the bomb but tried to cushion the blow by not telling him the " way out of his league " part of Pooja ' s response, partly because she didn't want Khyati to be proved right .

" She is leaving - " ! ? Arpan appeared heartbroken " . Oh man, that sucks " !

" I know. But you will find someone better than her. I am sure ". Tanya tried to console him .

“ You are right. It ’ s not like I was in love with her ”, Arpan said, more to himself than Tanya “ . I feel like I am already over her ”.

“ Good for you ”, Tanya said, trying to cheer him up .

“ I am going to go back to the hostel. Need to work on this project ”, Arpan said and left with a heavy heart. Tanya and Khyati watched as he left. They both felt bad for him .

Khyati had been quiet until now. She told Tanya “ , Confidence is a good thing, but overconfidence is a recipe for heartbreak. I told him she is way out of his league, but he didn ’ t listen to me ”. Khyati sighed, Tanya just nodded .

Khyati continued to talk “ You know I would ’ ve been surprised if Pooja had said yes. If a girl like Pooja agrees to go out with a guy like Arpan, then either there must be something wrong with her or she must have some selfish reason for it ”. So far, Tanya thought Khyati was too unobservant to notice her schemes, but now she got concerned about Khyati ’ s clear thinking. Not a good sign for her !

## Chapter 4

Tanya was patiently waiting for a perfect opportunity to execute her plan and an excellent opportunity presented itself when Nidhi went home for a week to meet her London-returned uncle and Khyati went home for three days to celebrate her birthday .

Fortunately, that day, Mayank was in the administration office when Tanya found Vikram alone in the parking lot and approached him .

“ Hey Vikram, how are you ”? Tanya asked batting her eyelashes .

“ Ummm ... Good...I guess...and you ”? Vikram asked suspiciously .

“ Me too ”. Tanya said, sitting across from him .

Tanya was a sweet talker. She started talking about random things to Vikram and then brought up her boyfriend in the conversation .

“ Yea, my boyfriend doesn ’ t like long drives. We are both so different. It ’ s been rough between the two of us lately ”.

Vikram was shocked by the sudden discussion about Tanya ’ s relationship issues, but he kept calm and just listened. Mayank got out of the admin office and saw these two talking. He had a mysterious smile on his face. He didn ’ t interrupt them, just watched them from a distance .

“ So the fisherwoman has thrown her bait ”. Mayank walked up to Vikram after Tanya left .

“ What ”? Vikram, as usual, couldn ’ t understand .

“ She is trying to trap you, but don ’ t worry, we will push her into her own trap - ”. Mayank could scan Tanya ’ s mind like a CT scanner. He felt a strong urge to teach her such a lesson that she wouldn ’ t be able to use her evil brain to con anyone ever again .

“ Why? Why should we get involved in any game with her? I just want to stay away from her. I feel a strong negative vibe from her ”. Vikram was just annoyed .

“ I know, that ’ s why we need to end her games once and for all. Trust me, she will not leave you alone until you either accept her or destroy her ”. Mayank ’ s thinking was extreme .

“ I am not sure, dude ”. Vikram was still not convinced .

“ Vicky, just trust me on this. You will be fine ”. Mayank assured him. Mayank also wanted to use Tanya to make Nidhi jealous, which would help Vikram in the long run. However, he kept this reason to himself .

After that, Tanya used to talk to Vikram every day for hours. Arpan was annoyed by this change of routine. Because there was no Khyati and Tanya was occupied with Vikram, Arpan felt very lonely at that time, especially because he was still recovering from his heartbreak. He was hoping Tanya would talk to him and cheer him up, but she had completely ignored him for the past few days .

When Khyati came back after three days, Tanya dropped the bomb on her “ , I am not friends with Arpan anymore ”.

“ What? Why? What happened ”? Khyati asked in a high-pitched voice, and her eyes flew wide open .

“ He thinks he can decide who I can and can ’ t talk to ”. Tanya softened her tone and continued “ , Look, I am going through some relationship problems, and I found Vikram understanding enough to share my problems with. You know how Arpan is, he can ’ t give me any sound advice on relationships. So now, he is upset with me because I am sharing my problems with Vikram instead of him ”.

“ Oh...I see ”. Khyati said, thinking about this sudden turn of events “ . Tanya ’ s argument makes sense. She does have a right to share her problems with anyone she wants. Arpan or I can ’ t have an opinion about that ”. Khyati thought, but she didn ’ t want to come to any conclusions without talking to Arpan. You should always listen to both sides of the story before blaming anyone .

The next morning, Khyati found Arpan in the college and asked him in a concerned voice “ , What happened, dude? Tanya and you were such close friends ”.

“ Do not say her name in front of me ”. Arpan seemed like a totally different person. He was not able to hide his rough side anymore. He was out of control “ . I hate that bitch. She is a slut. She just uses everyone around her to fulfill her own selfish interests. I have never seen such a selfish manipulative girl in my life ”.

Khyati was stunned by the language Arpan was using. She had never heard him, or anyone for that matter, use such profanity before. Even though Khyati knew that everything he was saying about Tanya was true, she just didn ’ t think that Tanya would use Arpan or her for any selfish reasons. Khyati was shocked because he was saying all these things about their friend. How can two people be so close one day and become such grave enemies the next ?

Arpan kept venting and cursing. Khyati was too shocked to say anything. Horror-struck, she just kept looking at him. A big dumpster full of garbage was placed a few meters behind Arpan. Khyati imagined Arpan ’ s face blended into this dumpster. For the first time, Khyati could see his true colors. Arpan was upset because his ego was hurt. Khyati was never close to Arpan. It was mainly Tanya who talked to him. Just hearing Arpan talk shit about Tanya, with a dumpster in the background, made Khyati realize that it was time for her to kick Arpan out of her life .

Khyati waited until Arpan was done talking and then said in a very soothing voice “ Arpan, I think I understand why you are upset, but it is clear to me that Tanya and you can ’ t be friends anymore, so I am left with making this choice to pick just one of you. And for obvious reasons, I am going to pick Tanya ”.

" I knew this," Arpan said furiously. He was fidgety and anxious. He thought for a few moments and said “ , I knew you won ’ t be able to leave her, and I can ’ t leave you - ”. He said with his softest tone and looked at Khyati in a loving way for the first time .

Khyati was shocked “ . What? What did you just say ”?

“ You heard me. I will patch up with Tanya because I don ’ t want to lose you ”. Arpan said, almost pleading .

Again, Khyati couldn ’ t understand Arpan ’ s behavior. His emotions were just all over the place. It was hardly a week since Pooja left, and he was already hitting on another girl. He just seemed desperate for attention and love, and the biggest turn off for any girl is to see a needy man begging for love .

Khyati was now grossed out, but still, her manners didn ’ t allow her to be rude to him, not when he was so emotionally vulnerable. She said with all her composure “ , Arpan, I appreciate your sentiment, but I am afraid it ’ s not possible. Tanya will never patch up with you. I don ’ t think this is a good idea. Sorry, Apran ”. Once again, Arpan was left heartbroken. He saw Khyati walk away in despair .

## Chapter 5

Even though Khyati felt weird about the sudden change in Tanya ’ s behavior, she didn ’ t say anything. Khyati believed it wasn ’ t up to her to judge people and their actions .

Tanya made sure she made Vikram feel like an essential part of her life. She wanted to take advantage of one of the fundamental needs of the human race: To feel needed .

“ Vikram, you are so sensible and wise. I am very glad that I ’ ve got you during these trying times. I am not able to figure out how to deal with this mess on my own. Thanks for being there for me ”. Tanya was painting a picture that didn ’ t even exist. She was the one who involved Vikram in her mess and now she was making it sound like it was Vikram ’ s idea to help her .

Vikram had learned to play along by now. His response to most of her statements was to nod his head .

“ Really Vikram, your help means a lot to me. I owe you big time. Please let me know if there ’ s anything I can do for you now or in the future. I will be more than happy to risk my life for you ”. Tanya didn ’ t want to leave any room for doubt .

Vikram used to tell Mayank every single word that Tanya uttered in their conversations. Even though Mayank hadn ’ t done anything drastic yet, Tanya knew he was watching her every move. He was the only person Tanya feared. She thought very hard to find a way to keep Mayank out of her game, but it was futile .

One day, Tanya was talking to Vikram when Khyati was reading a book on the lawn waiting for her. Tanya and Khyati daily rode on Khyati ’ s Scooty back to the hostel .

Mayank saw Khyati from a distance reading a book under a neem tree on the campus. He hadn ’ t noticed Khyati by herself before. She was always with Tanya, and Mayank only focused on Tanya to discern her evil intentions when he saw her. Khyati ’ s calm and poised image compelled Mayank to go up to her and talk to her .

Khyati was so lost in her book that she didn ’ t notice Mayank until he sat down next to her .

“ Hey Khyati, what are you reading ”? Mayank asked in a friendly voice .

Khyati was surprised and irritated. Mayank always behaved rudely with her along with Tanya . So, another change of behavior was too much to take for Khyati .

“ Gora ”. Khyati gave a short answer, without looking at him .

“ What ’ s that ”? Asked Mayank .

“ It ’ s a novel by Rabindranath Tagore ”, said Khyati, hoping he would shut up after this .

“ Cool! What ’ s it about ”? Mayank was calm but persistent .

Khyati was annoyed by now. She shut the book and looked at him angrily “ . Why do you care? It ’ s not your type of book ”.

“ And how do you know what my type is ”? Mayank was still very calm, which irritated Khyati even more .

Khyati decided to expose his illiteracy in literature “ . When was the last time you read a book ”?

“ I finished one last week ”. Mayank replied .

“ Which one ”? Khyati asked suspiciously .

“ Freedom at Midnight ”, Mayank said casually .

Khyati looked at him in disbelief “ . Freedom at Midnight by Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins ”?

“ Which other Freedom at Midnight have you read ”? Mayank asked with a smile. Khyati was noticing Mayank ’ s normal behavior for the first time .

Khyati was impressed but tried to hide it .

“ So now will you tell me what it is about ”? Mayank persisted with a soft tone .

Khyati exhaled and finally gave in “ . The events of this book take place during the preindependence era in India. The story is about a man who is born to British parents but is raised by a Brahmin couple because his parents were killed by freedom fighters. He grows up to be an extremist Brahmin and hates the British. He becomes a freedom fighter, then one day, he finds out that he is not Indian but British ”.

Mayank listened to her with rapt attention. Wanting to know more, he queried “ , Wow...very interesting!! What happens next ”?

“ I don ’ t know. I am still reading ”. Khyati poured into her book hoping he would leave now, but he didn ’ t leave. He sat there for a few moments looking up at the tree. Then, he started another conversation .

“ Can I ask you something ”?

Khyati looked at him with a question mark “ . What do you think about this interesting turn of events ”? Mayank asked, pointing toward

Tanya and Vikram talking in the parking lot .

Khyati looked at them and said casually “ , She is having some relationship problems ”.

...“ and you believe her ”? Mayank wanted to know if this girl was involved in Tanya ’ s games or totally unaware of it .

“ I take people at their face value ”. Khyati was giving short and direct answers .

“ Isn ’ t it suspicious that she chose the most good-looking and rich guy to share her problems ”? Mayank persisted .

Khyati looked at Mayank and then at Vikram. After a moment, she said “ , I don't understand why everyone thinks he is handsome. He seems like a completely average guy to me ”.

Mayank smiled and said “ I don ’ t buy it. You are either lying or ”...

“ Or what ”? Khyati asked impatiently .

“ You know ”,... Mayank said testily .

“ What ”? It took Khyati a moment to understand what he was trying to say .

“ You think I am gay? What nonsense ”!! But then Khyati stopped and thought for a second. Mayank ’ s ridiculous argument made perfect sense in Khyati ’ s mind .

“ Oh, God!! You are right ”! Khyati panicked and started blabbering “ . I have never been attracted to a guy. But wait...I have also never been attracted to a girl ”. She calmed down a little and continued talking “ . Oh OK. That means I am not a lesbian ... Maybe I am just developmentally delayed ... Wait ... Is there a term for people like me ”? Khyati looked seriously confused “ . Asexual ”? Khyati asked Mayank as if he would know, looking at him for the first time since her panic attack .

Mayank was looking at Khyati in total amazement. He burst into loud laughter when Khyati finished her monologue and looked at him. He was literally rolling on the lawn, laughing. He was intrigued by this girl ’ s simplicity and childlike nature. Khyati looked at Mayank in surprise when he was still laughing hard. After a moment, she realized why he was laughing. She just smiled and threw her pen at him .

Tanya heard Mayank ' s laugh from a distance while she was talking to Vikram. She looked at both of them under that neem tree for a moment and then she had a freak epiphany. She had finally figured out how to keep Mayank out of her game. She had a cunning smile on her face .

## Chapter 6

“ I broke up with him ”, Tanya told Vikram “ . I feel so relieved ”. This was one big milestone accomplished by Tanya .

“ Good. Then we should celebrate ”, Vikram said. He was able to understand Tanya ' s game plan now “ – . Let ' s take Mayank and Khyati with us too ”.

Mayank, Vikram, Khyati, and Tanya started to hang out more often. Mayank and Tanya didn ' t get along very well but they tolerated each other because of the other two .

After Nidhi came back from her week-long vacation, she noticed this changed routine. Vikram was spending more time with Tanya. She felt jealous but couldn ' t act on it. Vikram continued to hang out with Nidhi, and Nidhi continued to hang out with Rohit. Finally, Vikram admitted his insecurity to Mayank .

“ I am jealous. I admit it ”, Vikram told Mayank .

“ So what do you want now ”? Mayank asked calmly. He knew this day would come and he had patiently waited for it .

“ I don ' t mind her hanging out with Rohit. I just need to know which one of us she loves ”. Vikram said .

“ Then ask her ”, Mayank said “ , It ' s as simple as that ”.

And that ' s exactly what Vikram did. When he met Nidhi the next day, he told her about his concern .

“ Nidhi, I really like you but I don ' t know how you feel about me. I know you are also close to Rohit. But now I need to know if it ' s me or him ”.

Nidhi knew she would have to face this question one day. She said “ I also like you, Vikram. But give me some time to think about it. It ’ s a big decision ”.

“ How much time do you need ”? Vikram wanted a definite answer .

“ Give me a week ”. Nidhi said after thinking for a moment .

“ You got it. We will meet again after a week. I won ’ t try to influence you by talking to you during this time ”. Vikram said and then added “ Choose wisely ”.

Vikram told Mayank about the one-week deal. The first thought that came to Mayank ’ s mind was “ , If she has to think about which one she loves, then she doesn ’ t love either of you ”. But he didn ’ t say anything. He wanted Vikram to realize this on his own .

Mayank devised a plan to ensure Vikram didn ’ t get hurt in this process .

“ Okay, listen up. I want to make sure that Nidhi picks you ”. Mayank told Vikram, after carefully planning everything .

“ How do we do that ”? Vikram asked with curiosity .

“ Whatever I do, you will have to trust me on this. Just remember, I am doing this because I don ’ t want to see you hurt ”, Mayank assured Vikram .

Vikram nodded .

“ First, I will talk to Rohit and explain to him the whole situation ”. Mayank explained the first step of the plan .

Vikram could never understand these weird plans of Mayank. He asked, in a slightly irritated tone “ , Why ”?

“ Just trust me on this. He also needs to know what ’ s going on ”. Mayank explained .

Again, Vikram just nodded .

“ Second, we will have Tanya talk to Nidhi in the hostel ”. Mayank continued with his second step .

“ Again, I have to ask, why involve Tanya ”? Vikram asked, feeling more irritated .

“ Dude, just relax. I know what I am doing ”, Mayank calmed him down .

Vikram looked at him for a moment with an angry face and then said ,  
“ Fine ”.

Mayank dictated the lines Vikram was to tell Tanya and then said “ ,  
Go talk to Tanya and tell her what she needs to do and I will talk to Rohit  
” .

Vikram didn ’ t understand the plan but he was sure that it would work  
because it was Mayank ’ s plan. He went to college to find Tanya .

## Chapter 7

Tanya was speechless for the first time in her life .

Vikram had asked her for a big favor .

“ Tanya, I remember you told me once that you would do anything to  
help me ”. Vikram said repeating what Mayank had told him .

“ Yes, I remember that ”. Tanya said, unaware of the lightning that was  
about to strike her .

“ I need a big favor from you ”, Vikram was leading on to something  
big .

“ Sure, anything ”! Tanya said, faking enthusiasm .

“ Will you talk to Nidhi about me –”? Vikram explained the whole  
situation and the one-week deal .

Tanya was too shocked to say anything. She had hoped that Nidhi  
would gradually drift away, and she would get Vikram to herself. However,  
Vikram was still into her .

Tanya regained her cool and said casually “ Of course. I will do  
everything I can do to make sure Nidhi realizes that you are a better pick  
for her ”.

At the boys ’ hostel, Mayank found Rohit and told him about the  
whole situation. Rohit was a nice guy. He went up to Vikram and told him

“ I am sorry, dude. If I knew that you also liked her, I would have stayed away from her ”.

“ It ’ s OK. There ’ s nothing we can do now. It ’ s up to her. Let her decide ”. Vikram said. He was surprised how cool Rohit was about the whole situation. He admired Rohit ’ s sportsmanship .

The same day, Mayank was looking for Khyati at the college. He found his cousin Meera instead. They were in the same class. She was the friendliest person in the class. She didn ’ t belong to any particular group but everyone warmly welcomed her into their groups. So, she used to hang out with everyone in the class. Khyati, Tanya, Nidhi, and Meera lived in the same room at the hostel .

Mayank was a protective brother but he also wanted her to live her life without his interference. But this plan he was executing was too dangerous. He said to Meera “ , Meera, come here. I need to talk to you ”. Just then, Khyati also showed up “ . Good, Khyati, come here. I need to talk to both of you ”.

Meera and Khyati were good friends because of Meera ’ s friendly nature. They both gave Mayank a surprised look. Mayank said in his most concerned voice “ , During the next week, you will see a lot of commotion taking place at your hostel and at the college ”. He took a dramatic pause and continued “ . Do not get involved in any conversations. Just stay away from everyone ”.

“ What? But why ”? Meera and Khyati said in unison .

“ Do not ask any questions. You will get all the answers next week. Just do as I say for now ”. Mayank loved building up the suspense .

Meera was a few months younger than Mayank and she obeyed him religiously. Khyati also agreed and didn ’ t inquire further .

Mayank was trying to protect both of them from the game he was playing .

## Chapter 8

The week was going by very fast. Tanya was trying to postpone her talk with Nidhi as much as she could. She couldn't influence Nidhi to favor Rohit directly but at least she could try to confuse her even more .

Finally, one day after dinner, she spoke to Nidhi “ Nidhi, I know about everything going on between Rohit, Vikram, and you. They are both great guys. You are a very lucky girl that both of them like you. I don't know Rohit that well but Vikram is certainly the best guy I know. All I can say is pick the one who you think will make you the happiest ”.

Nidhi knew about Tanya's new friendship with Vikram, and she listened to her calmly. After Tanya was done talking, she said “ , Thanks, Tanya ”.

Nidhi was irritated. She thought “ , Why is Vikram telling Tanya about the one-week deal? So, is she going to meddle in our relationship if Vikram and I got together ”? Mayank's game was working. This is exactly why he wanted to involve Tanya in this game .

Tanya was off the hook. She was hoping and praying that Nidhi would pick Rohit and not Vikram. She knew Mayank was playing a game and she was trying to figure out this game, but her efforts had been futile so far. Then, the day before the week was over, something really strange happened .

Nidhi had a close friend, Vaishali. Everyone knew that they were BFFs and Nidhi believed everything Vaishali said. So far, Vaishali wasn't involved in this whole plan, until Mayank approached her after class. Mayank had never spoken to Vaishali alone before. Vikram wasn't at the college that day. Nidhi was on the phone with Rohit. Tanya, Meera, and Khyati were chatting in the parking lot, when they saw Mayank go up to Vaishali and talk to her. He made gestures that suggested he was telling her a big secret. Vaishali's face was pale after what she heard. She didn't say a word, she just kept nodding her head when Mayank talked .

Mayank left after talking to Vaishali. That night, Vaishali and Nidhi talked for hours in the hostel garden. Tanya, Meera, and Khyati even saw Nidhi crying on Vaishali's shoulder .

Finally, the week was over. During the week, Vikram had had a bad feeling that Nidhi would pick Rohit. He met Nidhi at the college cafeteria. Mayank, Vaishali, Tanya, Khyati, and Meera were waiting outside. Khyati

and Meera had no idea what was going on, but they knew whatever it was, it was going to end today .

Vikram was extremely anxious, but he managed to keep a straight face and spoke to Nidhi .

“ So Nidhi, what ’ s your decision –”? He asked, his heart almost in his throat .

Nidhi couldn ’ t look him in the eye. She looked down and said “ , I love Rohit ”.

Vikram felt as if a gigantic skyscraper had fallen on him and he was buried under a big pile of debris. It took him a moment to regain his composure. He just got up and left .

Mayank, Khyati, Tanya, and Meera saw Vikram leave on his bike. He was visibly pissed. Mayank sighed with relief. Tanya had a little smile on her face, and Meera and Khyati were still confused .

After Nidhi left with Vaishali, Meera, Khyati, and Tanya went up to Mayank. The suspense was too much for Khyati to take now. She finally asked Mayank “ , So will you please tell us now what ’ s going on ”?

Mayank took his signature dramatic pause, smiled a little and said “ , Vikram had given Nidhi a week to pick Rohit or him, and he just got dumped ”.

Tanya looked at Mayank and said “ , I know for sure that this has a lot to do with you talking to Vaishali yesterday. I can barely imagine what you might have said to Vaishali ”.

Tanya was right. Nidhi ’ s decision was solely based on her discussion with Vaishali the night before. Vaishali had told Nidhi everything Mayank told her. Mayank was feeling guilty for ruining his best friend ’ s love story. He had to make this confession .

He confessed his crime in front of these three girls “ : I told Vaishali that Vikram wants to take revenge with Nidhi for not leaving Rohit. Vikram wants Nidhi to pick him, and if she does that, Vikram will dump her soon after, so Nidhi would end up losing both guys ”.

All three of them looked at Mayank in horror. Finally, Khyati gathered the courage to ask him “ Why would you do that ”?

“ Because he is my friend and I wanted to save him from a bad relationship ”, Mayank said, unapologetic. He didn ’ t feel guilty anymore .

## Chapter 9

Gradually, life went back to normal after the big disaster in Vikram ’ s life. Every wound heals with time, faster if you have friends like Mayank. Mayank helped him get over Nidhi by spending some “ quality time ” with him hitting on junior girls at college .

Tanya was relieved that the whole Nidhi chapter was over and now she could take her sweet time to get closer to Vikram. It ’ s a fundamental quality of a selfish person; they find their interest even in the terrible misery of other people .

Khyati always felt that Nidhi was not the right girl for Vikram, or any nice guy for that matter. That ’ s why it was easy for her to forgive Mayank for what he did .

Vikram, Mayank, Khyati, and Tanya got closer every day and became good friends eventually. Mayank and Tanya still hated each other, but they had learned to tolerate each other for other people in the group .

Vikram was completely over Nidhi the day he saw her talking to one of Rohit ’ s friends. Vikram was hanging out with Mayank at the cafeteria when he saw Nidhi laughing and touching this guy ’ s arm. Vikram felt disgusted “ . Rohit goes home for a few days and she starts flirting with his friend. Such a horrible person ”!

“ Finally, now you can see what I ’ ve been trying to show you all this time ”. Mayank gave himself a mental high-five .

“ Seriously dude, I am glad that she didn ’ t pick me. What was I thinking ”? The residual feeling of guilt, that was bothering Mayank also left when Vikram said this .

“ Exactly. You deserve someone much better than her ”. Mayank felt very relaxed .

“ Like who ”? Vikram asked , scoffing. He was over Nidhi, but the damage that Nidhi had caused was still there. He was still not ready to trust girls again .

Mayank got a chance to tease him “ . Tanya ”?

“ Just shut the fuck up ”, Vikram said as Mayank laughed .

“ Dude, I am so excited about the class trip next week. Three whole days of fun ”!! Tanya said to Khyati. It was an official college-sponsored trip, and everyone was excited to go and have fun .

This trip meant that people like Tanya could have a great opportunity to rekindle their relationship, and for some other people like Nidhi, Vikram, and Arpan, it was just awkward to be around someone they shared a patchy past with .

Arpan had become an outcast after Tanya and Khyati abandoned him. He didn ’ t try to make new friends. He used to come to class and go back to the hostel after the class was over. This trip was going to be super awkward for him, especially because he had no one to spend time with .

Finally, the day of the trip arrived. Tanya had made it a point to sit with Vikram on the bus. Khyati sat with Meera, and Mayank sat with the professor that accompanied them. Mayank was given the responsibility to keep this professor distracted and entertained to ensure he didn ’ t spoil the fun .

The trip began with a lot of excitement. It was supposed to be an educational trip with a class project, but it was obvious that everyone just wanted to have fun .

When everyone was playing Antakshari, Meera noticed Arpan, sitting alone on his seat, looking outside the window. Meera knew that Tanya and Khyati had ended their friendship with him. She was too kind to see someone left out like this. She felt a strong urge to go sit with Arpan, but it would be very awkward if she did that in front of everyone, especially Mayank. She kept her compassion to herself and participated in Antakshari .

When the bus finally reached the guest house where the entire class was supposed to stay, everyone was tired. The next day, the class gathered at the research center where they were assigned a project. Everyone had a partner for the project. Arpan was the only one who was doing his project by himself. Meera again felt bad for him and wanted to talk to him .

She looked at Arpan with sympathy, she couldn't bear to see his sad face anymore. She walked up to him and started a conversation .

“ Hey, Arpan! What are you working on ”? Arpan was pleasantly surprised to see Meera. He was bored to death on this trip and was dying to talk to someone, but he had too much pride to start a conversation with anyone. He smiled at her and they started talking .

Both of them spent the whole day together. Meera instantly connected with Arpan, which was not a new thing for her. She was the friendliest person in the whole class, and it was easy for her to be friends with anyone .

Everyone noticed this blossoming friendship, but no one acknowledged it. Tanya didn't care what others were doing. She was busy courting Vikram, hoping that he would fall in love with her. Mayank noticed this but didn't think it was harmful. Although, he did keep a close watch on the two of them. Khyati didn't find anything wrong with it either, knowing Meera's friendly nature. She was just concerned for Meera because she knew how needy Arpan could get .

However, both Mayank and Khyati got worried after what happened at the guest house that night .

## Chapter 10

That night, Khyati was updating notes from her project on the laptop on the balcony of her room in the guest house. She was sitting on a chair facing the garden of the guest house. She looked up from her laptop to rest her eyes for a while and saw Meera and Arpan walking in the garden .

Khyati checked the time, it was 10:30 P.M. Khyati's gaze was still fixed on them when Mayank walked out to the balcony of his room, which was right next to Khyati's room. Mayank came to hang his towel on the

balcony fence, and right when he was about to turn back, he saw Meera and Arpan in the garden. He stopped and stared at them furiously until he noticed that Khyati was staring at him from her balcony. He looked at Khyati for a second and stormed back to his room in a rage .

Khyati saw Mayank leave and mumbled to herself “ , Uh-oh! This can ’ t be good ”. She observed Meera and Arpan for a few more minutes. They were not holding hands or showing any PDA. They were just talking and gesturing as if they were having a very meaningful talk. Khyati kept an eye on them until it was hard for her to keep her eyes open. She went to bed at 11 PM .

Early next morning, Mayank found Meera and told her “ , No need to hang out with Arpan anymore ”. He said it in a no-nonsense way, looking straight into her eyes. Meera didn ’ t say a word, she wasn ’ t scared of him or angry at him, but she knew when to not say anything. Mayank had used the elder-brother card for the first time with Meera. He just ordered her to not hang out with Arpan without building up to it first or giving any explanation .

After that, for the remaining two days of the trip, Meera didn ’ t talk to Arpan at all. She looked upset that morning, but after that, she went back to her normal friendly self. Mayank and everyone else thought that it was the end of the story of Meera and Arpan .

