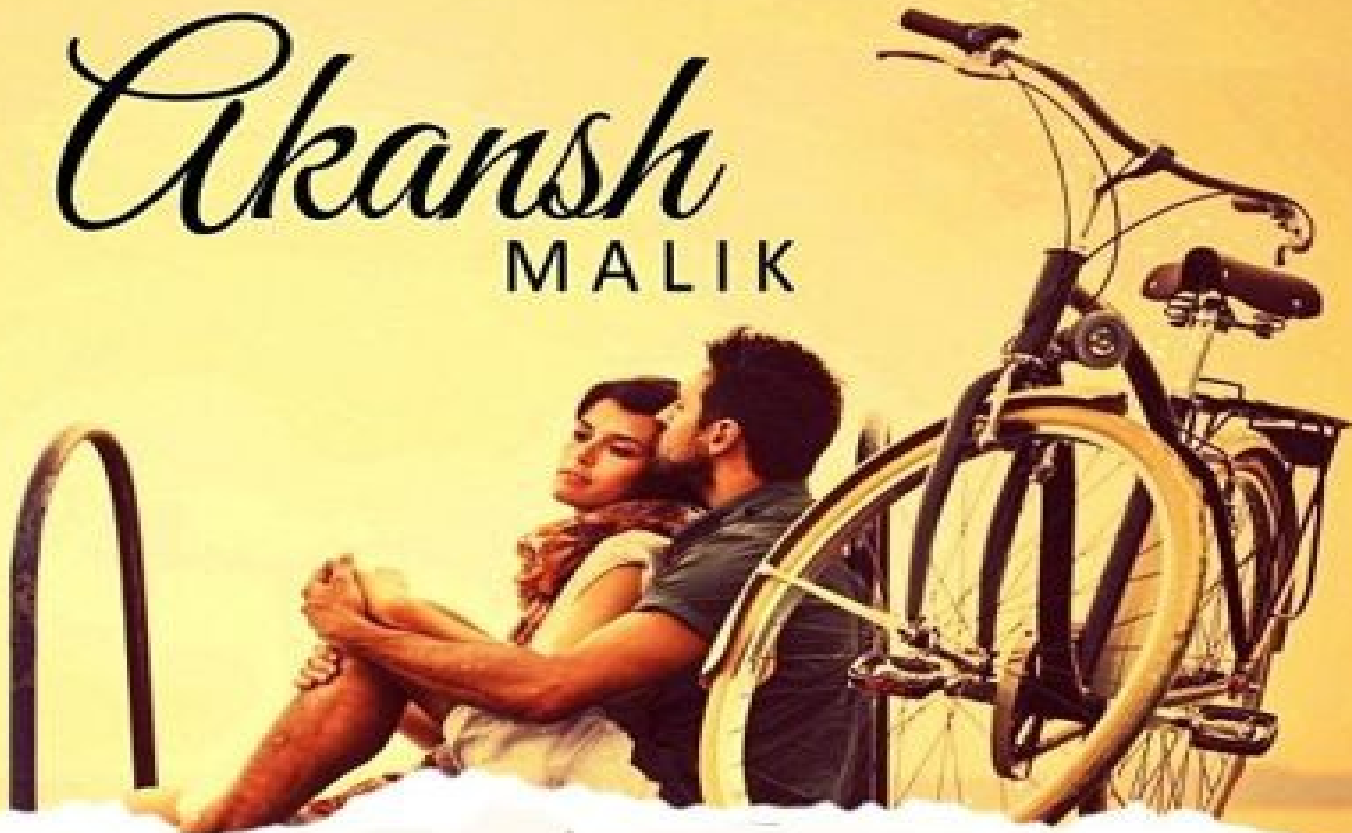


*Akansh*  
MALIK



LOVE HEALS  
EVERYTHING



# Love Heals Everything

Akansh Malik

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## Prologue

“Life is series of hiccups.” It was his ideology. But something made me believe in it too.

I met this guy on a night out at the Medical Canteen. He was quiet but I realized that he was holding a lot within. A single look towards him was enough to ignite my curiosity to know him more.

“Hi,” I said as an opening as Harshit, who was a frequent visitor to the canteen, introduced me to him.

“Hey,” he responded, sounding normal though his intense look, uncut beard and strong husky voice indicated a torment brewing within.

“Aarush,” he introduced himself and offered a firm handshake.

“Akansh,” I said, shaking his hand.

“Nice name,” he said, offering me the can of beer in his hand.

“Yours as well,” I returned the compliment and we settled.

I was wondering why he was behaving so intensely and why he was sitting in the Medical Canteen alone and chain smoking at this time of the night.

We were there for a night-out bunk as other places got closed by that time. Was he also there for the same reason?

“Do you come here regularly?” I asked.

“Yes, my fiancée is hospitalized here.” His intense face turned pale and I could see tears in his eyes.

“What has happened to her?”

“She is in coma,” he said, puffing out smoke.

He was holding something inside his mind and I was curious to know what he was writing in his diary.

“I am sorry to hear that. I hope she gets well soon...” I said looking towards dancing pen in his hand.

Then, suddenly, a call on his mobile phone disturbed him. He kept his beer can on the table and pulled the cigarette out of his mouth.

“Yes, doctor,” he said.

I became a bit nervous about the call. Why was the doctor calling him at this odd hour? Was his fiancé alright? Many questions popped in my mind.

He left all his belonging and ran towards the hospital...

“Aarush...?” I shouted.

I wanted to go with him but by the time I could get up, he had disappeared.

“Akansh you wait here, let me see where he is,” Harshit told me as he ran in the same direction as Aarush.

I sat there nervously, pondering over many possibilities when I noticed Aarush's diary lying on the table. I looked at the diary and my curiosity got the better of me. I picked it up and started reading what he was writing.

# How I Met Her...

“Hi, Aarush, AaroHi this side. Kanika had given me your number and said that you can help in getting me a place in Delhi.” Her voice was seductive and I was mesmerized as she continued talking without taking a breath.

“I have reached the Karol Bagh Metro Station,” she informed me, sounding excited. Listening to her voice, I tried to imagine her face. I saw the face of a goddess.

“I will be there in five minutes,” I said while turning the wheel of my car towards the metro station.

Kanika was my child-hood friend, who had been there during all the ups and downs in my life. AaroHi was her cousin, who had completed her engineering and was in Delhi for her internship.

It was the summer of 2009 when destiny had aligned AaroHi and me to meet for the first time. I could see her standing outside the station as I slowed my car near the parking. Her flowing hair was a sharp shade of ebony, her skin glowing with radiance and her figure was a perfect 10. I was baffled as to why Kanika had not told me about her ever before.

She was standing there, holding her hand bag in one hand and shielding her face against the harsh rays of the sun with the other. Her luggage consisted of just one strolley that was placed beside her.

She noticed the number of my car, which I had told her over the phone and started waving hand.

As I stepped out of the car and towards her, I first felt her presence by her fragrance as it aromatized my nose. Her baby blue eyes seemed to brighten the world and her straight nose, full lips and high forehead were a picture of perfection. She was dressed in a simple white salwar-suit but was giving competition to the girls, standing beside her, wearing tiny shorts.

“Hi,” I greeted her with nervousness. She greeted me back, firmly shaking my hand. I was nervous because I could feel all eyes were on us. Leave alone the boys, who were staring at her from the corner juice shop, even the women were admiring her beauty. The protective male inside me had awoken and I wanted to get away from there as quickly as possible.

“Shall we move?” I asked holding her luggage.

“Can we have a cup of coffee first?” She asked in a manner that no one could negotiate. I nodded my head in the affirmative.

“Let me keep your luggage first...” I said with a smile and she responded with a smile that could touch any heart.

There was complete silence between us as we walked towards the CCD outlet upstairs at the Metro Station. Usually, I was very comfortable with the opposite gender, but she was different and I found myself completely tongue tied in her presence!

She broke the silence, “Sorry, I must be wasting your time.”

“No, its fine,” I said while my eyes tried to avoid looking at those 'fall-for-me' eyes.

As we entered CCD, the refreshing aroma of coffee and a romantic song welcomed us inside. Romance was truly in the air.

“What would you like to have?” She asked, breaking the awkward silence again.

“Whatever you would like,” I said and she ordered two cold coffees. I pulled out my Android just to hide what was running in my mind and to hide the nervousness too.

Wicked Kanika! She had told me that she was not my type. But look at her! She was as pretty as a statue in Madame Tussauds. One could look at her for a couple of hours without uttering a single word and I was no different. I could definitely spend weeks, months or even years just looking at her that way. Who would say she was not my type? She was too religious and spent most of her time in temples. She had never looked at the world outside her books. So what? It didn't matter if she believed in something and I didn't. And there was always a first time. She was not interested in relationships. So what? She might have not found anyone like me. My brain was having a collision of millions of thoughts.

I should never have listened to Kanika. First impression is the last impression, and there I was, awoken after a bad hangover of the previous night, wearing an unwashed T-shirt and a pair of jeans, and a beard, which I had never shaved after my break up two months ago.

“Devil calling.” My phone read. I smiled.

“Hi, Kanika,” I said with a curse. She gave me a look, her lips emphasizing on the word- Kanika.

“Yes,” I said smiling sheepishly. She too smiled and took a sip of her coffee.

How lucky the cup was to get touched by her lips. The red mark of her lipstick was visible on the edge of the cup after she placed back it on the table. I was jealous. Yeah, I was jealous of the cup!

“Yes, she has reached here,” I said.

“Just stay away from her. Do not flirt with her,” she continued with her list of Don't Do's.

We are already on a coffee date. She is amazing, I said to myself.

Kanika only had instructed me to pick her up and now she was behaving like she didn't trust me. Wait, but she trusts me more than I trust myself. She knew every bit of me.

While I was pre-occupied in my thoughts, I heard a noise. Kanika was shouting at me, “Baat kara na meri,” which I was teasingly denying her. In the end, I lost the war-of-the-tease and I handed over the phone to her. She smiled at me.

Aarohi rested my phone on her left ear, flicking her hair behind, showing her heart shaped earrings.

“Aaru is really a nice boy,” she said while looking at me.

“Aaru?” Only my 'close friends' called me by that name. She had also given me the 'nice-boy tag' and I thought I had lost the chance to date her since girls like to date bad-boys and nice boys are only used

to provide their shoulders once their hearts have been broken.

After her conversation ended after about 10 minutes, I started the conversation that I had built up in my mind.

“So, when do you have to join,” I asked with curiosity to know every bit of her life.

“Next to next Monday,” she said with a smile on her face. A simple smile at the end of every sentence, yet so beautiful.

“Okay, 14 days to go.” I calculated.

After we finished the coffee, we left for the hotel where she had already booked a room in her name. She wanted to stay in the hotel while she finalised a place to stay for herself for the six month duration of her internship.

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After a drive of around one hour, I understood what Kanika was talking about. Not a single temple on the way passed where she didn't join her hands in prayer. She would close her eyes and hands and I when I looked at her face, she would ask me to do the same, little realising that what had not been done in past twenty two years could not be done now.

“How mean are you !” I taunted her.

“Mean...?” She raised her eye brows.

“You always ask God for yourself, have you ever asked him how he is?” I said remembering a dialogue from a movie.

“No. And you? As if you ask him...na?” She teased me.

“But I don't even ask for myself.”

“You don't believe in God...na?”

Her ending her sentence with the word 'na' added a sense of curiosity to her questions and I loved the way she stressed on that word. And the change of her facial expression with each word was a magnetic field which would attract anyone to look at her and forget the rest of the world. Her facial muscles were perfectly in a practice to perform such small actions that would steal anyone's heart.

“I believe in destiny,” I said.

“Destiny is what God decides,” she said in an argumentative tone.

Believe me when a beautiful girl argues with you; you can't leave the argument and at the same time you can't win it either.

“If God has decided us to meet, on this day, at this time, at this place, then I should reconsider my belief in God.” I said wittingly and she smiled. I was scoring better than her. My flirtatious nature

was still intact and waiting to display itself.

“So, you might start believing in God because he has let us meet?” She raised her eyes and looked at me with her Mona Lisa smile.

“We have reached the destination ma'am.” The last mile of our journey rescued me from that argument, which I could have easily lost on my last pick-up.

Never show a girl that you are attracted towards her, or else you will lose her that very moment. I was counting on each and every rule of the 'How to behave with a girl' dictionary installed into my brain-drive by my friend, Arun.

Reaching the hotel, I had a deep confusion about whether I should accompany her up to her room. And my pragmatic side win.

Hotel Glassy - the board read, above the 25 feet wide entrance door. The glass door opened automatically as soon as we stepped on the mat. I accompanied her to her room on the third floor in the lift. The room had a nicely sheeted bed, a sofa set and a round glass centre table.

“I should leave now. You take rest, and we will go tomorrow to see the rooms,” I said half-heartedly, hoping she would stop me from going.

“If you don't have any other plans, why don't you join me for a dinner?” She was waiting to listen to a 'yes'. Has she ever been told a no, I wondered. Her twinkling eyes always demanded a yes.

“Sorry, I have to go the birthday party of a friend, tonight” I said, disappointed myself.

“Hmm,” she said.

That 'hmm' tore my heart apart. How could I disappoint a beautiful girl like her?

“Why don't you join me, it would be a great fun,” I said with excitement in my tone. I was optimistic about her positive response.

“I am sure it would be fun, but I wouldn't know anyone there,” she said innocently.

“But you know me, and I am sure I am not that bad a companion for a party.” I tried flirting and she agreed after a little argument.

As I stepped out of the hotel, my brain and my heart seemed to be in a conflict.

Brain: You had decided not to fall for anyone again.

Heart: I am not falling for her; it's just a minor attraction.