On the other hand, Vikram was getting considerable attention from Tanya on this trip .

“ She follows me around like a puppy. I am telling you, she is only one pat away from starting to lick me ”, Vikram told Mayank, frustratingly .

Mayank laughed and said “ , and you don ’ t like it ”?

“ I am not able to decide if I like it or hate it. On one hand, it feels good to get so much attention from a girl who is throwing herself at me . I mean which man wouldn ’ t like that ”? Mayank nodded in agreement “ . But on the other hand, I am like, have some self-respect, woman ”!

“ Why do you care about her self-respect? It ’ s her problem, not yours. You should just enjoy this King-like treatment in the meantime ”. Mayank patted his shoulder .

“ Yea, but I don ’ t know what her game is behind all this ”? Vikram knew she was doing all this not out of love but out of her selfish interest .

“ I know her game very well. I know each step of her game ”. Mayank said, and then he explained the whole plan to Vikram “ . First, she will seduce you to the point that you accept her as your girlfriend. Then, she will emotionally manipulate you to make you and everyone else believe that both of you love each other madly and you are the best couple in the college, and eventually, she would want to meet your family, and impress your mother. If that doesn ’ t work out, then she would do whatever it takes to get knocked up, so you would have no choice but to marry her. And FYI, she won ’ t be afraid to blackmail you and your family ”.

It sounded a little extreme. However, Mayank would never make assumptions without any robust research. He had obtained all the details of Tanya and her family from her hometown. He had also found some very interesting details from her last boyfriend. In a very weird way, Tanya had become Mayank ’ s obsession. He wanted to counter attack every move of her with a foolproof plan .

“ Are you crazy? Who would do that? You are just exaggerating this way too much ”, Vikram immediately discarded his theory “ . Besides, every ordinary girl has a dream, when starting college, of falling in love with a guy who would love her back whom she would marry eventually. There ’ s nothing abnormal with it ”.

“ I know. But Tanya is no ordinary girl. She is the mistress of manipulation. She doesn ’ t want to fall in love. She just wants to bag the most eligible bachelor who is way out of her league ”. Mayank tried to explain .

“ You are being ridiculous ”, Vikram disagreed .

But Mayank didn ’ t care. He knew his theory was a little unrealistic, but sometimes, when you are dealing with people like Tanya, the truth can be more unrealistic than fantasy. He told Vikram “ , You don ’ t have to believe me. Just go with the flow. We ’ ll figure out the rest ”.

## Chapter 11

Following the project trip, Mayank, Vikram, Arpan, and two other boys were selected to participate in the national-level competition for their projects. Mayank and Vikram were not exactly friends with Arpan, but on the trip, they had to spend a lot of time together. Mayank avoided him as much as he could because he was still mad at him for trying to get close to his sister .

However, Arpan had been very friendly with the rest of the boys on this trip. He seemed more confident than before, and most importantly, everyone couldn't help but notice that he was texting someone constantly during the whole trip .

It was obvious that it was a girl on the other side. Vikram and Mayank didn't care who he was texting. After finishing the competition, all five boys were chatting in the train compartment on their way back. Arpan was talking to the other two boys when his phone beeped and he smiled as he read the message. He texted back and resumed the conversation .

One of the boys asked “ , Who ' s the text-girl ”?

“ Someone very special ”. Arpan said with pride. He paused and then looked at Mayank “ . But I need to get her brother ' s blessings before I announce her name ”.

There was a cold silence in the compartment. The other boys looked at Mayank in fear. Mayank was a fearsome guy in the whole college. No one would ever mess with him, let alone joke about his sister .

Arpan was waiting for Mayank ' s response with confident eyes and a cunning smile. He knew he had pressed the most painful point, and Mayank couldn't do anything because Meera had reciprocated .

The expressions on Mayank ' s face went from anger, fury, helplessness, and back to calm in five seconds. He didn't want to discuss his sister ' s life in front of his classmates. Vikram could see that his eyes were a little moist due to the sheer helplessness he felt at the moment. Only a person who has been thrown into such a moment, completely out of the blue, that is so outrageous that they want to kill that person, but have to remain calm, could understand what Mayank was feeling at that time .

Mayank took a deep breath, regained his composure, and said “ , Let ’ s talk about this when we reach the hostel ”.

Vikram knew this wasn ’ t going to be pretty. Arpan didn ’ t know that he had tempered a sleeping lion. He had no idea what the repercussions of that one statement were going to be. They were silent throughout the rest of the journey .

At the hostel, Mayank took a hot shower to refresh himself. Vikram was waiting for him to burst into a rage. After Mayank got out of the shower, he told Vikram “ , Let ’ s settle this ”.

Both of them went to Arpan ’ s room. Mayank kicked it open and grabbed Arpan by the neck .

After a while, Meera got a call on her cellphone when she was in the hostel garden with Khyati .

Meera answered the phone “ , Hello ”.

Meera heard Mayank and Vikram beating Arpan and telling him “ , Tell her, you don ’ t want to see her or talk to her again ”.

Meera ’ s heart started pounding. Arpan repeated everything Mayank was asking him to say. In between, she could hear Mayank and Vikram cursing and Arpan ’ s painful screams .

She kept crying and yelling “ , Stop it! Stop it, Mayank ”, to no avail .

Finally, after Arpan said “ , I am sorry, this is over ”, the phone got disconnected .

Khyati was standing next to Meera this whole time. She could hear the whole conversation even though the phone was not on speaker. She was petrified, but once the call was over, she consoled Meera and comforted her until she stopped crying .

The next morning, Khyati and Tanya were waiting for Mayank and Vikram at the campus. Meera didn ’ t come to college that day. She was sick from crying all night. Khyati was extremely mad at Mayank and Vikram. Tanya kind of loved it that Vikram smacked Arpan. She loved it when her “ boyfriend ” was not afraid of physical altercations .

When both the boys arrived at the campus, Mayank saw Khyati and he could tell she was about to yell at them and give them a big speech. Right when Khyati was about to start talking, he said “ , No need to get all parenty on me. You are not my mother. I know what I did, and I am not sorry for it ”.

Tanya noticed that Vikram had a splint on his finger. She panicked “ , Oh my God, Vikram! What happened? Is it fractured ”?

Vikram said “ , No, I am OK ”.

Khyati couldn ’ t take the foolhardy behavior of these two jerks anymore. She got up to leave and said “ , Both of you should be ashamed of yourselves ”.

When she was ready to walk away, Mayank stopped her “ Khyati, wait! I need your help ”.

“ No, you can ’ t ask for my help if you are not ready to listen to my yelling. It doesn ’ t work like that ”. Khyati knew what kind of help he was talking about .

Both Vikram and Mayank hung their heads as Khyati went on to yell at them for the next twenty minutes .

## Chapter 12

Mayank, Vikram, and Tanya were surprised to see this angry version of Khyati. They always thought of Khyati as a quiet and easygoing girl. All three of them quietly listened to her yelling .

“ Who the hell do you think you are, always meddling into other people ’ s lives ”? Khyati said, looking at Mayank “ . You don ’ t care about what your sister feels, you don ’ t care about that guy and his life, you don ’ t care about your future and career, and you just get into a big physical fight with a guy only because he talks to your sister? Are you freaking insane ”?

...“ and you ”!!... She looked at Vikram now “ . You are even stupider for getting into a fight that has nothing to do with you ”.

She was so loud that some students that were passing by noticed her yelling at these two boys. It was an amusing sight for them. Mayank and Vikram were the “ bad boys ” of the college. Forget girls, even boys didn ’ t mess with them, and here this girl, half their size, was yelling at them and they were standing quietly “ . What if he got seriously injured? What if he complains to the dean? What if he goes to the cops and gets you arrested? You didn ’ t think about any of these before breaking into his room ”??

Usually, a man ’ s biggest pet peeve is a dominating and bossy woman. But right now, Mayank and Vikram both were impressed by Khyati ’ s warrior avatar because, one, she seemed like she was one of them with her bold attitude, and two, somehow, it felt nice to have a friend who could stop them from being bad boys. During her nonstop yelling, Mayank managed to say “ , But he is not the right guy for Meera ”.

“ I know he isn ’ t ”. Khyati cut him off “ . But there are other ways to deal with this. You could have handled the whole situation much more wisely if you just had a little patience ”.

“ You have no idea how much patience it took to control myself from the time of his statement on the train to the time we reached the hostel. That ’ s much more patience than I can expect from myself ”. Mayank said in his defense .

“ Stop confusing your rage with your courage. Violence has never solved any problems; it only makes them worse. Now you have probably ruined your relationship with your sister for the rest of your life, I hope you realize that ”.

“ That ’ s why I need you to talk to Meera and explain to her why I did this and why Arpan is not the right match for her. And then tomorrow I will come to your hostel to talk to her ”.

“ You should have come to me before you beat him up. You have only made it more difficult for me to make her see why he is not worth it. She will be even more sympathetic toward him now. But I will try, I will talk to her tonight ”. Khyati said, then asked “ , Where is Arpan ”?

Mayank said “ , He left early this morning. I think he went home ”.

Vikram added “ , I don ’ t think he will ever come back. He will probably get a transfer to another college ”.

Khyati shook her head in disapproval and said “ , Seriously guys. This is not cool ”!

At the hostel, Khyati found Meera in her bed just the way she had left her in the morning before going to college. She sat on her bed and gently woke her up “ . Meera, let ’ s go have dinner ”.

After the dinner, Meera and Khyati sat on the bench in the hostel garden. Khyati started the conversation “ I think Mayank and Vikram shouldn ’ t have gone so far. Mayank should have talked to you first ”.

“ How ’ s Arpan ”? Meera asked, looking worried .

“ He is OK. He went home for a few days ”, Khyati said .

Meera looked away and said “ He ’ s not answering my calls ”.

“ I know it must be difficult for you , but to be honest, he doesn ’ t deserve you. Just forget him ”. Khyati couldn ’ t see her being so heartbroken for the wrong guy .

Meera knew she would say this. She defended him calmly “ . You don ’ t know him ”.

“ I do know him, that ’ s why I am telling you he is not worthy of your love. You can get a much better guy than him ”. Khyati stopped to see if her argument was working. Meera looked unfazed. Khyati continued “ , You know his whole history. First, he was rejected by Pooja, then Tanya, and then me. All of us can ’ t be wrong about him. He is weird ”.

“ But what if all of you ARE wrong about him ”? Meera said, completely blindsided “ . He doesn ’ t seem weird to me. He is very gentle and caring toward me ”.

Khyati figured it was not going to be easy to make Meera see Arpan was a sympathy-seeking psycho. For the first time, Khyati was observing the old adage “ Love is blind ” being played out. She made all the arguments she could, which eventually annoyed Meera. Meera usually never said anything hurtful to anyone but finally, when she couldn ’ t take Khyati bashing Arpan anymore, she told Khyati “ , Khyati, I don ’ t need relationship advice from you. You haven ’ t even been in a real relationship ever. You always find faults with every guy you meet. Tell me when was the last time you didn ’ t find something wrong with a guy ”?

Khyati really thought about it. Meera was right. She didn't say anything for a while. She got up to leave and said to Meera " , Meera, I just want you to know that Mayank loves you and cares about you a lot. I don't support what he did but it's good that Arpan walked out of your life. Try to forget him "

Meera thought about this a lot that night. She was still sad but she had developed a soft spot for Mayank. She knew her family was very rigid in these matters and Mayank could have told their family about Arpan but he didn't .

Khyati knew Meera was not in the right state of mind when she accused her of not knowing anything about relationships, but it still hurt Khyati, and in a way , Meera was right. Khyati introspected that night and admitted that she was a bit cynical when it came to guys, but you can't force yourself to love anyone. It just happens .

Khyati wondered if she would ever fall in love ...

### Chapter 13

The following morning. Mayank went to Meera's hostel to talk to her. He wanted to make sure Meera was OK and wasn't mad at him .

It was Saturday and looked like it would rain. Mayank parked his bike outside the hostel and went inside. He asked the watchman to call Meera and signed the visitor book. The watchman asked him to wait and went to call Meera .

The hostel had a huge garden on the front. Mayank was standing under a tree in the garden area when it started raining. It was just a drizzle and he didn't get wet. He was looking at the rain drops and mentally scolding himself for not bringing a raincoat when Khyati appeared running out from the hostel building. She was coming to take her books that she had put on a bench in the garden. She hurriedly took the books and ran back to her room .

Mayank saw her right from the moment she came out of the hostel building. She was wearing a white t-shirt that had a picture of Powerpuff

girls on it and a pink-colored capri. Her hair was tied in a messy ponytail. She hadn't straighten her hair, and the naturally wavy locks of her hair were carelessly moving with the wind. She was running in her flip-flops, trying to save herself and her books from getting wet .

This sight took Mayank's breath away. He literally skipped a heartbeat. He kept looking at her without blinking his eyes. Until today, he had never found Khyati so beautiful. He had thought she was beautiful, but not breathtakingly gorgeous. When he saw Khyati running back to her room with the books, he mumbled to himself " , Damn! She is hot "! He wondered how come she had never looked so pretty before. He was still looking at her in total amazement when Khyati noticed him standing under the tree .

She didn't notice Mayank until she was running back into the hostel. She looked surprised and stopped to talk to him " . Hey, what are you doing here "? Then immediately, she remembered that he was going to come to meet Meera that day. She said " , Yea, right. You are here to meet Meera. I will let her know ".

She was in a hurry to leave because of the rain. She didn't notice Mayank's dumbstruck face who only nodded his head in response. By the time Meera came out of her room, Mayank had figured out why he was seeing Khyati in a totally new light. Khyati always seemed like a geeky girl to him. He found her dressing very boring. She would always tie her hair tightly, walk carefully, and talk more seriously than her age. In short, she came across as very uptight. Mayank had never seen her so carefree and comfortable .

Today, she truly looked like a nineteen-year-old girl who could have dreams and wishes, could be silly and innocent, stubborn like a child, and loving like a mother. Mayank had never thought of hitting on her before. He did find her very compatible intellectually; he could talk to her about any topic from Galileo to Gul Panag, knowing for sure that she would have a very unique view on the topic. His conversation with Khyati always broadened his views and helped him learn more. But never had he ever thought that he would find her attractive in a romantic way .

He tried to shake off thoughts of Khyati from his mind as he saw Meera come out of the hostel and walk toward him. Mayank smiled at her

hoping she would smile back, but she didn't. She had probably lost her ability to smile.

Both of them sat on a bench in the visitor area quietly for some time. Then, Mayank started talking.

## Chapter 14

Mayank had never felt nervous talking to anyone before, but today, he found himself lost for words in front of his sister. Finally, he started the conversation with a stupid question “, Are you mad at me”?

Meera didn't respond. Mayank answered his own question “ . Of course, you are. I know you are. If I were you, I would be mad at myself too”. He continued his justification speech “ . But believe me, if you were me, you would have also done the same thing”. Meera looked at him with a question mark on her face.

“ Meera, you are the most innocent and compassionate person I have ever seen in my life. And even though we are both the same age, I always see you as my little sister who I want to protect from everything that is bad in this world”. Mayank now switched to his protective elder brother mode “ . This world is full of people who are always ready to exploit and use innocent people like you . Please trust me, I am not against a girl falling in love with a guy. I wasn't mad at that fact; I was mad because he exposed you in front of our classmates and you know that things like this spread in college in no time”.

Meera was shocked to hear this “ . He used my name in front of other people”? Mayank nodded in response “ . I told him not to until I was ready”, Meera said.

Mayank said “ , If he truly loved you, he would have respected your name and your privacy. He just wanted to come across as a big shot who is dating Mayank's sister because he was a worthless piece of crap before you came into his life”.

Meera was lost in deep thought. She realized that Mayank was right. Sometimes, just one little act can reveal a person's true identity. Defaming someone is a very cheap act, even if that person is an enemy.

Here, Meera thought Arpan was falling in love with her. The soft spot in her heart for Arpan immediately disappeared after learning this. She remained quiet for a while .

“ I can ’ t undo what I did, but I promise the next time you like any guy, I will be the first one to support it. Just try to be more selective when picking a guy. Don ’ t just fall in love blindly ”. Mayank said with a caring tone .

Meera was quiet, but Mayank could tell his speech was working. He got up and said “ , Now, let ’ s go. We ’ ll go out for lunch, at your favorite restaurant ”.

Meera didn ’ t move “ . Come on! Go tell your rector -”, Mayank said and grabbed her by hand. Meera smiled and nodded her head. Mayank wanted to tell her “ , Ask Khyati if she wants to join us ”. But he curbed his urge and decided to spend this time with just his sister .

Mayank tried to forget about Khyati over that weekend and he was almost successful. Then on Monday, he saw Khyati at college. She was back to her boring avatar, but now Mayank couldn ’ t unfeel what he had felt that morning. Even in her boring avatar, he found her attractive .

The law of attraction has very little to do with how you look and more with how you carry yourself. The image of Khyati, full of life, with those thick books in her hands, was stuck in Mayank ’ s head. However, Mayank was not someone who could be digressed from his principle so easily .

Mayank had learned very early in life that the thing that people call “ love ” is not eternal. Every relationship, in the beginning, seems rosy and exciting. But all of them, without exception, go through a phase when love fades away. Then the form of love keeps changing with age, but it never goes back to its original form when there ’ s excitement, electricity, passion, impatience, and all those cheesy feelings .

He also strongly believed that if a person was not ready for commitment, then its best not to initiate anything. Plus, he didn ’ t want to lose a friend like Khyati because of something so mundane. It ’ s totally

normal and obvious at this age to have feelings for someone with whom you spend so much time. No need to take it seriously .

Mayank had learned pragmatism very early in life. His vision for his life was very clear and falling in love was not a part of his vision. He acknowledged the feelings that were rising for Khyati in his heart, but promptly put them away .

Meera was her normal self in a few days. There was no sign of Arpan after that incident. Tanya was now getting more aggressive in her efforts to make her relationship with Vikram official. She wanted to convince Vikram and everyone else that she was madly in love with him, but she didn ' t find any opportunity to do so. Then one day, she got a perfect chance to prove her love .

It was the last class of the day and the campus was almost empty. Khyati and Tanya were in the hallway of the first floor of the college building. Mayank and Vikram were talking downstairs in the parking lot on their bikes. A car drove speedily into the campus out of nowhere and braked noisily next to Mayank and Vikram. This loud noise grabbed Khyati and Tanya ' s attention. They noticed four large guys get out of the car and walk toward Mayank and Vikram .

All these guys had things in their hands that could be used as a weapon, such as hockey sticks, cricket bats, and bicycle chains. They approached Mayank and Vikram and started talking to them. Khyati and Tanya couldn ' t hear anything but they could see them clearly from where they were standing. Both of them, unable to move or react, were watching the scene in absolute shock .

## Chapter 15

Mayank and Vikram looked cool while talking to the guy with a hockey stick, but Khyati and Tanya could tell they were not having a pleasant conversation. Khyati was watching them with rapt attention. Just then, Tanya started to have a panic attack. She was literally gasping for air .

“ Oh my God! Oh my God! What are they going to do to Vikram? I can ’ t live without Vikram. We should help Vikram. Vikram! Vikram! Vikram ”! Tanya was freaking out .

Khyati shifted her focus from the guys to Tanya. She was surprised to see Tanya scared for the first time. Usually, she came across as a daredevil. Khyati held her in her arms and tried to placate her “ . He is OK. They are just talking. Don ’ t worry . Everything is OK. No need to freak out ”.

Khyati ’ s efforts weren ’ t working. Tanya started crying, and now she was unable to say anything except Vikram ’ s name. She kept repeating “ , Vikram, Vikram ” as if she was having a stroke. Khyati got really worried and gave her water. Both of them were still looking at what was going on in the parking lot .

The guys were still talking. It was hard to tell what they were talking about. Two minutes into the conversation, Mayank and the guy with the hockey stick smiled and shook hands. A minute after that, one of the four guys took out a long sharp dagger from his back and showed it to Vikram. Vikram took the dagger in his hand and started admiring it .

It was now clear that they were having a casual conversation. Khyati was relieved but Tanya had still not calmed down. She got more restless when she saw the dagger. Khyati finally shook her vigorously and that brought her back to her senses “ . Tanya, listen to me. Vikram is fine. They are just talking. They are smiling. Calm down. Take a deep breath ”. Tanya ’ s panic attack subsided. She calmed down .

After a few minutes, the guys left. Both Khyati and Tanya ran downstairs to the parking lot. Vikram and Mayank were laughing at something when they noticed the girls. Tanya just ran and hugged Vikram tightly “ . Are you OK, Vikram? Did they hurt you ”?

Vikram gently pulled her off and said “ , I am OK. Nothing happened ”. Vikram and Mayank shared a look that meant “ , Look at this one. Such a drama queen ”!

Khyati asked “ , What the hell was that ”?

“ Any guess ”? Vikram asked with a mischievous smile on his face .

“ Come on! I ’ m not in the mood to play guessing games. Just tell us ”, Khyati said. She said impatiently .

Mayank and Vikram smiled at each other and then Mayank spoke “ . Those guys were hired by Mr . Arpan to beat us up ”.

Khyati and Tanya looked at them with their eyes wide open and jaws dropped “ . You are kidding ”! Khyati said in disbelief .

“ Nope ”! Mayank was smiling .

“ Then how did you talk them out of it ”? Khyati was listening to the most thrilling incident she had ever witnessed in her life .

“ Well, I know the guy with the hockey stick. He is the chief of that gang ”, Mayank said casually .

“ WHAT ”? Both Khyati and Tanya said in unison .

“ You know a gangster? How? Why ”? Khyati asked .

Mayank waited for a second to respond as if he was trying to decide if he should lie or tell the truth “ . He is like my third or fourth cousin ”, Mayank said matter-of-factly .

“ What the hell ”? It was all too much for Tanya and Khyati .

“ Yea, I hadn ’ t seen him in a long time but he recognized me and canceled his deal with Arpan ”, Mayank said and then added “ . And then he invited us to a party at his place this weekend ”.

“ Wow! I don ’ t know if I should be proud of you or mad at you. I realize now that you are the guys that our parents warned us about before starting college ”, Khyati almost regretted being friends with these guys .

Mayank and Vikram laughed “ , But it ’ s too late now. You are stuck with being friends with us forever ”. Vikram said teasing her .

“ Anyway, I am relieved. We thought you guys were in grave danger ”. Khyati said and then looked at Tanya “ . Tanya had a massive panic attack ”.

“ I thought I ’ d lose you, Vikram. I wanted to help you so badly. Please never do this again. I will never leave you alone ”. Tanya again started to cling to Vikram .

“ Everything ’ s OK. Chill ”! Vikram said .

“ So Tanya wanted to help Vikram. What about me ”? Mayank looked at Khyati looking for her sympathy. This was the first time he was flirting with her .

“ Don ’ t look at me. I would never jump into somebody else ’ s fight. I love myself too much ”, Khyati made it clear “ , Besides, it was all your fault. I told you in the beginning that violence would only make this worse ”, She added .

That night, Khyati woke up in the middle of the night to get some water and saw Tanya sitting on her bed looking like she had seen a ghost. Khyati got scared at first. Then she went closer and asked “ , Tanya, what happened? Everything OK ”?

Tanya looked at Khyati blankly at first and then said “ , I still can ’ t forget the sight of Vikram surrounded by those gangsters ”.

Khyati sighed. She said “ , Let ’ s go to the balcony ”. She didn ’ t want to disturb the other girls .

Both of them went to the balcony. The moonlit sky and cool breeze welcomed them “ . Tanya, what ’ s going on? You are always so strong. I am the one who gets scared of little things ”. Khyati asked with genuine concern .

“ I don ’ t know, Khyati. I think I am just too protective of Vikram. When those guys were approaching him with all those creepy things in their hands, that ’ s when I realized how much I care about him. I tried to hide it a lot but now I admit that I am madly in love with him and want to spend the rest of my life with him ”.

“ Hide ”? Khyati thought. It seemed exactly the opposite of hiding. Khyati wasn ’ t surprised but she was glad that finally, Tanya was confronting her feelings. Khyati said “ , That ’ s great. You should talk to Vikram about this ”.

Khyati felt that Vikram wasn ’ t as interested in Tanya. In fact, Khyati had never seen Vikram being romantic with Tanya. But she didn ’ t want to bring that up. She wanted Tanya to find it out on her own .

That ’ s what Tanya wanted to hear. She wanted someone else to encourage her to go ahead with this “ . You are right. I will talk to him tomorrow ”, Tanya said .

“ Now let ’ s go. I am yawning like crazy ”, Khyati said and both of them went back to bed .

That night Tanya didn't sleep and planned how to play it right to ensure Vikram would say yes .

## Chapter 16

Tanya was prepared to talk to Vikram. She had to play this right, as it would be the stepping stone for her future with Vikram. She had texted him the night before that she wanted to talk to him in the biochemistry lab .

This biochemistry lab had been closed for a long time and was in a secluded part of the campus. Students usually went to this lab when they wanted to have very private and personal conversations, and when they wanted to get intimate. Funnily enough, too many biochemical experiments were performed in this lab after it closed. So, when Vikram showed Mayank the text Tanya sent, Mayank knew what she was up to .

He told Vikram “ , She is going to say ‘ I love you ’ to you tomorrow ” .

Vikram knew this day would come. He asked Mayank “ How do I respond to that ”?

Mayank told him every little detail of what he is supposed to do. Vikram was prepared for the battle .

That morning, Tanya woke up with the most serious face. She wanted to look nervous and painfully in love with Vikram .

Khyati and Tanya reached the college on Khyati ' s Scooty. Vikram and Mayank were already at the campus waiting for them. Tanya ' s body language and facial expressions were well-rehearsed to show that she was so helplessly and hopelessly in love with Vikram that she had no choice but to confess her love for him .

Khyati had been taken in by Tanya ' s fake expressions right away. Mayank, on the other hand, actually felt proud of Tanya for taking her evilness to a whole new level. Today was very crucial for Tanya. She knew that if Mayank wasn ' t there to protect Vikram, she would ' ve trapped Vikram a long time ago. But if today, Vikram accepted her proposal, then it

would mean that Vikram stopped listening to Mayank, which would be another big milestone for Tanya .

Tanya and Khyati walked up to them and Tanya said to Vikram “ , Are you ready ”?

“ Yes ”, Vikram also managed to keep a serious expression on his face .

“ Let ’ s go then ”, Tanya said and then turned to Mayank and Khyati , “ We ’ ll be right back ”.

Both of them went into the lab and closed the door .

“ What do you think is going to happen in there ”? Khyati was curious .

“ He ’ s going to get some ”, Mayank said with a naughty smile on his face .

“ What? How gross ”! Khyati was a borderline prude “ . Is that all you can think about ”?

“ That ’ s what that lab is for ”, Mayank stated matter-of-factly .

“ Tanya is not that type of girl. People use that room to have a personal conversation too ”. Khyati defended Tanya .

“ Really? What kind of girl is she then ”? Mayank wanted to find out what Khyati thought about this whole situation .

“ She really loves him. You should ’ ve seen her freaking out when those guys came to beat you both ”. Khyati said with genuine concern .

Mayank couldn ’ t take Khyati ’ s naive thinking anymore “ . It was all fake, Khyati. She doesn ’ t love him. Open your eyes. She ’ s just playing games with him ”.

“ What? How do you come up with this kind of crap ”? Khyati couldn ’ t understand why he had so many misunderstandings about Tanya .

“ It ’ s not crap. It ’ s the truth. But don ’ t worry, I am going to put an end to all her games ”. Mayank was finally revealing his intentions to Khyati for the first time .

“ Dude, what ’ s your problem? Just let the poor girl fall in love. Why are you so jealous? Because she didn ’ t pick you ”? Mayank came across as the bad guy to Khyati right now .

Mayank laughed “ , You think I am jealous? I am glad that I am not Vikram right now ”.

“ Come on! You wish you were there in the lab with a girl right now ”, Khyati probed him a little more .

Mayank responded right away “ , Yea! With a girl I like, not with Tanya. She grosses me out ”.

Khyati realized that Mayank genuinely hated Tanya .

She could sense that Mayank was weaving some crazy games in his mind to hurt Tanya. She interrogated Mayank “ . Why do you hate her so much? I can tell you are planning something drastic that would destroy Tanya. Just like you did with Arpan ”.

Mayank didn ’ t say anything. Khyati didn ’ t move her gaze from his face .

“ Are you ”? She asked again. Mayank was looking away to ignore her question .

“ Mayank, I ’ m talking to you. Tell me ”, Khyati persisted .

Mayank just looked at her without saying anything, but his eyes were saying that he was, in fact, planning to destroy Tanya .

Khyati was scared for Tanya. She wanted to protect her. She said “ OK. Just promise me you will not break them up as you did with Arpan and Meera ”.

“ I can ’ t promise you that. No way ”. Mayank shook his head .

“ That means you ARE planning to break them up ”. Khyati ’ s fear was confirmed .

Mayank got annoyed now “ . Just leave it, will you ”?

“ No. I will not. I will not let you destroy her relationship with Vikram ”. Khyati was angry “ . I don ’ t know what you think about her but I know her. She ’ s a nice girl. Promise me you won ’ t do it. I won ’ t leave you until you promise me ”.

Mayank couldn ’ t figure out how to make Khyati see Tanya ’ s real face. He didn ’ t want to promise anything to Khyati because if he did, his entire plan would be in vain and Tanya would end up trapping Vikram .

He looked at Khyati to say something but instead, he found himself so lost looking at Khyati ’ s beautiful face that he couldn ’ t say no anymore.

He was in a serious dilemma. He didn't want to disappoint Khyati, but at the same time, he didn't want to cancel his plans of destroying Tanya .

Finally, he said “ , Fine. I won't break them up ”.

“ Promise ”? Khyati asked .

“ Yes, I promise ”, Mayank said. He was confident that he would find a way to break them up without upsetting Khyati .

“ You are so sweet ”, Khyati finally smiled and pinched his cheek. She assumed that he would keep his promise .

Right then, Vikram and Tanya came out of the lab holding hands. Tanya was smiling joyously “ . We are together now ”.

“ Yay! I am so happy for you ”. Khyati hugged Tanya .

“ Great ”! Mayank smiled. His plan had worked “ . Let's celebrate ”.

All four of them went for dinner that night and celebrated the new relationship status of Tanya and Vikram .

“ I am telling you. I should've just told her that I don't love her in the lab today and it would've ended her games right there. I don't understand why you asked me to pretend that I love her too ”. Vikram asked Mayank at the hostel that night .

“ If you had rejected her today, she would have created more drama. I am sure she would have attempted suicide with a suicide note blaming you for her death ”, Mayank explained to Vikram .

“ Only you can think so drastically ”. Vikram never believed Mayank's crazy speculations .

“ Well, me and Tanya ”, Mayank clarified .

“ I just feel like you are pushing me into deeper shit. We're just letting her do whatever she wants ”. Vikram still didn't have faith in Mayank's plan .

“ This was the last stroke from her. The ball is in our court now. The difficult part of the game is over . Now, the game is totally under our control ”, Mayank said to Vikram and then explained to him the rest of the plan .

“ Damn! You are a genius, man! This is going to be fun ”, Vikram was excited after learning the whole game Mayank had planned “ . There's no

way she 'd be able to beat this game. She 's going down ". Vikram high-fived Mayank .

Mayank was glad that Vikram was finally on board .

## Chapter 17

Vikram and Tanya 's relationship was blooming like flowers in spring. They spent hours talking after class. They also frequently visited the biochemistry lab. Khyati was happy that Mayank was not doing anything to break them up . During this time, Khyati and Mayank were left alone when Vikram and Tanya spent a lot of time away from them. Meera used to join them occasionally. As a result, Meera, Khyati, and Mayank became very close .

On the night of the annual Garba function of the college, Meera, Khyati, Vikram, and Tanya were playing together. Mayank was sitting in the audience as he was never interested in this festival and he didn 't know how to play Garba properly .

He was sitting peacefully in the audience and watching Khyati play Garba without blinking. All his senses had stopped working except his vision. His eyes could only see Khyati play Garba. Meera took a break for water and saw Mayank staring at Khyati. She walked up to him and sat next to him, but Mayank was so lost looking at Khyati that he didn 't notice Meera at all .

Meera waited for him to notice her “ . You 're so smitten ”. Meera finally broke him out of his reverie .

“ What ”? Mayank saw her now .

“ You are falling for her so hard ”, Meera said happily .

“ You can tell from just the look on my face ”? Mayank got concerned

“ Anyone can tell ”, Meera replied .

“ Khyati too ”? Mayank got scared .

“ No. She can 't ”, Meera corrected herself “ . She doesn 't know anything about love or anything related ”.

“ Thank God ”! Mayank breathed a sigh of relief .

Meera finally asked him the question she had been wanting to ask for a long time now “ . Why don ’ t you tell her about how you feel? She ’ s so perfect for you ”.

Mayank shook his head “ . No. I can ’ t. You know I can ’ t ”. Meera knew what Mayank had envisioned for his future and his life .

“ But it ’ s painful to see you like this ”, Meera was worried about him .

“ I don ’ t want to feel this way. Trust me ”. Mayank felt helpless “ . But I can ’ t seem to stop this rush of feelings. I want to touch her, I want to hug her, I want to kiss her, but all I can do is to look at her. And the more I look at her, the more I want to go closer to her ”. Mayank continued to pour his feelings “ . I am out of control. I want my eyes to move their gaze from her. But right now, my brain is not listening to me ”.

Then he looked at Khyati “ . Just look at her. She looks like a freaking goddess. Her face is glowing with joy. Her eyes are sparkling with innocence and she is playing Garba so gorgeously ”. Then he placed his hand on his eyes and said with a little frustration “ . And that goddamn choli she is wearing. That one lucky piece of cloth. Look at her waist. Her skin is like shining silk ”. Mayank went on and on “ . I ’ m just crazy about the way her body moves with the rhythm. She is so in sync with the rhythm that it seems like the drums are following her footsteps ”. Mayank didn ’ t realize how much he was talking. He had kept his feelings to himself for a long time. Today, he just let them flow. Meera was looking at him in total astonishment .

“ It ’ s good to see that you can also fall in love. I thought you were too dry for love. Khyati changed you a lot ”. She looked at Khyati and said “ , She is pretty amazing ”.

“ You know what the most amazing thing about her is ”? Mayank was still not done praising her .

“ What ”? Meera asked .

“ That even she doesn ’ t know how awesome she is ”, Mayank said, completely mesmerized by her .

“ Look at you. You ’ ve started talking like a poet. How sweet ”! Meera said with joy .

Both of them stopped talking when they saw Khyati walking toward them .

“ Meera, Come on! I need you. Raas is about to start and you ’ re my partner ”. Khyati said completely unaware of what these two were talking about .

“ No, I am tired. I can ’ t be your partner. Ask Mayank ”. Meera tried to help Mayank .

Mayank refused her offer “ . Who? Me? No way. I don ’ t know the first thing about playing Raas. I might end up hurting you ”.

Khyati was in a hurry. Navratri was her favorite festival and she wanted to enjoy every bit of it “ . Come on! One of you has to be my partner. Vikram got Tanya, so I don ’ t have anyone. Please! We only have an hour left before they close us down. Come on, guys ”!!

“ Mayank, you go ”, Meera said again .

“ No. I insist that you go. Please ”! Mayank looked at Meera trying to tell her that it ’ d be a bad idea for him to play Raas with her. Meera understood his hidden message .

She got up and said “ . Fine. Let ’ s go ”. And they left .

Mayank gathered the courage to get up and walk out of the hall because he felt like his brain was going to explode. There was a fierce war going on between his heart and his brain. He wanted to turn off the switch in his mind that made him so crazy about Khyati, but he couldn ’ t .

## Chapter 18

Just when Khyati thought Mayank had stopped playing games with Tanya, she saw Mayank talking to Tanya one day in a secluded corner of the campus. Khyati saw Vikram busy with his cellphone on his bike in the parking lot. She walked up to him and asked him “ , What ’ s going on between these two ”? Vikram glanced at them for a second and shrugged his shoulders signaling he doesn ’ t care .

“ You don ’ t want to know what your girlfriend and your best friend are talking about in that corner ”? Khyati was annoyed .

“ No. They don ’ t have to tell me everything ”. Vikram said carelessly

“ I find this very fishy. I just hope he ’ s not playing one of his dirty games again ”, Khyati said .

“ Just relax, since when did you become so paranoid ”? Vikram tried to calm her down .

“ Since you guys beat up Arpan ”, Khyati replied .

“ It ’ s nothing. Don ’ t worry about it ”, Vikram said and then added .  
“ I ’ m dealing with a bigger problem right now ”.

“ What problem ”? Khyati asked .

“ Well, they kicked us out of the hostel. So now we have to find a place to rent ”, Vikram said still looking into his phone .

“ What? Why ”? Khyati asked .

“ When we beat up Apran, we broke some stuff in his room that belonged to the hostel, and then somebody complained about us ”, Vikram said as if it was a very common thing to happen .

“ So where are you staying right now ”? Asked Khyati .

“ At Prashant ’ s place ”, Vikram said .

“ Who ’ s Prashant ”? Khyati had never heard his name before .

“ Mayank ’ s gangster cousin ”, Vikram said, knowing Khyati would cringe again .

“ Oh my God! I don ’ t know for how long you ’ ll suffer the consequences of that one fight ”. Khyati said disappointed “ . I don ’ t even feel bad for you guys anymore ”.

Khyati started observing Mayank and Tanya again, trying to figure out what they were talking about .

“ Hey, Tanya! Do you want to watch an awesome video I recorded ”? Mayank had asked Tanya when Khyati and Vikram were not around .

“ It depends ”. Tanya said, looking at Mayank suspiciously. He never showed any interest in talking to her casually “ . What ’ s it about ”?

“ It ’ s about a girl and a guy going third base in the biochemistry lab ”. Mayank said and made horns on his head with his fingers .

Tanya momentarily stopped breathing. She immediately figured out that Mayank was talking about Vikram and her. She started freaking out. Sweat beads appeared on her forehead, her fingers started shaking. Her mouth went dry .

“ You didn ’ t ”. She managed to say to Mayank .

“ I didn ’ t, what ”? Mayank continued to play with her .

“ Show me the video. I don ’ t believe you ”, Tanya said whispering .

“ What if I told you exactly what happened in there on Monday? I know who came on to whom, who was doing what, and where your hands were the whole time. That window in the biochemistry lab has the perfect angle to capture a great video ”. Mayank loved watching her freak out .

Tanya ’ s legs started shaking now. He wasn ’ t faking. He really did have the video .

“ Mayank, just delete the video right now ”. Tanya had never been so scared before .

“ You really think I will delete it because you asked me to do so ”? Mayank teased her a little more .

“ Why did you do it ”? Tanya asked. She looked angry and helpless .

Mayank ’ s job was done. He said “ , I think Khyati and Vikram are calling us. Let ’ s go ”. He left the conversation and joined Khyati and Vikram .

Tanya had no choice but to calm down and look normal, but she looked like she had just seen a ghost .

All four of them were having a casual conversation when Vikram started signaling Tanya to go to the biochemistry lab with him. On this side, Mayank was giving his most evil grin and looking at Tanya signaling her “ , Go ahead ”. He was flipping his cellphone in his hand. Tanya looked scared, stressed, and confused. Khyati was looking at these three and trying to figure out what the hell was going on .

Finally, Tanya and Vikram got up and went to the lab. She figured she must act like nothing happened until she figured out how to get out of this situation .

“ OK, what was that all about ”? Khyati asked Mayank after Vikram and Tanya left .

“ What ”? Mayank was acting like he didn ’ t know anything .

“ The sign language you three were speaking ”? Khyati asked .

“ What sign language ”? Mayank continued to dodge her questions .

“ Mayank, are you playing a game again ”? Khyati was irritated .

“ No, Mother Teresa . Give it a rest ”; Mayank ignored her interrogation and said “ , I need to find a place to rent ”. He got busy with his phone .

Khyati didn ’ t probe him anymore but she could sense something was cooking between Mayank and Tanya. She asked Tanya about it and she said everything was fine. The following day, Khyati found Mayank and Tanya talking again. This time it was clear that they were both arguing .

Mayank looked calm but Tanya looked very angry. Khyati went to the parking lot and sat next to Vikram without asking him anything .

Tanya was not one to give up so easily. She came up with a plan. She didn ’ t discuss any of this with Vikram. She didn ’ t know if Vikram was involved with Mayank or not. But she didn ’ t want to lose Vikram even if he was involved .

“ If you don ’ t delete the video, I swear I will destroy your friendship with Vikram ”, Tanya warned Mayank .

“ Wow! I haven ’ t even told you what I am going to do with this video yet and you already started to threaten me ”, Mayank said laughing .

“ I ’ m serious. I will do it ”, Tanya was angry .

“ Please! Go ahead! There ’ s no girl in this world who could do it, but you can give it a try ”, Mayank said .

“ Fine. Just wait and watch. I ’ ll end your friendship with him today ”, Tanya said determinedly .

“ Wow! Today? Let ’ s see ”. Mayank provoked her .

Vikram and Khyati were looking at the online apartment listings when Tanya and Mayank joined them. Tanya seemed to have regained her cool.

They started talking about random things when Tanya did something unexpectedly .

“ The Garba night was fun, wasn ’ t it ”? Tanya brought up the Garba night .

“ Yes, I loved it ”, Khyati said .

“ Vikram, you are such a great Garba player. It was great to be your partner. I ’ m glad I am your girlfriend now because if Mayank didn ’ t break up your relationship with Nidhi, I would ’ ve missed playing Garba with you ”. Tanya said it like she accidentally blurted it out .

There was a pin-drop silence among the four of them. Khyati couldn ’ t believe that Tanya had let out the big secret. Mayank didn ’ t look shocked. Vikram was caught off-guard .

“ WHAT ”?? Vikram asked, unsure if he heard it correctly .

Tanya tried to act like it was an honest slip of the tongue and said “ , Oops ”!

“ What did she just say ”? Vikram now turned to Mayank .

“ She said I broke up your relationship with Nidhi ”, Mayank said, a little apologetically . He hadn ’ t thought Tanya would use this information against him. But he was sure that it would still not affect his friendship with Vikram .

“ Is it true ”? Vikram was still baffled .

“ Yes ”, Mayank said , looking at Vikram .

Khyati thought Vikram would get up and punch Mayank in the face. Tanya waited for Vikram to flip out .

Everyone was waiting for Vikram ’ s reaction but he didn ’ t react at all. He seemed lost in deep thoughts. Finally , Mayank asked “ , Are we cool ”?

Vikram was still pondering over the information he just got and then he got back his composure and said “ , Yea! We ’ re cool! If you hadn ’ t done it, sooner or later, I ’ d have broken up with her ”. And both of them smiled at each other .

Mayank was relieved “ . I ’ ll tell you everything in detail later ”. He assured him .

Vikram just nodded. He wasn't angry at Mayank. Khyati was also relieved and was impressed with the strong bond the two guys shared. Vikram trusted Mayank blindly. Tanya looked disappointed, her plan hadn't worked, but she continued to apologize " . I ' m sorry, guys. It was an honest mistake "

Mayank looked sternly at Tanya and seemed to tell her " , You are so dead ". Tanya tried to conceal her evil look and told Khyati " , Let ' s go, Khyati ". She turned to Vikram and said " , I ' ll talk to you tomorrow ". Both of them then left .

Tanya had to find a way to convince Mayank to delete that video. She came up with another plan that night, and she was confident that this plan would definitely work .

## Chapter 19

Tanya ' s wicked mind conjured a foolproof plan. She was going to make an offer that Mayank couldn't refuse. She wanted to take advantage of the fact that he was a man. Women have always been better than men at mind games . From Cleopatra to Clinton, it was evident that a woman didn't need weapons to win a war; her mind is her biggest weapon .

A man ' s greatest weakness is his manhood. He associates his manhood with power, money, and sex. Historically, it has been proven numerous times that a man can be lured easily with these things. Tanya wanted to try out this age-old trick that has never failed to conquer a man. She couldn't wait until morning to execute her plan and called Mayank that night to strike a deal with him .

Mayank received Tanya ' s call at midnight. He didn't answer. He knew she wanted to convince him to delete the video. So he tried to get her to text him instead. He texted " , Can ' t talk. Vikram will hear everything. Text me instead "

Mayank waited for her text to see if she had fallen for his trick. It would be advantageous for Mayank if she texted the whole conversation. Women also have a weakness called impatience. Tanya was so impatient to

get her plan rolling that she agreed to texting immediately. She didn't think there was any harm in texting because it was Mayank who was blackmailing her and not the other way around. She texted him back “ , OK ”.

Mayank smiled. Both of them texted back and forth for hours .

“ Mayank, why are doing this? What are you going to do with the video ”? Tanya had to know .

“ I will send this video to your respected father, so he can see what his daughter is doing in the name of education. Once he sees the video, he will come and take you away from Vikram. Then my job will be done ”.

Mayank finally revealed his intentions. Now, Tanya was even more terrified. She had thought he would post the video on the college WhatsApp group but this was even worse. She had to somehow convince him to delete the video .

Tanya put forth her offer, feeling confident that Mayank would agree. Mayank was appalled by Tanya's inhumane mind games. He never thought she could stoop so low. He texted her after reading her offer “ , I have to think about it. I'll talk to you tomorrow at college ”.

Mayank woke up feeling happy that day because he thought he could now end the entire chapter of Tanya without breaking his promise to Khyati. He didn't say anything to Vikram and went to college with him. At college, he saw Tanya talking to Khyati. After Vikram and Tanya went to the lab, as usual, Khyati and Mayank were left alone .

Khyati was worried about Tanya “ . Tanya didn't sleep at all last night. She didn't come to bed and spent the night on a bench in the hostel garden. What are you doing to her? Just leave her alone ”.

“ I was hoping you'd say that. That's exactly what I'm going to do today. I will never bother her again ”. Mayank said with a grin “ . Not just that, today I will tell you the whole game that has been going on for the past few months ”.

“ Really ”? Khyati was happy but also curious “ . But why now ”?

“ Because now you are also a part of this story ”. Mayank was calm .

“ Me? How? I didn ’ t do anything. I don ’ t even know anything ”. Khyati wondered how she became part of the story .

“ That ’ s the beauty of this game. You get involved in it without your own consent ”. Mayank sounded like a philosopher .

“ OK. Fine. Tell me the whole thing ”. Khyati didn ’ t want him to create any more suspense .

Mayank looked at her and said cautiously “ , I will, but you have to hear the entire story without interrupting me, no matter how angry or impatient you may get. If you can do that, I can tell you the whole story ”.

Khyati looked at him suspiciously, but she had no choice but to agree with him “ . OK. Fine ”.

Mayank smiled and sit up to start telling the story “ . So this story started on the first day of the college. When Tanya saw Vikram and learned how rich and high-profile he was, she realized that her boyfriend was nothing compared with Vikram. She started to make efforts to be Vikram ’ s friend. She discussed her imaginary relationship problems with Vikram because she wanted to break up with her boyfriend with Vikram ’ s help. Once she was single again, she started flirting with Vikram and tried to make her relationship with Vikram official. When she was finally able to do it, she convinced Vikram to let her meet his parents. She started talking to him about their wedding and kids. She made sure Vikram knew that she wanted to marry him, and that this is not just some casual short-term college relationship. Whenever Vikram didn ’ t show commitment, she ’ d cry and emotionally blackmail him. I knew her plan from the beginning. I told Vikram to play along and do what I say. I wanted to destroy Tanya in such a way that she ’ d never again go close to Vikram. According to my plan, Vikram let her do whatever she wanted to do physically with him in the lab. After that, I started to blackmail her that I have her porn video with Vikram ”.

Khyati jumped up from her seat and was about to yell at Mayank but Mayank stopped her “ . No! No! No! You can ’ t say anything yet. You have to hear the whole story ”. It took Khyati considerable effort to sit down again and keep her mouth shut. Mayank continued “ , So that ’ s why Tanya has been trying to convince me to delete the video. That ’ s what all those intense talks with her were about, and that ’ s why she blurted out

that Nidhi fiasco in front of Vikram. When that didn ' t work on me, last night she made a quid-pro-quo offer ". Mayank stopped to breathe .

" What ' s the offer "? Khyati was shocked to her very core. She didn ' t believe that these guys were playing such a dirty game right under her nose .

" Before I tell you the offer, I want to tell you something else ". Now Mayank switched gears " . You have always intrigued me. I have always felt that you don ' t let yourself be yourself. You hide who you are, and you try too hard to come across as a mellow, simple, and docile girl. Tanya thinks you are very gullible ". Mayank stopped talking about the game and started talking about Khyati instead " . But I strongly feel that that ' s not who you are. I see a radiant fire in you. Remember when I first asked you about Tanya and you said that you take people at their face value " ?

Khyati remembered that she did say that. Mayank continued " , No one says that. That sounded very strange to me. That sounded like a quote from a book. As if you were following instructions, as if somebody told you to take people at their face value ". Mayank continued to recall his experiences with Khyati " . I also think that you have a crazy temper. It ' s so powerful that it is as if you take control and become the most powerful when you are angry. I saw the power of your temper when you got mad at Vikram and me after we beat up Arpan. I could see that you had lost it that day but still it wasn ' t the worst of your temper. It can get much much worse " .

Mayank was a little scared of how calm Khyati was even after listening to these most outrageous things about her. He was saying all this because he wanted to prove a point " . I don ' t know the whole story behind this but all I can say is you have the sharpest and the most powerful mind. But you refrain from using it because you are scared of your immense powers. You think I am playing games with Tanya and I think Tanya is playing games with Vikram. You think I am dangerous and I think Tanya is dangerous, but the reality is you are much more dangerous than Tanya and I combined .

Khyati was listening to him with rapt attention. He was narrating her entire personality to her as if she was an open book to him. She didn ' t say

a word. Mayank stopped to see how she was reacting but she maintained a poker face. He continued his narration .

“ Have you heard that story of Akbar and Birbal? Akbar wanted to impress Birbal with his wit so he trained a cat to sit quietly as a candle stand and then invited Birbal for dinner to show him how nicely he trained the cat to maintain poise even with a burning candle on its back. Birbal leaves impressed but schedules another dinner with Akbar. The next time he secretly brings a mouse in his pocket and releases it in the room. When the cat sees the mouse, it starts jumping and chasing the mouse, and burns the whole room ”.

Mayank continued “ , You are like that cat, Khyati. You have been trained to stay calm, but it ’ s not your nature. Your nature is to catch mice, and I have a feeling that when you see a mouse, you will chase it down and kill it. Not just that, you will take complete control over the situation and burn down everything in sight. No one else will get a chance to do anything ”. Mayank finished his monologue and ended his speech with disclosure “ . Of course, all of these is just a conjecture. It ’ s just my hypothesis. I may be wrong. Now it ’ s up to you to prove me right or wrong. If I am wrong, it ’ s fine, but if I am right, I will be even more impressed with you than I already am ”.

Khyati couldn ’ t believe how Mayank had revealed her whole personality with just one story. Mayank was absolutely right. Khyati traveled back to her past. She was born in a well-educated bureaucrat family. Her dad was an IAS officer and their social circle was full of high-profile people .

Khyati was a very well-behaved child. Her parents taught her the best mannerisms and etiquettes. But once she hit teenage, her entire personality changed. She started understanding the vanity of the society she lived in. She started questioning everything. She started to realize that every single human being on this Earth has some selfish motive behind every action, no matter how good the action may be. She started to dig into people ’ s minds to expose their inner motives .

When Khyati recognized the selfish motives of people, she used to get angry. She hated two-faced people. Khyati ’ s temper was inexplicable.

When she got angry, she used to become so powerful that no one could control her. Everyone would wait until she calmed herself down .

There were some unpleasant social gatherings where she insulted some guests of her parents by calling them out. Once she accused a politician that he had built a school in a poor village not because he was a nobleman but because he wanted to get the villagers ' votes. After that incident, her parents stopped taking her to parties. She started spending time alone in her room. She wouldn ' t talk to anyone. She didn ' t have any friends. Her academics also got affected badly .

Khyati had a very difficult adolescence. Her parents were worried about her. They finally took her to a psychiatrist and she went through year-long therapy. Her psychiatrist eventually made her aware that every person has at least a few good qualities. He helped Khyati to realize that she needed to correct the inappropriate outlet of her anger and channel it in a more constructive way .

Khyati wanted to get better, she hated herself when she was angry. Eventually, Khyati decided to stop finding faults in every person she met and turned off the edgy side of her. She started to take people at their face value and stopped being overly sensitive. She worked hard on herself to go back to her well-behaved self that her parents wanted her to be .

However, today, Mayank was trying to bring that old Khyati back. It was as if he was awakening her from a deep slumber that she had inflicted on herself many years ago. Khyati was still looking at him without any expressions on her face .

Mayank wanted to handle this situation very carefully. He took out his phone and gave it to Khyati “ . I am going to show you the mouse now ”.

Khyati took the phone in her hands “ . Read this chat between Tanya and me from last night ”, Mayank said .

Khyati started to read the texts and Mayank sat back watching her .

## Chapter 20

Khyati started reading the texts. She wanted to prove Mayank wrong, so she decided to remain calm regardless of what she read .

Mayank :

Can ' t talk. Vikram will hear everything. Text me instead .

Tanya :

OK .

Mayank, why are you doing this? What are you going to do with the video ?

Mayank :

I will send this video to your respected father, so he can see what his daughter is doing in the name of education. Once he sees the video, he will come and take you away from Vikram. Then my job will be done .

Tanya :

But why? What did I ever do to you? Why do you want to destroy my life ?

Mayank :

Because you are trying to trap Vikram .

Tanya :

No. I am not. I really love him. I want to marry him .

Mayank :

You want to marry him only because he is rich. You don ' t love him .

Tanya :

So what ' s wrong in that? A girl has to look for financial security. I come from a lower middle-class family and I never got what I wanted when I was growing up. My only chance to live a rich life is to marry Vikram. He is not only rich but also attractive and I can easily control him. Guys like him don ' t grow on trees. If I lose him, I will never find anyone like him again .

Mayank :

So this marriage will only benefit you. What about Vikram ?

Tanya :

I will love him. I will always take care of his every need. I will make him happy every day .

Mayank :

Any girl can do it. What ' s special about you ?

Tanya :

I am pretty and smart .

Mayank :

He can get a much better girl than you any day. You know that you are nothing compared to him .

Tanya :

Why are you so involved in his life? Just leave us alone .

Mayank :

I will, once I send this video to your dad .

Tanya :

OK, Mayank. Listen to me. If you do it, my life will be ruined .

I have an offer for you .

Mayank :

What offer ?

Tanya :

I know you like Khyati. I also know that she doesn ' t even give you any chance to flirt with her. If you let me keep Vikram, I will give you Khyati .

Mayank :

What do you mean ?

Tanya :

I mean I can easily convince her to go out with you. She is very gullible and she will be very easy to persuade. I will say great things about you to her. She trusts me blindly. If I tell her that you are her Mr Right, she will immediately fall for it .

You say the word , and I will bring her to your feet. Then you can marry her and I can marry Vikram and the four of us will be friends forever. It ' s a win-win situation for the both of us. Vikram and Khyati are not smart like us. We can easily manipulate them .

And if you don ' t want to marry her and just want to have fun, I can also make that happen. All four of us can go on a trip to Goa or something

and you can have all the fun with her. She won't be able to do anything even if you dump her after the trip .

So what do you say ?

Mayank :

It's a great plan. Let me think about it. I'll talk to you tomorrow at college .

By the time Khyati finished reading the texts, her face was red with anger. She was breathing heavily. Her nostrils were flaring. Mayank was closely observing her every reaction. He wanted to see what she'd do after reading these messages. Khyati looked up from the phone with anger on her face. She got up and violently threw the cellphone at Mayank “ . You assholes ...!! You think I am this dumb ...? That bitch used me ”...! She was so angry that she couldn't say a sentence in one breath .