Brain: Minor attraction? You've already fallen for her.

Heart: It's just an attraction.

Brain: Boy, your attraction will turn into love.

Heart: No, it won't.

Brain: It will.

Conflict was disturbed by a call from Kanika.

“ Hey, have you dropped her to the hotel?” She asked in her commanding manner.

“ Yes, ma'am, I have properly dropped your sister to her hotel room.”

“ Okay, show her the rooms tomorrow morning, I will call her.”

“Okay ji, by the way, you didn't tell me earlier,” I said in a lazy tone to tease her.

“What?

“That she is so beautiful.”

“Haan to...?

“ I might fall for her.”

“Aarush, just stay away from her and don't you dare to talk to her.”

“Okay, baba, don't shout, I was kidding.”

“Hmm.”

“For your kind information, Miss Kani, we are going on a date tonight.”

“What?”

I disconnected the call to tease my friend a little more. She called me again and again but I disconnected each time until I reached my home.

“What happened?”

“Don't you dare, Aarush,” she said, shouting.

“Kanika, don't be so possessive, I don't have any engagement plans with your sister.”

“Aarush...!!

“Its Prachi's birthday and we are going there together. That's it!”

“Okay, bye.”

The rest of the story, I guess, she got from Aarohi. Kanika was always like this, she would always advice me not to get closely attached with opposite sex as then she would have to hear my entire story after the break up much to her irritation. Or was she just caring for me as she had seen me too closely during my last two break ups. Whatever, but she was indeed one of my best friend.



## **Party, Long Drive and Locha**

The evening had something to offer something pleasant; pleasant climate, pleasant momentum of joy, pleasant music; everything was as pleasant as it could be.

Dressing up that day was different for me. I was going to accompany the most beautiful creation of God that day and I was already feeling an inflated pride within.

I reached her hotel and called her. She asked me to come directly to her room.

“Aarohi?” I knocked at the door.

“Come inside, Aarush, the door is open.” I pushed the door inside and realized that she was in the bath.

“Get yourself comfortable, Aaru, I will be ready in 10 minutes,” she screamed from the glass cubicle covered with white curtains.

My brain started to erupt with some naughty thoughts and in a bid to divert my mind, I switched on the television but those sizzling videos on VH1 were an adding to my devilish thoughts, so I changed to AAJ TAK, the safest channel for the day.

“Aaru...” She called again. I muted the sound to hear what she was saying.

“I forgot my towel outside; could you please pass that to me?” She sounded very seductive that moment and I had to control the hardest-to-control men feelings and I did. I thought to myself that she too would have felt quite embarrassed asking for it like this.

While passing the towel, I tried my best not to look at her but I got a glimpse of her through the mirror on the opposite wall; it was purely unintentional. She came out shortly afterwards.

Active, charged, excited, nervous, whatever adjectives you can imagine were not enough to count my emotion at that moment. Her beauty had made me speechless again and I actually gulped before I could say anything.

She was looking stunning. Her body was covered with water droplets and her long and dense hair were enough to make me get lost in them. She was dressed in her black lace fit flare dress which ended just few centimetres below her thighs. As she applied kajal over her eyes, I couldn't resist and said- “Gorgeous!!”

“Thank you,” she said winking, and adjusting her dress with her hand. I smiled back. I was feeling shy and so was she.

“Shall we move?” I said, pointing my hand towards the door.

We were looking stunning together but she was the charmer as was apparent from the appreciative looks of people around us while we walked to my bike outside the hotel.

I purposely brought the bike that evening after quite a long time because I wanted to enjoy that precious ride, sitting close to her and to roam on the roads of Delhi with her. You know how the Delhi roads are and you could never know how often and suddenly you may have to apply the brakes. And with a stunning girl like her sitting behind, how could I avoid braking.

“I love bikes,” she said, excitedly in her melodious voice.

“Me too...” I screamed without losing speed and the distance of around five km to end within a few minutes.

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“Aarush, I have never been to such places before...” she said while we were moving upstairs, clasping my hand.

“Don't worry...” I said holding her hand in my arms.

“But Aarush...” the roar was fearsome for her. It was not the roar of people, but drunken people.

“We will leave soon. Let me know if you feel uncomfortable and we will leave,” I said. I was interested in seeing the reaction of Prachi and Arun when they caught sight of me with a girl.

“Hi Aarush...” Prachi came and hugged me.

“Here's the birthday girl, wish you a very happy birthday.” I hugged her back and a small kiss on her right cheek.

“Meet Aarohe...” I said, and as they hugged and I realised I was pretty much jealous of Prachi.

Something in her that was pulling me towards her. Since the demise of my last love, I had never thought of any girl like this for the last two months as I didn't want to be in a relationship anymore.

While the exchange of hello continued with some colleagues, friends and others, the chilled beers were ready to chill my parched throat and after three of them, I was ready to shake a leg.

Then I suddenly looked for Aarohe and found her sitting on the couch under the dim green light with her hand covering her face. Though she was looking gorgeous, she also looked highly uncomfortable in that wild party. I went to her, held her hand and moved out.

“Thanks, Aarush,” she said with a smile on her face.

“Thanks for what...?” I raised my eyebrows to look at her with an intense look towards her eyes.

“So, where should we go now?” I asked her.

She looked at me with her lower lip a little downward and both her hands cutely flying in the air

which I thought meant- wherever.

“Food...?” I asked. I knew she had not had anything since evening.

“Sure...” she said nodding her head. The wind was blowing and so were her hair. Every now and then a flock of her hair would touch her face and she would flick it back behind her ears.

I loved to see her that way. Aaroahi, she was no ordinary girl; she was the definition of beauty.

It was 11PM and we drove to the Hauz Khas Village to grab a bite but hiccups were always a part of my life. This time the hiccup was in the form of my bike. The bike suddenly spluttered and gasped a few times, pushing Aaroahi towards me, and then finally went dead.

I marked the checklist. Petrol- Okay, Choke-Okay, the supply pipe was working. And I kicked back, one, two, three, four and I lost to count after seven after which I parked bike there on the side stand.

I cleaned my sweaty palms on my jeans and wiped my forehead to look for an auto rickshaw forgetting completely that all autos were on strike that day.

“We should walk,” her voice sounded like a rescue plan and I had had no choice but to follow her.

I suggested we go for dinner to the restaurants on the other side of the road but I was in for a shock again. After walking for about 15 minutes, every restaurant that we went to had the closed sign put up in front. The whole thing was killing my passion. First impressions were the last impressions, and mine were getting worse moment by the minute.

First, I took her, a girl with such strong religious beliefs, to a lounge. Then, I took her on out bike that had not been properly serviced in three months and lastly, I was prodding and stumbling on the roads of Delhi in the darkness of the night with her.

Saravana Bhavan was the only dine-out that was open that night. I don't like south Indian cuisine very much but realised that it was the only option open at that time of the night. There really was no question of choice then.

The man at the cash counter was enjoying some south Indian song and smiled at us as we entered. We smiled back.

“Maalai Vanakkam,” he greeted us, joining his palms together and bowing his head slightly. I greeted him similarly and was promptly directed to a round table covered with a purple polka dotted table cloth.

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I started the conversation hesitantly, “Aaroahi, have you ever been to Delhi before...?” She was playing with her hair and was looking at her phone. Hearing my voice, she raised her face and looked towards me.

“No, Aarush, I have never been out of my hometown, Rohtak,” she said with her eyes twinkling.

A waiter interrupted our talk and stood with a pen and a pad in his hand to take our order for food.

“I would like to have idly,” she said with a smile on her face. Her dimples and her gestures were making me fall for her more.

Suddenly, her phone rang with vibration.

“I am with Aarush...No...!! I didn't like the lounge so we were heading back to the hotel...Just stayed for dinner...Yes, I will...”

The one sided conversation was proof enough of how much Kanika cared for her cousin.

“Kanika...?” I asked.

“Yes... How did you know?” She asked with innocence.

“I know her very well,” I replied with confidence.

“Are you both in a relationship?” She asked with curiosity.

“What?” When a beautiful girl asks you about your relationship status you almost melt.

“Don't you like her?” She continued.

“Who said that to you?” I asked out of wonder. What she was talking about, had anyone told her a story?

“No one, baba, she always talks about you,” she ended the argument.

“What does she talk about?”

“Nothing...”

“Tell me”

“Come on, Aarush, nothing...” Her nothing was telling me many things. I must speak with Kanika.

Idly, white with coconut- cream, was served on the table. It smelled delicious but its taste was as depressing as the depression of night. But still, our hungry and starving stomachs were ready for any possible filling.

“Aarush... how did you both meet?” She asked with a spoon near her lips. Her eyes were looking towards the plate.

“Aarohi, we met at school. Nursery, if I remember correctly,” I said and laughed on my own. “She was a leg-puller...”

“She is still a leg-puller,” she replied sarcastically.

“You know what she was saying?” She asked with a wink.

“What?”

“Stay away from Aarush...” She said and laughed.

“What?” I said and turned my face.

Aarohi was straight-forward; she never gave a second thought before speaking.

“You know, Aarush, she is everything to me. She was the one who handled me, after my parents' death...” she said in a doleful way.

I was mum and I had no words to say to her. She pulled her hanky to wipe the tears. Some more tears rolled down her cheek from the corners of her eyes while she uttered those words. I was deliberately mildly obtuse to respond as I rubbed my index finger and to remove that drop that I never wanted to see again in her eyes.

“Aarohi...”

“Sorry, Aarush, but there is no one in my life except her.”

“Kiska hai yeh tumko intezaar main hu na...” I began to sing to change the mood.

“Aaru...” She said with a laugh on her face.

A waiter with the bill and smile was a clear sign that the restaurant wanted to shut down for the night.

“Dada, is there any hotel nearby?” I asked, and he looked me from head to toe and then at Aarohi, his eyes were thinking something was fishy.

“No,” he replied rudely and turned to say something to his staff.

I took Aarohi's hand and we stepped outside. We were on a road without an end. The auto-rickshaws were on strike and the metro was closed till 5 AM and we still had five hours to while away on that lonely night before we could reach her hotel.

“Movie...?” I asked to shock her in a surprise.

“What?” She said, duly surprised.

I pointed the cineplex which looked as good as the Good Shepherd from a distance.

“Instellar, 12:30” I read aloud the LED.

“Do you like sci-fi movies?” I asked while we were already walking towards the cineplex.

“Wow...Mathew... Anne, Jessica and who I don't remember the name...” her voice was filled with excitement that served like *Selaginella Bryopteris* to my fraying nerves.

“Do you know who that actor is, Aarush?” She asked pointing towards the handsome dude in the right corner. I was confused with those names.

She was excited on account of the cast and that was definitely a score for me on that disastrous night.

The theatre was empty besides a few other couples who were busy making out rather than watching

science fiction. I was feeling lucky that the movie proved to be the saviour for us. A few minutes later, she was having a nap with her head placed over my arm. I could smell the ravishing aroma of her body. I didn't want to disturb her but could not stop myself from moving her hair, which fell on her face, behind her ear.

I kept looking at her. The movie had nothing that could divert my attention from the goddess sleeping on my shoulder. Similar was the case with everyone else in the theatre; nobody was actually watching the movie. I tried to take nap too but every time I woke up, I found my eyes smitten with her.

I didn't notice before, but she was carrying a quartz sculpt of Lord Ganesha. I felt her astuteness more by observing that her tenderness bound her life, her nature, and her beauty.

“Hey, Aarush,” Vikrant called out while I was replying to 'nature's call'.

“Hi Vikrant,” I was extremely happy to find someone I knew that night...

“So, did you hook up?” He asked realizing that I was with Aarohi as he was the one at the back seat with her girlfriend.

“Yes,” I said, cutting off the detailed story.

“Vikrant, my bike stopped and the engine never started when we were on the way. Could you please drop us to at Indraprastha?”

“Of course, yaar.”

After the movie, with her head resting on my left arm on the back-seat of the car, travelling to the hotel was a special journey for me

“I should book another room,” I said to be nice to her.

Flopping on the large bed, she uttered in a sleepy voice, “Sleep here only, I know I can trust you.”

I sat there looking at her and I was thinking that there was nothing in my mind at that moment. I was lost, I was carried away, and I was not what I was. Something was stopping my eyes from moving anywhere else as I lay on the couch near her bed.

Why is she attracting me towards her, why is she so sweet? Why I couldn't resist her? Why this is happening again? No, I don't want to fall for anyone again. No I won't. It's just mere attraction, I convinced myself.

“Morning...” she said while placing the coffee tray on the round crystal table near the couch.

I could notice her smile as she pulled the table towards her and her sweet smell was wafting into my nostrils. I tried to move my eyes away from her 'fall-for-me' eyes but they were struggling to see anywhere else but her face, her cleavage, her hair, and the rest of her body.

“Morning...” I replied, my strong desire for her aroused.

“So, where would we be going today?” She asked innocently.

“Office, first,” I said as I was on continuous leave for the past few days without any information.

She politely understood.

“See if you can take leave...” she asked and added, “Only if possible...”

“I was already on leave for last 10 days,” I said, feeling a bit crushed.

“Okay... We will meet in the evening.”

I left the hotel, caught hold of a mechanic and went to Kalkaji to fetch my bike, which had failed me last night.

“Sir, petrol pipe mein kachra hai...” The mechanic told me.

I kicked my Avenger and decided to send a text to my reporting manager-

“I am sorry I was not able to inform you, but my brother has met with an accident and is in serious condition, therefore I would not be able to come to office for a few more days.”

Then I messaged Aarohi- “It was the best night I have ever had, without drinks \*wink\*. Let's go hunting a domicile for you.”

My phone rang within a few seconds, “Are you coming...?” I could sense a smile on her face from there itself.