Mayank was calm. He had expected Khyati to react this way. Khyati was still yelling when she saw Tanya and Vikram walking out of the lab. She stopped yelling and walked toward them like an angry lioness. Both Tanya and Vikram figured she was extremely mad. Mayank thought she would slap Tanya and destroy her right then and there. Vikram and Tanya had no idea what she was up to but they were both a little scared seeing her so angry. Khyati went close to them and told Vikram “ , Get back in there ”, and pointed at the lab. Vikram followed her instruction right away because he didn't want to antagonize her further .

Tanya was surprised. She looked at Mayank. Mayank gave her a cunning smile. Tanya figured what he had done. Her plan had gone horribly wrong. She was absolutely sure that a man could be easily controlled by such an enticing offer. She was horrified. Mayank didn't expect that Khyati would talk to Vikram instead of fighting with Tanya. He curiously waited for both of them to come out of the lab .

Tanya was freaking out. For the first time, Khyati looked like a threat to her. That look she saw on Khyati's face was the look of pure power. She seemed so powerful that she could change the course of rivers, move the mountains, win world wars, change Vikram's mind. Tanya was seeing this form of Khyati for the first time .

Mayank and Tanya were anxiously waiting for both of them to come out. Finally, after forty-five minutes, Khyati opened the door and walked out, Vikram followed. Tanya rushed toward Khyati to try to explain to her everything, but Khyati was still angry. She gestured with her hand to stop Tanya and said “- You and I are done here ”, and walked away. Tanya turned to Vikram now, trying to talk to him. He threw his hands in the air and said “ , so are we ”.

Mayank saw this and applauded Khyati. He was giving a winning smile as if he was telling her “ , I was right! You really are a cat ”! Khyati gave him a stern look while walking away from him and raised her middle finger at him without saying a word. Mayank burst into laughter after seeing this. The original Khyati was back. He was loving this .

Vikram also kept walking and signaled Mayank “ , I ’ ll talk to you later ”. Mayank nodded. Both Khyati and Vikram left on their respective vehicles in opposite directions .

Mayank breathed a sigh of relief. Tanya was still standing in shock. Her game was over. She had lost her boyfriend and her only friend. Mayank looked at her and said “ , Relax! There ’ s no video. I am not you. I do have your texts though ”. He laughed at her mockingly and left .

## Chapter 21

The storm had passed, leaving behind a debris of broken relationships. Mayank had expected Khyati to flip out and take control over the entire situation. He knew she would not only end her friendship with Tanya but also kick her out of Vikram ’ s life. The only thing he didn ’ t see coming was Khyati ’ s anger toward him. He thought he ’ d be a hero in Khyati ’ s eyes once he exposed Tanya, but Khyati had completely cut him out of her life .

Another thing Mayank wanted to know was what Khyati had told Vikram in the lab that day. Mayank still couldn ’ t understand Khyati ’ s strategy of confronting Vikram instead of Tanya after reading Tanya ’ s texts .

He had asked Vikram several times about his conversation with Khyati “ . Seriously dude, tell me how she convinced you to break up with Tanya in just forty-five minutes ”.

“ She didn ’ t ask me to break up with her. In fact, she barely talked about Tanya or you ”, Vikram clarified .

“ What did she say then ”? Asked Mayank .

“ Everything she said in there was simply transcendent. I feel that if I repeat what she said in there, it will taint the philosophy of her words of wisdom ”. Vikram was a changed man after that incident .

“ What? I didn ’ t understand a word of what you just said ”. Mayank was confused .

Vikram elaborated “ . All I am saying is that she made me realize how stupid I was for playing such ridiculous games with Tanya. She also made me realize that I must take control of my own life and not rely on you or anyone else to take decisions about my life. I am the youngest in my family and I never felt confident enough to make any independent decisions. I have this habit of seeking approval about my decisions from someone who I think is wiser than me. She made me see that it ’ s stupid. So from now on, I will be brave enough to make these decisions of my life, take full responsibility of those decisions, and be ready to face the consequences, good or bad, of those decisions ”.

Mayank still didn ’ t comprehend “ . She made you realize all this in forty-five minutes ”?

“ Yes, those forty-five minutes in there were a big turning point of my life. It was a life-changing event. Everything she said was just common sense if you think about it, but still, the way she articulated it was so cool that it hit the right chords in my brain ”, Vikram had never sounded so poised before “ . It was like Gautam Buddha being enlightened under the bodhisattva tree ”.

Mayank thought “ , Oh crap! Now, he also has a crush on Khyati ”.

He tried to find out “ . Looks like somebody is developing a crush on somebody ”.

“ No dude. There was no room for any romantic sparks in there. I mean yes, now I see her in a totally new light, but I am not attracted to her.

She is like one of those monks who give you a piece of wisdom and your life is changed forever. You know ”? Vikram didn ’ t sound like he was smitten, but he was finding it difficult to explain to Mayank why those forty-five minutes had changed his life forever “ . Does it make sense ”?

Mayank thought for a moment and said “ . A little bit ”. He wanted to address his problem right now “ . Anyway, can you convince her to start talking to me again? I don ’ t understand why she is mad at me ”.

“ I ’ ve been trying, man. She is very stubborn ”. Vikram said “ , You ’ ll have to convince her yourself ”.

The dynamics of the group had changed. Khyati ended her friendship with both Tanya and Mayank. Now she only hung out with Meera and Vikram. Vikram and Mayank were still best friends but Khyati would get up and leave every time Mayank joined their conversation .

Meera and Khyati became very close during this time. They spent a lot of time talking at the hostel. Meera felt bad for Mayank because Khyati stopped talking to him. She tried to change Khyati ’ s mind .

“ I totally understand why you are mad at him, but don ’ t let go of a friend like him. I can assure you that he will never play any games with you ”.

“ These ‘ never ’ and ‘ always ’ promises are meant to be broken, and it ’ s not anybody ’ s fault. People and circumstances change with every passing moment. You can ’ t expect them to keep a promise for their entire lives ”. Khyati said adamantly .

Meera didn ’ t know what to say next. Finally, one day, Mayank approached Khyati .

He cornered her and asked her directly “ , So why exactly are you mad at me ”?

“ I am not mad at you ”, Khyati said with an expressionless tone .

“ Then why are you not talking to me ”? Mayank probed her a little more .

“ Because I don ’ t need people like you in my life. I hate people that are so manipulative and play such dirty games ”, Khyati made it clear .

“ But you know that I didn ’ t actually record the video, right? Vikram told me what happened between Tanya and him ”, Mayank tried to explain he didn ’ t do anything evil .

“ Doesn ’ t matter. You just always try to control everyone ’ s life. Meera, Vikram, Tanya, Nidhi. You think you can change everyone ’ s destiny ”. Khyati was blunt .

“ No, I don ’ t. I just try to help my friends ”. Mayank was upset because Khyati was taking it all wrong .

“ Whatever. I can ’ t deal with someone like you. I need normal, simple friends like Meera and Vikram, who are as transparent and honest as I am ”. Khyati didn ’ t budge .

Mayank couldn ’ t bear this cold attitude toward him. He softened his voice and pleaded to her “ . I am just asking you to give me one more chance. I will not play games with anyone ever again, and if you find me being manipulative, you can end your friendship with me right at that moment ”. Mayank said again “ , Just give me one more chance ”.

Khyati looked at him with her sharp gaze for a few moments. She could glean the truth in his eyes. He sounded genuine. Khyati thought for a while and finally said “ . Last chance, Mayank. Absolutely last one ”.

Mayank smiled with relief “ . Yes, absolutely last. I understand that ”.

With this reconciliation between Mayank and Khyati, the group reformed again. The group now consisted Mayank, Vikram, Khyati, and Meera. Soon after this incident, Mayank and Vikram hosted a house warming party at their new apartment. Khyati and Meera were regular visitors to the guys ’ apartment after that .

However, the group dynamics changed again soon .

## Chapter 22

The dynamics of the group changed again when Meera met an amazing guy and started dating him .

This time, Mayank supported her completely as he had promised her. He genuinely liked this guy. Ajay was a student in a medical school close to Meera ’ s college. He was a very sincere, down-to-earth, and friendly

person, just like Meera. Khyati also liked him a lot. Finally, Meera had found a guy that deserved to be with her .

Meera started spending a lot of time with Ajay. This left Khyati, Vikram, and Mayank in the group. They didn ' t really notice this change in the group, but everyone else noticed this triangle .

Mayank, Khyati, and Vikram were seen together everywhere. They would spend hours talking in the cafeteria or in the parking lot or in the classroom. Khyati was their new partner in crime. She even joined them when the two boys hit on the junior girls .

Khyati started trusting Mayank again. Mayank knew this was his last chance with her. He had to be careful or he could lose Khyati forever. He decided to block his romantic feelings for Khyati. He didn ' t want to lose her even if that meant that he had to remain her friend for the rest of his life. He just wanted to see her and talk to her every day .

Gradually, the friendship of these three musketeers became very strong. Khyati enjoyed spending time with them. She started to see them as her best friends. Even after spending so much time with them, she didn ' t develop any romantic feelings for either of them .

It is said that a guy and a girl can never be just friends, but these three friends were proving the adage wrong. For a long time, the three of them were connected by a feeling of pure friendship, nothing else .

One day, one of the seniors ignited a fire of doubt between them. Usually, people in this so-called civilized society can ' t tolerate anything that is not within their norms. How could two guys and a girl be just friends? People were not able to accept such a friendship .

This senior just walked up to Mayank and Vikram one day and told them “ , What ' s going with the three of you? Are you guys taking advantage of her or is she taking advantage of you two ”? Mayank and Vikram were stunned by his comment. The guy continued “ , Trust me, she is a very smart girl, she will fool both of you before you know it ”.

Mayank and Vikram tried to discard this thought right away and went back to being normal. However, unconsciously, the seeds of doubt had been already planted in their minds. Understanding a woman is an impossible task for men. They wondered if Khyati was playing games with them .

After the incident with Tanya, both of them were aware of the sharpness of her powerful mind . If she could destroy Tanya in just a matter of minutes, then they are like a piece of cake for her. Khyati was so frank with both of them that it was impossible to tell what she was trying to play or which one of them she liked more .

One day, Mayank broached the topic. Friendship Day was approaching. Everyone in the college was buying friendship bands for their friends. Mayank finally expressed his doubts with Vikram, trying to sound casual “ . I bet she ’ ll give you a better band than mine ”.

Vikram didn ’ t sense the intention behind his comment. After all, he was the innocent one. He said sounding equally casual “ , Who cares? If you ask me, she thinks of you as her close friend, not me ”.

“ Do you want to bet ”? Mayank asked. He wanted to find out which one of them was a closer friend to Khyati .

Vikram was unfazed until now, but Mayank ’ s jealousy infected him soon “ . OK. If your band is better than mine then you owe me one pack of cigarettes ”.

“ Deal ”, Mayank said and shook hands with Vikram .

Khyati, unaware of this game, brought two bands on Friendship Day .

“ Happy Friendship Day you guys ”!! She said happily. She took out a band and tied it on Vikram ’ s wrist first. It was a silk thread that had little plastic dolphins on it .

Mayank and Vikram saw the band. Then, they eagerly awaited the band for Mayank. Khyati moved to Mayank and took out another band from her bag. It was identical: a band with dolphins. Mayank and Vikram looked at both bands and then at each other. They were silent for a moment and then burst into loud laughter .

Their jealousy and doubts were gone in just a second. Both of them realized they were such idiots for trying to measure the closeness of Khyati ’ s friendship .

Khyati was startled by their laughter. She didn ’ t understand what just happened that made these two guys laugh so hard. She just saw them look at the band and laugh .

“ What happened? Why are you laughing so hard ”? Khyati was confused .

“ This is freaking hilarious ”, Mayank said looking at the belt. He couldn ’ t believe he had let one ill-intended comment of a random guy mess with his mind so badly. He realized he loved both Vikram and Khyati equally .

Khyati was still trying to figure out why they were laughing “ , Why? Are the bands too girly ”?

“ Well, that too. But that ’ s not why we are laughing ”, Vikram said holding his stomach .

“ Then why are you laughing? Tell me ”. Khyati felt embarrassed .

“ Nothing, we bet that whoever gets a better band from you has to buy the other one a pack of cigarettes ”, Vikram said, still laughing hysterically .

Khyati froze. Vikram realized what he had done. Mayank was furious with Vikram. How could he just blurt it out? Mayank knew this was probably the end of Khyati ’ s friendship with both of them .

He waited for her to start yelling at both of them, but Khyati didn ’ t yell. She just stood there looking at them. After a moment, tears welled up in her eyes. Her face looked like she was in a lot of pain. She felt like something that she had held on to for a long time just slipped out of her hands. These guys had hurt her immensely. They had proved again that, after all, they were men, just filthy-minded men .

She wiped her tears, turned around and left. Mayank and Vikram didn ’ t have the courage to say anything to stop her. They let her go .

## Chapter 23

Mayank and Vikram missed Khyati a lot. Besides the infatuation he had for her, Mayank just missed being with her. The nonsexual part of the

heterosexual relationships is often overlooked. So many human emotions go unidentified. Mayank felt the group was incomplete without her. The three of them made a really fun group .

Khyati had completely abandoned them. Exams were approaching and she had immersed herself into studies. Mayank and Vikram wanted Khyati to get mad at them, to yell at them, but the fact that she didn ' t even wait to talk to them before ending her friendship was gnawing at the back of their minds .

Mayank knew he had lost his chance and ask for forgiveness from Khyati. He told Vikram “ , I lost my chance, but this was your first mistake, maybe she will forgive you. Go talk to her ”.

“ No way. I can barely deal with her yelling. Her silence is more dangerous than her anger ”. Vikram didn ' t have the courage .

“ So what? Are we just going to let her walk out of our lives like that ”? Mayank didn ' t want to accept that this was it .

“ Give it time. Hopefully, with time, she ' ll be able to forget what happened and forgive us ”. Vikram was hopeful .

Meera also didn ' t try to help the guys this time. They had clearly violated the rules of friendship and hurt Khyati terribly. Meera didn ' t have a single argument in favor of the guys. There was no way she ' d go to Khyati and advocate them .

Khyati had completely shut herself off. The guys ' conduct was wrong on so many levels that it was beyond the scope of just getting angry. She didn ' t want to deal with them anymore. In her mind, they were a lost cause. Manipulating was in their nature, and there was no point in wasting her resources in changing someone ' s nature because it is impossible .

Khyati had thought that after her speech to Vikram and Mayank ' s atonement, they had changed. However, now she realized that people didn ' t change easily. Years and years of impressions and effects on your mind didn ' t just vanish overnight .

They had doubted her intentions and questioned her integrity. They had tainted her friendship. They had proved the old adage true that a patient with jaundice sees everything in yellow. Our opinions for others are actually reflections of our own character .

On top of everything, they did all this for a pack of cigarettes. A pack of cigarettes! Khyati didn't know they smoked. Khyati didn't even drink tea or soda. She strongly believed that only weak-minded people who have no self-restraint get addicted to smoking and drinking .

She believed that only mentally stressed and depressed people need such external stimulants to make themselves feel better. Such people are slaves to their addictions, and she was extremely annoyed by the fact that such people often try to pass it off as a cool habit .

Khyati was amazed to see how these companies were making fools out of people. These soft drinks, cigarettes, alcohol don't do any good to the body. Instead, they are very harmful to your health and taste terrible. There's not even one good reason why anyone would buy and consume these things. Still, these companies advertise these products as a style statement and people fall for it !

It's so easy to influence the human mind. It is the height of stupidity to spend your own money to kill yourself slowly and painfully in the name of looking cool, which you don't! People look pathetic with a cigarette or beer in their hands .

In short, the guys had no chance with Khyati anymore. Khyati was able to forget what happened and focused on her studies. She had learned that it's never worth losing your sleep and peace of mind for someone else, especially for those who hurt you intentionally. Khyati was capable of completely cutting people from her life .

It looked like that was the end of their friendship, until one day, Meera called Mayank for help .

It had been four months since the Friendship Day incident. Khyati was coming back from college on her Scooty and had an accident. She was taken to a hospital by an ambulance and had called Meera from the hospital. Meera went to the hospital right away and saw that Khyati was injured badly. She had bruises all over her arms and legs and the doctor said she had fractured her leg .

Meera suggested calling Khyati's parents. Khyati was in a lot of pain but she told Meera not to call her parents. Khyati's dad was a very busy IAS officer. He could hardly give any time to her mom. Her mom used to

feel very lonely especially after Khyati went to hostel for college, as she was their only child. Khyati had been asking her dad to take her mom on a long trip. Finally, her parents went on a month-long Europe tour a few days before the accident. Khyati didn't want them to cut their trip short because of her. The doctor said that she didn't have any severe injuries, they just put a plaster cast to stabilize the bone. They kept her in the hospital for a couple of days for observation and then sent her home .

Meera agreed with Khyati about not calling her parents. However, Meera felt overwhelmed because she would have to take care of Khyati alone. She had never cared for anyone alone before and she didn't want to mess it up. Finally, she called Mayank and told him what happened. Mayank and Vikram quickly came to the hospital. They talked to Meera and got the full description of Khyati's injuries. They helped Meera with outdoor chores like going to the drug store or getting fruits for Khyati .

Mayank and Vikram intentionally didn't come in front of Khyati. They sat outside Khyati's room the whole time. Meera also didn't tell Khyati that the guys were helping her take care of her. But then, when the nurse was changing the dressing on Khyati's arm, Khyati couldn't take the pain and screamed. Meera, Mayank, and Vikram came running to her room .

Khyati was surprised to see the guys. She looked at Meera angrily. Meera knew she'd get mad but she knew she could explain this to Khyati. No one said anything until the dressing was done. Then Vikram and Mayank talked to Khyati “ , Hi Khyati, how are you feeling now ”?

Khyati looked at them and said reluctantly “ , I am OK ”.

“ We were just helping Meera. She was worried so she called us ”. Mayank gave an explanation without Khyati asking for it. Khyati didn't respond. There was an awkward silence in the room for a moment. Finally, Vikram said “ , Anyway, we'll let you rest. Let us know if you need anything ”. Both of them left the room .

Khyati was in too much pain to care about her dispute with the guys. She was able to understand why Meera had called them .

After that, Vikram and Mayank visited her a few times a day. Even though Khyati barely talked to them, it felt nice to have them around. You want to be surrounded by people who care about you when you are sick .

All four of them were watching TV in Khyati ' s room when Khyati noticed both guys still had the dolphin bands on their wrists. Khyati suppressed her laughter. The bands did look girly. She felt good that even after she stopped talking to them, they had kept the bands on .

She started the conversation “ . Why are you guys still wearing these girly bands ”?

Mayank and Vikram felt relieved that Khyati was finally talking to them again. Vikram smiled and said sincerely “ , Because we like dolphins. They are a very cute and kind animal ”.

Mayank added “ . And we also like the person who gave us the bands. She is also like these dolphins. Cute and kind ”. He was trying to use flattery on Khyati .

But Khyati was still tough “ . You think I will forgive you if you sweet talk to me ”?

Mayank replied “ , Doesn ' t hurt to try ”.

“ It might. So be careful ”, Khyati said, signaling that she hadn ' t forgiven them yet .

Meera tried to change the topic “ . Khyati, I am worried about what we ' ll do after you are discharged. Our room at the hostel is on the second floor and you can ' t climb up the stairs. Even if we get help from other girls, you would need to go up and down a few times during the day since the dining hall and the bathrooms are on the ground floor. It will be very difficult for you. The exams start after two days and you need to rest ”. Meera explained to her the whole list of things that would make it difficult for Khyati to live in the hostel in this condition .

“ You are right. What should we do then ”? Khyati hadn ' t thought about this. It ' s not that it was impossible to live in the hostel in this situation but it ' d be too much hassle for Khyati and Meera .

“ How about you stay with the guys for a few days ”? Meera suggested. Vikram and Mayank tried to act cool .

Khyati didn ' t seem cool “ . Are you kidding me ”?

Meera knew she won ' t agree. She had her arguments ready “ . Hear me out. They have an elevator in their apartment complex and in the

apartment, the bathroom and kitchen are close ”.

“ You expect me to live with guys? Alone? That too with these two jerks ”? Khyati didn ’ t care that both of them were right there. Mayank and Vikram were not in the place to feel offended .

“ I know. But they are nice guys and I will also live with you. We can sleep in the bedroom and they will sleep in the living room ”. Meera had thought this through .

“ Did you already talk to them about it ”? Khyati looked at Meera suspiciously .

“ Yea. They are cool with it ”. Meera said .

“ Of course, they are. Why would they miss a chance to live with girls ”? Khyati was sarcastic .

Nobody said anything for a while . It wasn ’ t clear if Khyati agreed to the plan or not. Finally, Meera asked her “ , So are you okay with the plan ”?

Khyati agreed out of helplessness “ . Fine ”.

Mayank and Vikram were quiet until now. Vikram felt this was a good time to apologize to Khyati “ . We are really sorry, Khyati, for everything ”.

Khyati looked away. Mayank also chimed in “ , I know what we did was terrible, but it won ’ t happen again. We are still learning how to be friends with a girl, and it ’ s a very gradual learning curve. So you have to bear with us until we learn it ”.

“ I have to ”? Khyati raised her eyebrows .

“ I mean we ’ d appreciate it if you would bear with us ”, Mayank corrected himself .

Khyati didn ’ t say anything. It ’ s important to forgive in a relationship. If you think about it, it ’ s very easy to end any relationship. Relationships don ’ t sustain because of love, they sustain because of determination. The determination to keep the relationship alive and to work through it. No relationship is perfect. We need to work hard to make it perfect .

Khyati sighed. It seemed like she was ready to forgive them. She didn ’ t want to say it so she changed the topic “ . I hope your place doesn ’ t

smell like cigarettes ”.

Vikram clarified “ , We are not chain smokers. We used to smoke once in a while and we stopped even that after the Friendship Day incident ”.

“ Yea, right. Because you are so capable of improving yourselves ”. Even though Khyati had given them yet another chance, she wasn ’ t going to stop making them feel terrible about it .

The guys went home and spent hours cleaning the apartment. They changed the bedsheets on both beds, mopped the floors, cleaned the bathroom, and bought groceries. They were happy that Khyati had finally gotten soft toward them, but they were also worried that they might screw everything again. They were very cautious .

After two days at the hospital, Khyati was discharged. Meera had got a bag of her clothes and other stuff from the hostel. The final exams were starting the next day . All four of them had lost three days of studies so they all started studying once they got home .

All four of them were studying in the living room late at night. Khyati was on the couch and the rest of them were scattered on the floor in the room. Khyati was wearing shorts because of her plaster and the bruises on her knees. She was totally lost in her book. Vikram hadn ’ t seen Khyati in shorts before. He was seeing her in her casual avatar for the first time. Vikram was experiencing the same thing that Mayank felt when he had first seen Khyati in her casual, nongeeky form .

Vikram didn ’ t realize that he was staring at Khyati. Khyati didn ’ t notice this but Mayank, who was sitting across from Vikram, saw him .

Mayank smiled mischievously and picked up his cellphone. He texted Vikram “ , Dude, if she catches you staring at her legs, she will kick your ass with her good leg ”.

Vikram read the text and suppressed his laughter. He texted back “ . Damn ! It ’ s so hard to concentrate on the books when you have a hot girl in the room. Has she always been this sexy ”?

Mayank realized Vikram was also getting a crush on her. He didn ’ t feel jealous at all. After the Friendship Day incident, he had changed. He replied to the text “ , Yea, she just likes to play it dull ”.

“ Let ’ s focus on the book. We won ’ t clear the test if we keep talking about her ”. Vikram texted and went back to his book. Both Khyati and Meera had no idea that the guys were texting each other .

The next morning, all four of them went to college in Vikram ’ s car. Vikram had called his dad and asked him to send his car so he could drive Khyati to the college every day .

For the two weeks that Khyati lived with the guys, they were very considerate toward her. All three of them took care of Khyati like family. Ajay used to come on a regular basis to change Khyati ’ s dressing. Meera used to help Khyati take a shower and change. Even though they had final exams, they spent a significant amount of time every day taking care of Khyati. During times like this, one gets a chance to recognize true friends and solidify friendships .

## Chapter 24

Slowly but surely, Khyati was becoming soft toward the guys, but she was cautious this time. She had started to understand that there are some fundamental differences between men and women. It ’ s unrealistic to expect men to be as emotional and sensible as women are .

This was the first time she was having such a close encounter with guys. She was observing their way of thinking and way of living life. It was interesting because the guys had a totally different perspective on everything. For example, one day, the guys decided to cook rajma and Khyati didn ’ t agree with them .

Khyati said “ , It ’ s too much work to finely chop onions and tomatoes. We don ’ t have that much time. Just cook something easy ”. Khyati found it very sexy to watch the guys cook .

Mayank clarified “ , Rajma is the easiest thing to cook ”.

Khyati “ , How? You just boil the rajma in the cooker and add the spices without any veggies ”?

Vikram responded “ , No, we do add onions and tomatoes. We just don ’ t waste time chopping them ”.

Khyati asked “ , Then what do you do ”?

“ We cut them into big pieces, cook them in a little oil, and then blend it into a puree. The job is done ”! Vikram explained. Mayank nodded in agreement .

Khyati was impressed. There were many things like this that made her see that the guys were very efficient and cooked most of their meals. She also learned that they were efficient because they were lazy. Lazy people always find the easiest way to do the most difficult things .

Khyati felt that learning about the guys ’ perspective on different things actually gave her a 360 ° vision on the matter. She actually liked the way they thought. They didn ’ t complicate things like girls usually do .

Guys are very easygoing and don ’ t cling on to grudges forever like girls usually do. Even though sometimes they ’ d oversimplify things, she realized that it ’ s much less stressful to be a guy. Of course, all of these assumptions were based on the two weeks she spent with these two guys .

During the two weeks that Khyati lived with the guys, she learned a lot of great things from them. Khyati didn ’ t have siblings and this was her first experience living with guys. Meera and Mayank were already from the same family so the sense of family came very easily in the group. In fact, Khyati realized that it was much better to live with guys than with girls. Her roommates at the hostel were too girly for her taste, even drama queens at times .

One night, Khyati woke up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. It was dark in the room and she hit her broken leg into the side of the table. She let out a tiny scream. Meera and Mayank didn ’ t hear the scream in their deep sleep, but it woke up Vikram. He came quickly in the bedroom and saw Khyati sitting on the floor holding her broken leg .

Vikram sat down on the floor with her and asked her “ , What happened ”?

Khyati said with a lot of pain in her voice “ , I hit my leg on this table ”.

Vikram cringed as if he could feel her pain “ . Crap! Does it hurt too much ”?

Khyati took a few deep breaths and said “ . It ’ s better now ”.

Vikram wanted to make sure it was nothing serious “ . Are you sure? Should I call Ajay ”?

“ No. I am OK ”. Khyati assured him .

Vikram was relieved “ . How did this happen? Were you sleepwalking ”? He asked teasing her .

Khyati looked at him with a little anger and said “ . No. I need to go to the washroom ”.

“ Oh OK. Let me help you ”. Vikram said without feeling uncomfortable .

Vikram held Khyati from the waist and pulled her up carefully. Khyati leaned on him and he slowly walked her to the bathroom. They had never been so close physically before. Vikram could breathe in the unique fragrance of her hair. His arms were around her waist and he was practically carrying her entire weight .

Even though Khyati ’ s face and hair were a mess and she was wearing baggy pajamas, Vikram found her beautiful. He felt as if electricity was transmitting between both of their bodies but he remained calm . Khyati was half asleep and in a lot of pain, plus she really had to pee so she didn ’ t feel anything .

Vikram took her to the bathroom and left her there “ . Call me when you are done. I ’ ll help you walk back to your bed ”.

Vikram could tell Khyati didn ’ t feel any of these romantic vibes during this process. This was not the first time Vikram had been so close to a girl. He had been intimate with girls before, so the rush was not that he was touching a girl. He just felt different with Khyati. It felt comforting and soothing. It felt right .

However, Vikram didn ’ t overthink this and didn ’ t take these feelings seriously. He just saw them as side effects of having a female friend .

The two weeks went by quickly. Finally, the exams were over. This was one of the most memorable experiences of their lives. All four of them decided to go to their favorite restaurant to celebrate before going home for summer vacations .

## Chapter 25

Khyati ' s parents came back from their trip the day before the last exam. Khyati asked them to come to her hostel and pick her up. When they saw Khyati with a broken leg, they bombarded her with questions. They were angry that she hadn ' t called them when this happened. Khyati explained to them that it wasn ' t a major accident and how Meera, Mayank, and Vikram took care of her for two weeks .

Khyati came back home but she was missing the guys ' apartment. It had been very cozy and comfy at their place. The little dolphins that Mayank and Vikram drew on her plaster on her leg used to remind her how funny the guys really were .

She used to talk to them almost every day on group chat. One evening, Vikram texted her on a separate message .

“ You forgot something in my car ”.

“ What ”? Khyati texted .

Vikram texted back: It ' s a piece of paper. It looks like a prayer in your handwriting .

Khyati: Oh yea! It ' s my exam prayer. I recite it before exams. You can keep it until we meet again .

Vikram: Does it help when you pray ?

Khyati: It does. It gives me the strength to keep faith in myself just like the prayer says. Because I get very nervous before exams .

Vikram: Maybe I should also try this next time .

Khyati: You act like it ' s just another day during exams and you still get an A. You don ' t need any prayers .

Vikram smiled as he read the text. He inquired about her leg .

“ How ' s your leg now ”?

Khyati continued to text “ . It ’ s OK. The plaster is coming off next week. Can ’ t wait ”.

“ You are going to miss being treated like a princess, aren ’ t you? Just sitting all day and people bringing things to you ”, Vikram said teasing her .

Khyati didn ’ t sense the sarcasm in his comment. It ’ s hard to convey the tone while texting. Texting could be the thing that has impaired the entire generation ’ s ability to communicate without words. She texted back “ . No. Not really. I don ’ t like to be dependent on other people ”.

“ Good. Because I also don ’ t like to walk people to the bathroom in the middle of the night ”. Vikram teased her a little more. Guys ’ tendency to tease every girl they know is inexplicable .

“ I didn ’ t ask you to do that. You did it voluntarily ”, Khyati defended herself .

Khyati and Vikram talked until two that night. They instantly connected and the topics to talk about just kept coming. Khyati was surprised to see Vikram making such interesting conversation. She never got a chance to know Vikram without Mayank. That night, both of them discovered that they liked talking to each other .

Then this became a routine. Vikram used to text Khyati every day and they would talk for hours. Gradually, they realized they had become so used to talking to each other that the day seemed incomplete when they didn ’ t talk .

Initially, they talked about movies, music, and people from their college. Khyati called him a playboy one day .

“ You are such a playboy. There ’ s no pretty girl in the college who you haven ’ t hit on ”, Khyati texted Vikram when he was trying to come across as a prude .

“ That ’ s not true. I never hit on you ”, Vikram argued .

“ I said pretty girls and I don ’ t think I am the type of girl you would find pretty ”, Khyati expressed her opinion .

“ How do you know my type ”? Vikram was surprised to see that Khyati was so clear about her views on beauty .

“ I mean you like the girls that are too much into their looks, and come across all flashy and shiny. I ’ m not like that ”. Khyati clarified .

Vikram thought about it. Khyati was partially right. Her assumption was based on her observation of what she had seen so far. He texted back , “ You are right. You are one step above them. You are not just pretty, you ’ re hot ”.

Khyati had never dealt with anyone being so direct. She didn ’ t know how to react “ . Okay. So now you ’ re hitting on me ”.

Vikram knew he was hitting on her but he tried to come across as casual “ , No! I am just saying. Nobody has told you before that you ’ re very hot ”?

Khyati was red with embarrassment by now “ , Okay . Next topic ”.

“ Why? Does this make you uncomfortable? I thought we are in that place in our friendship where we can compliment each other without any agenda on the mind. Mayank always tells me that I am the most good-looking guy in the college, and I don ’ t feel uncomfortable. I believe him ”. Vikram tried to make Khyati feel cool about this .

“ I think he has a crush on you. You two make a great couple ”. Now Khyati started teasing him .

“ See that ’ s what I ’ m talking about. Our society has become so stringent that we don ’ t think independently anymore. We ’ ve set presumptions for every innocent action. If a guy compliments a guy people think he ’ s gay , and if a guy compliments a girl, people think he ’ s hitting on her ”. Vikram really believed that people should be able to express themselves without being scrutinized “ . We can ’ t even compliment each other anymore ”.

“ We can if we don ’ t use the words like “ hot ” in the compliment ”, Khyati added a little sarcasm in her comment .

Their conversations would last for hours. They challenged each other ’ s views all the time, but there was warmth in their conversations. Both of them were now comfortable complimenting and criticizing each other openly .

“ Given a chance, you ’ d sleep with anyone. You don ’ t have any standard ”, Khyati expressed one day .

“ That is extremely offensive and not true at all ”, Vikram was in denial .

“ Come on! You did stuff with Tanya and you didn ’ t even like her ”. Khyati finally revealed to Vikram what she thought about the whole thing between Tanya and him .

“ Well, she wanted to do much more than that but I didn ’ t ”. Vikram made a lame excuse to save his reputation .

“ Yea, right ”! Khyati discarded his argument .

Vikram knew he had nothing else to say in his defense so he changed the topic “ . Let me tell you something funny that happened one time when I was with a girl from our college. Then you make a guess who it was ”.

They started sharing personal and funny stories with each other. Khyati used to laugh a lot during their conversations. Initially, it was Vikram ’ s sense of humor that made Khyati so fond of him. She loved people who could make her laugh so easily. Gradually, she also realized that Vikram was extremely smart and sincere .

Vikram, on the other hand, was simply mesmerized by Khyati ’ s simplicity and sharpness. Both of these qualities are hard to find together. He was very grateful to Khyati to have turned his life upside down during those forty-five minutes .

“ You set me free from the fear of my own insecurities. Now I don ’ t feel the need to get other people ’ s approval of my decisions ”. Vikram never hesitated from expressing gratitude and giving people credit .

“ I hope it ’ s in a good way. The next thing I know I created a rebel and your parents are looking for the person who taught you to be independent ”, Khyati tried to be funny .

“ No, I ’ m serious. I ’ ve started helping out my dad in our family business and I ’ m already making independent decisions. I ’ m loving this new version of me ”. Vikram texted .

When you spend so much time with someone, even if it ’ s not face-to-face, it starts to transform your personality. Everyone else around you notices this change but you .

Khyati and Vikram continued to text on their group chat as well and Mayank noticed the change in the way they talked to each other. He could

tell Khyati had grown much closer to Vikram than she ever was with him. Mayank felt a cocktail of emotions, something he had never experienced before. Jealousy, joy, sadness, anger, greed, love, hatred — all of them altogether .

## Chapter 26

Vikram and Khyati ’ s daily conversations became longer. They were learning new things about each other every day. Finally, Khyati ’ s plaster came off. Vikram texted her that day .

“ So your plaster is gone now ”?

“ Yes, finally! But I still can ’ t run and play ”, Khyati replied .

“ Where do you want to run and play ”(; ? Guys have a unique talent to make anything sound dirty .

“ I mean I still have to go through some physical therapy. Which means I can ’ t play tennis yet ”, Khyati clarified .

“ You play tennis ”? Vikram texted, surprised at learning this new information about Khyati .

“ Yes . My favorite sport ”, texted Khyati .

“ You never told me that. I also play tennis ”, Vikram revealed .

“ Really? Hard to imagine you play tennis ”, Khyati loved to tease him .

“ What ’ s that supposed to mean ”? Vikram loved it when Khyati teased him .

“ Well, it ’ s a very difficult sport and it requires a lot of discipline and hard work ”, Khyati said .

“ For your information, I was an interschool champion ”, Vikram defended himself .

“ Oh, yeah? I was a state-level champion ”, Khyati said proudly .

“ I ’ ve gotten much better since high school. Let ’ s play a match when we go back to college ”. Vikram loved the fact that Khyati and he had so much in common .

“ Deal! I should be able to play by the time college starts ”. Khyati was happy because finally she had found someone who could play tennis with her when she was at college. Otherwise, the only time she could play was when she came home for vacation “ . I ’ d love to see you lose a match against me ”.

“ We ’ ll see ”, Vikram texted .

The summer vacation was finally over. Khyati was a little homesick the first day at the hostel but she was better after she met Meera. Khyati met Vikram and Mayank at the campus. She was extremely happy to see both of them .

Khyati was a little hesitant to talk to Vikram at first. She couldn ’ t figure out if she should talk to him the way she used to talk before the vacation or should she be the friendlier version that texted him. When your only way of communication with someone is texting, it feels weird when you talk to them in person. You wonder if this is the same person you ’ d been talking to .

The first day of college was routine. Khyati, Meera, Mayank, and Vikram spent hours in the cafeteria to catch up. They had gotten mature and wise. A person changes with every moment but this change is very intangible by itself. You can only see this change when it is drastic. They hadn ’ t seen each other in two months and when they met after this long break, they realized how much they had changed .

Vikram hadn ’ t forgotten their chat about tennis with Khyati. He found a club close to their campus that had a tennis court “ . Khyati, what are you doing this Saturday ”? He asked her .

Mayank thought he was going to ask her out. Now that Mayank was noticing their chemistry, he could see more clearly how close they were. It was driving him crazy. All his mind was doing was to compare Khyati ’ s behavior toward Vikram and himself .

Khyati thought for a second and said “ , Nothing. Why ”?

“ I found a tennis court. Let ’ s play a match ”, Vikram proposed .

“ Already ”? Khyati wondered how he was able to find it on the very first day .

“ I came back last week and did some research ”, Vikram clarified .

“ You also play tennis, Khyati ”? Mayank said. He knew how much Vikram liked to play tennis “ . That ’ s a freakish coincidence ”. He said it without showing his jealousy. He tried to find out if Khyati played his favorite game “ . Do you also play chess ”?

“ I know how to play but it doesn ’ t interest me that much ”, Khyati explained “ . Why? Do you play chess ”? She asked .

“ Yea, sometimes ”. Mayank gave a short answer. He scolded himself mentally for sounding so desperate .

“ I like tennis. It ’ s going to be fun ”, Khyati switched to talking about tennis again “ . It ’ s been so long since I played ”.

“ Me too. I didn ’ t know they had a tennis court so close to our college ”, Vikram was disappointed that he had lost all this time that he could ’ ve spent with Khyati playing tennis .

Finally, Khyati was able to play tennis after a long break. Vikram was awestruck to see her play, just like Mayank was when he saw Khyati play Garba for the first time. Khyati thoroughly enjoyed every moment of that match. Just like texting, they lost track of time and played for hours that day .

It was when Khyati looked at her phone that she realized it was seven o ’ clock .

“ I ’ m done. Gotta go back to the hostel. It ’ s dinner time ”, she told Vikram wrapping up her racquet .

“ No. Let ’ s play a little more. We ’ ll go out to eat afterward ”. Vikram was neither satisfied nor tired .

“ We ’ ll play tomorrow. For sure ”, Khyati assured him. She knew that just like texting, this would soon become a regular thing for both of them .

“ Alright ”! Vikram agreed and walked toward his backpack. Suddenly he realized something “ . Hey! We forgot to keep score ”.

Khyati remembered she had challenged him into playing this match “ . You ’ re right! We did ”. She said surprised at herself “ . I guess we had so much fun playing that it didn ’ t matter who won ”.

A relationship develops piece-by-piece, little-by-little. Little things like this build the nature of your relationship. When you don't keep score of who won, who's better and whose fault it was, that's when your relationship truly becomes strong.

It's one thing to let go of grudges to save the relationship but it's a different dimension when there are no grudges at all. This happens when you've become one with the other person intellectually and emotionally. Vikram and Khyati had reached this level very easily and very early in their relationship. For them, all that mattered was to be able to spend time with each other.

## Chapter 27

Khyati and Vikram's relationship had reached a point where they were both in love with each other but didn't know it yet. Love is very sneaky that way. The cupid strikes silently.

Their tennis matches had become a routine. They played every evening. Sometimes after the game, Khyati would go to Vikram's apartment to have dinner with him and Mayank. Mayank had learned to accept the fact that Khyati loved Vikram, not him.

Mayank had the strongest will and determination. He never clung on to any kind of negative emotions like jealousy for too long. He had learned to overcome them. He moved his focus to his ultimate lifelong dream. Until now, he had been distracted by other people and their relationships. Now, everyone was living their own life.

Against all odds, Nidhi was still with Rohit and their relationship was becoming stronger by the day. Tanya was back with her ex-boyfriend after she figured that he was the second-best option available. Arpan had left college and was gone from their lives forever. Meera was happy with Ajay, and now Vikram was with the most amazing girl Mayank had ever met, Khyati.

Mayank figured he wouldn't have been able to express his love to Khyati anyway. If Khyati had to end up with someone else other than

himself, there was no guy better than Vikram. Mayank didn't feel jealous anymore when he saw Vikram and Khyati together .

Khyati and Vikram used to spend a good part of their day with each other. Vikram knew he was crazy about everything Khyati said or did, but it hadn't occurred to him yet that this was actually love. Khyati, on the other hand, just kept telling herself that she likes to spend time with Vikram because he played tennis, was funny and complimented her a lot. She also hadn't felt the breeze of love yet .

Then, on Mayank's birthday, Khyati, Vikram, Mayank, and Meera went for dinner. After dinner, they went to their favorite ice cream parlor .

“ They have a new flavor on the menu. I am going to order lychee ice cream - ”, Khyati said, instead of ordering her usual pineapple ice cream .

Vikram and Khyati always ordered pineapple ice cream. But today Khyati ordered lychee. She tasted her ice cream and said “ It's not bad, but it's nothing compared to the pineapple ice cream ”. She made a sad face and added “ , I should have stuck to my usual ice cream ”.

Vikram offered her his ice cream “ , If you don't want to eat that, leave it. Here, have my pineapple ice cream ”.

Vikram extended his hand toward her. Khyati moved closer to him and took a spoonful of ice cream from the bowl. Vikram and Khyati shared the bowl of ice cream and in these few moments, it hit them that they were in love. There is just something about sharing food. It seems like a normal activity but it's more intimate than it sounds. There's no definite moment when you fall in love, but there's always an eye-opening moment when you realize you're in love and your life turns upside down. During this ice-cream-eating process, their eyes met and right then they knew something had changed .

Khyati couldn't move her gaze from Vikram's face for a good five seconds. She was mesmerized to be in such close proximity to him. She could finally see that Vikram was extremely handsome. She felt tremendous attraction toward him. She could barely hide her affection. Even Mayank and Meera noticed something had happened. However, within thirty seconds of this episode, Khyati told herself “- Stay cool, baby! Stay cool ”! She regained her composure as she finished the ice cream .

However, this very moment was the beginning of the everlasting love story of Khyati and Vikram .

## Chapter 28

Khyati couldn ' t sleep that night. She felt sensations she had never felt before. There was a tingling in her stomach and goosebumps on her skin. She was smiling and blushing for no reason and seemed disconnected from the rest of the world .

She was going through internal turmoil. There was a big chaos in her mind that she was trying to hide from everyone. She stayed up all night trying to figure out what was happening. Whenever she found it difficult to sort out her thoughts , she would write in her journal. It helped her organize her thoughts. That night she wrote in her journal for hours .

At the end, she confessed to herself that she was falling for Vikram. She was disappointed with herself because she always thought of Vikram as a playboy who couldn ' t commit to one girl. She wanted to shut her feelings out but she couldn ' t. The least she could do was to not act like a stupid-in-love girl in front of Vikram .

After that, Khyati managed to keep a poker face in front of Vikram, but every now and then, she was unable to hide her affection .

One day, Khyati and Vikram were ready to go for their tennis match after college, when Vikram realized that he left his racquet at his apartment .

He told Khyati “ , I left my racquet at the apartment. Give me ten minutes, I ' ll go get it ”.

“ Why don ' t you just call its name? It will come running ”, Khyati blurted out and immediately regretted saying such a stupid thing .

“ What ”? Vikram didn ' t understand, but Mayank did .

“ Nothing - ”. Khyati tried to cover up .

“ If it was a joke, I didn ' t get it ”, Vikram said, still confused .

“ Never mind. Go get your racquet ”, Khyati wanted to end the discussion .

Vikram left. Mayank and Khyati were alone. Mayank hadn't missed any of these little signs of love that Khyati was demonstrating. He looked at Khyati shaking his head in disappointment .

“ What 's happened to you? When did you become such an idiot ”? Mayank said to Khyati .

“ I know. I can hear myself talk but I just can 't help it ”. Khyati felt helpless. Even the smartest people do stupid things when they 're in love .

“ You are the strongest, the sharpest and the wisest girl I know and it 's heartbreaking to see you so vulnerable ”. Mayank was not upset because Khyati was in love with Vikram. He was upset because Khyati was losing herself in this love .

Khyati shared with Mayank all of her feelings and thoughts about Vikram. Mayank listened to her like a good friend. Sharing a genuine friendship with a person of the opposite sex is a true treasure in life. It enriches your emotional as well as intelligence quotient .

“ It 's so hard to keep my eyes off him. Has he always been this handsome ”? She asked Mayank with curiosity .

“ Yes. I told you on day one ”, Mayank reminded her .

“ Yea, right. I think I can finally see what everyone was talking about. And now I can 't unsee it ”. Khyati stopped as she saw Vikram come back on his bike with his racquet .

“ You ready ”? Vikram said as he stopped next to Khyati and Mayank .

“ Yea, let 's go ”. Khyati got up to start her Scooty .

“ See you at home ”! Vikram told Mayank and zoomed off .

Khyati saw Vikram leave and then looked at Mayank and said “ , I 'm so done ”!

As days passed by, it was becoming more and more difficult for Khyati to keep her feelings to herself .

One day, she told Mayank “ , I am definitely in love with him. I thought this is just infatuation and it will fade away eventually but it 's not. I don 't want to fall in love with him ”.

“ Why not ”? Asked Mayank .

“ My heart and brain are constantly fighting with each other because of him. My heart is falling in love with him every day but my brain says don ’ t do it ”, Khyati said with frustration .

“ Why ”? Mayank wondered why she didn ’ t want to fall in love with Vikram .

Khyati explained her concern “ , First of all, I don ’ t even know if he is feeling the same for me. Even if he is, this is not the first time he is falling in love. I am not the first girl. I am certain about my feelings that I will never feel this way about anyone else ever again but I can ’ t say the same for him. He keeps falling in love over and over again. What if after a year or two, he falls in love again ”?

Mayank smiled like a detective who just solved a mystery “ . That is the fundamental difference between a man and woman. A woman doesn ’ t act on her feelings until she is a hundred percent certain that it ’ s love. But men think every infatuation is love until they finally fall in love. They keep doing trial and error until they find ‘ the one ’ .’

Khyati didn ’ t respond. She carefully mulled over Mayank ’ s words. Mayank waited for a while before continuing his explanation “ . A girl never forgets her first love, and a guy never forgets his last, because that ’ s their one true love ”.

Mayank ’ s philosophy once again made perfect sense in Khyati ’ s mind “ . How do you know I ’ m the last one ”? Khyati still had one doubt .

Mayank always rooted for his friend “ . I know him better than you and I can bet that you ’ re it for him. His search is over ”.

## Chapter 29

Vikram had also realized that night that he was in love with Khyati. He felt great after this realization. He loved to love Khyati. He could see Khyati ’ s lame attempts to hide her affection but her eyes said it all. Vikram didn ’ t want to rush Khyati to admit her feelings. He actually enjoyed this phase of their relationship. Every couple that goes from being friends to lovers, goes through a transition phase where they are on the

verge of converting their friendship into a relationship. It ' s called prerelationship awkwardness .

Vikram was enjoying every bit of this awkwardness but Khyati was struggling with her conscience. Khyati could never understand why girls would do and say stupid things when they were in this so-called love. She used to scold her friends when she saw them make fools of themselves for a guy, and now, she was indulging in the same silliness .

Nothing much had changed in Vikram ' s behavior toward Khyati after that ice-cream sharing incident. He still spent a lot of time with her and complimented her a lot and played tennis with her. Khyati, on the other hand, was having a hard time adjusting to this new state of mind .

Khyati didn ' t bash him anymore for being late or for forgetting his racquet. She didn ' t make fun of him for playing a bad shot or for falling while playing tennis. Now, she talked less and thought more. Every now and then, she paused to look at Vikram .

Initially, she used to look elsewhere if Vikram caught her looking at him. But now, every time their eyes met, they smiled at each other. These smiles said more than a thousand words about their love for one another. There is a point in a relationship when you don ' t have to admit your love with words. You just look into this person ' s eyes and you know that they love you .

However, Khyati was not ready to confess her feelings to Vikram, and because Vikram was enjoying this buffer state of their relationship, he didn ' t say anything about his feelings either, until finally one day, Khyati couldn ' t keep it in anymore .

That day, after their game, Khyati got her water bottle and noticed it was half empty. Whenever Vikram forgot his water bottle, he used to drink from Khyati ' s bottle. Khyati loved it when he did that but because she wanted to act like a regular friend, she told him “ , You drink up all my water. Bring your own water bottle tomorrow ”.

“ I am not coming tomorrow ”, Vikram announced .

“ Why ”? Khyati got anxious .

“ I need to go to our branch office to work on some reports ”, Vikram explained .

“ How come ”? Khyati tried to act cool again .

“ The branch manager had a family emergency so he couldn ’ t come to work. I need to finish the reports for the board meeting this week ”. Vikram loved to give in to Khyati ’ s interrogation .

“ How do you know how to do the reports ”? Khyati didn ’ t know Vikram could handle these business affairs .

“ I go to the office with my dad when I ’ m back home ”, Vikram clarified “ , I know a little bit. I will have other staff to help me, and I can call my dad or brother if I have questions ”.

“ Cool ”! It seemed like Khyati ’ s interrogation was over, but then she thought of another question “ . Where ’ s your branch office ”?

“ It ’ s like forty kilometers from here. Not too far ”, Vikram answered all her questions as if he had accepted her authority over him .

Khyati went to college the next day, and not seeing Vikram in the class was extremely disappointing. She kept telling herself “ , This is ridiculous. He ’ ll be back tomorrow. Just chill ”! But she could barely sit through the classes. The moment the professor left the classroom after the last class, she took her bag and hurriedly walked out of the classroom. She found the address of his branch office on Google Maps, started her Scooty, and zoomed off .

It was raining cats and dogs that day. She donned her raincoat but it didn ’ t help much. She drove forty kilometers in rain, and on roads with potholes. There was no way she ’ d have done this for anyone else .

She had to see Vikram. She didn ’ t think for a moment what she would tell Vikram when she saw him. Love starts with obsession and addiction. It ’ s natural in the beginning phase when love is still new .

When she reached the parking lot of his office, she realized that she had nothing to say to Vikram. The rain had stopped, but it was almost dark outside. She took her phone out to call Vikram but she couldn ’ t figure out how she ’ d justify this crazy chase to him. After struggling with her thoughts for about ten minutes, she called Vikram .

Vikram saw Khyati ’ s name on the display. He answered right away “ . Hey, Khyati, what ’ s up ”?

“ Are you busy ”? Khyati was regretting this whole adventure she had put herself into .

“ Kind of. What happened ”? Asked Vikram, unaware that she was calling from the parking lot of his office .

“ Ummm ... Nothing ”. Khyati stammered “ . I am outside your office, in the parking lot ”.

“ What? Really ”? Vikram didn ’ t believe her .

“ Yea ”, Khyati said embarrassed .

“ Are you lying just to make me walk all the way to the parking lot ”? Vikram still didn ’ t believe her .

“ No ”, That ’ s all Khyati could say, but Vikram could tell she wasn ’ t lying .

“ OK. Wait there. I ’ ll be right there ”, Vikram said and hung up .

Khyati thought Vikram would ask her why she came and what she was doing here. She thought Vikram would call her crazy or he might get upset that she was disturbing him from doing his work. But Vikram didn ’ t say any of these things. He wasn ’ t mad at all. In fact, he was pleasantly surprised .

He walked out of the office and saw Khyati standing in the parking lot in a raincoat. Khyati looked confused and embarrassed. Vikram could discern her state of mind. He walked toward her with a smile on his face as if he was saying “ , It took you this long to express your love ”.

When he got close enough to talk to her, he said “ , You ’ re shivering ”.

“ I ’ m OK ”, Khyati said. She wanted to be brave enough to admit and say to him “ , I came all the way over here because I missed you a lot ”, but she couldn ’ t. She stood there quietly , not able to look him in the eye. Vikram read her mind. He had also missed her all day but he got too busy to act on his feelings .

Vikram went closer to her, held her cold hands in his, looked into her eyes and said softly “ . I missed you too ... a lot ”!

Khyati ’ s face lit up. She was so happy that she wanted to hug him but she refrained herself again. She shyly snatched her hands away and tried to change the topic “ . What time are you planning to leave ”?

“ In an hour, at the most ”, Vikram said .

“ OK. Go finish your work. I ’ ll wait here ”, Khyati suggested .

“ Are you crazy? Come in with me ”, Vikram offered .

“ No way. Your office people will think I am nuts ”, Khyati had done enough crazy stuff for one day .

“ No, they won ’ t. Let ’ s go ”, Vikram insisted “ . It ’ s cold out here ”.

Khyati reluctantly agreed and went with Vikram to his office. Most desks were empty. Only five or six people were still working. They looked at Khyati and smiled at her .

Both of them went to Vikram ’ s office. Khyati took off her raincoat and sat on the sofa in his office. Vikram got hot chocolate from the coffee machine for Khyati .

“ I ’ m almost done. Just some final revisions on the reports. Make yourself comfortable. I ’ ll be done soon ”, Vikram didn ’ t want to make Khyati wait but he had no choice .

Khyati didn ’ t mind waiting “ . Don ’ t worry. Take your time ”.

Vikram got busy with his computer. He called his coworkers in his office every now and then to discuss the data on the reports. He called his dad a couple of times to clarify his doubts. Khyati was observing this totally different version of Vikram .

He looked like a real businessman and an executive in his formal clothes. He looked mature, smart, and responsible. Khyati was falling in love with this new version of Vikram as well. She didn ’ t know about his business acumen. So far, she had only seen him doing childish things at college. Now she was realizing that after all, he was a born businessman. You don ’ t have to paint a peacock ’ s eggs .

Finally, Vikram finished all the reports and sent them to his dad. His dad reviewed and approved them. Vikram ’ s job was done. He got up from his chair and stretched “ . It ’ s way past dinner time at your hostel. Let ’ s go out for dinner ”.

“ OK ”. Khyati was still fumbling for words .

Both of them walked out of Vikram ’ s office “ . It ’ s too late for you to drive back. Let Tapan drive your Scooty to your hostel. We ’ ll go in my

car ”, Vikram suggested .

“ OK ”, Khyati couldn ’ t say more than one word at a time .

Vikram talked to this accountant in his office about driving Khyati ’ s Scooty. He agreed and took the keys .

Vikram and Khyati drove back in Vikram ’ s car. Khyati didn ’ t say anything throughout the ride. Vikram talked about his day and asked random things to Khyati. Khyati continued giving short answers .

Both of them went to their usual restaurant and had dinner. After coming back to her normal surroundings, eating her favorite meal, and after her hair and clothes had dried off completely, Khyati felt relaxed and comfortable. She started making regular conversation with Vikram. Now Vikram was speechless and Khyati was talking. Vikram was lost looking at her beautiful face and her beautiful fingers that she gestured with when she talked .

After dinner, Vikram suggested “ , Do you want to go for ice cream ”?

Khyati thought for a moment and said “ , OK. Let ’ s go ”.

The ice cream parlor was about to close when they reached there. They ordered their usual pineapple ice cream and sat on the stairs of the shopping complex because the shopkeeper closed the shop after he sold the last ice creams to them .