Meanwhile, I received a message from Mr. Rachit, my reporting manager- “Feel free to ask if you need anything. Take your time; we will manage here.” That sure did take some pressure off me.

## **My Heart, the Abode of Love**

She was looking ravishing, dressed in a green kurta and white salwar with a white tippet covering her bosom. As she was stepping down the stairs of the hotel and moved towards me, I felt a dull ache in my heart.

“Office...?” She asked in the mild tone of hers.

“Aarohi, I am suffering from high fever...” I said and winked.

She smiled and settled herself on my bike. Her one hand was on my shoulder and the other hand was resting on her lap. Though our bodies were a few inches away but I could feel her closeness.

We moved towards Karol Bagh where I had negotiated some rooms for her beforehand.

“What kind of a room would you prefer?” I asked with decency to know her choice.

“Anything will work...No specific choice, yaar, like one bedroom, kitchen and a hall...ah...open balcony if possible. I love open balconies. And it should be properly painted...” She continued with her list of demands. So much for 'anything will work'!

Room One... Trial One...

We reached the Floor-1 of B-12 in Main Market Chowk. A lady with a child in her arm came out of the house. Her reeking kurti was the evidence of the piddle of her child on her clothes.

“Manish ji had given your address, we are here to see the flat on rent,” I said as an answer to her questioning looks.

“Come inside,” she said, nodding her head.

Cream colour walls were displaying criss-cross pencil art and I guessed that her elder child, who was roaming in the half pants, was the artist.

“Beta, say hi to bhaiya and bhabhi,” she told her child.

I looked at AaroHi. Our eyes met and so did our words as she and I responsively uttered-

“We are not married...”

The lady gave us a dirty look but continued to show us the flat.

“Do you like it?” I asked AaroHi.

“No...” she said softly, crunching her nose.

“It's quite nice; you have maintained the floor well.” I told the lady with sincerity but it had to be solely AaroHi's decision.

“Thank you” the lady said while moving her lap up and down to move her crying child.

“We will inform you soon about when we are going to shift...” I said to save an embarrassing situation.

We moved outside the flat and were walking toward bike when AaroHi whispered “bhaiya-bhabhi” and laughed gently to herself.

“You too will be carrying a crying baby in your hands after marriage like her,” I teased her.

“Not like that, both my hands will be occupied with a boy and a girl in my respective hands,” she said with sparkling eyes.

“And a baby in your womb,” I said and laughed.

She smiled and play acted firing a bullet at me with her gun shaped hand with one eye closed. She was mature enough to understand everything but still excluded childlike behaviour. I loved it.

Our next destination was few meters away but we landed up at the Laxmi Narayan temple instead



since Aarohi spotted it on the way and forced me to stop.

I stayed outside to wait while she went inside. She was frequently turning back and was looking at me, hoping I would join her, but God and me, after my father's death, had developed a strained relationship.

The temple bells were inviting me inside and forcing me to pay obeisance to the statue of God but I forced myself to look away in the opposite direction where children were playing in a park. I could see elders walking and I could see smiling faces that I found to be a more pleasant sight. I had no interest in looking at the God, who had omitted the presence of my father before I could even step out of my teens. Every time I look back to that night, my eyes become wet and I long for my dear departed father..

She came back with a fist full of 'parsad' but I deliberately refused to take it. It was the first time that I was refusing since we had met. I could not look her in the eyes as I was hiding something in my eyes which I didn't want her to look at.

“Take it as sweet...” she said innocently.

“Aarohi, please...” I said and move my face away. She didn't compel me and quietly sat on the bike.

“You don't believe in God na?” She asked the obvious.

“I do believe in your God, Aarohi,” I said, calming myself down as I did not want to offend her.

“Then?” She asked, a little confused.

“Long story,” I said and I was quiet. An awkward silence followed.

—

It was an early summer morning but I hadn't slept much the night before. I fetched my coffee mug and moved to the balcony of my room to feel the refreshing air. I lit a cigarette and was soon lost in thoughts.

I was moving back and forth in my past and present and was trying to figure out my sleeplessness.

Aarohi had replaced my past. I had committed a lot of mistakes in my past, which I never wanted to repeat in this relationship. Everything was happening so suddenly - arrival of Aarohi into my life, spending time with her, getting habitual to her mannerisms...But wait, I had been there before with Sakshi too till time had changed us both. With Aarohi, it was just a presence of a girl in my life after a long time that was attracting me towards her. I told myself. But why am I thinking about her so much? After all, she is just the cousin of my best friend. There is nothing else. I have already been in a broken relationship. How could I fall for someone else so soon?

My alarm brought me back to senses but I had no answers yet. I had no idea what was happening in my life. I moved back to my room as it was already eight o'clock and I had to get ready to for the quest to find a place for Aarohi.

Fifteen days with Aarohi and brought about a remarkable change in me. I was gentle as never before, dressed formal in my wear, had shaved off my beard and most significantly, I hadn't touched my soul-mate – my cigarette for the last four days. My late night wakefulness and my gazing at blank walls had changed to texting Aarohi. There was love blooming somewhere inside me and I hoped that it was mutual.

Me: “Hi Café latte \*smile\*”

She: “Hieee...” (Double 'e' end was picturing her excitement in my mind...)

Me: “Are you excited about the work. They're gonna take the best out of you.”

She: “No, I don't want to work here. I don't like it”

Me: “Cutie-pie, you haven't even joined yet...”

She: “I don't want to work anywhere. I just want to travel, travel, and travel, and picture, picture and picture...”

She seemed excited and I could picture her lying on her bed, fiddling with her hair, and embracing her pillow.

Me: “Am I in those pictures?”

She: “Let me check... No... You are not there...”

For a second, that message made my heart skip a beat. I was about to check my pulse when she sent me another message that saved my life-

“You are clicking the photos \*wink\* and making me a memory \*tongue\*,”

My mornings began with her and my nights ended with her “Good Night” texts. I was getting addicted to her.

“Well, this is the last place I had to show you. If you don't like even this then, I guess, you will have my heart your abode...” I said sarcastically.

“Your heart, I won't mind,” she said with a wink.

She was looking more than beautiful that day. What made her so beautiful? Was it her personality? Was it the way she dressed up? Was it the way she put mascara on her eyes? Was it the nose ring she wore? Was it the mole below her lips? What is it? My grey cells, though they were no longer functioning, were trying to figure it out while my heart told me that I was falling hard for her.

Moving further to Block-B, Rajindra Nagar, we were quite tired, physically and mentally, and the last hope now was Smriti Bhavan.

“Hi, Gulati Ji had told us regarding a one room apartment...” I was tired of repeating the name of

property dealers.

“The key is here... you can take the stairs to third floor.”

Our morale dropped hearing the word- third floor and we were completely demoralised but since Aarohi had liked the locality, I requested her to finalise the place as there were no more rooms to show her.

We walked up to the third floor of the building and she was delighted to see the place that had been designed and done up like a cottage on a hill station. The room had pink tiles, a mattress on floor, a vanity on one side and a LCD on the other side of wall. The best thing was that the spacious room had a centre table of concrete and a hut-shaped lantern, which was perfect for candle-light twosome.

“Aarush, would you like to have dinner at my new place,” she asked me temptingly.

“Anything you say, ma'am,” I said with a smile on my face.

—

She had invited me to a candle light dinner, which she had told me would be my best dinner ever. Was it a date? My heart fluttered just thinking about it.

“Are you ready?” A text from her at 7:40 PM was sensually firing me up.

“Just few minutes and I will be there” I replied.

A black suite, a white shirt, a waist coat, with a fair amount of redolence and I was ready to romance. I had been confused about the gift that I should take for her but after consulting, both, my male and female friends, I decided on a painting of a mermaid, copied from RHTDM.

Twenty minutes later, as soon as knocked, she opened the door and I walked into the sound of music and candlelight and my heart skipped a beat as I looked at her. She was looking gorgeous in her sexy black slip dress.

Suddenly, she hugged me and her bosom touched my chest. I wish I could have saved that moment for eternity.

“Thank you, for choosing the best for me,” she whispered in my ears and I could smell her heavenly perfume.

There were candles everywhere and the round table under the cone ceiling with half tree trunks as stools were waiting for us. The table was already laid out with food that probably had been made by her and smelled awesome.

“So, did you prepare this all?” I said with a smile.

“I tried to...” she winked at me.

“But for whom?” I teased her.

“For a boy, I want you to meet...”

“Who is it...?”

“I want you to meet someone. Someone, who I had always wanted to be with. He is inside the room”

My heart skipped a beat, it needed some pumping, I didn't want to be a part of that game anymore. My happiness was ebbing and I was feeling deflated.

“Call him,” I said with a heavy heart, but in a normal tone.

“Yeah,” she said and moved toward the room,

“Baby, are you ready, Aaru is here.” She was yelling while moving towards the room and I was hoping it would be a pet and nothing else. My eyes followed her and my heart was in my throat. Her giggling and her calling out to her 'friend' was getting unbearable for me now.

“Aarush, can you please come... the door is not opening,” she called me.

She was trying to pull open the door of the washroom and as I moved to help her, I wondered who could be using her washroom for the last 25 minutes, the time that I had been in her apartment. It scared me. I pushed hard and the door opened and I took a sigh of relief. The washroom was unoccupied. She had been playing a game with me to make me feel jealous.

“There is nobody here,” I said and she pushed me inside.

“See, there he is...”

I looked in the direction that she was pointing to and could see myself smiling in the mirror. She was pointing at me in the mirror, I turned back and she hugged me again. As I held her in my arms, my lips touched hers and there was magic. We stood there lip locked for quite some time, feeling a unique oneness with each other. Her perfume was driving me crazy.

Later, as we lay on her bed with her running her fingers in my hair, she looked into my eyes and said, “Aarush, promise me something...”

“Anything,” I said, loving her touch and the touch of her body next to mine.

“You will never leave me alone,” she said and hugged me, tears rolling down her eyes.

“I promise,” I said and kissed her forehead.

It had been love at first sight for me but I wondered what Aaroohi found in me. Then, I remembered Arun telling me once that love was blind. I smiled to myself and swore that I would never let that thought occur to me in future.

# Double The Love

Morning sunrays woke me up from the deep sleep, and Arohi was not there. I called her name. There was no response. I was about to get up to give her a call when I saw the goddess entering the room with a tray in her hand. She had prepared coffee for us.

“Good morning, good that you're awake else I would have had to dip your finger in hot coffee,” she said with a notorious smile on her face.

I didn't say a word. I raised myself and planted a 'good morning' kiss on her cheek while she was placing the coffee tray on the bed. She placed the coffee carefully on the bed, held my head, looked deep into my eyes for a few seconds and kissed me on my lips. Her deep, passionate kiss was more than just seduction.

“Aarohi... you have come into my life like the sun and brightened it up again.”

“Aarush, never compare me to the sun,” she argued with her cheeks turning a blushing pink.

“Why?” I asked with curiosity.

“Because the sun sets at the evening, budhu...and I am not going to leave you before I die.”

I kept my index finger on her lips.

“Hey, don't say that ever. I will die without you.”

“Aarush, you know what - I never thought somebody would come into my life like this,” she said and rested her face on my chest.

It was the day Aarohi had to join the office and while she was getting ready, I was standing and adoring her beauty. She wore a pink top with blue jeans which fitted her perfectly. Her beauty was beyond words. Even a critic would run out of words defining her beauty.

Her phone rang and it was her possessive cousin, Kanika. I was cuddling her with my trimmed beard on her soft face, while she was talking to her.

“Hi,” she said and the voice on the other end was calm and possessive.

“You joined the office?”

“No, bas....going...” she said while I pricked her hard with my trimmed beard.

“Aarush!” She screamed.

“What happened? Is Aarush there?” Kanika rushed with lot of queries.

“Aarush is coming here to pick me up.” She tackled the tickling very beautifully.

“Aarohi, don't get too close to him. I know him very well.” She said that aggressively and I was astonished.

I moved aside and she softly gestured that I should get ready, pointing to the washroom.

Why did Kanika say that? Did she say anything further after I moved to washroom? What did she mean by that...? A lot of questions popped up in my mind. I wanted answers, but I remained quiet.

She carried her hand bag and innocently gestured at me to leave for the office, locking the door behind while she was still on the call.

“He is a nice guy...he is not like that,” she said on the call, and now Kanika's rants were really getting on my nerves. I wanted to know what she was saying.

We walked hand in hand to the car and as soon as we settled in it, she disconnected the call telling Kanika that she was with me.

“So what was she saying?”

“Kaun? Kanika? Nothing...”

“Nothing...?” I asked with suspense mode expression on my face.

But she kept it too short, “Kanika knows you very well. She was telling me about your relationship with her best friend.”

“And...?”

“And I am okay with it,” she said and hugged me.

“Aarush, I don't believe in the past, I believe in creating the future. And I see my future with you.”

I had never told her about my past because I fear that it was too early but I was happy to know that she was absolutely okay with it. On the other hand, I was disappointed with Kanika. Why did she have to tell her and make it seem like I was the culprit?

She was still holding my hand as we reached IBM parking.

“Whom do you have to report to?” I asked her and noticed that she was holding the crystal God that she always used to carry with her. As she closed her eyes to pray for a great first day, I moved behind her, and as soon as she was done, I embraced her and kissed her cheek.

“Your happiness is my dream now, you don't have to turn to God for everything” I said, teasing her.

“Aarush!” She said in mock anger.

“I have to report to Mr. Vipin,” she continued.

“Hamburger...!”

“What?”

“Nothing, he will be on the 1st floor.”

“And you?”

“Just above you,” I said with a wink.

“Meet me in the cafeteria once you're free. All the best,” I said and I kissed her as soon as we entered the gate.