After the rain, the night sky was clean and stars shone even brighter. There was a light breeze blowing and the temperature seemed perfect for a romantic setting. Khyati was back to her normal self. She was crazy about this ice cream. She took a spoonful of ice cream and said “ , Oh my God! It ’ s so good! I never get tired of eating this ice cream ”. She pointed at the ice cream bowl and said to Vikram “ This is the best thing I ’ ve ever tasted in my life ”.

Vikram had no interest in the ice cream whatsoever. He was just staring at Khyati eat her ice cream. He replied almost involuntarily “ . Give me a chance. I can make you feel better than that ”. Only after he said it, he realized that he said it out loud .

Khyati was a little stunned at first, but then she smiled softly. She looked at Vikram and caught him looking at her lips. Vikram slid a little

closer to her, leaned forward, and kissed her. Khyati just sat there, like an ice sculpture. She was too shocked to react .

It was Khyati ' s first kiss but Vikram was good at kissing, so it wasn ' t awkward. Vikram had learned the appropriate length of a first kiss with experience .

First kiss! History is divided into two parts, before Christ, and after Christ. Just like history, at this moment, Khyati ' s life also got divided into two major sections, before the first kiss, and after the first kiss .

## Chapter 30

Khyati stopped fighting her feelings after that night. She accepted and embraced the fact that she was in love and it was not a stupid thing. In fact, to love someone without any reason, without any logic, and without any expectations is the single greatest thing that a human being can do .

The next day, when Khyati went to college, she saw Mayank and Vikram talking in the parking lot. She went to them trying to look normal, but Mayank caught her off-guard .

“ Congratulations, Ma ' am ”! Mayank said shaking her hand .

Khyati looked at him in shock and then asked Vikram angrily “ , You told him already ”?

Before Vikram could respond, Mayank defended his friend “ . So? You told me you loved him months before you told him ”.

“ What? You knew about her feelings? Why didn ' t you tell me ”? Vikram was surprised. All the communication gaps between the three of them were getting filled today “ . And by the way, she hasn ' t told me that she loves me yet ”, Vikram added .

“ Neither have you ”, Khyati said in her defense .

There was a silence in the group for a moment and then Vikram smiled. He stepped forward to go closer to Khyati. He wasn ' t good at expressing his feelings poetically but he decided to give it a try. Besides, in the history of humankind, billions of people have confessed their love trillions of times. How do you say “ I love you ” without making it sound like a cliché ?

Vikram held Khyati ' s hands, looked deep into her eyes and said “ , Khyati, you never cease to amaze me with your charismatic personality, your kind heart, your mesmerizing beauty , and your sharp wit. Your presence makes me want to better myself. You don ' t even know but you have unearthed qualities in me that I didn ' t know I was capable of having. You bring out the best in me. I know you were the most awesome and perfect person even before you met me, but I want to be a part of your life so I can love you as long as you let me ”. Vikram paused to pull her hands to his chest and said “ , P.S. I love you ”.

Khyati ' s eyes were wet by now. She knew Vikram loved her but it was overwhelming for her to hear him say those three magical words for the first time. She hugged Vikram and said “ , I love you too ”.

Mayank felt happy to witness their confession of love for the first time. He put his hands on both of their heads and said “ , I ' m very happy for both of you ”.

Khyati loved the fact that Vikram was equally crazy about her. Both of them spent a lot of time talking. They exhibited considerable public display of affection at college and at Vikram ' s apartment. Mayank knew this day would come eventually anyway. He had prepared himself for it. He didn ' t mind Khyati spending a lot of time at their apartment. In fact, he was very happy to see Khyati so happy. Khyati and Vikram shared everything about their relationship with Mayank. Having a mutual and unbiased friend in a relationship is a very important asset .

Khyati and Vikram spent the first few months of their relationship deliriously happy in love. They still played tennis every day. One day after the game, Vikram invited Khyati back to his apartment “ , Do you want to come over for dinner? Mayank is going to make Bhaji Pav ”.

Khyati loved Mayank ' s Bhaji Pav “ . Sure ”! Khyati accepted the invitation. Both of them went to the apartment . It was locked. Mayank wasn ' t home yet. Vikram opened the door. There was an envelope on the floor that someone slipped under the door. He picked it up. It was a lease renewal notice from the landlord. Vikram picked it up, put his bag aside and sat on the sofa to read it .

Khyati took off her shoes and crashed on the sofa next to Vikram “ . I ’ m so tired today, and my head hurts so bad ”, Khyati said holding her head .

“ Come here ”, Vikram signaled her to lie down and put her head on his lap. Khyati followed his instructions and closed her eyes. Vikram massaged her forehead with one hand and kept reading the notice with the other .

Khyati felt much better. She was so relaxed that she almost fell asleep. Ever since they started dating, both of them had been chatting with each other all night on their phone, and both of them had inadequate sleep .

After a while, Vikram got so focused on the notice that he didn ’ t realize that he stopped massaging Khyati ’ s head and put his hand on her cheek. Khyati was half asleep when she felt the edge of Vikram ’ s palm on her lips. She opened her eyes a little, took his palm in her hands, and softly kissed it .

Vikram stopped reading the notice and looked at Khyati. Khyati looked at Vikram with her eyes half-open. She grabbed his neck with her hand and pulled him down to kiss him .

Kissing, hugging, cuddling, and holding hands had become a routine for Vikram and Khyati, and they never went beyond that. Khyati never felt the need to go any further than that. Vikram, like a good boyfriend, didn ’ t rush Khyati to do something against her wish, but today, they knew it was not going to stop at a kiss. The intensity of their kiss grew more and more. Soon, Vikram took over and pinned Khyati down on the sofa after throwing away her backpack .

Right then, Mayank came back from his jog. He was about to open the door with his key when he heard noises inside. He could hear the loud breathing of Khyati and Vikram. He could hear the backpack thrown down the sofa. He could hear the clothes taken off and flung away to the wall. Just like how Ferrari goes from zero to a hundred miles per hour in less than three seconds, Mayank ’ s head went from a completely calm state to a highly explosive state in just about the same time .

He had never been so angry before and he didn ’ t even know why he was so angry. He knew Khyati was going to end up with Vikram and this was going to happen sooner or later. Why was he getting angry? All the

blood in his body rushed to his head and eyes. He felt as if the big vein in his head was going to burst, and his head was going to explode like a watermelon. He stood there for about five seconds and then darted from there .

He kept running until he reached his cousin ' s gym. Prashant, his gangster cousin had a gym in his house that he and his gang members used. Mayank had to release this tremendous energy from his body somehow or he could murder someone that day. Even in this terrible state of mind, he knew the right thing to do. He went to the gym and worked out for three hours until he had no energy left in his body and he wasn ' t angry anymore. Prashant saw him and could tell Mayank was upset, so he didn ' t bother him .

After his crazy workout session, Prashant gave Mayank a glass of warm milk and asked him to go to bed. Mayank took a long hot shower, gulped down the milk, and fell asleep the moment he hit the bed .

There are so many things in life that don ' t go according to your plan and that makes you angry, but the best remedy to deal with anger is to sleep through it. Just sleep the heck out of your worst anger, and when you wake up the next morning, you will feel liberated. That ' s exactly how Mayank felt the next morning. He wasn ' t angry anymore. Instead of drowning into the flood of his emotions, Mayank took control of them and disposed them .

He knew this surge of anger was because of the long-overdue emotions that wanted to surface but he didn ' t let them. He didn ' t allow himself to be jealous or angry about the fact that the girl he almost worshiped was in love with his best friend. He “ knew ” it would be wrong if he got angry but knowledge and understanding are two different things. Even though you have “ knowledge ” of what ' s good and what ' s bad, it doesn ' t always happen that you also have an “ understanding ” of it. But now that he was past his anger and jealousy, he had reached a poised state of understanding that allowed him to accept the fact that Khyati and Vikram just had sex .

He went home feeling good and peaceful. Vikram was ironing his clothes when he opened the door .

“ Hey, where were you all night ”? Asked Vikram .

Mayank wasn't able to look at him " . I came back but I heard you were getting lucky, so I left " .

Vikram responded with sadness in his voice " , Yea, I didn't get lucky last night. It hardly lasted for ten minutes " .

Mayank turned around in shock and looked at Vikram " . What " ?

" Yup " ! Vikram tried to hide his disappointment .

Mayank wondered what went wrong " . What happened, bro? Performance Anxiety " ? He asked making fun of Vikram, faking a sympathetic expression .

Vikram looked at him with a little anger and replied immediately " . No, dude! My performance was perfectly fine " . Then he lowered his voice and said reluctantly " , It was her " .

Mayank got hooked " , What about her " ?

Vikram kept ironing his shirt, trying to figure out how to say it delicately. He paused before speaking " . We had great foreplay and right when I was about to do the main thing, she pushed me away, got dressed and left " .

" WHAT " ??????? Mayank ' s " whats " were getting higher and higher in pitch .

" Yea, man " , Vikram said like a defeated warrior .

Mayank got more curious " , She didn't say anything " ?

" She just said ' , we are not doing this until I get a formal commitment from you " , Vikram delivered the punch line .

Mayank got a little serious now. He thought for a moment and continued his interview " . What did you say " ?

" Nothing. All of this happened in less than a minute and I was totally lost. It took me half an hour after she left to comprehend what just happened " , Vikram was pouring his heart out by sharing this sad and disappointing incident to Mayank, and Mayank burst into loud laughter " . Oh man, this is hilarious " !

Vikram had expected this reaction from Mayank. He went back to ironing his shirt to let Mayank laugh it out .

After laughing for about two minutes, Mayank was able to speak again " . I should have stayed and watched this epic fail " . He said holding his

stomach .

“ This is not funny, dude ”. Vikram tried to bring him back on track “ . What am I supposed to do ”?

Mayank wiped his tears and said sincerely “ , Nothing. Do you love her ”?

“ Of course ”, replied Vikram .

“ Do you want to marry her someday ”? Came the follow - up question .

“ Yea, dude ”, Vikram said with conviction .

“ Then commit ”, Mayank gave a simple solution .

“ It ’ s not that easy ”, Vikram had his own valid issues “ , I am barely twenty. I have not even reached the legal age to get married yet, and she doesn ’ t just want a commitment, she wants a “ formal commitment ,” meaning approval from both of our families. My family is very practical in these matters. Nobody even thinks about getting married before twenty-five. I am sure they will love and accept Khyati but this is not the right time. I am the youngest in the family. If I go tell them that I want to make a formal commitment to this girl, they will kick my ass ”, Vikram ended his rant .

“ Oh! I see ”. Mayank pondered over his situation “ . Well, in that case, just wait until you are twenty-five ”, Mayank said bursting into laughter again .

“ You are a jackass ”, Vikram withdrew from the discussion and went back to ironing .

Both of them went to college after this discussion. Khyati came in a bit and walked over to them in the cafeteria .

Vikram wanted to act normal as if nothing happened. Mayank saw Khyati and he couldn ’ t control his laughter again. He put both his hands on his mouth in a lame attempt to not laugh. Khyati figured Mayank knew. She wasn ’ t surprised. She went up to them and said to Mayank “ , So you know ”!

“ I ’ m so sorry. It ’ s the funniest thing I ’ ve ever heard in my life ”, Mayank said giggling .

Vikram was sitting there looking sincere. Khyati sat down across from him and said “ . I am sorry about yesterday. It was totally my fault. I promise it won ’ t happen again ”. Khyati took the blame on herself because after all, she was the one who had initiated the physical interaction. She made a silent vow to be more cautious in the future .

Mayank and Vikram both were stunned with this revelation “ . I ’ ll see you guys after class ”, Khyati said and left .

After she left, Vikram looked at Mayank puzzled “ , What won ’ t happen again? Sex? Or running away in the middle of it ”?

Mayank had another laughing fit. He managed to stop laughing and said to Vikram “ . Bro, don ’ t even think about asking her that. Otherwise, she will kick your ass ”.

## Chapter 31

Ever since Khyati ran away from Vikram, she limited her interactions with him. She still loved him a lot, and they still talked for hours on the phone and on campus, but she avoided any physical interaction and any situations that could lead to sex .

Vikram was not happy with this change of condition. He expressed his dissatisfaction to Mayank “ , Now she doesn ’ t even hold my hand when we go for walks ”.

Mayank had been very impressed with Khyati ’ s decision. He could see why she was keeping a distance from Vikram. He expressed his views on this situation to Vikram “ . I am actually proud of her. I thought she had lost her sharpness after she fell in love with you. I thought she had become one of those stupid-in-love people who make stupid mistakes in the name of love, but she is still that headstrong person who likes to be in control of her brain and not the heart ”.

Vikram was not concerned about that “ . I feel like she ’ s a different person now. Apart from not being able to be intimate with her, I feel like she is not that close to me anymore ”, Vikram missed her loving soft caress .

“ This situation is not just about Khyati and you. It ’ s a major social issue ”. Mayank tried to show him the bigger picture “ . Today sex has become very casual. The girls who do it without commitment should ask themselves this question. Why ”?

Vikram looked at Mayank squinting “ , What are you talking about ”?

Mayank turned philosophical “ . Most things you do in life, you don ’ t even know clearly why you are doing it. What ’ s your intention behind it? We just do it under somebody ’ s influence or in the flow. Only when we dig deeper into ourselves by asking the question ‘ why ’? over and over again, we can know why we are doing what we are doing ”.

Mayank had a clear picture in his mind of the social dynamics of the society he was living in “ . The girls who have sex without commitment, do it for various reasons ”. Mayank held up his hand and counted the reasons on his fingers “ . One, they think it ’ s OK to have sex with the person you love. Two, they cannot control their physical drive. Three, they don ’ t really want to have sex but they give in to their boyfriends ’ demands because they are scared they will be dumped if they didn ’ t have sex. Four, and this is the worst reason, they have become pseudo feminists after all the peer pressure and brainwashing, and they think being able to have sex without commitment is their right and society or family shouldn ’ t interfere in their life ”.

Mayank was on a roll. Vikram felt he had digressed from the problem of Khyati getting aloof, but he found Mayank ’ s analysis quite interesting. He let Mayank continue his TED talk “ . And you know who benefits from this flawed logic? Men. That ’ s what they want. Being able to have sex without any liability. They are the ones who tell women, you are an independent twenty-first-century woman, forget about all the social bondage and do what you want. It ’ s your choice to have sex, society can ’ t decide that. Gullible women fall for this trick. But the truth is, just like how it is a woman ’ s choice to have sex whenever she wants, it is also her choice to NOT have sex when she doesn ’ t want. But men confuse them and then women don ’ t even know what they really want ”.

Mayank skillfully articulated his opinions and thoughts in the most convincing way. He spoke about how the media plays a role in shaping our belief system “ . Media and movies paint a distorted picture of feminism.

Women hear from all sides that they have a choice to have premarital sex and even extramarital sex, but who is it actually benefiting? Men ”.

“ If men are able to have sex without commitment, believe me, soon, the Indian society will become like European and American societies; men will not want to get married at all. They won ’ t take responsibility of children born out of wedlock ”. Mayank was farsighted and his prediction about the future of Indian women could come true .

“ The condition of American women is much worse than that of Indian women. They become sexually active in high school and get into many casual relationships before they turn thirty, and at thirty, when they want to get married and have kids, they can ’ t find any man to commit to them. Sadly, Indian women are also following the same path ”. Vikram had never thought about this .

“ The institute of marriage was built to help women. Men don ’ t need it. Heck, they don ’ t even like it! But now, in the name of feminism, women are encouraged to not wait for commitment to have sex. For men, that ’ s the dream. This way, they can say openly when a woman expects a commitment — we both knew this was casual ”. Mayank was a man so he knew how the male brain worked .

Mayank tried to use a story to better explain his next point “ . There ’ s this famous story in Panchtantra about an old man, a young man , and a donkey. They keep changing their positions based on what people said about them, and in the end, no matter what they did, people always found reasons to criticize their choice and their action ”.

He explained the moral of the story “ . The biggest disease of the Indian society is the fear of people. A lot of things we do and don ’ t do are because of this fear — what will people say? But we need to understand that the people are always going to criticize you no matter what you do. If you have casual sex, people call you a slut, if you refrain from having premarital sex, people call you outdated. There ’ s no solution to this, except you must stop listening to people and follow what your conscience says; do what you think is right, and do it with conviction ”.

He now applied this theory to Vikram ’ s current situation “ . Khyati is someone who always follows her conscience and doesn ’ t give a damn about people. She is not scared to kiss you in public but at the same time,

she doesn't want to have sex without commitment. She has her own convictions that she follows and doesn't worry about what people will say about her actions".

Vikram understood Mayank's perspective, but he wasn't like other men ". All of that is OK but this is not a casual relationship for me. I am going to marry her eventually. Then why does she need approval from our families"?

" You want to marry her today, but you are an Indian son, and you have Indian parents. If tomorrow your parents tell you to choose between them and Khyati, you are not going to leave your parents, and neither should you. But what about Khyati? Indian men don't ask for their parents' permission to have sex but they will not marry a girl without the approval of their parents". Mayank was unbiased and neutral .

" Yea, that's true ", Vikram agreed with him .

Mayank now switched to the entire concept of feminism ". Today's women need to do two things. One, learn emotional endurance, and two, understand the difference between feminism, antifeminism, and pseudo feminism. I think, pseudo feminism is hurting women almost as much as antifeminism".

" What's pseudo feminism"? Asked Vikram .

Mayank was happy to see Vikram's curiosity on the subject ". Let me give you another example. Today, women want to work alongside men. In a perfect world, there's nothing wrong with it. In fact, ever since women started getting education and jobs, they have proved that they can beat men in both academic and professional fields. But, in the Indian society, when a woman decides to work, in the name of being independent and achieving equality, she ends up bearing half of the financial responsibilities of the family but she still has a hundred percent responsibility for the household chores".

Mayank wanted to show Vikram how men are manipulating women ". Indian husbands are laughing at their wives in their mind because these women took half of their financial burden but none of these husbands have taken even one-tenth of the burden from women's shoulders of doing household chores. Then these women fall into this flawed logic and think that they are feminists, independent, have gender equality, but the reality

is that working women are in a worse situation than the women who don't work are”.

Mayank was a believer in Indian values “. In older times, women didn't work, but they had complete control over all financial matters of the house. The husband was supposed to give his entire income in his wife's hands. It's written in our scriptures. But then, men stopped women from reading scriptures, and created this fake religion that only benefited them”.

Mayank was drawing this inference from a long span of time from Vedic ancient times to a hundred years in the future “. That's when women's condition in family and in society worsened, and finally, they decided to get education and become financially independent. But even then, men found a way to fool them again. There are so many women who work and earn equal salaries as their husbands, if not more, but still, they don't have the same amount of authority as their husbands do and don't have a say in the financial matters of the house. Her husband still makes the decision on how her salary will be spent. This is the most ridiculous irony of our times”. Mayank concluded his long monologue .

This dialogue between Mayank and Vikram had enlightened Vikram, just like Arjun after he heard Bhagavad Geeta from Lord Krishna. Vikram said in the end “, You are right. Do you know what Khyati's career plans are? She says she hates the nine to five work culture and doesn't want to spend one-third of her life at work in the name of being independent. She wants to become a part-time lecturer and teach Physics in college”.

“ I'm not surprised. That's classic Khyati”, Mayank said “, Women need to use their brains and not get influenced by every man and pseudofeminist and follow them blindly. That's why Khyati's decision to withhold sex is admirable”.

“ I'm really proud of her”, Vikram said with a grin “, Although, I am not going to tell her all of this. Just in case she changes her mind”, Vikram said and winked at Mayank .

Mayank laughed and ended the discussion on a more decisive note “. If more girls started to be as strong as Khyati, a lot of men will have only two choices, either stay celibate or commit”.

## Chapter 32

The final year of college had started. The kids were now grown-ups. Their priorities were changing. They shifted their focus from trivial things to big life decisions. Until now, Khyati and Vikram didn't take their relationship too seriously, but now, Khyati didn't know what would happen to this relationship after college was over. She wanted to talk to Vikram about this, but she didn't want to come across as needy. She had decided not to say anything to Vikram if he doesn't bring it up. If he is not serious about this, then no point in forcing him to do something he didn't want to do. If he is serious, then he would make an effort to keep her in his life .

Khyati had started to learn cooking. She'd often come to the guys' apartment and cook dinner. One day, when Vikram was out at his branch office, Khyati came to his apartment to cook him a new recipe she had found online. Her cooking was not terrible but also not very tasty, but the guys used to eat it because they didn't want to discourage her from trying. She was in a learning phase .

Mayank was surfing on his laptop when Khyati started taking the veggies out of the fridge. She had barely washed the veggies to chop them, when Mayank got a text from Vikram. He read the text and said without moving his gaze from his laptop .

“ Bhabhi, don't cook dinner. Vicky is bringing Chinese food ”.

Khyati couldn't see him from the kitchen. She came out of the kitchen and looked at him with wide eyes “ . What did you just say ”?

Mayank didn't understand why she looked so surprised “ . I said don't cook dinner. Vicky is bringing food ”.

“ Did you just call me Bhabhi ”? Khyati asked in disbelief .

Mayank used to refer to her as “ Bhabhi ” when she wasn't around to tease Vikram. He was always careful not to use that word in front of

Khyati but today it just came out involuntarily. He realized his blunder and tried to sound casual “ . Oh, that! Yea, I did ”.

But Khyati didn ’ t let it go that easy. She interrogated him more “ , Has your brother told you that he ’ s going to marry me ”?

“ Why? He hasn ’ t told you yet ”? Mayank asked a counter question .

“ No. He doesn ’ t say anything about our future ”. Khyati said a little disappointed .

Mayank tried to cover it up “ . I just feel you guys will end up together. That ’ s why it just slipped ”.

“ I don ’ t feel so confident ”. Khyati didn ’ t feel better after Mayank ’ s statement “ . He hasn ’ t even introduced me to his mom yet ”.

Mayank got confused “ . What does that have to do with his commitment to you ”?

Khyati explained “ , My mom says a guy is not serious about you until he introduces you to his mother ”.

“ I don ’ t agree. Maybe he is waiting for the right time ”. Mayank defended Vikram like he always did .

“ Why do you always have to defend and support him ”? Khyati got annoyed “ . You are so biased ”.

“ I am not biased. If you knew all the things he has been telling me about you, you would also start to believe that he intends to marry you eventually ”. Mayank never played a messenger between these two but he knew their feelings for each other better than they did .

Khyati didn ’ t say anything because she knew it was impossible to get information from Mayank even if she tortured him .

The next day, Vikram and Khyati were planning to watch a movie at the theater. When Khyati arrived at his apartment, Vikram was not dressed and was sitting on the sofa with his laptop .

Khyati got anxious. She didn ’ t want to miss the beginning of the movie “ . Vicky, what are you doing? We will be late for the movie. Get up ”! She almost yelled .

Vikram looked up from his laptop and took off his earphones “ . Come here, Khyati ”. Then he looked at the laptop screen and said “ . Mom,

Khyati is here ”.

Vikram was video chatting with his mom. Khyati was not prepared to meet his mom. She signaled Vikram she is scared to talk to her. Vikram smiled and signaled that it would be fine. Khyati adjusted her hair and dress before coming to the webcam. She sat next to Vikram on the sofa and said politely “ . Namaste, Auntie ”!

“ Hello beta, how are you ”? There was a very elegant and poised lady on the other end .

“ I am good, Auntie. How are you ”? Khyati tried to be as polite as she could be .

“ I am good. Finally, I got to see you today. Vicky tells me a lot of things about you ”, Vikram ’ s mom said .

It was a surprise for Khyati. She didn ’ t know Vikram ’ s mom knew she existed “ . Really? Does he ”?

“ Oh, yea ”! Vikram ’ s mom reassured her. She knew Khyati was her son ’ s girlfriend “ . How ’ s college ”? She changed the topic as she knew Vikram wouldn ’ t like it if she shared all his secrets with his girlfriend .

“ It ’ s going good ”! Khyati said reluctantly, knowing she was about to go out with her son to watch a movie .

“ Final year, huh ”? She implied that it is a crucial year for them without actually saying it .

“ Yes ”, Khyati said, feeling a little guilty for not being serious enough about the studies .

“ OK. I won ’ t keep you long. You guys have a movie to watch ”. Vikram ’ s mom sensed Khyati was getting a little uncomfortable so she concluded their conversation “ . I will talk to you later ”.

“ OK, Auntie. It was nice talking to you ”, Khyati said .

“ Same here, dear ”. She said with the same elegance .

Khyati went back to her normal self after they ended the video call “ . Dude, you didn ’ t even give me a notice that I was going to talk to your mom today ”.

“ It wasn ’ t planned. You just walked in when I was talking to her ”, Vikram said and got up to get ready for the movie .

“ When did you tell her about us ”? Khyati asked Vikram, still pretty stunned .

“ A few months ago ”, Vikram said casually .

Khyati smiled. She felt relieved, but then she remembered she talked about this to Mayank just the previous day .

“ Did you tell him what we talked about yesterday? Or was it a coincidence that he introduced me to his mom today ”? Khyati asked Mayank when Vikram went to his room to change .

“ No. For the last time, I don ’ t do that ”, Mayank said. He wasn ’ t lying .

Some coincidences happen so naturally that it ’ s uncanny and hard to believe there was no manipulation involved. Maybe there ’ s a lot that we don ’ t know about the power of the human mind. A thought, an idea, an emotion — all of them are intangible objects, but they can bring pretty tangible effects to human life .

Khyati didn ’ t say anything, but it seemed like she was doing some deep thinking. Mayank figured she was getting nervous about her future with Vikram .

“ Don ’ t think about it too much. He loves you ”, Mayank tried to put her mind at ease .

“ It ’ s not that I can ’ t live without him ”, Khyati finally said what she hadn ’ t allowed herself to say out loud “ . but if I end up with someone else, I don ’ t think I can love anyone this much again ”.

## Chapter 33

The final year was passing quickly and many things were also changing very fast. One day, Khyati came to the guys ’ apartment with a big carry-on bag with her .

Mayank opened the door and saw the bag “ . What ’ s this ”?

Vikram was on the sofa with his laptop. He looked up and asked dubiously ” . Are you moving in here ”?

Khyati put the bag aside and replied with another question “ . Will you be happy if I was ”?

Vikram was happy for a moment, but immediately retracted his smile . “ What ’ s the point! You ’ re not going to let me do anything anyway ”.

“ Is that the only reason two people should live together ”? Khyati raised her eyebrows .

Before Vikram could answer, Mayank chimed in “ , You practically spend your entire day here. Might as well move in officially ”.

“ I am not moving into this dirty apartment ”, Khyati finally revealed , “ I am just leaving some of my stuff here ”.

“ Why ”? asked Mayank .

“ There was a theft in our hostel and I don ’ t think it ’ s safe to leave all my jewelry in my room anymore ”. Khyati said .

Both the guys were surprised “ . Is this your jewelry? This entire bag ”?

“ Yea, but it ’ s not that much. Just the boxes are too big ”, Khyati explained .

“ I didn ’ t know you had so much jewelry ”, Vikram was learning something new about Khyati .

“ You never noticed? I wear them every day. I love different kinds of gems and stones ”. Khyati showed the necklace she was wearing “ . See, this one is ruby ”.

Vikram shrugged it off “ , I would ’ ve never noticed it if you didn ’ t point it out. It ’ s so tiny. Besides, guys never look at this kind of stuff ”.

“ I have only one hobby. To collect gems and stones. I don ’ t spend money on clothes, bags, shoes, or sunglasses. But I love jewelry ”, Khyati said with a twinkle .

“ This must be expensive. How much did you pay for this one ”? Mayank asked looking at the ruby necklace .

“ Thirty-eight thousand ”, Khyati said casually .

Mayank and Vikram looked at each other “ . What? Did you pay thirty-eight thousand rupees for this small chain that is so tiny that you can ’ t even see it ”? Vikram was baffled .

“ The gem is expensive ”. Khyati tried to justify the price .

“ Everything in here is this expensive ”? asked Vikram, pointing at the bag .