I could see from the corner of my eyes, the receptionist was poking her colleague to look at us. The environment of the office was changed. Muje phr se sab acha lagne laga tha. From the guard to the receptionist, from the computers to the small size cabins... everything seemed amazing to me. The sweet smell of roses was changing my mind and I was smiling like never before.

I was happy, I was moving with a new found confidence and there was bounce in my step. My colleagues were surprised to see me smiling and all of them had the same question, “Kya baat hai bhai, bada khush lag rha hai?”

The giant, Harshal, with a large spectacle and un-creased clothing walked up to my desk and asked with a sarcastic smile-

“Aarush, why were you not coming to the office?”

Harshal was an assistant to Mr. Rachit but was more of a reporter than an assistant to him. He was boss's eye and ears. Mr. Rachit was a straight-forward person but he was just opposite and though Harshal was under Mr Rachit's direct reporting he could not change his nature.

His marshy tone was enough to ignite the anger within anyone, but I was calm and was relaxed enough to not to react.

“Family problem, Harshal,” I replied.

“Doesn't seem that way” he said handing over a pen drive.

“Look at the presentation; you need to present it in front of the new client” he continued in his marshy tone.

I was opening my laptop after three weeks and my mailbox was almost full. Naukri.com to Shaadi.com, all the portals missed me while I was gone. There were also a few pictures of a girl, sent by my uncle.

“We have chosen this girl for you. Your mother has already agreed it. Just contact her. We have already given them your details.”

Looking at those job portal mails, I felt they were useless. And, those matrimony e-mails, I found them useless too, but the idea of marriage had always tickled my mind. And some of the girls were really hot.

There had been a constant push from my family for almost two years but I had always declined. I had been through several spot interviews but I always rejected the candidate, knowing that I was not a sufficient employer.

But now, Aarohi and I are together and I could see my future with her. But first, I wanted to check out

her Facebook page and download a few of her pics that would serve as my screensaver and wall paper. Browsing through her profile was making me fall for her more. Photographs from the past two years, since she started login, to recent ones all got an instant 'like' from me. I commented on a few and posted smile emoticon on others.

Suddenly, I got a beep on my phone “Waiting for you...”

I rushed to the canteen and waited behind the wooden partition to see her. To see her playing with her hair, to see her looking at time again and again, and to see her playing with her bracelet which I had gifted her last night. The sparkle in her eyes was calling me, and I loved to watch her.

Arun was sitting behind her with Prachi and he waved his hand as soon as he saw me. I kept my finger on my lip to ask him to remain silent and followed by a text, “Hey Arun, AaroHi is sitting there waiting for me; she would be nervous to see you both here.”

He moved his thumb upward and moved outside the canteen with Prachi. Prachi and Arun were my colleagues but from a different team and they were too lucky to be together in same team and the same building.

“Hey, sorry, I got late...” I reached and bent a little to kiss my lady love, She was a little annoyed and she blew her face to show her anger but she looked even more endearing like that and a cold coffee was enough to cool her down.

Arun was standing behind the pillar, witnessing the scene.

“How's day?” She asked sipping the coffee through a straw.

“Quite good,” I said even though my routine was up-side down from a workaholic's to a lazy couch potato's.

“And yours...?”

“Interesting, IBM, has got something. There is something very gracious, haina?” Her stressing on her ending words was something I always loved to hear. Her voice was filled with innocence like a cut little kid.

She began running her fingers over her earrings and had a sip of coffee while her eyes looked at me. Her “fall for my eyes” could make any guy nervous and lose his confidence and surrender himself to be lost in them. I was no exception.

I simply loved her expressions, she was simple, she was innocent and she was immature, but on the same time she was mature enough to handle me.

Our talks were interrupted by a call from Vipin; her training session was about to start again.

“See you in the evening,” she said and move towards her floor.



Arun and Prachi blocked my passage before I could leave as they had been paying attention to us for quite some time.

“Aarush...” Prachi called in a tone that made me blush.

“Hey, dude, happy to see you move on.” Arun put his hand on my shoulder as Prachi boxed me with her soft hand in my tummy.

“Need a party, mote,” she commanded.

“On my birthday,” I said and winked.

“She is really hot for you...” she again hit me with her elbow.

“Catch you later, Aarush, Raghav's calling,” Arun said as he dragged Prachi to go and see their boss.

As they left, I went back to my desk and saw that Kanika had left an inbox message for me on Facebook.

“Hi Aarush, how are you? Hope you are taking care of my sister as your own sister...” Her words were enough to boil my head. First, she was telling her sister to stay away from me and now, she was calling Aaroohi my sister! Fuck!! What had happened to this girl? I was, both, amused and irritated by her behaviour and decided not to reply to her.

Overall, the day ended on a good note. We came together, we left together, we had dinner together, and we were together emotionally and physically. We were nothing short of an ideal couple. So much so that dinner was followed up with a fight 'stay in your room, my landlord would not like it.'

Aaroohi perfectly knew how to maintain distance and yet be close, which I never learnt. But I was happy to be with her.

—

“She has been calling me for the past three days,” I told Arun while discussing Kanika with him.

“Believe me or not, she likes you,” he said deliberately. Arun was far more mature in matters of girls.

“She is just a good friend...”

“A friend, who is jealous to see you with any other girl...”

“It's not like that. She has always been there in my past relationships too.”

“And now, she has realized that she is in love with you....”

“That's why she is telling her sister that I am a flirt.”

“Aarush, you won't understand.”

I was really confused by that conversation with Arun. Pondering over what he had said, I was giving actually giving a second thought to my relationship with Kanika.

What was it? Was she only a friend? Why was she behaving like that? Should I ask AaroHi to tell her about us? Many questions, no answers.

We ended our drinks, while AaroHi and Prachi were busy in kitchen.

Prachi was looking gorgeous that day. Her raven black hair kept opened were waving in the air, her eyes were sparkling and looking towards Arun again and again. I looked at her and saw my girl behind her with plates in her hand.

AaroHi always looked special. No makeup at all. Her dressing did it all. She seemed the goddess of perfection.

The girls came and sat down with us and my eyes met AaroHi's.

“I have made this for you...” our eyes were talking.

“The aroma is wonderful...” I said smiling while opening my mouth wide.

“I would like to feed my baby...”

“And I would love to get fed like this for the rest of my life.”

“When are you getting married?” I asked Arun, looking at him

“Whenever Prachi decides,” he said and looked at Prachi, who was already blushing.

“Our parents have agreed, by the way. You tell me, Aarush, what about you and AaroHi?” He turned to me, with the same question.

“We have not yet decided,” AaroHi answered.

“We haven't thought of marriage yet, and we need time to answer any such question,” I offered.

Our dinner was followed by ice-cream, and as it was late, Prachi decided to stay there with AaroHi. Wishing good bye to AaroHi and Prachi, Arun and I move to our respective rooms.

“Arun...” I sounded intense.

“Yes...”

“Should I tell Kanika, about us?” I asked with a deep thought in my mind....

“Let it be done by AaroHi.”

“Yes, you are right.”

I moved back to my room, and as soon as I powered on my mobile, there were a slew of messages from Kanika.

“Hey Aarush...”

“I need to talk...Call Me...”

“I am waiting, it's urgent.”

“I have a surprise for you...my buddy...”

I called her. “Hello” her voice was recognizable, even after so much time.

“Hi” I said half-heartedly, her behaviour was still pinching me.

“Aarush, do you remember what is the date today?” She asked.

“No,” I said, feeling sleepy.

“Something special?” I asked.

“Aaru, you've forgotten that we had decided to celebrate this day every year as a special day,” she said innocently with a deep sigh.

I checked my calendar. 5th of November was the day we had promised each other to celebrate as our friendship anniversary. She had a habit of doing such silly things.

“Kanika...”

“Happy friendship anniversary, Aaru, there is a mail on your G-mail, please check it out.”

“Sorry, I forgot, Happy Anniversary to you too. I will check, Kanika.”

“Aarush...” She was uttering something when I disconnected the call.

## **Twist Wala Locha**

Four months had passed during which our love had bloomed and our relationship become more meaningful. Then, suddenly, it was my birthday. No, it was my happy wala birthday, as I was never ever happier on my birthday like I was then. Fortunately, it was on a weekend. Aaroahi, Arun, and Prachi had already decided to throw a house party at my house that night and I was getting ready with all the stuff required for a party at night, mainly alcohol.

Aaroahi came to my place to help me out and after planning everything for almost two hours, I was ready with a purchase-list in my hand.

Aaroahi was a great event planner. Though I tried to disturb her, she was determined to organise everything perfectly and pushed me away in her typical way of speaking. “Aaruuuusshhhhh...” Her stressing on ending words never failed to arouse me.

“Baby, I love the way you care for me,” I said in an amorous manner.

“I don't care for you, baby.” She teased me.

“I care for us.” She said smilingly and I smiled back.

Aarohi prepared a birthday cake, the beers were stocked in the refrigerator, the snacks were in the kitchen, and the house was decorated amazingly. I never realized that my house could look that good. All thanks to Arohi. My love for her doubled. Bell rang.

I went to open the door while she was putting the finishing touches to everything. Prachi entered and hugged me. "Happy birthday, Aarush," she said and handed me my present. Arun too gave me a hug and wished me. My birthday cake was ready to be cut but they decided to put my face into it sharp at 12.

Arun and Prachi were in a relationship since I knew them. And they had maintained a good harmony from the past three years. Prachi was a simple girl with a simple thinking that a relationship must end with a wedding and Arun was also convinced that he wanted to marry Prachi. They were made for each other and looked good together.

Prachi was looking astonishing in her one piece red dress that ended at her knees and red boots were matching perfectly. Her dark complexion had never been a minus and her figure was perfect for a modelling. My eyes would have like to see more of her bare legs if Aarohi had not been keeping her eyes on me.

"Where are the bottles, man?" Arun asked, seeking a remedy for his dry throat.

"In the fridge," I pointed towards the refrigerator, but Aarohi stopped him, "Wait, cake first..." she instructed and everybody followed.

Aarohi was sitting in my arms and Prachi was in Arun's when Arun announced- "Cake time...!"

I cut the cake and everyone started singing the birthday song. I made Arohi eat a piece of cake with my hand, which did she but not before applying some cake on my cheeks with her fingers. Like a tigress marking her territory. It was the happiest feeling. Then, we kissed.

The cake applying session turned dirty with Arun and Prachi not even leaving my hair but I didn't mind and after a quick shower, I was back to enjoy the celebrations.

We ended up with beers in our hands and relaxed. Aarohi was sitting on my right, Prachi on the left and Arun in the front. We all were ready for Truth-Dare game.

The bottle completed a circle and a half and stopped pointing at Prachi.

"Truth or Dare?" Aarohi asked her with excitement. And she turned to look at Arun.

"Dare," she said and Arun asked her to drink the beer, bottoms up. She cursed him and ended up in washroom, vomiting. The dare spoiled the game.

Arun was now busy taking care of her, and after a few minutes and a little argument, Prachi went to sleep in my room.

Arun joined us after a few minutes, "She's slept off." He made an excuse but we knew he had been kicked out of the room. I give him a sheepish smile which he understood.

“So, whose turn...?” He said and turned the bottle to take rounds.

This time it was Arun.

“Arun, Truth or Dare...?” I asked with curiosity and was sure he would say dare. I had something planned for him. An item number on which he would have to dance as I knew he was shit scared of dancing but he chose truth instead.

“Tell me about your relationships?” Aarohi said.

“What relationships...?” He asked.

“Name of all the girls you have hooked up with,” I added and Arun moved to bedroom with an excuse that his mobile was in the bedroom and that he had an urgent call to make and I was left with my girl in the room. She rested her upper body on my thighs and stretched her legs on the cushion while I sipped my beer. I moved her hair back from her forehead and planted a kiss on it.

“Thank you for coming into my life,” I said as she dug her hand into her bag with excitement.

“Thank me again, baby.” She said and put her hand on my eyes.

“Just close your eyes for a second,” she ordered and I obeyed her.

She kept something on the table while whispering, “No cheating...”

“Now...?” She said, finally.

She moved something around my hands and asked me to open my eyes.

An audio deck was placed on the table in front of me.

“Shall we dance...?” She said and I placed my hand in hers and danced slowly to the romantic song that was being played on the deck. She closed her eyes and moved her lips towards mine. I could see that they were glittering, after which I too closed my eyes. Our breaths and heart beats were in tandem as our lips met again and again with passion and a sense of lustful urgency. I could taste the cake on her lips as I ran my fingers in her hair. With my lips on her, I reached out to unhook and peel off her top and I guided her to the bedroom. I locked the door and pushed her on the bed gently. She lay back invitingly as I crawled up next to her, still feeling, touching and kissing her continuously. She moaned softly and bit my ear as I ran my tongue in her ear and neck. We were both sweating in the throngs of passion but when I tried to reach out to remove her brassiere, she pushed me away.

“Aarush, we should not cross the line...” she said and sat with her arms covering her legs and tears rolling down her eyes.

“Hey, Aarohi...” I said gently holding her face in my palms.

“I am not into you for this, baby. I am lost in your eyes and my heart beats for you,” I comforted her and held her tightly in my arms.

Her head was on my chest and I could feel the warmth of the tears that rolled down.

“Aarush, you will never leave me na...” she said with eyes full of love.

“I will be with you forever, my love,” I said and a tear rolled down my cheek too.

We slept in each other's embrace that night.

She woke up at 6 AM in the morning and had a bath. With her hair still wet from the shower and rolled up in a towel, she was lighting some aggarbattis when I took her in my arms from behind and held her tightly.

“AaroHi, I want you to stay here forever,” I whispered in her ear.

“Baby, I already decided that last night, to be here forever,” she told me smilingly.

“But before that, let us get married.”

I kissed her and held her in my arms tightly when there was a knock on the door. AaroHi was still in my arms and I hated it when I was separated from her. She moved away and I called out, “It's open.”

As I walked towards the door, it flung open and there stood Kanika with bags in both her hands.

“Kanika...” I uttered in surprise. AaroHi came over to see her. She too uttered her name with surprise.

“AaroHi, you...?” She said while she opened the door wide and entered the house.

Meanwhile, Arun and Prachi too came out of the room to the common room.

“What were you doing here...?” She asked AaroHi.

AaroHi was silent and looking at me for support.

“We were celebrating Aarush's birthday, Kanika,” Prachi said and went and stood with AaroHi.

I was shocked to see Kanika there. What would be running in her mind seeing AaroHi?

“Di, would you take anything?” AaroHi asked Kanika while Kanika gave her a dirty look.

“Kanika, you here, it's really a surprise.”

“Even I am surprised...” She said and asked AaroHi to come into my room alone.

“What are you doing here...?” She asked AaroHi.

“Di, Prachi forced me to join the party.”

“And you joined to stay with the boys”

What the hell was she saying? My temper rose and I rushed into the room when Arun held my hand.

“Aarush...stay...” Prachi asked.

“But...”

“She will handle it herself.”

I calmed my anger but was still annoyed at Kanika. Who was she to just barge into my house and start questioning AaroHi and who the hell did she think she was, my keeper?

A little later Kanika rushed out of the room and out of the house while AaroHi followed her, leaving us all very confused as to what was going on.

After a while, Arun and Prachi left too, and I was sitting alone. I messaged AaroHi and I called Kanika but she didn't answer any of my calls.

I was left with a feeling of guilt and embarrassment, not so much for me but for AaroHi and when couldn't contact her, I decided to land up at her place.

“AaroHi... AaroHi...” I kept on knocking at the door, but nobody responded.

I called Kanika again and this time she answered, “Hey Kanika, where are you?” I asked sounding concerned but basically I was curious to know about AaroHi.

“I am at mall, Aarush.”

“Kanika, there is nothing....” I tried explaining.

“Aarush, I don't want to know anything and I am sorry for my behaviour at your house,” she said, relaxing me a bit.

“You are at which mall...?” I asked but she remained silent and then disconnected the call telling me that she was busy.

My heart sank. I badly needed to talk AaroHi. I tried to call her again but as usual, there was no response.

I preferred to sit there and wait for her when Arun came to pick me up.

“Hey, everything will be fine. She might be with Kanika.” He tried to console me.

“Arun, she is not capable enough to handle all this alone.”

“Aarush! She is your girlfriend,” he said sarcastically and was almost succeeded in consoling me.

My only hope was to wait till the next morning to meet her in office and I couldn't wait for the sun to rise.

[Next Morning @ the Board Meeting]

“Aarush, are you done with the presentation?” Harshal asked sternly keeping in mind my performance for last few weeks.

“It is almost done, sir,” I said to pacify his anger though it was yet to be started.

“Almost? You have already crossed all the deadlines and you are saying it is not yet completed,” He shouted.

“Calm down, Harshal,” Rachit ji ordered him in his usual soft tone.

“Aarush, is everything alright? We have a high expectation from you,” He said boosting my moral.

“Yes, sir, everything is fine. I would see to it that in future nothing like this happens again,” I said in embarrassment.

“Aarush, you may leave,” he instructed and I followed his order.

I could hear them whispering while I was heading toward the door.

“You should have taken an action, sir.” Harshal told him.

“Harshal, don't forget he is one of the performers of our company and he had always been a value addition with clients,”

“But sir... His performance is affecting our team efforts.” Harshal further aggravated the conversation.

“Harshal, what I think is that he needs a change. Why don't you send him for the Nigeria Project?”

“Do you think it will work, sir...?”

I had overheard enough, so I left and went to look for AaroHi on her floor. I asked her colleague trainee and she told me that she had not come to office.

“AaroHi, I have been calling since last night...” I shouted as soon as she took the call.

“Aarush, Kanika here. I don't know what's happening between the two of you but don't call her again and again. My father has arranged her marriage and she would not say no to him,” she said and before she could utter anything else, I disconnected the call.

What? Who was she to speak like that? And who was her father to choose a boy for AaroHi? She would not say no...What was she talking about? Damn! I needed to talk AaroHi urgently.

I requested Prachi to call AaroHi for me but she also got the same answer from Kanika. Arun was standing and looking at me intently.

“Why don't you ask Kanika, wasn't she your good friend?” He asked me but I remained silent.

“I had told you that Kanika holds feelings for you,” he continued.

After a lecture of 15 minutes or so I called back Kanika.

“Kanika, you are in Delhi, right?” I asked her.

“Yes, Aarush, I am in Delhi.” She answered delicately.

“Let's meet, Kanika.”

“Why not...?” She sounded a little excited.



“Bar 360 tonight...”

“Okay, done.”

“What are you doing?” Arun asked me in confusion.

“Nothing...” I kept my silence.

“Prachi, Arun, please you two join us at 360” I asked them and they agreed. It was the time to check Arun's gyaan.

I was keeping my fingers crossed.

[Bar 360 at 10.00 PM]

Prachi, Arun and I were at the bar waiting for Kanika but she was stuck in traffic, so we decided to order a round of drinks.

“Arun, Prachi don't tell Kanika that you both are in a relationship,” I requested while they both looked confused at my strange request..

Just then, Kanika entered the bar and I spotted her immediately.

“Hi, Aarush,” she waved her hand and came near us.

“Hi, Kanika...” I said while I offered her a seat next to me.

“This is Arun and this is Prachi.” The introduction was followed by a round of Vodka shots.

“Aaroohi didn't come?” Prachi asked.

“My parents have arranged her marriage and she is back in Rohtak as the boy's family is coming from USA next week.”

What? Hell!! Aaroohi's marriage...!! I kept my silence and moved another shot of Vodka towards her.

One, two, three and four shots were enough to ignite all of us. I extended my hand towards Prachi and asked her for a dance. She looked at Arun and he nodded his head.

I began to groove with her but kept an eye on Kanika, who kept looking at me. So did Arun and his sheepish smile gave me a signal that he was in. He stood and asked Kanika for a dance and they too started to groove. After a round, we exchanged our partners.

Kanika was in my arms and looking into my eyes.

“Hey, Kanika, I want to say something to you...”

“Shush.... Aarush...” She kept her finger on my lips. Her red lipstick was insidious.

“Aarush, before you say anything, I want to say something to you...” She said in her aphrodisiac voice.

“Aarush, I love you...” she said and I dropped her hand.

I was not shocked but I never wanted to hear that from her. I left the bar, started the car and came back home.

## **Moving Ahead of Her**

It had been two weeks since I had seen Aaroohi or heard from her while Kanika was constantly messaging me.

I had never thought that Kanika would ever fall for me. She was my best friend and she knew everything about me. I never felt for her that way, so why was she feeling like that for me?

What about Aaroohi? Did she know that? Where was she? Was she alright? Everything was topsy-turvy in my life and I was smoking my 10th cigarette in thirty minutes. I was standing in the lobby and tears were rolling down my cheeks. But for whom was I crying, for Aaroohi or for Kanika? And why I was crying at all?

What if Aaroohi had never come into my life and what if Kanika had told me about her feelings before I met Aaroohi? What was I doing to myself and what if I could not contact Aaroohi? Those questions had no answers at that point of time.

Heart: She wants to call you, but circumstances.

Mind: Oh, fuck circumstance, if she really had wanted she could have made a call or could have at least dropped a message.

Heart: Sooner or later she will contact you. Maybe, she is already trying to do so.

Mind: She could have told Prachi.

Heart: Her phone has been taken and she is locked in a room.

Mind: She had not done anything for she should be locked.

Heart: Kanika might have cooked up stories.

I slept in the lobby only.

Next morning, I joined my office with an intent to forget everything. I wanted to forget Aaroohi, Kanika and everyone else that bound me to my present.

“Aarush, we need you to join with our client at Nigeria, would you want to go there?” Mr. Rachit asked me and it seemed like a perfect opportunity to leave everyone and everything behind.

“I would love to,” I replied with a single thought in my mind.

“Okay, I will send you the details, rest you discuss with Harshal”

“Okay, sir,” I nodded in affirmation.

Arun and Prachi joined me in the canteen when Prachi asked if she should call AaroHi.

“Not required, if she had loved me ever, she would have called me at least once,” I replied in a huff.

“But Aarush, she might be in a problem,” Arun said defending her.

“No problem is so big, Arun, that it vaporizes love.”

“Aarush, she might not be able to call...”

“If she can't even make a call, what is this relationship for?”

“Don't act childishly, Aarush,” Prachi taunted.

“Childishly... yeah, I am childish.”

“Aarush, you are blaming her but what you have done?” Arun again defended her and I was wondering if he was my friend or hers.

“I don't want to listen to anything, I am going to Nigeria.”

“What?” Prachi exclaimed

“I got a project to represent on behalf of company, I am going there for 3 months.”

“Aarush, don't run from this...” Arun argued again.

“I am not running, Arun, I need to look at my career too.”

“What about your dreams?” He asked

“Dreams...?”

“Dreams that you have woven with AaroHi.” Arun was smart enough to pinch me emotionally but I preferred to leave and not to be a part of that conversation anymore.

Arun was right, I know I was running but I had no solutions to the problem until AaroHi spoke to me.

I was ready with my passport and visa. The day before I had to board the flight, I gave a second thought to my escape plan and without telling anyone, I went to my hometown, Rohtak, that was also the hometown of AaroHi and Kanika. There, I called my friend, Payal, who was also a friend of Kanika.

“Payal, I need your help...” I asked with a little grief in my heart.

“Bolo, Aarush,” she said.

“Payal, I have fallen for AaroHi.”

“Ahaaaaaann... Aarush!” She exclaimed to tease me.

“Payal, she is Kanika's sister.”

“Wow...!” She exclaimed “She was your best friend.”

“Payal, she is against us and she informed her parents due to which I am unable to contact AaroHi.”

“So what can I do, Aarush?”

“Can you please call AaroHi to a restaurant?” I asked.

“How, Aarush?” She asked with curiosity.

“See how you can, you are best at it.”

A little push and she came up with the idea of inviting AaroHi and Kanika to her supposed promotion party. It worked and according to plan, I gave the waiter a hundred rupees to drop coffee on AaroHi's dress, so that she would come towards the washroom. As expected, AaroHi came towards the washroom and as soon she reached, I grabbed her in my arms and dragged her behind the wall for privacy.

“Aarush!” She exclaimed.

“Why, AaroHi...?” I asked in anger though inside I was crying.

Tears were filled in her eyes and they began to roll eyes. She hugged me and it was the best hug I could ever get. Our heartbeats were beating in tandem.

“Aarush, I missed you so much...” she said while she was in my arms.

“Why did you do this to me?” I asked.

“Kanika told everything to uncle and he had arranged my marriage to his friend son.” She was crying bitterly now.

“Kanika!” I hugged while AaroHi held me tight.

“Aarush, please!”

“What please, and what did you say to your uncle? Did you tell him about us?”

She kept quiet.

“AaroHi, say something!”

“AaroHi, please say something...” I was sounding harsh.

I turned my face and in anger, held her more tightly.

“You love me or not?” I asked in anger.

“I do, Aarush...but I can't say no to them, they have been everything to me after my parents' death.”

“Okay, go get married,” I said and moved out of the restaurant crossing Payal and Kanika on the way.

Kanika stood up as I crossed her and called out my name, but I moved on as I was seething in anger at the turn of events. I came back to Delhi and decided not to call anyone. Then, packing my bags, I left all the things behind that would bind me to Aarohi.

Standing in the departure corridor of IGI-Terminal 3 and waiting for my flight to Nigeria, I just wanted to run away from it all and never ever come back again. Somewhere in my mind I had decided to look for a job abroad not to come back to India ever. I switched off my mobile for the next 10 hours and preferred to check only my social media profile and emails.

Nothing new on Facebook, Twitter but my Gmail had something for me. It was a mail from Aarohi...

Aarush, you should not have come that way. I cannot resist hiding my feelings from myself anymore. Aarush, you are the one, who let me learn how to live, how to dream, how to love and now I can't run from the truth that I love you, and I can't live without you in spite of the fact that I cannot be yours.

Reading her mail, my mind was in a tizzy. Though other passengers could see a smile on my face, they could not have known that I was crying inside. As I sat in my seat in the airplane, I read and re-read her mail and tears rolled down my cheek onto the phone in my hand. What I had thought was just an infatuation seemed more like love now. Her mail had changed all equations.

I was sobbing as I dialled her number.

“Hello, Aarush...” Her voice made start weeping inconsolably.

“Aarush, are you there?” She asked but I was quiet. There was just an awkward silence and the sound of our breathing between us.

I could feel the tears rolling down her cheeks by the sound of her voice. “Aarush, please say something....” Her voice was quivering.

“I love you...” I said with the intense pain that I was carrying with myself.

“I love you too...” Her voice broke up.

“I am coming to you, Aarohi, I can't live without you,” I uttered my feelings in a rush. There was nothing in my mind anymore. She loves me, and so do I. I can't run away from her.

“Aarush, you have a very good opportunity in your hand and you should not miss it. Go to Nigeria.”

“Nigeria...!! Who told you...?”

“Arun, Aarush please go, I am already yours, and I will wait for you for my whole life.”

Her words motivated me; I was planning on leaving the country to never come back but the conversation with her motivated me to come back soon. I knew, now that distance could never draw us apart.