“ Yea ”. Khyati didn ’ t like the way the guys were getting so concerned about her jewelry .

“ This is insane. Do your parents know ”? Vikram asked .

“ Of course, my Dad gave me a credit card. How else can I pay for all this ”? Khyati was getting annoyed now .

“ This is ridiculous, Khyati. Don ’ t spend so much money on these stupid things ”. This was the first time Vikram was telling Khyati what to do and what not to do .

Khyati didn ’ t like it. She was annoyed “ . Look, I just want to leave this here. Do you not want me to leave it here ”?

Vikram got more upset “ . That ’ s not the point. Leave it wherever you want, but be more mindful of your spending ”.

Mayank sat on a chair in the living room and started working on his laptop, trying to pretend he wasn ’ t there. It ’ s very awkward when a couple starts fighting in front of you, and you don ’ t know what to do. It ’ s awkward if you leave, it ’ s even more awkward if you say something. You just sit there and wish you could hide your head under a pillow .

Khyati was more irritated by his tone “ . I don ’ t understand why you are getting so upset. You come from a family of millionaires. Thirty-eight thousand is nothing for you. Besides, I am spending my dad ’ s money and he doesn ’ t have a problem with it ”.

“ It doesn ’ t matter whose money you are spending ”, Now Vikram raised his voice “ . You won ’ t understand the value of this money until you earn it yourself. Besides, even though my dad is a millionaire, he never let us spend money recklessly. He gave me the cheapest model of Hyundai to drive even though we have an Audi and a BMW in our garage ”.

Khyati and Vikram had never argued so much before. Khyati had never seen Vikram getting so angry before. She was trying to prove that she was right and it was not that big of a deal .

In a verbal fight, only the first three or four arguments are unique. After that, it ’ s the same arguments that get reworded and retold over and

over again in the hope that the other person will understand the point .

Khyati was about to yell back but she stopped herself with a lot of effort .

She went into the kitchen, took a few deep breaths. She got a water bottle out from the fridge and gulped down one whole glass of water. She stood there for a few seconds and then poured another glass of water. She went to Vikram and offered him the glass quietly .

“ You want water ”? Vikram looked at the glass with anger, took it from Khyati ’ s hand and put it aside on the side table. He was ignoring Khyati by looking at his laptop .

Khyati smiled and sat on her knees on the floor close to Vikram. She held Vikram ’ s hand and said with love “ . If you don ’ t like it, I won ’ t spend money on jewelry anymore ”.

This statement didn ’ t assuage Vikram, because that ’ s not what he wanted to hear. He replied sternly but his voice was not loud anymore “ . You shouldn ’ t stop doing it because I don ’ t like it. You should stop when you understand it yourself ”.

Khyati could see his point “ . OK ”. She nodded her head in agreement .

The argument was over but Vikram still looked upset, so Khyati tried to improve his mood “ . Please don ’ t be mad. You look too hot when you ’ re angry, and I don ’ t want to break my promise ”. Vikram looked at her trying to look mad, she was batting her eyelashes and giving a killer smile. A relationship gets sweeter after each fight if at least one person knows how to deal with each other's anger .

“ Stop it! It ’ s not going to work on me ”, Vikram was supposed to say it with anger, but he couldn ’ t hide a grin .

“ It just did ”, Khyati gave a winning smile. Vikram laughed and pretended to punch her nose. A relationship becomes strong in the true sense after a fight .

Mayank felt relieved “ . Wow! Your first fight! Got resolved easily ”. He teased Khyati “ . Fight some more. I was having fun ”.

“ Shut up! I am going to sit and eat popcorn when you have a fight with your girlfriend ”. Khyati got up and sat next to Vikram “ . That

reminds me, are you ever going to get into a relationship ”?

All this time, it never occurred to Khyati that Mayank had never shown any interest in any girl. Even though he pretended to know a lot about relationships, he never seemed romantic .

“ I am looking for someone very special ”, Mayank tried to avoid the topic .

“ What kind of girl do you want? I am sure I can find one for you ”, Khyati offered .

“ No. Finding my type of a girl is going to be difficult ”. Mayank tried to end the discussion but it only made Khyati more curious .

“ Just tell me ”. Khyati knew he loved to create suspense .

Mayank looked at her and then Vikram. Vikram shrugged his shoulders. He knew the whole story, so he didn ’ t say anything. Mayank had no choice but to reveal his biggest secret that no one knew in the college, except Vikram and Meera. He exhaled and started to tell his story “ . OK. For starters, I want a girl who doesn ’ t want to have kids ”.

That was a shocker. Khyati was shocked enough to jump up from the sofa “ . What ”????

Saying it once wasn ’ t enough. She asked again, just to be sure she heard it correctly “ . I ’ m sorry. What ”??

Mayank didn ’ t repeat what he said because he knew Khyati heard it. It took Khyati a moment to absorb this information “ . So you don ’ t want to have kids ”?

“ No ”. Mayank said .

“ But you want to get married ”? Khyati was trying to understand his plan .

“ Yes ”. Mayank was giving short answers .

“ What ’ s the point of getting married if you don ’ t want to have kids ”? Khyati was baffled “ . Which woman would ever want to marry you? No, actually the more important question is, why do you not want to have kids? You don ’ t like them ”?

“ I love them ”. Mayank clarified .

“ Then ”? This was just getting weirder by the moment for Khyati .

Mayank tried to say something but then changed his mind and instead said “ , It ’ s a long story ”.

“ I don ’ t care how long it is. I want to hear it ”. There was no stopping Khyati .

Mayank knew Khyati won ’ t let him go without hearing the whole story. He exhaled heavily and gave in “ . Fine ”.

Mayank was finally starting to reveal what kind of girl he was looking for, why he never acted on his feelings for Khyati, and what his plan was for his life. He crossed his legs on the chair and started his story .

## Chapter 34

Mayank was thinking about how to tell his story eloquently. He took a long pause and started his story by asking a question to Khyati .

“ What do you think is the purpose of your life ”?

Khyati was not expecting a question from him, let alone such a philosophical one of that “ . What? What does that have to do with your story ”?

“ Indulge me ”, Mayank insisted “ . It all ties up ”.

“ I never thought about such serious things in my life ”, Khyati scratched her head .

“ Well, you can think now ”, Mayank encouraged her .

Khyati thought for a moment “ . The purpose of my life, I think, is to do something meaningful with my life, like teaching ”. She didn ’ t sound very confident when saying this “ . Have a family, kids. Raise them well. Make them good citizens ”.

“ That ’ s a good answer. Most people have the same plan ”, Mayank didn ’ t disapprove of her response. He added “ . Some other people have

plans for accumulating all the materialistic things in life, but my plan is totally different than all of these ”.

“ What is your plan ”? Khyati was about to lose her mind .

“ A little background story before I get to the plan ”, Mayank was a great storyteller. He knew how to keep his audience captivated .

“ My dad passed away when I was five, and my mom raised me single-handedly. She spent her entire life only for me. Never thinking about herself or others. When I got a little older, that ’ s when I realized that I don ’ t have a father. I only have one parent. Then a thought occurred to me, I have only one parent, but I can still survive because I ’ ve got such a strong and independent mother. What about those kids who lost both of their parents, or who were abandoned by their parents? Who takes care of them ”?

Mayank looked at Khyati as if he was waiting for her answer, but then he continued talking .

“ Until I turned eighteen and came to this college, my mom never thought about doing anything else other than taking care of me. Now that she is alone, she has started to donate a lot of her time and resources for these orphan kids. She never says it but I can see that she must have thought about doing this when I was growing up, but I took up all her time. Now, she spends her nonworking hours at this orphanage and within these three years, she has already spread so much joy in these kids ’ lives ”.

Mayank was telling the story not as a victim, not seeking sympathy, but to paint a full picture of his life .

“ That makes me wonder, when you have a kid, your entire focus is only on that kid. A child does require all your resources, and there ’ s nothing wrong with being a dedicated parent. But imagine, if you could skip having a child of your own, how many other kids you can raise with love and joy that they deserve? Inspired by mom, I also started volunteering at an orphanage here in this town two years ago ”.

Khyati had no idea about this. She was listening to Mayank with rapt attention .

“ If letting go of my own parenthood can mean a lot of other kids will get my love and attention, I would gladly give it a pass ”. Mayank finally

revealed why he didn't want to have kids of his own. He continued explaining why he still wanted to get married ". But this doesn't mean that you refrain from getting married altogether. I can work better and do more when I am in a team. However, I need the right partner. If I get into a relationship with a girl, and if she loves me, she will agree to support me with this plan initially. But gradually, she will want to have kids of her own. So, I must not sacrifice some girl's dreams to fulfill my dream. That's why I need to find a girl who already has a similar plan as me even before she meets me ". Mayank concluded his story. He looked at Khyati, not sure if she got the moral of this story ". Does that make sense"?

Khyati looked completely blank. She managed to say ". I don't know what to say. All of this is beyond my logic, I think it will take some time for me to absorb this ". She said with amazement ". I had no idea you were planning such a larger than life goal for your life. I feel so selfish now. I have never thought about these things ".

" It all depends on your upbringing and what kind of childhood you had. You have never seen your mother struggling to juggle job and motherhood. You have never missed your father because he was always there for you. Only people who have been through this struggle themselves will understand the suffering of these orphan kids. So, I don't even share this with anyone because I know no one will be able to relate to it ". Mayank tried to save Khyati from feeling bad about herself .

" So this is the purpose of your life. To give joy and love to the kids who don't have a family of their own ", Khyati concluded it in one sentence .

" Yes ", Mayank smiled .

" I think it's incredible. I think I've just got whole new respect for you ". Khyati went on and on complimenting Mayank ". It's awesome. Sacrificing your own parenthood for other kids is the noblest thing you can do ".

Mayank respectfully disagreed with what Khyati said ". Well, I don't see it as a sacrifice. This is just something I want to do very badly . I want to do it for myself ".

“ I understand ”, Khyati nodded her head “ . But, Mayank, sweetie, I ’ m just worried because how will you ever find a girl like that ”? Khyati looked genuinely worried .

“ Where there ’ s a will, there ’ s a way ”, Mayank said with faith .

## Chapter 35

“ Where ’ s all your jewelry? There are only two boxes in here ”, Vikram came back from his branch office and noticed that all the boxes that Khyati had put into his closet were gone .

It was a question that had a long background story .

Mayank ’ s story had deeply affected Khyati. In moments like this, a sensible person starts to reminisce about the meaning of life. As it happens to every overly enthusiastic person, she also wanted to work for these kids. She asked Mayank one day “ . Can I come with you to the orphanage the next time you go there ”?

Mayank could see she was not comprehending how much dedication and hard work was involved in this work. He poured cold water on her excitement “ . It ’ s not that easy. You can ’ t just decide to come to the orphanage one day and start working there. You have to go through a long application process first to be a volunteer. They interview you and perform background checks. They require you to commit to certain hours and you have to stick to that schedule. It ’ s like a real job, the only difference is that you don ’ t get paid, but you can get fired ”. Mayank explained “ . Not everyone can make a long-term commitment to a cause like this ”.

“ But isn ’ t it hurting them eventually ”? Khyati tried to understand the logic behind this “ . It must be so difficult to get enough volunteers ”.

“ It is, but that ’ s the whole point. They don ’ t want to compromise the quality of volunteers. They don ’ t want just any Tom, Dick, or Harry taking care of their children ”, said Mayank .

Khyati nodded her head. She slipped into some deep thinking for a few moments and then said “ , I will go through the process. It will be worth when I see a smile on those kids ’ faces ”.

“ Even if you get the volunteering position, you are not going to be allowed to interact with the kids right away ”. Mayank pulled back her horses again “ . You must have two-hundred hours of volunteer work before you can interact with the kids. If you meet the standards of professionalism and ethics, they will put you on a project that involves direct interaction with the kids. Until then, you are on probation, you can only do clerical work and can ’ t even talk to any kid at the house ”.

Khyati was stunned “ , Wow! That ’ s really strict. Two-hundred hours is a lot ”.

“ Well, two-hundred for women. It ’ s three-fifty for men ”, Mayank revealed .

“ Really? Why ”? Asked Khyati .

“ Because a lot of men are perverts ”, Mayank knew what it was like to be a man “ . They want to make sure the person is genuinely committed to the cause and can wait this long to serve the kids ”. Mayank explained the philosophy of this organization “ . Most of the time, people get a rush of feelings to do something good, but then soon they lose interest and leave. Moreover, this process also keeps away dirty-minded people who may abuse these kids ”.

“ I see ”. Khyati ’ s wish for helping the kids seemed impossible .

But every long journey starts with a small step “ . Well, I can at least start my application ”. She still wanted to explore other options “ . How else can I help these kids right away ”?

Mayank was impressed that Khyati was taking so much interest in this cause “ . You can donate money to the orphanage ”.

“ Really? They don ’ t make you go through all this to donate money ”? Khyati was surprised .

“ No. But giving money doesn ’ t mean you can meet the kids. Some rich people donate millions of rupees but even they don ’ t get to interact with the kids. They just get the annual report of how their money was spent ”. This was no ordinary orphanage “ . Everyone has to follow the same rules ”.

“ Wow ”! Khyati was visibly astonished .

Khyati thought about this a lot that night. She got up the next morning, went to the guys ' apartment, took all her jewelry with her, except two boxes, and left. Vikram was not home at that time .

Khyati sold all the jewelry and donated the money to the orphanage. She could truly understand why Vikram was so upset to see her spend so much money on jewelry .

When Vikram saw the empty closet, he panicked. He thought her jewelry was stolen “ . Where ' s all your jewelry ”?

Khyati tried to hide what she did with the jewelry “ , I sold it. Didn ' t like it anymore ”.

Mayank usually didn ' t participate in their conversations but he jumped in and said “ . She sold all of them except the ones that were gifts from her parents and donated all the money to the orphanage ”.

Vikram couldn ' t believe what he just heard “ . What ”!?

Mayank nodded his head “ . Even the ruby necklace ”? Asked Vikram .

“ Yea ”. Khyati said without any regrets .

“ But that one was your favorite ”, Vikram was still baffled .

“ Eh...Wasn ' t that great ”, Khyati shrugged .

Vikram looked at her face for a few seconds. He walked up to her and hugged her “ . I ' m very proud of you, do you know that ”?

Khyati was happy “ . I feel very good ”.

Vikram was proud but he knew it must have taken her a lot of courage to say goodbye to all her jewelry. The following day, he went to the store where she sold the jewelry, found that ruby necklace, and bought it back. He knew that Khyati wouldn ' t sell it if it was a gift .

Vikram and Khyati were celebrating their one-year anniversary that night. When Khyati opened her gift box, she saw the ruby necklace. Tears welled up in her eyes. She looked at Vikram with surprise and affection. Vikram had expected this reaction from her .

Khyati rushed to kiss him. Life would ' ve been much more complex if we couldn ' t kiss to express love .

After the kiss, Khyati asked Vikram “ , Why are you so awesome ”?

“ Because I love you ”, It was an obvious answer for Vikram .

## Chapter 36

“ Mayank? What happened? Is everything OK? Is Vicky OK ”? Khyati got a call from Mayank in the middle of the night. She woke up from deep sleep to answer the phone and heard Mayank crying on the other end .

She got scared that something terrible must have happened. Why else would Mayank call her in the middle of the night ?

She waited for Mayank ’ s response, but he kept wailing like a little baby .

“ Mayank! What happened? Where ’ s Vicky ”? Khyati was half asleep and couldn ’ t figure out Mayank was on one of his drama queen modes .

“ I ’ m right here ”! Vicky replied to Khyati ’ s question as she was on speakerphone .

“ Vicky! What ’ s going on ”? Khyati was relieved to hear Vicky ’ s voice “ . Why is Mayank crying ”?

“ He ’ s crying because he is drunk ”, Vikram said in his most carefree tone .

“ Why is he drunk ”? Khyati got up and walked out of the room as she didn ’ t want her roommates to wake up .

“ We were just celebrating the completion of his probation period at the orphanage, and he got a little too drunk ”, Vikram said casually “ , This always happens ”.

“ Wait a minute! What do you mean this always happens ”? Khyati had no idea these guys had a drinking problem “ . How many times have you had such a party ”?

Vikram rolled his eyes “ , Do you want to discuss that right now? You don ’ t want to know why he is crying ”?

Before Khyati could answer, Mayank started talking in addition to crying .

“ KHYAAA ... TIII ...!!!... I CAAAAN ’ T ... LIIIIIVE ... WITHOUT ... HERRRR ”!

“ What ”? Khyati couldn ’ t understand a word of his gibberish speech

“ He is saying he can ’ t live without her ”, Vikram repeated .

“ Who ”? Khyati was curious and concerned at the same time .

“ I love her, Khyati! She is so perfect! She is the best! There ’ s no one like her in this whole world! You have to tell her that I love her! You have to convince her to marry me ”!!! Mayank was continuously ranting. Khyati was now able to understand his speech a little. She came to the balcony of the hostel where it was freezing cold .

“ Who are you talking about ”? Asked Khyati , but there was no response “ . Hello ”! Khyati looked at her phone to make sure the call hadn ’ t disconnected “ . Just get to the point. I ’ m freaking freezing here ”. She was losing her patience .

“ He went to the toilet to throw up ”, Vikram answered on Mayank ’ s behalf. He figured he will have to take care of Mayank right now “ . I gotta go. I will talk to you tomorrow ”. The call got disconnected .

Khyati was angry for a lot of reasons but she had to go back to sleep and wait until the next morning .

The following morning, Mayank and Vikram came to college a little late. It was evident that Mayank had a bad hangover. Khyati was about to lose her mind when she saw him “ . What the hell was that ”?

Mayank ’ s eyes were half-closed, his hair was messy, and he looked feverish. Still, he managed to say “ . I stand by it ”.

“ You stand by it? You called me at one in the morning, and I listened to your weeping for ten minutes in the freezing cold ”, Khyati was now yelling at him .

Mayank put his hands on his ears, Khyati was too loud for his taste right now “ . That ’ s what friends are for ”. He continued to argue with her “ . You ’ re not my true friend until I drunk-dial you in the middle of the night ”.

Khyati lowered her voice a little bit “ . So who ’ s this girl? I ’ ve been busting my head all night to guess who she might be ”. Khyati hated this

suspense “ . I have crosschecked every girl in the college but I can ’ t tell who she is ”.

“ She is not from our college ”. Mayank was taking his time to tell his story. Khyati looked at him and Vikram in quick succession .

“ Do you know Pratima ”? Mayank sat down on his bike and asked Khyati .

“ Who ’ s Pratima ”? It didn ’ t ring any bell with Khyati .

“ She is the assistant manager at the orphanage ”, Mayank reminded her. Khyati ’ s volunteering application was approved and now Khyati was also volunteering at the orphanage with Mayank .

“ Oh! Pratima ma ’ am ”? Khyati remembered her now “ . Yea, I know her ”. Khyati had had a very brief interaction with her at the orphanage. Pratima was more like her supervisor and was training Khyati .

“ It ’ s her ”, Mayank said and drank a bottle full of water .

“ WHAT??? WHY??? HOW ”???? Khyati's voice was loud again. The mere thought of this combination seemed wrong in her head .

Mayank knew she would react like this “ . She is exactly the kind of girl I was looking for ”.

Khyati ’ s immediate response was not pleasant “ . But Mayank, she looks older than us, and doesn ’ t she have a glass eye ”?

Mayank looked at her with disappointment “ . Do you really think her physical appearance and age are going to matter to me ”?

Khyati felt guilty for being so shallow. She tried to refute her statement, she said “ . No , I mean she seems very different than us. I don ’ t know her that well, I may be wrong ”. She rephrased her opinion about Pratima “ . Maybe she ’ s not that old, but she is way too mature for you ”.

“ OK. This is not a discussion about if I should pursue her or not ”, Mayank tried to bring her back on track “ . I ’ ve already made that decision. Now the problem is I talked to her about this and she told me it ’ s not going to happen ever ”.

Khyati was surprised. She was also a little angry at Mayank because he didn ’ t tell her about Pratima for this long, but this was not the right time to bring that up “ . Really? Did you talk to her? You have got some guts . She seems very strict and mean to me ”.

“ Well, despite that, you will have to talk to her about this ”, Mayank instructed Khyati knowing how she would react .

“ What? Me? No way!! Not going to happen ”. Khyati rejected the proposal immediately .

“ You don ’ t have a choice ”, Mayank reaffirmed “ . You will have to do this ”.

“ Why me? Ask Vicky ”. Khyati looked at Vikram. He looked like he already had the same conversation with Mayank about this, and now he was too tired to say anything on this hopeless topic .

Before Vikram could gather the energy to say something, Mayank responded “ . No, I need you because she already knows you as a volunteer and it ’ s better if a girl talks to her, it will give her a better perspective about relationships ”.

For Khyati, Pratima was her boss, and the thing Mayank was asking her to do seemed like a suicide mission “ . I can barely say hello to her. If I go and ask her to marry my friend, she is going to kick me out of her office and I will lose my volunteering opportunity. I am not going to do this ”.

Now Mayank tried to emotionally blackmail her “ . Khyati, please! She might be the only person I ever want to be with. Do you not want to see me happy ”? He tried to add some logic to his request to convince Khyati “ . She won ’ t do anything to you. At the worst, she will fire me, not you ”.

Khyati was still not convinced fully but then she looked at Mayank. He had never looked so vulnerable and helpless. She had never seen him so emotional and romantic “ . Fine! I will talk to her when she is in a good mood. But first tell me this story from the beginning ”.

## Chapter 37

“ How did this happen? Tell me everything ”. Khyati was still puzzled by how Mayank ended up falling for Pratima .

“ I met her for the first time when I started volunteering at the orphanage. She presented the orientation and training for the first couple of days. I saw how passionate she was about these kids. She takes her job very seriously ”. Mayank began to narrate his unbelievable love story .

“ Then I tried to get more information about her. I asked a bunch of other employees who have been working here for a long time. They told me that she was brought to this orphanage when she was a couple of days old. She was found in a dumpster, left alone to die. Someone found her and brought her to this orphanage. Ever since, this orphanage is her home ”. Mayank wanted Khyati to understand what thought process he went through before he came to this decision .

“ When she was eight years old, she got an infection in her eye . She kept complaining of pain and itching but everyone ignored it. By the time she got medical attention, she had lost her eye. After that incident, she decided that she would become a doctor, and work at this orphanage. She vowed that she won ’ t let this happen to any other kid at this orphanage ”. Khyati was listening with rapt attention and was giving an understanding nod every now and then. Somehow Mayank felt this story was making more sense to Khyati than it did to Vikram .

“ She just completed her MBBS and now she is back to live here at this orphanage, not as an orphan but as an assistant manager. The manager of this place loves her like his own daughter. He was the one who supported her through medical school. He is like a father to her. After she turned eighteen, she took as many responsibilities as she could from the manager. She changed a lot of policies and procedures at the place. She is the one who implemented the strict screening process and the probation period for volunteers and employees. She has also implemented a lot of other initiatives like monthly physical checkups of all kids, tuitions for kids in high school, healthy meal plans for kids of all ages, and annual tours and picnics for these kids ”. Mayank ’ s eyes sparkled when he talked about Pratima ’ s work at the orphanage .

“ She is only twenty-five but she has done more than anyone has ever done at this orphanage. She is an inspiration to everyone who works here. Zalaji, the manager, insisted she get married to a suitable guy but she has pledged to spend her entire life for these kids. She has decided not to get

married ever ”. Khyati was visibly amazed. Every person is a living story, you just have to be observant and patient to read it .

“ Wow! I could have never imagined there was such an inspiring story behind my mean boss ’ s life ”... Khyati now completely understood why Mayank was so adamant about pursuing this girl. This was the perfect life partner he always envisioned .

Mayank tried to clear the misunderstanding Khyati had about Pratima “ . You know what, she is not mean. You should see her when she is with the kids. I have never seen anyone else have such love for those kids. She laughs and plays with these kids like they were born from her own womb. She is strict to the employees and the volunteers because she wants to have the highest level of discipline at this orphanage. As a result, the overall health and education of these kids have improved tremendously in the past few years ”.

Now came the challenging part of the story “ . After I learned about her, I started spending more time with her so I could befriend her. She is not strict with me anymore . She likes my work and my love for these kids. She is even thinking about giving me a full-time position after I graduate. At one point, I felt this was the right time to approach her with my proposal. I told her about how I feel but she said this relationship is supposed to be strictly professional. She likes me as a volunteer but that doesn ’ t mean that she is going to marry me ”.

“ I used to think that the kind of girl you wanted didn ’ t exist, but you were right. Where there ’ s a will, there is a way ”. Khyati was convinced she was the one for Mayank “ . She is perfect for you. Now the only problem is how do we convince her to break her pledge. I will talk to her but I don ’ t think anyone can convince her. She has her own valid reasons ”. Khyati was onboard with Mayank ’ s plan of talking to Pratima but she didn ’ t know how she would do it .

“ If you can convince Vicky to break up with Tanya in forty-five minutes, you can convince her for this. I know only you can do this ”. Mayank had confidence in Khyati ’ s persuasion skills .

“ I will try my best ”. It became Khyati ’ s mission to make this happen for Mayank .

One day, after Pratima came to back to her office from the kids ' playground, Khyati knocked at her door. She knew Pratima was always in a good mood after spending time with the toddlers " . Hello ma ' am, may I come in " ?

Pratima looked up " . Yes " .

" Ma ' am, I wanted to talk to you about something if you ' re not busy ", Khyati said politely .

" Yes, go ahead " . Pratima moved her gaze from her computer and gave her full attention to Khyati .

" But it ' s not about the kids or the orphanage. It is a little personal " . Khyati didn ' t want to mislead her .

" I am already losing interest in this conversation but let ' s get it over with " , Pratima leaned back on the chair .

Khyati started talking about Mayank but she had already lost her self-confidence " . Ma ' am, Mayank is a very good friend, and I ' ve known him for a long time now. His idea of marriage is very unique but I think he ' s right. When you work as a couple, as a team, you can do more and better work " .

Pratima sighed. She looked at Khyati for a few seconds. She didn ' t have to give any explanation to Khyati but she appreciated Khyati ' s efforts to help her friend " . I don ' t want a man making decisions on how and how much work I should do for these kids. I do not want any authority and responsibility of a man in my life " .

" I agree with you, but he is not an ordinary man who wants to control and oppress a woman. In fact, he wants to work under you so he can learn about serving orphaned kids from you. In his case, you will always be his boss, even after you get married. He respects you a lot and wants to follow your path. That ' s the only reason he wants to marry you " . Khyati regained her confidence as she started talking .

Pratima forgot for a moment that Khyati is one of her volunteers. She opened up to her like Khyati was an old friend " . I understand his point that you can work better as a team. Sometimes I feel that I don ' t have enough time to help these kids. There are times when I want to be at two places at the same time so I can be more helpful to these kids but there ' s

just one of me. If I have a partner who is equally passionate about this work, then we can accomplish twice the work together”. Pratima had also thought of this .

“ Exactly! And you don ’ t have to marry him next week. At least, try to get closer to him, learn more about him, and test him before you make any decision, but don ’ t just cut him off without giving him a fair chance ”. Khyati tried to cushion the blow “ . He is not like a college Romeo who is madly in love with you. It is his lifelong vision to live a meaningful life ”. It seemed to Khyati that her logic might work on Pratima .

Pratima was listening to her carefully. She said in a soft but firm voice “ . I understand what you are saying but still this is not a good enough reason for me to change my decision. I think we don ’ t have to get married to work as a team. We can still work together as a team without being husband and wife, and I will be happy to let him work with me as long as he wants, but just ask him to close this marriage chapter forever ”.

Khyati ’ s smile disappeared. She was disappointed, she figured it was futile to make any more arguments. Mayank was dealing with a very headstrong girl .

Khyati got up to leave and said “ , Thank you for your time, ma ’ am ”.

## Chapter 38

“ So this is it ”? Khyati was trying very hard to not cry .

“ This is not it ”, Vikram said halfheartedly .