## Long Distance Relationship

“Baby, I have just landed.” I called her as soon as I was checked-out of the airport. A beautiful lady with her new born baby was next to me in the queue and gave me a pleasant look when I kissed my screensaver on the phone.

“Take care, eat on time, and don't skip meals...” her motherly advise was heart melting. She knew how to care; she kept a record of every single detail of mine.

Covering the distance of nearly 100 kilometres more, I reached my guest house.

“Keys, please” I asked the boy at the reception as I showed him my identity card.

“Room-201, second floor.” His white teeth brightened his face as he handed over the keys to me.

It was all wood there, the stairs, and the corridor. They cut a lot of trees, I thought. Finally, I was on the bed and staring at the ceiling, lost in the thoughts of my love, Aarohi.

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It was the fifteenth time since morning that I was disconnecting her call and I knew I was going to be the victim of her spicy anger. I wanted to talk to her but those people at office were staring at me and my curriculum like they were going to give me their daughter and I had asked for dowry.

“Hey, I am with my boss, will call you soon,” I whisper to her the sixteenth time she called, without listening to her.

Raman Chandaram was dark and tough looking boy from Chennai.. He must me my age, I thought, but his white creased shirt with black trouser and a black blazer were giving me a timid feeling. He looked at me, raising his eyes and looked back at the transfer letter with my curriculum.

“Aarush, join from tomorrow in the noon shift,” He said and instructed Mr. Godwin, my team leader, a young Nigerian, to take care of me in learning the work and the process.

“So, Aarush how was your flight?” He triggered the conversation. We were walking in the corridor when my phone rang again, I pulled out my phone to see the name of the caller. It displayed, 'My Love'.

I disconnected it slid it back in my pocket. The urge to talk to her was extreme, but the adage- first impression is last impression was on my mind, hence I remained patient.

An hour long description about my duties and role ended at 2 in the afternoon with a firm handshake with Godwin. I left and went to cigarette shop outside the office. I lit a cigarette and pulled out my phone to call Arohi. One full ring but she didn't answer the phone. I called again, and again, yet no response. I began to worry but just then I received a text, “In training”.

It made me a bit relaxed to know that she was not angry at me.

I looked for a taxi and it was really hard for me to convey to him the name of the guest house. It would have been easier to crack CAT rather than explaining him the name of the place, I thought. Finally, I was able to show it to the driver on Google Map and we were on our way.

When I reached the guest house, I called her again.

“Aarohi?”

“Aarohi, are you there?” I asked again the only sound I could hear was of her snivelling.

“What happened, baby?” I asked, suddenly concerned.

She kept crying.

“Has someone said anything?” I asked.

But her sobbing continued.

After few seconds of my asking again and again, she finally responded- “Aarush, I am so into you that I cannot spend a single day without you.” Hearing that, my heart burst into an emotional trauma.

“Baby, it is for you, it is for us. I will be back in few months,” I said but inside me, I was broken too.

“Aapne khana khaya?” She asked me with a concern and her respect in her calling me 'aapne' was the spice to our romance.

“Aapne?” I asked her back. We both knew that none of us had had dinner yet. Though it was 7 pm in Nigeria, in India it was 11:30 and I knew Aarohi would wait for me to have a dinner together.

Tears filled in my eyes, seeing which the reception girl, Rosie, gave me a heart warming smile.

“Can I have the keys to 201?”

“Sure sir, May I see your identity card?” She said and smiled. She was the perfect person for that job. Her smile had a soothing effect.

“Who was the girl?” Aarohi asked me, hearing Rosie's voice.

“She is pretty” I whispered, teasing her.

“Aarush, go and sleep with her then, don't talk to me,” she said and disconnected the phone.

At ten, I called her again, “Mera babu kya kar rha hai?” I tried to be an innocent, loving boyfriend again. She too had forgotten the conversation we had last. Our conversation ended at 3 in the morning amongst yawns and dead phone batteries. My baby slept after giving me a passionate kiss to me over the phone. I was happy after a long day and slowly went into slumber.

I was still dreaming about Aarohi when the song alarm on my phone buzzed for third time. It was a wake-up call from Aarohi.

“Aaru....You aren't awake yet, you will be late,” she shouted from the other end of phone. I groggily

gained consciousness and looked at the clock. It was 11:30 and I had to be at office at 12.

“Hey, thanks, I will call you back, I am already late,” I said and rushed to get ready for the first day in my office.

Raman will be angry on the first day. I had already had this in my mind and entered my office trying to hide myself from the vision of my boss. But boss is boss and an Indian boss will never change his attitude wherever he is. Godwin came to my desk and called me to his cabin.

“I guess you are not clear about our policies?” He asked with a straight face and the way I was standing quietly in front of him reminded me of my college days when I use to be late for every lecture. Just then, the phone rang and at that point in time a call on my phone was a call of death.

“No cell phones are allowed. Submit it at the reception,” He said and I nodded my head in affirmation but troubled in mind. What? Did I hear him correctly? No cell phones? No AaroHi? What the fuck!! Now, I had no option but to Email her my situation.

Godwin came with the bundle of instructions for me and I got occupied in my project. C++ coding, installation of editor and all that kept me busy all day with the result that I was not able to call AaroHi the whole day.

After work, as soon as I stepped out of my office, I took out my phone and started dialling her number. I was feeling the distance now. Why was she not picking the phone? Was she alright? She even didn't reply to the mail...Had she read it? These thoughts were consuming me all the time.

My mind was again engaged in a fight with my heart.

Mind: Why is she not replying?

Heart: She might be sleeping.

Mind: Why didn't she reply to the mail?

Heart: She might not have read the mail yet.

Mind: Was she okay?

Heart: Yes, just a little tired.

Those twelve hours of not speaking with her and not hearing her voice were driving me crazy and I was not ready to sleep off without listening to her voice. I pulled out my laptop from my bag and logged into Facebook and posted a status update. Never knew that somebody would come into my life, holding me from the dazzle view... Life has turned into a dream now, a dream I would never want myself to come out of...And out of the blue, she was the first one to like it, with a comment “ahhmmm...ahhmmmm...” I was happy that she was there and she too was happy seeing me online. She rushed into my message box with a series of messages....

“Hey where were you?” “Your phone is not reachable” “I called you several times” “Call me.”



I dialled her number, desperate to talk to her.

“Baby, I was missing you badly...” she said followed by a silence and I just kissed her back. This was the first time there were tears in our eyes but we were smiling together at the same time.

“Mere Babu ne dinner karliya?” She asked with cuteness in her voice. Her care for me was dissolving me.

“Yes, shona...and you?” I asked in reply and continued our conversation till the first morning light.

It was now decided that I would call her around 8 and she would manage her sleep at 12:30 to talk to me and the next week we will do vice-versa.

Distance was maturing into a love, I was in love with her voice and her sweet talks were part of my life without which I could not think of my future.

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“Shift change, baby, you will wake up early from tomorrow,” She instructed me on Sunday night, while I was still fighting off with my sleep and constipation due to “forensic food” I was surviving on for the past few days.

We slept earlier that day with several alarms set, one in my clock, one in my phone, and a snooze facility so as to meet her expectation.

“Hi, baby,” I said with a sensuous voice.

“Aaru...let me sleep...” she said in her half awake voice but still she sounded alluring.

“Time to wake up, bachcha.”

“Aaru, please thodi der aur.” Her voice was cracking in sleep but I was eager to talk to her in the couple of hours we had together.

“What are you going to prepare for breakfast?”

“Smoothies.”

“Smoothies, delicious! I can taste it here...”

“And I can feel your lips implanting that taste on mine...”

“I can feel the glitter on your lips, have you used anything?”

“No, it is just...”

“Hey, wait, close your eyes, I am going to kiss you...” and she was there in my arms, with her eyes closed, waiting for my lips on hers.

Our day started with a conversation till my phone took its last breath due to heating up but suddenly the song buzzed, disturbing our conversation. “You and I...in this beautiful world...” It shuffled again

and again and again.

And this time, my hand to my phone to move to the red button.

“Oh...fuck... Aarohe...” I read the name on my phone screen and looked at the time. It was 11.45 and I had already failed to meet her expectations. My alarms had failed. Snooze never got a chance to work. And I was screwed to meet her expectation...

“Aarohe calling you in five minutes...” I rushed with words as soon as I picked up the phone and disconnected the call. Thinking, I would return her calls in the afternoon, I ran towards my office.

“Raman sir is waiting for you...” Laxman told me as soon as he caught my sight.

Three weeks already and there was not a single week that I had not been called for being late.

“Aarush, there is good news and a bad news for you...” Raman exclaimed without changing his expression.

“Bad/good” I spoke those words with a series of possibilities on my mind.

“Bad news is our project, for which you have been called here for is now withdrawn from us.”

“And the good news is we have terminated you...” Is that the good news? I was deadly nervous... And his pause to utter the second sentence was taking its toll on my patience.

“Your work on that project was impressive and the client wants you to join them for the project completion in USA.”

What? USA! Impressive! What I was hearing, I could not believe the words.

“Here is your appointment letter for the provisional period.”

Coming out of the cabin, I was happy and wanted to share my happiness with Aarohe, so I called her from the PCO outside our office.

She didn't answer my first three calls. On the third call, Kanika picked the call. Her voice was recognizable. “Hello...Yes, who is this?” She asked.

I thought it better not to mention my name. “Can I talk to Aarohe...?”

“Sorry, but she had an accident this morning and is admitted in the hospital. You can give me a message if you want, I am her sister.”

I was shocked by those words and my legs gave way. I left the receiver hanging in the air and dropped down to my knees, my heart beating abnormally fast.

“Is she okay? What happened?” I said in a cracked voice.

“She is in serious condition. She was hit by a truck while taking her morning walk.”

“Kanika, Please take care of her...” I cried, and tears rolled down my eyes.

“Aarush...?” She exclaimed.

But I disconnected the call. I immediately went back to Raman and told him about the incident. I realised then that his hard exterior had a soft interior as he immediately arranged the tickets for me to come back to India.

“Aarush, take care of her, and your offer for America will always be there whenever you want to join.” He said, putting his hand on my shoulder.

I rushed to the airport to catch the first flight to Delhi and while I was standing there, I called almost every friend of mine in Delhi, including Prachi, Arun and Payal to be with her.

Boarding the flight and keeping the phone off was a torture for me and I cursed myself for not picking up her phone in the morning. The journey of nine hours seemed like a hundred years to me and I just couldn't wait to see Aarohi. I had cried through the entire course of the flight and was feeling totally sapped emotionally. As I looked at the bracelet that she had given me through tear filled eyes, I was glad that I had already told Arun to pick me up from the airport.

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Aarush and Aarohi were now part of me by then, and I was eager to know why Aarush was there but I was more eager to know how Aarohi was now. What had happened to her? Inside my heart, I was crying, crying for her to be at her best health. I called Harshit; he said he would get back to me.

“Harshit, what has happened to Aarohi?” I asked as soon as I saw Harshit.

“Who is Aarohi?” He asked

“Aarush's fiancée...” I told him.

“She is his fiancée?? She is in coma...” he told me.

“What...?”

“Yes, she is in a coma for the last three months,” he said. I was shattered to hear that.

“Harshit, where are they?” I wanted to meet Aarush.

“Akansh, we are getting late, we have a paper tomorrow,” he argued.

“Harshit, I don't care. I want to meet him,” I told him but he advised me to come back after our exam and his concern was right. We decided to come back there next afternoon.

While I was in the examination hall, there was just one thing that was on my mind and that was Aarohi and Aarush. I wanted to know about them. I wanted to know how they got engaged. I wanted to know everything about them.

I returned home and began to read his diary again before going to the hospital.

## How? When? Shit..!!

“Hi, Aarush...” Arun said, but I rushed towards the parking, ignoring his question.

“Where's the car...” I asked, running towards it.

“How's she now?”

“Arun tell me the truth...”

“Say something, Arun...” He was silent.

“Please speak up,” I implored him.

“She is in emergency and is in a critical stage.” He uttered the words that added to the restiveness. I was shaking and my legs felt as if they had no sensation in them.

I asked for the keys and drove as fast as I could towards the hospital. Arun kept asking me to slow down but I didn't listen to him. On reaching the hospital, I got out of the car and rushed towards the emergency. I found Payal and Kanika standing there and as soon as Payal saw me, she came to me to hold my arms and console me.

“How is she?” I asked with a quiver in my voice.

“Doctors are operating on her,” she said with stress writ large on her face. Just then, a doctor came out of the room and I rushed towards him.

“Doctor...” I screamed but he didn't stop.

“Is she alright?” I enquired, running after him.

“She has an injury on her head,” He said and stopped to look at me.

“We are trying our best but we cannot operate on her until the bleeding in her brain stops,” He told me and moved on.

Kanika came and hugged me. She kept her face on my chest and I started crying.

Payal handed over a glass of water to me. I was almost ready to die. Why, God, why did this have to happen to her, I thought to myself. Kanika was still there and crying on my shoulder- and why should she not; she was the closest to her.

“Everything will be fine, nothing will happen to her,” I said holding her from her shoulders and pushing her away. I realised that I was still angry with her.

“You are with her, nothing will happen to her...” She said, wiping her tears and my anger abated a little hearing her say that.

At a distance, I could see Kanika's parents and I nodded my head to greet them but I didn't go and meet them as I was still thinking about what Aaroahi had told me about being a burden on them and I thought that now that she was in the hospital, the burden on them would have been heavier.

“Arun, why they are here now? They always thought her to be a burden and now they will have more reason to taunt her for the rest of her life,” I shouted at him without any reason.

“Aarush, there is nothing like that.”

“Arun, you don't know”

“Aarush, they have been so worried and have not moved for moment from here since yesterday.”

“Arun, I don't know but I don't want to see them here,” I yelled.

“Aarush...don't be childish.”

“I am not being a child. Okay, if you can't I will directly ask them to leave,” I said while I moved towards them.

“Aarush...” He grabbed my hand.

“Let me ask them,” He told me.

“Uncle- Aunty, you have not rested since yesterday morning, you should go to home.” Arun offered them a rest.

“Beta, how could we rest?” The man with a full beard, Kanika's father, asked in a heavy voice while Kanika's mother hold her husband's hand to request him to rest a little.

“Beta, the boy's family is coming tomorrow to see her,” she said with concern and grief.

“Aunty, all will be okay,” Arun said and thanks to him they went, leaving me, Arun and Prachi behind. Kanika too stayed back.

We moved back to lobby and Arun tried consoling me as best as he could, but I remained inconsolable. I just could not imagine a life without Aaroahi.

We were talking only about her well being when we saw them moving Aaroahi from emergency to ground floor for a CT-Scan. I rushed with them and saw that the white sheet covering her was stained with her blood.

It shattered me to look at her that way and my heart broke seeing her condition. I moved a bit back and was about to fall when Arun held me firmly. Kanika and Prachi too came to see her.

We decided to wait outside the elevator till they come back with Aaroahi. We were wandering here and there and I was sweating despite the air-conditioning. Kanika, too, was crying incessantly.

As they were taking her back to the third floor, the elevator door opened briefly and there was a collective cry of “Aaroahi...” from all of us. Then the door closed and she disappeared from in front of

our eyes.

“Attendant of Miss Aarohe...” A voice called from the reception and I rushed towards the reception with Arun following me.

“Patient is being shifted to the ICU and doctors are attending to her. You need to submit 50,000/- as initial deposit.” The man at the counter told us.

Arun looked towards me while I took out my credit card.

“Be here, you need to fill this form.” He handed over a formality paper to me. It was a form indemnifying the hospital for Aarohe's treatment. I signed the same without even reading what was written on it. As I handed over the form, he asked us to wait inside a cabin as doctor was coming for a discussion and an update on Aarohe's condition. My heart had no control over its beats.

“Who is with Aarohe...?” A doctor in a white coat asked.

“I am with Aarohe...” I said standing in front of him.

“You are her relative?” He asked looking at me.

“She is my girlfriend...” I proudly answered him. Kanika looked at me, but I didn't care what she thought.

“Boy, her CT-scan reports are out and if there is anyone from her family that you can call...I need to discuss with them,” he asked me.

“Doctor, I am her sister, and he is part of our family. You can discuss anything with him,” she said to my surprise.

“Okay, see there is a clot on her brain due to bleeding from damaged nerves.” He moved his hand over the screen of the computer, showing us the clot.

“We can't operate on her until the bleeding stops and she regains consciousness,” he further told us. His every word was tearing my heart apart.

“After the bleeding stops, we will install a surgical wire to block the passage of nerves being damaged...” He moved his hand over the parts of her brain.

“Doctor, will she be fine?” I asked him, holding my breath.

“We will try our best but you must know that operating on her will cost money,” he told us in his casual manner.

“How much,” Kanika asked, but before the doctor could say anything, I told the doctor not to worry about the cost.

Prachi held her hand for moral support and as we were moving out of the doctor's room I told the doctor politely to take good care of Aarohe.

Aarohi was moved to the ICU and the visits there were limited to a morning and an evening for half-an-hour each with due passes for attendant. The doctor had already given me an estimate of the expenses, so I gave Arun a cheque and asked him to withdraw the cash from the bank.

Kanika asked me to not to pay and wait for her parents but I refused and clearly told her not to ask her parents for the expenses as I was depositing Rs.10 lacs which would be sufficient for now.

I offered everyone else to go home as we were not allowed to meet her till the next morning anyway. After they had left I settled myself in the rest room for attendants.

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I got up in the middle of the night, feeling uneasy, so I got up to go out for a smoke. While I was in the lobby, I noticed the gate to the video room open and requested the security guard to allow me to visit it for a few minutes. I could see her on the video screen, lying there with many surgical pipes and wires from different machines that were around her. Though she was in coma, just looking at her like that broke my heart. Tears rolled down my eyes and my breath became laboured. I could see her lying there helplessly and I wanted to comfort her but was unable to do so and that was cruel. My grief overtook me and I couldn't help crying loudly seeing her in that state. The cameras were moving all around her, recording every moment but all I see was that she was just lying there lifelessly, not moving at all. I hoped that if I could hold her hand and speak to her, she might hear me and react but deep down I knew that was not possible.

As it was already morning by then, I rushed to the ICU to get my visitor's pass made so that I could meet her, see her and touch her.

The attendant at the ICU advised me to wear foot covers, a face mask, a cap, a gown and clean my hands with a cleanser before entering the dust and germ free environment of the ICU. I entered the I.C.U and looked at my love, who was lying on the second bed from the left corner. There was a lump in my throat while I was heading towards her and my heart broke after I looked at the patients fighting for their life in I.C.U. All of them dressed in grey and covered by pipes and each had an attendant sitting beside them.

While I was looking for Aarohi, my eyes went to the bed next to her that was divided by white curtain wall and saw that his attendant was crying with his heart out. I knew the patient must have lost his battle for life and left everyone devastated. I reached Aarohi and sat down on the chair next to her bed and as I looked at her face, tears roll down my eyes.

I could see her pulse rate, her beat rate, her oxygen intake, etc being recorded on a computer next to her and a nurse maintaining a record of everything half hourly. I controlled my tears to talk to her, although I knew she would be able to reply.

“Hey, baby, see I am back.”

“Aarohi, I am here with you...and I am not going to leave you ever.”

“Aaroahi, baby I know you are listening and you are angry at me but don't punish me like this.”

“Bachcha, you know Kanika and I sorted it out.” I lied.

“See, I have this ring ready for our engagement.”

“Aaroahi, please speak. Say something, baba...” My voice cracked and tears rolled down my cheeks. I wanted to kiss her, I wanted to touch her, but I could only sit near her. I didn't even have courage to touch her. A nurse came to me and alerted me about the time. I wanted to spend some more time with her but her care was my at most priority and I didn't want to disturb her.

I got up to leave but before doing that, I stopped at the duty doctor's table and went to speak with Dr. Sachdeva, who was looking after my Aaroahi.

“Sir, is she alright?” I knew she was not, but I was being positive for her.

“Beta, she is fighting with her life, just pray to God. We are doing our best,” he advised and held my shoulder in a fatherly manner.

I left the I.C.U and went back to the waiting room. Arun, Prachi and Kanika came in at 7 in the morning. Arun offered me a tea, which I declined and Kanika came and sat next to me.

“Aarush, if you don't take care of yourself, how would you take her care?” She asked me to have breakfast as I had been hungry for more than 24 hours. But how could I when my love was in a situation where she couldn't even move.

Arun and Prachi too agreed with her. “Aarush, Kanika is right. Please eat something,” Prachi said.

I took the cup of tea and went outside for a smoke.

I could see the Lord Ganesha's sculpture in the middle of the park, so I looked towards him and asked- “Why? Why did you? How could you? She was your acolyte, she offered you prayers day and night and in return you did this to her? I know you won't reply but if you really needed to do something, it should have been with me. It was me, who never believed in you nor I do now. My little belief of your existence has totally vanished today. You should not have done this to her.”

I was fighting with that sculpture and my heart was throwing questions, which had no answers, by me, or by god, or by anyone. I controlled my tears and decided to be the strength to her, to our relationship, and to myself.

“Attendant of Aaroahi.” A voice called and I rushed to the reception. Arun, Prachi and Kanika came from other side.

“Yes...” I asked.

“Doctor needs to discuss something; you can wait in his cabin.” We moved to his cabin and sat down quietly.

“Aaroahi is still in a critical situation.” Those words were hard to take but I had decided not to show



my weakness anymore. “We need to operate on her in this situation only,”

He said.

“Doctor, you can do what you feel is right,” I said. I was eager to see that she be treated in the best way possible.

“Doctor, a friend of mine, Dr. Kavar, is working in Neuro in America, and he wants to discuss something with you, would you?” I asked him, pulling out my phone.

I called Kavar and handed over the phone to doctor.

Both doctors started discussing Aarohi's case seriously and it turned out that they had attended the same medical college. As soon as I left the room, I called Kavar and asked him about what the doctor said about her present condition.

“Aarush, I have talked to him and advised him to wait for her to be conscious before operating on her.” He further told me, “Aarush, Aarohi is in really serious condition. Pray to god for her well being and I will keep in touch with the doctors from here. I will also try and come there by next Monday.” Words from him were more than enough and the fact that he was coming too were a great source of relief and comfort for me.

“Thanks, Aarush” Kanika placed her hand on my shoulder.

“Mention not,” I said and as I turned, she hugged me.

“Everything will be fine. Nothing will happen to her,” I held her tightly and said.

“Till you are with her, nothing will happen,” She said, sobbing.

Prachi too came to us and held her. My face was expressionless. I had forgotten how to smile and I had forgotten how to cry.

It was 10 in the morning when Kanika's parents arrived. I touched their feet but did not interact with them.

While Kanika and Prachi stayed there, Arun and I went outside. We were smoking when I heard a cough. It was Kanika's father, so I quickly stubbed my cigarette.

“Beta, thank you for your help, Kanika told me everything,” He said soberly.

“Uncle, it was for her, you don't need to thank me,” I was sounding a bit arrogant, so Arun poked me with finger in my lower back to warn me.

Kanika's father put his hand on my shoulder and started walking with me.

“Aarohi is my brother's daughter and her responsibility to me is more than anything.” He sounded concerned and sincere. “I was strained hearing about your relationship with her. I didn't know you before, but today, I know you.” He added.

I was quiet, calm and reaction less.

“Her marriage has been fixed with my friend's son, who is coming today but we haven't told them about her.” He kept on talking and I was listening to him but my mind was with Aarohi.

As soon as the topic turned to her marriage with someone else, I showed my displeasure by moving away his hand from my shoulder.

“Uncle, we should think of her well being first,” I said and walked off without listening to what he had to say after that.

While Kanika was with her father and mother, Prachi came to us with a cup of tea. “Rohit is coming today,” she said as she handed over the tea-cup.

“Who is Rohit?” Arun asked.

“Aarohi was going to be engaged to him.”

“What?” Arun shouted and looked towards me.

“They care more about her marriage rather than her well being. She is just a burden to them and they wanted to get rid of her even when she is fighting for her life.”

Kanika came and asked Prachi to stay there as all of them were going home to take care of Rohit.

“What the hell they are doing?” Arun was enraged at hearing that but I didn't care. The only thing I was concerned about was Aarohi.

## **And It Happened While You Were Sleeping**

Three days had passed and she was still in the ICU. For me it seemed like three years as my life had completely changed and so had my routine. The only thing that I was left was her memories and all I was left to do was to think about her and dream about her. I was trying to sleep in the dimly lit room for attendants but sleep eluded me but finally my eyes became heavy and my eyelashes dropped.

My head was aching in spite of the pain killers that I had had in the evening and again after dinner, so I decided to go out to catch some fresh air. It was raining and there I saw Aarohi standing in the middle of the road and calling me.

She was looking beautiful. Her hair were wet and her white dress was drenched and clinging to her porcelain skin. She moved her hair back with her hand and removed the water over her eyes with the other one. As soon as she saw me standing there watching her, she waved her hand. I moved out in the pouring rain, waving my hand at her. The smile and happiness on her face matched mine. I moved towards her and she looked down coyly. I slowed down to look at her as her shyness added to her beauty.

Then, suddenly, a speeding bus came out of nowhere and hit her, throwing her high in the air.

“Aarohi...!” I shouted aloud. The receptionist switched on a dim light and came towards me to ask if all was fine with me.

It was a dream. The worst nightmare I could ever have. My heart was beating so fast that I had to place my hand over my heart on my chest. My eyes were filled and tears were roll down my cheeks.

I went out to the lobby and to divert my mind. I lit a cigarette and after the smoke I went to the CCTV room to look at Aarohi but, unfortunately, the room was locked that night. I was feeling terribly depressed after the nightmare.

The next morning, Rohit was coming to the hospital to see her and my brain was whirling with questions. Why was he coming? Why could Kanika's family not understand her situation? Why was all this is happening?

Mind: It is good he is coming, you can tell him about you and Aarohi

Heart: You should not make things complicated. He would himself refuse to marry her in this condition.

Mind: What about Kanika and her parents?

Heart: They can't force him, I will talk to him.

Mind: But you will not tell him about your relationship with Aarohi?

Heart: I won't.

Mind: You will.

Heart: I will not.

Mind: You should.

My mind won over my heart and I decided to tell him about our relationship.

In the morning, Kanika's mother reached there early and took the pass to see Aarohi. I hated myself for being late. Kanika's father was approaching me with a boy and he was staring at me. Maybe, he was doing so because of my shabby condition.

I went towards the elevator and somehow managed to enter the I.C.U without a pass. I waited behind the curtain to watch Arohi with her aunt and saw that Kanika's mother could not stop her tears. After about 15 minutes she got up to leave and after she had gone, I went up to Aarohi.

“Hey, Baby, How are you today?”

“What was Aunty saying?”

“Bacha, Rohit is here, I will tell him that we are together.”

“Don't you worry, I will make everything perfect.”

“Baby, you just be okay, and we will leave for America, forever.”

“Aarohi, I will make everything work.

I carried on with my one side conversation for next fifteen minute before it was time for me to leave the ICU and as soon as I reached the ground floor, I came face to face with Kanika's father and Rohit.

“Aarush, this is Rohit, Kanika and Rohit are going to be engaged,” He said introducing me to him.