“ Then why does it feel like it is ”? Khyati ’ s words were piercing Vikram ’ s heart like a sword .

It was the last day of college. Four years of college had flown by. The moment that Khyati feared had finally arrived .

“ Now what ”? Khyati ’ s lips were silent but her eyes were screaming and blaming Vikram for being commitment-phobic .

“ We will keep in touch ”. Vikram gave her a hollow consolation .

“ Until when ”? Khyati looked straight into his eyes .

“ I will talk to my parents about you. I am sure they won ’ t have any objections. You ’ re perfect. They will love you ”. Vikram was more confident than Khyati .

“ What if they do have an objection ”? Khyati didn ’ t believe in pseudo optimism .

“ I will keep you posted on everything. Don ’ t worry. We will meet again very soon ”. Vikram was finding it difficult to face her .

Khyati didn ’ t believe his words. It ’ s an unfair paradox of a relationship that the person who is more invested suffers more than the person who is less invested .

Mayank had stopped chasing Pratima after Khyati ’ s discussion with her, but he knew that they would end up together one day. Pratima had given him a nice recommendation letter when he left his volunteer position at the orphanage. She had personally called and talked to the manager of the orphanage that Mayank planned to join in his hometown “ . All the best for your future ”. Pratima had high hopes for Mayank. Mayank just smiled in response .

Khyati and Mayank were from the same town. Vikram instructed Mayank to keep in touch with Khyati when they left college .

At home, Vikram regularly talked to Khyati. After a while, Khyati stopped initiating contact. Vikram would call her whenever he got time from his work. He had joined his dad ’ s office .

Khyati asked him a couple of times if he talked to his parents about her. But every time he replied saying he ’ s waiting for the right moment. Gradually, Khyati stopped bringing it up .

One day, during a social gathering, Vikram was talking to Avika about the latest venture their company was embarking on. Avika was the daughter of Avinash Prajapati, who was his dad ’ s business partner .

“ That sounds interesting in theory, but do you think the execution will be equally fruitful ”?

“ It will be if everyone on this project shares the same vision. All we need is a good team ”. Vikram and Avika knew each other since they were kids. They were not best friends but they were always comfortable in each other ’ s company .

“ Is Vikram bragging about his new project ”? Vikram ’ s mom interrupted their discussion .

“ No, Auntie. We ’ re just weighing out the possibilities ”, said Avika. Avika ’ s mom and Vikram ’ s mom were close friends .

“ Why don ’ t you team up with him on this project? Your dad is also keen to introduce you to our business ”. Avika had also graduated from college recently .

“ Yea, he told me about it, but I want to come up with my own product. I don ’ t want to interfere with Vikram ’ s project ”. Avika tried to avoid any discomfort to Vikram .

“ No. It would be fun to work with you ”. Vikram said just to be polite “ . Of course , I don ’ t want to force you ”.

Avika gave a sly smile “ . I will think about it ”.

Vikram had thought this was an innocent attempt from his mother to get Avika working into their company until his mom expressed her real intentions that evening at the dinner table .

“ Your dad and I were thinking that Avika will be a good match for you ”, she casually slipped in her suggestion during their conversation .

Vikram was more disappointed than shocked “ , Mom, I didn ’ t think you ’ d make such a clichéd suggestion. It ’ s a classic business family strategy. Marry your kid to your business partner ’ s kid, so the business doesn ’ t get divided ”.

“ There ’ s nothing wrong with it ”. Vikram ’ s father defended his wife “ . It ’ s a legitimate business strategy, and it ’ s not like Avika is not right for you. She was raised in a family with the same values. You have known each other since you were kids. Avika will easily blend into our family ”.

“ And it ’ s not like we ’ re asking you to marry her right away. Spend time with her and make an informed decision. That ’ s all we ’ re saying ”, Vikram ’ s mom added .

Vikram respectfully expressed his disagreement “ . I think you guys are oversimplifying the whole situation. I would have considered this option if I already hadn ’ t found Khyati ”.

Vikram ’ s mom sighed and shared a look with her husband “ . I thought your relationship ended when your college did ”.

This was the right time for Vikram to talk to his parents about Khyati . “ Well, it didn ’ t. I am not saying I will marry only her, I am not going to commit to her without your approval. I ’ m just saying give her a chance. Give us a fair chance ”.

Both of them looked at each other. Nobody said anything for a few moments “ . How about you give us a chance first ”! exclaimed Vikram ’ s dad .

“ You work with Avika on this project until we launch this product, which is next year. Spend time with her. Give her a fair chance. See by the end of the year whether you feel she ’ s a better match for you and our family. If you still want to be with Khyati after one year, we ’ ll not object ”.

Vikram ’ s mom supported her husband ’ s decision. She tried to make it a fair deal “ . Khyati is a great girl. There ’ s no doubt about that. We just feel Avika is a better fit for our family. Ultimately, it ’ s you who decides. The only promise we ask from you is to be honest and fair about this deal. Give your full attention to Avika. Don ’ t talk to Khyati during this time. This way both of you will get a chance to figure out if you really want to spend your lives together or it was just an infatuation that ended with college ”.

Vikram felt pressured to accept his parents ’ proposal. Even though they didn ’ t say yes to Khyati, they also didn ’ t say no. This was a fair deal for both parties. He thought about it and finally gave in “ . OK. You got yourself a deal ”.

## Chapter 39

After college was over, Khyati and Mayank started volunteering at an orphanage in their hometown. Khyati also started working as a lecturer at a college. Her life had changed drastically. Vikram had stopped calling her after he made a deal with his parents. Khyati was certain that he wasn't going to come back in her life .

Khyati ' s father encouraged her to attend social gatherings and parties. Khyati had matured a lot. She was not a short-tempered teenager anymore. Khyati's parents noticed a previously unseen deep calmness in her personality. She didn ' t jump and run in the house, didn ' t play loud music in her room, and didn ' t laugh hysterically while watching cartoons .

Khyati accepted Vikram ' s aloofness without putting up a fight even though she was broken inside. She was mad at Vikram, but at the same time, she also understood his situation. It was unfair to ask a guy to go against his family for a girl that he has known only for a couple of years .

Most of the relationships that occur during college cannot stand the test of time once college is over. Life during college is dreamy with no responsibilities. Once you get out of those college gates, real life hits you hard, and the first thing to shatter is a college relationship .

Khyati ' s father mentored many young IAS, IPS, and IFS officers. He wanted his daughter to marry one of these bright officers. Khyati introspected and tried to get the most of the broken relationship “ . The least I can do is learn from Vikram how to obey parents. They fulfill all my wishes so I was confident that they wouldn ' t say no to Vikram. I take their love for granted. I am not going to be happy without Vikram, but I can at least make my parents happy by choosing the guy they like ”.

Khyati started interacting with these officers during diplomatic parties. She was really impressed with these highly intelligent officers, who had a completely different perspective at life. She also met some women officers who had reached this milestone against all odds .

Gradually, Khyati started to understand the concept of weighing out things. It didn ' t occur to her until now that everything in life is as

important as you make it to be. Someone once said: Most of the things in life are mind over matter. If you don't mind, then it doesn't matter. It all depends on how much importance you give to love and relationships in your life. These officers had only one goal in life. Khyati felt much better after she realized that her relationship with Vikram didn't take center stage in her life. There were bigger and better things in life, which she hadn't pursued yet .

The only meaningful thing for her to do was to volunteer at the orphanage and teach at the college. She started volunteering as a part-time activity inspired by Mayank. She never thought about making it a lifelong goal like Mayank. But now, she realized that it had become an integral part of her life .

Mayank noticed this change in Khyati's personality. He liked the fact that Khyati was focusing on more meaningful things in life than just a petty relationship. However, he missed that girl who simply lived each moment to its fullest and was oblivious to the harsh realities of life in college .

Mayank didn't want Khyati to be so serious about life. He occasionally took her out to restaurants and movies just to cheer her up. Khyati had only one friend after college. She talked to Meera on the phone sometimes but Mayank was the only friend who was physically present. She loved his company, she loved to laugh at his stupid puns. They spent a lot of time together and it seemed like eventually there was going to be a spark between them .

## Chapter 40

Khyati had stopped talking about Vikram with Mayank. In fact, she made a conscious effort not to think about him anymore. However, Mayank didn't miss the vacant eyes and hollow smile and understood she missed Vikram terribly. She had lost connection with the world. She often seemed lost and detached when she talked to Mayank. She would say things out of context which didn't make any sense .

One day when Khyati was spaced out yet again during a conversation with Mayank, he couldn't help asking her " . Do you miss him " ?

Khyati was startled by his question. She tried to get the grip of what he was asking " . Who " ?

Mayank exhaled and tried to be sarcastic " , Our dean " !

Khyati tried to laugh. She looked down at the floor out of embarrassment " . Come on " ! Mayank hated seeing her like this. He wanted Khyati to deal with this breakup and move on .

" I miss him a lot, but I don't want to " . Khyati finally let down her defenses " . I can't help it. Every day I try different things to forget him, but nothing has worked so far " .

" So now what " ? Mayank asked sympathetically. Vikram was in touch with him and he knew about the one-year deal, but he didn't tell Khyati about it. He knew it would be even more difficult for Khyati to learn that Vikram was with someone else now .

" I have come up with a new strategy " , Khyati tried to sound confident " , I have decided every time I think about him, I will think of all the bad things about him " .

Mayank wanted to yell at her for not being able to get over Vikram, but he couldn't. Instead, he encouraged her to share her feelings " . Like what " ?

" Like, why did he never show any interest in volunteering with us " ? Khyati said " . It never occurred to me that he never felt like doing anything for those kids. The story of your life changed my life, he knew your story long before I did, and he never did anything about it. He's so selfish " . Khyati felt better that she had found at least one reason to not love Vikram .

Mayank, however, broke her illusion right away " . OK, Khyati. I know you are trying too hard to forget him, and I will help you get there, but I cannot let you weave false assumptions about him " .

" What do you mean " ? Khyati didn't understand where he was going with this argument .

" Vicky and I applied for volunteering at the orphanage at the same time. Once he heard my story, he also wanted to join me in serving these

kids”. Mayank revealed the true story that Vikram had never told Khyati . “ He went through the whole screening and interview process, both of us started volunteering but Vicky fell into borderline depression one week after joining. He couldn ’ t see the orphan kids so starved of love and attention. He suddenly became quiet. He didn ’ t cry and didn ’ t tell me anything, but I could tell he was not OK ”.

Mayank continued to defend his best friend “ . After a week, I made him promise me that he would never go to the orphanage again. He agreed hesitantly but he still wanted to help the kids. So, he started to donate his monthly allowance to the orphanage. He also convinced his dad to make a big donation at the orphanage ”. Khyati was on the verge of breaking down at the end of this story. Mayank concluded his monologue by a solid closing statement “ . Believe me, he cares about those kids more than you and me. Never doubt his integrity and kindness ”.

Khyati was too hurt to say anything. She just nodded her head and left without saying a word. After months of hard work to get over Vikram, she was now more in love with him .

The only true asset a human being has is free will, but love is the only thing that doesn ’ t fall into the category of free will. To love someone is a completely involuntary action, and it ’ s impossible to fight it. The only way people can deal with it is to forget who and what they really love .

## Chapter 41

Mayank came home after telling Khyati Vikram ’ s secret. He reached home feeling guilty when he saw Vikram ’ s car parked outside his house. He walked in and found Vikram talking to his mom .

“ There he is ”, Mayank ’ s mom said “ , I told you he must be on his way ”.

Vikram got up and gave Mayank a brief hug “ . How long have you been waiting ”?

“ Not too long ”, Vikram said with his old jovial grin but Mayank could sense the pain behind it. A true friend is the one who can not only see the pain behind your smile but can also tell the reason and the remedy of that pain without saying a word .

“ Why didn ’ t you tell me you were coming ”? Asked Mayank .

Vikram didn ’ t answer, just shrugged in response .

“ Come, let ’ s go to my room ”, Mayank signaled toward his room .

Vikram had put himself through self-inflicted misery by agreeing to his parents ’ deal. He spent major part of his day with Avika on their new business project. He was as miserable as Khyati was but he didn ’ t reveal his loneliness to anyone because it was his decision to prove his love for Khyati to his parents. He always stuck to his decisions. Although, his inherently joyful nature was changing rapidly. On the outside, he talked and laughed the same way he did before, but on the inside, he felt empty .

He missed Khyati terribly, but he didn ’ t want to break the promise he made to his parents of not talking to Khyati for a full year. At last, he couldn ’ t stop himself. One weekend, he drove to Khyati ’ s hometown and went to Mayank ’ s house .

“ I know I am not allowed to talk to her but I just want to see her once ”, Vikram had been patient for a long time .

He nodded “ . I can make arrangements so you can see her from a little distance. She wouldn ’ t know that you are here ”.

“ Perfect ”! Vikram tried to look happy .

The following morning, Mayank took Vikram to his chess club .

“ Since when did Khyati start playing chess ”? Vikram was surprised .

“ I make her play chess to improve her focus ”. Mayank explained “ . She has become very absent-minded these days ”.

Vikram sat on a table in the corner. Khyati arrived a little bit later. Mayank made her sit across from Vikram so he could see her .

The entire game, Vikram looked at Khyati without blinking his eyes. He wanted to rush to Khyati and kiss her, but somehow, he managed to stay put. He also noticed changes in Khyati. She looked like she hadn ’ t smiled in a long time. She looked older and more mature. Her eyes were

swollen, Vikram couldn't figure out if they were red because she cried a lot or didn't sleep last night or both .

After Khyati left, Mayank asked Vikram “ , How ' s Avika ”?

“ She is great ”. Vikram was spending a lot of time with Avika and now he could see why his parents thought Avika was perfect for him and his family “ . I am afraid it will be very difficult for me to find a legitimate reason to reject her to my parents ”.

## Chapter 42

That day, Khyati was smiling unnecessarily. There was a mystery in her smile. When Mayank arrived at the orphanage she was already waiting for him at the front gate. Mayank couldn't understand what she was so happy about. Mayank had noticed that for the past few days, Khyati ' s behavior had changed drastically. She didn't look sad or depressed anymore. She was giving complete attention to the kids at the orphanage. She looked like she was on a mission. She was planning something and she wasn't sharing it with Mayank .

When Khyati saw Mayank enter the orphanage, she rushed to him “ . Good morning ”! Khyati said with excitement .

“ Good morning ”! Mayank was surprised “ . What are you so chirpy about ”?

“ Nothing ”! Khyati said “ , It ' s just a beautiful morning, isn ' t it ”?

Mayank looked around “ . Looks the same as yesterday ”.

Khyati couldn't hide her excitement anymore “ . You know we got a new manager at the orphanage ”.

“ Nice! We needed a good manager. This orphanage needs a lot of work. It ' s not like the previous one ”. Mayank didn't want to mention Pratima ' s name but he wanted to say that every orphanage needed a manager like Pratima .

“ You ' re right ”, Khyati got a little serious “ . I met the new manager. I am very impressed. Why don ' t you also go say hi ”?

“ Yes, I should ”, Mayank said “ . Let ’ s see if this manager has any real potential ”.

Khyati looked at Mayank walking toward the manager ’ s office. She had the biggest smile on her face but her eyes were filled with tears .

Mayank knocked on the door and entered the manager ’ s office. To his surprise, Pratima and the senior manager, Zalaji, were present in the office .

“ Come in, Mayank ”. Zalaji came forward to shake hands with Mayank .

“ We were hoping to see you today ”, said Zalaji. Mayank looked at Pratima, she was standing by the window, giving Mayank the widest smile .

“ After you left the orphanage, Khyati called me a few times, she told me about you and your mission. She requested me to convince Pratima to marry you. I had seen you work at the orphanage. I knew you had the passion and the potential to continue the work Pratima and I had started. I talked to Pratima and like a good daughter, she understood a father ’ s heart. She agreed to come here to take the manager ’ s position. Now, both of you need to carry this work forward ”. Zalaji leaned back on the chair and let out a sigh .

Mayank was too surprised to say anything but before he left the office, he managed to say “ . Thank you, Zalaji. I will not let you down ”.

Outside the office, Khyati was glad she witnessed the expression on Mayank ’ s face. He was bursting with joy as if a devotee had seen the most magnificent form of God after years of penance .

Mayank saw Khyati and rushed to her to hug her. Out of love, out of gratefulness, out of joy. No one said anything for a few moments “ . How did you pull this off ”? Mayank asked Khyati, even though he knew from the beginning that only Khyati could make it happen .

Khyati just shrugged “ . All of us think we are different than others, we are better than others. We all want to live an extraordinary life, but in reality, only a handful of people make a real change in the world, the rest of us just live an ordinary life hoping it would become extraordinary one day ”. Khyati had reached a whole new level of wisdom after her breakup

with Vikram “ . I spent too much time feeling cheated, by Vikram, by life, by fate. But then, one day, I decided I won ’ t play the victim and I won ’ t feel helpless anymore. It ’ s OK if I couldn ’ t get my love story, but I was determined to give you yours ”.

Mayank had never loved Khyati this much before. She had a saint-like aura around her “ . I didn ’ t do this to make you happy, I did this because I wanted to make myself happy by witnessing my best friend get the love of his life ”.

Mayank wanted to hug her again. He wanted to tell her what she meant to him, how much he loved her, how much he respected her, but the society he grew up in hadn ’ t taught him a way to express his platonic love to a person of the opposite sex .

## Chapter 43

It was the day Vikram was going to announce his decision to Avika and his parents. Avika also had to make the decision whether she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Vikram. Vikram met Avika that morning. Both of them had become very good friends. They had learned a lot from each other in the last year. They were comfortable enough to be totally honest with each other. Vikram knew what he had to say but he hesitated a little, Avika sensed his hesitation and started talking .

“ It ’ s not going to happen, is it ”? Avika smiled as if making fun of Vikram .

Vikram looked at her surprised “ . Come on! I know both of us make really good business partners, really good friends, but we will be a terrible couple ”. Avika had always been a transparent and open-minded girl .

“ You ’ re awesome. I mean I can see why my parents want you as their daughter-in-law, any guy will be lucky to have you as his wife, but it will be unfair to you if I married you ”. Vikram wanted to make sure Avika knew why he couldn ’ t marry her .

“ Let me guess, you love someone else ”. Avika was sharp .

Vikram was impressed with her intuition “ . How did you know ”?

“ Come on! That was easy. I can see it in your eyes that you will not be able to love anyone else the way you love this person. I will never want to be the wife that her husband doesn ’ t really love ”. Avika didn ’ t want to have a loveless marriage .

“ Well, you made my job easy. Thank you so much. Let ’ s go talk to our parents ”. Vikram knew there was still one roadblock between Khyati and him .

Both of them went to their respective parents and told them their decision “ . So you ’ ve decided ”. Vikram ’ s father asked in a stern voice as if he was trying to scare Vikram into changing his decision .

“ I like Avika a lot, she and I are very good at doing business together, but who says we have to marry to do business? You didn ’ t marry Avika ’ s dad to do business with him, and still, both of you are great business partners. Why can ’ t Avika and I be like that ”? Vikram had run out of patience. He made a valid point to his parents. Sometimes, it just takes the last speck of patience to say the right thing .

Vikram ’ s parents looked at each other. Vikram ’ s mother said “ . Well, you tried, and we are happy about that. You kept your promise, now it ’ s time for us to keep ours. When should we meet Khyati ’ s parents ”?

Vikram was deliriously happy. It was as if a big rock had moved from his heart. He didn ’ t wait for a day to meet Khyati and propose to her. He drove five hours nonstop to reach Khyati. Khyati was, as usual, working at the orphanage. He wasn ’ t sure how Khyati would react to see him but he was dying to have Khyati yell at him. He texted Khyati after one long year “ . Hi, Khyati ”.

Khyati ' s phone beeped. She looked at the screen. Her heart skipped a bit to see his name on the screen, but she suppressed that tiny breeze of joy with great effort. She ignored the message and went back to her work. After five minutes the phone beeped again “ . I am outside your orphanage ” .

Khyati tried to ignore this message too but she had to let out her anger. She picked up the phone and replied to Vikram ' s last text “ . No fucks to give ” .

Vikram laughed to see her reply. He texted and called her a few times, but Khyati didn ' t respond. Then he called Mayank and told him the whole story and his plan to propose to Khyati. Mayank ran out of the orphanage, found Vikram, and hugged him “ . She will not be easy to persuade. She may either kill you or completely ignore you. It was a very long year for her ”, Mayank warned Vikram .

“ You haven ' t told her about the one-year deal, have you ”? Vikram asked Mayank .

“ Of course not ”, said Mayank .

“ I am ready to get my ass kicked, but I will not leave without her ”. Vikram knew how difficult it was going to be to face Khyati .

Mayank went back to work. Vikram waited until Khyati came out of the orphanage after work. Vikram was in his signature casual look, wearing a white cotton shirt and faded jeans. He was wearing aviator sunglasses and sneakers. He was leaning against the car waiting for Khyati. He straightened up as he saw Khyati. Khyati hadn ' t been able to concentrate on work after getting Vikram ' s texts. She saw Vikram and moved her gaze immediately without any particular expression on her face. Vikram walked toward her and said “ , Khyati, wait. I need to talk to you ”.

Khyati didn ' t stop and started her Scooty. Vikram rushed to stop her . “ Khyati, please. Just give me a chance to explain ”.

Khyati looked at him looking extremely mad. There are two types of anger. One has the deepest love behind it and the other has the deepest hatred. Only the person who loves you the most can look at you with this type of anger .

“ Khyati, you have no idea how difficult this past year has been. There hasn't been a day when I didn't miss you. It was the most difficult year of my life ”.

“ Oh really? Because for me, it was a piece of cake. And it's so convenient for you to just show up one day and tell me how difficult it was for you ”.

“ You are right to be mad at me, and I'm here to explain to you what happened “ ”. I'm not mad at you ”. Both of them started talking over each other, then Khyati said “ . Fine, you go first. Then I'll talk ”.

“ Khyati, after college was over, I talked to my parents about you, but they had some other plans ”.

Vikram told Khyati the entire story about the deal he made with his parents, how he spent the year with Avika, and why he couldn't talk to Khyati during this time ”.

“ I've told my parents that I still love Khyati and I can't marry Avika. They want to meet your parents ”. Vikram ended his story on a positive note, hoping it would change Khyati's mood .

“ Oh, so you have come here to tell me that you picked me. Am I supposed to be happy? Am I supposed to feel lucky ”? Khyati was even madder to learn that Vikram had spent this entire year practically dating another girl .

“ One day, you stopped talking to me without any explanation. You abandoned me without realizing what a hell it has been for me. Then one day, you show up all of a sudden and tell me that now you can marry me. So basically, it means that you have the ultimate power in our relationship. You get to make all the decisions about our relationship. You can love me when you want, and abandon me when you want, but my wish to love you or leave you doesn't matter at all. Is that how it works ”?

Vikram was listening to Khyati with his gaze on the ground. He felt extremely sorry for being such a jackass toward Khyati, but he knew there was nothing he could say to make her feel better. He knew the best thing he could do right now was just let Khyati talk. There was year-old lava in her heart that erupted like a volcano today and Vikram had to face this metaphorical lava .

Khyati yelled at Vikram for a good hour and at the end, she told him , “ Vikram, I don ’ t want to be in a relationship where I am treated like a doormat. I love you a lot, but I have some self-respect. So, thank you, but no thank you ”.

Vikram didn ’ t dare stop her anymore. He let her go. He stayed at Mayank ’ s place that night “ . I will talk to her every day for the rest of my life to get a yes from her. She thinks she is stubborn, I am no less ”.

For the next few days, Vikram waited for Khyati outside her college and the orphanage. Sometimes, Khyati would leave without talking to Vikram even after he tried to make her stay, and sometimes, she would give in to her anger and yell at him for hours and leave without listening to him .

Finally, one day when she didn ’ t see Vikram at his usual spot outside of the orphanage, she looked around worriedly. Vikram was standing at a different spot. Khyati pretended to not see him and walked toward her Scooty. Vikram laughed a little and walked toward her “ . Are you done yelling at me ”?

Khyati was done yelling at Vikram. She had nothing else to be mad about. She wasn ’ t angry at Vikram anymore. When you ’ re angry at someone you hate, no matter how many times you get angry at them, it always leaves a little seed of hatred that just grows. That anger never really goes away because it is accompanied by hatred. But when you ’ re angry at someone you love, all you need to do is to just let out that anger, and you ’ re clean. The relationship becomes as good as new .

Khyati almost smiled at Vikram ’ s adorable comment but she pretended to be angry again “ . Vikram, you still don ’ t understand that what you did to me was terrible. How can you act so cool ”?

“ I know what I did to you, and I told you why I had to do it. All I can do now is to apologize and listen to your yelling for as long as you want to ”. Vikram could finally see that love in Khyati ’ s eyes again .

“ Do you have any idea how much I missed you, how many nights I cried myself to sleep, how difficult it was for me to get over you ”? Tears were rolling down Khyati ’ s eyes .

Vikram could feel her pain. He went close to her, held her hands and looked right into her eyes “ . Are you over me ”?

Khyati didn't answer, instead, she looked down. Vikram continued " . This one year of distance couldn't fade our love for each other. It doesn't happen that often . No matter how much we both try to push each other away from our lives, I know we ' ll end up together one day because we ' re meant for each other. It ' s as simple as that " .

Khyati removed her hands from Vikram ' s. She stopped crying and looked at Vikram " . I ' m also afraid of the same thing " . She had a little mischief in her voice " . No matter how much I try to kick you out of my life, you will make your way back to it. You ' re a lot more stubborn than I had thought " .

" So do you want to save both of us some sleepless and sexless nights and just cut to the chase " ? Vikram was back to his original sense of humor .

" Oh, so that ' s the reason you want me back " . Khyati turned around to leave " . Never going to happen " .

Vikram tugged at her arm, turned her face toward his and kissed her with overdue passion and love .

Mayank saw them from a little distance. His wish had come true. He took out his phone and took a picture of these reunited lovebirds .

Vikram looked at this picture on the album as he came back from his long journey to the past. It was the last picture on the album. It had been thirteen years since this picture was taken. Soon after that day, Vikram ' s and Khyati ' s parents had met and decided their engagement. Mayank and Pratima had married a few months before Vikram and Khyati .

Vikram closed the album and got up to put it back. He was not the same Vikram anymore. He was older, more mature and boring , and a better businessman, but he still loved Khyati as passionately as he did when he was in college. Just the way he expressed his love had changed .

Mayank and Pratima had started their own orphanage in the same town where Vikram and Khyati lived. They had kept their decision to not have kids of their own. Vikram and Khyati had a daughter. Khyati still taught at the college and worked religiously with Mayank and Pratima .

Vikram went to check on his daughter Kiara, who was taking an afternoon nap in her room. She was four years old now. As Vikram came out of her room, he heard a car in the driveway .

He walked out of the house as he saw Khyati get out from the car “ . Hey honey, how was your day ”?

Vikram stayed home during the weekends to take care of Kiara so Khyati could work at the orphanage .

“ It was great. I found our old pictures from college. I ’ m all nostalgic now. How was your day ”? Asked Vikram .

Before Khyati could answer, Mayank yelled out from the driver ’ s seat “ . Your wife just made a huge hole in your pocket. She wrote a big fat check to the orphanage for the new computer lab for kids ”.

“ Eh! She ’ s the boss. She can do whatever she wants with our money ”, Vikram shrugged it off .

“ You guys are coming for dinner tonight, right ”? Khyati asked Pratima and Mayank .

“ Sure! See you then ”! Pratima said and Mayank drove off .

Nothing much had changed in the last fifteen years, other than the fact that the friendship shared by Vikram, Mayank, Khyati, and Pratima had become super strong. All of them learned the biggest lessons of life together and walked on the same path of making the world a better place for the kids in their orphanage .

Vikram and Khyati waved at them and went in the house “ . You look sexy in those white shirt and faded jeans ”, Khyati said mischievously as she sat on the sofa across from Vikram .

“ That ’ s the beauty of this combination ”! Vikram winked like the twenty-year-old that Khyati had fallen for in college .