I ignored him and gave him a cold look but shook his hand when he offered it.

“This is Aarush, Aarohi boyfriend,” Kanika's father said to him.

What? He had called me her boyfriend? I also recalled him saying to me that Rohit and Kanika were going to be engaged. I was confused. I looked towards Kanika and she looked into my eyes and then downwards.

They all sat in the waiting room and I went to get some tea for them. My entire perspective for them had changed and my mind was calmer now. Kanika's father had accepted me. And Rohit was going to marry Kanika. All seemed settled now.

I was happy and it was the first time that my tense face had a hint of a smile on it. I told Arun and Prachi as soon as they came in the afternoon and they were very happy for me. Arun thumped my back and said-

“Aarush, I told you, they were good... Anyone in such a situation would behave like they did in past.

I was happy that he was there beside me.

Soon, I advised uncle and aunty to go back to home as we were all there for Aarohi. They left with Rohit but Kanika stayed back and when Prachi and Arun went to get food packed from the canteen; I held Kanika's hand and said-

“Thanks, Kanika...”

“Aarush, I fell for you, but realised that you two are made for each other and that I would never be able to separate you both,” she said with a tear in her eye.

“Kanika...” I said wiping the tears from her eyes.

“Aarush, I will love you forever. I know you will keep my sister very happy and if we would have been together, we would never have been happy.”

“Kani, Rohit looks cute...” I said holding her from her shoulder to face me, a wicked smile on my face. It was after a long time that I had called her Kani. She too smiled back.

“Aarush, you must thank Arun.”

“Arun?”

“Yes, he made my father change his decision.”

“What? You stay here,” I said and rushed towards the canteen.

I ran towards Arun with a smile on my face and I hugged him tightly.

“Saaley, how did you do that?” I asked, squeezing him hard.

“What?”

“Kanika told me everything” I said and smiled. He too smiled.

“Thank you, brother.”

“Aarush, bhai kehta hai aur fir thank you bhi” He reverted with a filmy reply.

Prachi was looking at us and came toward us. All three of us then crossed our arms and hugged each other. I had tears in my eyes when I sincerely told them, “Thank you, both, for being there for us.”

—

We went back to the waiting room and settled down. I couldn't wait for the clock to strike six as I was eager to tell AaroHi about this new development.

“She will be okay na?” Kanika asked me and her stress on 'na' reminded me of AaroHi.

“She will be absolutely fine; she is just being temperamental for me not calling her timely,” I replied giving a silly excuse.

“Aarush, she will be fine...” Prachi and Arun said in unison.

“Kawar is coming day after tomorrow. He will take care of everything.” I further relaxed everyone.

Kawar was my uncle's son and had been a brilliant scholar in his college time. After his MBBS, he had moved to America four years ago and was especially coming back for me.

“Attendant to AaroHi...?” A voice called and a call at that time, in the middle of the day, was new for us. Nobody had ever called at that time, there must be something urgent, I thought.

We all rushed together to the reception. “Please wait in the cabin, doctor is coming,” the receptionist informed us and I saw the doctor exiting the elevator and moving towards his cabin.

“Please come inside.” He pointed towards the cabin and his expression made me more nervous. I sat on the chair in front of him while he proceeded to see the CT-scan report on his laptop.

“What was your name?”

“Aarush”

“Yes, Aarush, her bleeding in these nerves has been stopped and that is a positive sign. But the clot

over these cells has damaged the cells.” He pointed towards the watermark over the brain cells.

I remained quiet and just nodded my head.

“Aarush, we feel we must treat her now. You can discuss it with your doctor.”

“Sir, can you please talk to him.” I pleaded him to talk to Kavar.

They had a long discussion over the phone. After they were done, the doctor passed the phone back to me.

“Aarush, you all decide and tell me,” he told me politely.

I moved out of the room and told Kanika and others about the conversation. They were all quiet. I pulled out my phone and called Kavar again.

“Kavar, what should we do?”

“Aarush, she's at life's risk. If we operate now, she might be in coma and if we don't operate her now, we might end up losing her,” he told me sincerely without hiding anything from me.

“Kavar, are you coming tomorrow?” I asked.

“Aarush, she needs to get operated on an urgent basis and if I leave for India tomorrow, I will not be able to stay in touch with you for two days during the course of the flight.” He approached the situation practically.

“Aarush, I am staying here only and will be in touch over phone.” He helped me a lot saying that he will be in our touch.

He relaxed me a lot but my mind was in a fix. How the operation will go? How should I tell others about this? What if she doesn't recover? Everything was aquiver in my body, my legs, my hands, and my lips-all. I was shivering from tip to toe.

The thoughts of her being operated and the knowledge that her life was at risk were scaring me no end and I was smoking continuously after the call with Kavar.

In the evening, the doctor called me and asked me to sign the papers, stating that if anything happened to Aarohi, it would not be considered to be any fault of the doctor or the hospital.

After indemnifying themselves, they proceeded for the operation and I moved to the waiting-room.

A deep fear could be observed on all our pale faces. Kanika called her parents and they were there within half an hour. I regularly called Kavar to enquire about the operation, as he was coordinating with the doctors operating on Aarohi.

I had soaked all the tears within. I could not utter anything to anyone as the lump in my throat obstructed every word.

# I Was Changing

It was a long surgery. The night had almost passed but still a few more hours of her surgery were left. And each hour seemed longer than a day.

My heart was sinking. I wanted to go to the operation theatre, but I had no courage to move my legs. I had been just standing still all that time. I took out a cigarette but a failed attempt to light it made me throw it away.

I moved towards the park and all I could see there were the attendants and dear ones of the patients. I too sat on a vacant bench. I saw a temple in the middle of the park and a few believers standing outside it with their hands joined in prayer. I smiled cynically but for some reason; I kept looking at them continuously and I don't know when my feet started to move towards the temple.

I noticed that some people who were not standing outside the temple were also praying from a distance. As I reached the temple, I saw someone walking up the stairs of the temple and looking at me, turning her head.

It was Aarohi, she was looking at me with a smile and she was climbing up the temple. It made me smile too and I walked after her inside the temple. She was done with the last step and moved inside the temple as I ran towards her.

As I stepped in, I could smell aggarbatis. It was different, different from the smoke I was habitual of. It had a soothing effect on my mind. I could see the people chanting prayers. I tried to search for her. I moved here and there to find her but I could not find her anywhere. She was there a moment before and as I was following her, she vanished in thin air and I was lost in her fragrance.

I moved in further to look for her and ended up in a chamber. I saw a statue of Lord Ganesha established in that chamber. Nobody else was there. It was just me and him.

“Why did you do this to her?” I asked in anger. Though I knew, my question was in vain as sculptures made of stone do not talk. But I heard something, something that only I could hear. “What have I done?” And I started talking.

Me: Aarohi, she is my life.

Voice: Every patient here is Aarohi for somebody.

Me: Why did you do this to them?

Voice: It's a cycle of life, everyone has to die someday.

Me: Die..!! All of them are going to die?

Voice: Many of them Those words sounded harsh, hard to listen but I stayed there, confused.

Me: Aarohi too?

Voice: May be.

Me: Why? No. It can't be.

But the voice was gone. Suddenly, I realized I was actually talking to God.

I fell down on my knees. It was the first time for me and I was on my knees in front of him. Tears rolled down my cheeks and I was breathing heavily.

Me: She is my life; please don't take her away from me. Please. If she dies, I would die too. I might commit suicide, and you will be blamed. I am sorry; please do not punish her for my deeds. I am the non-believer. Please let her live. Please let her live with me.

That was all I could say. I waited for a response but there was pin drop silence.

Tears were continuously flowing out my eyes and I had lost the courage to be there anymore. I moved outside the temple, wiping my tears, leaving the ones that had dried. The hairs over my skin were erect and I was shivering all over.

I came out of the temple and went to restroom. I was speechless The surgery was still going on. I was sweating heavily.

“What happened to you?” Arun came near me and enquired, looking at my condition.

“Nothing. Any information about Arohi, has the doctor said anything?” I asked ignoring the question he asked.

“No, nothing as of now.”

We all were quiet and lost in thoughts, or maybe, everybody was praying for Arohi to recover.

I never believed in God before, but today I was standing there on my knees in front of him. I was selfish and I was standing there for her, for my life. I had never thought that one day I will believe in the power that I had never seen, but it is everywhere. He was listening to me, He was talking to me. Aarohi was right, 'Believe in him, he will do everything for you.' But why he was doing this to her. She always believed in him. She always remembered him in every good and bad phase of her life.

I could count every time she achieved something; it was him whom she thanked first and every time she faced a problem, she called him for help. Then, why he did this to her. Why was she suffering?

“You.” My subconscious mind told me. And I realized then.

Yes, it was me, who always pushed her away from her beliefs. It was me, who always tried to pull her away. It was me, who always commented sarcastically at her prayers. I was the culprit. And, again, I could feel the tears flowing on my face.

It was me because of whom Aarohi was fighting for her life. I ran back to the temple and to the chamber. I folded my hands, joined my palms and knelt down on my knees and begged for mercy, “God, please save her” and closed my eyes to feel the depth.



I could see her and she was in front of my eyes. She was happy to see me changed.

My phone rang and it was Arun. He called me to the waiting room. The operation was over.

I got up and ran towards the operation theatre. The doctor came out, removing his gloves and called us to his cabin.

“The operation was successful, and if God wishes, she will be back to her health soon,” He uttered the words that we were waiting to hear since she was admitted.

“Thank you, lord, thank you very much.” I looked up with my palms joined and thanked the merciful within my heart.

Arun, Kanika and Prachi were shocked to see me doing so but they didn't react, instead, they smiled.

“Thank you, doctor...” I said looking towards him.

“We will keep her under observation for two-three days and will shift her from the I.C.U soon.” He further relaxed us.

I ran out and from the shop outside the temple, I purchased some parsad to distribute. I also called Kavar to thank him for his support. I was happy and as soon as I handed the parsad to Kanika's parents, her father hugged me.

“Beta, she is getting married and as soon as Aarohi regains her health, you two should marry too,” he said pointing towards his daughter. Kanika smiled, with tears in her eyes.

I was happier than ever before, and my belief in God, my faith, everything was changed; my life had got a new direction.

Arun and Prachi were happy to see me so happy. Arun hugged me.

“Aarush, nobody can separate you two,” He whispered in my ears.

“Thanks, Arun, for being there for me.” I was happy that he was there with me during the toughest moments of my life.

My eagerness to meet her was on height. But I had to wait for the visiting time. I got a chance to see her in the evening and was immediately entrapped by beautiful and dreamy eyes. She was looking at me for the first time after so long.

“Baby, you gonna be okay,” I said looking deep into her eyes.

“Doctor has assured us that you will be out of this place within a day or two.”

“You know what, I met someone today. It was God. I finally dropped my ego, I lost against him, but I am happy that he listened to me.”

Her eye movements were telling me that she was listening to me and that she was happy to listen to me.

“Baby, you get okay soon. Your uncle is ready for our marriage.”

She could not speak anything because of those surgical instruments and she was still not moving at all but her eyes were telling me that she had understood and was happy. She was happy to know that we were going to get married soon. Tears roll down her eyes. I moved my fingers to remove those tears and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“Your belief in God was never wrong, you were never wrong. It was me, who never believed in Him, but, baby, I am changed now. This whole situation changed my beliefs.”

“Shona, I am missing you a lot, I want to cuddle you right now. I want to kiss you right away, be okay, baby. Get well soon.” The flow of my emotions was on a high and I could not stop myself from talking to her. I could not stop myself from looking and falling for those -fall-for-me eyes.

Finally, I ended my one sided conversation with her and I went outside so that her uncle or aunty could visit her too. I was standing with Arun and Prachi when they told me about their time issue, their deadlines and of their leaves they took from office.

“Bro, if you need anything, anytime, I will be a call away.” He said to me and I hugged and thanked him again for everything he did for my life. If anyone asked me the definition of friends, I would take two names, Arun and Prachi.

Kanika's father came outside after fifteen minutes and was sobbing. I went up to him to calm him down.

“Uncle, she will be fine very soon.” He kept on crying.

“Beta, thank you for everything you did.”

He advised me to go home and take some rest that night as I had never left the hospital, even for a single minute, all this while that she was in the hospital.

“Nothing is going to happen in the night and you can come in the morning to see her.” I surrendered against his forceful approach and agreed to go to home.

—

My home was in the same city, but I hadn't told my mother or anyone else about the situation,

It was 10 in the night when I left the hospital. I called my mom and her excitement at hearing my voice was at a peak. I had dropped the message to her a week before that I will not be on a call for a sometime due to some technical issues in Nigeria.

“Aarush, where are you beta, we were trying to call you since last week,” she sobbed at hearing my voice.

“Mom, I am in Rohtak,” I replied to her and felt pangs of guilt at not telling her anything.

“What?” She sounded excited.

“I am coming, mom,” I said and disconnected the call and drove Arun's car, which he had left behind for me at the hospital, to reach home fifteen minutes later.

I was going home after a gap of five months to meet my mom, but I was sure she would understand once I told her everything.

My mother hugged me as soon as she saw me and I realised that her motherly hug was something I needed the most at that point in time. My lonely soul needed a home and that was her lap.

“Aarush, what happened, beta...” she exclaimed, worried, as she looked at me. My untrimmed beard and my tense look was more than enough for her to figure out that something was wrong in my life.

“Mom, Aarohe...She is in the I.C.U.” Tears roll down my eyes as she held me in her arms more closely.

“Beta, sit down...” She settled me down and gave me a glass of water to drink.

“Mummy, Aarohe and I were together in Delhi...” The whole night passed in my narrating the story of my life to her; the part of my life which she was totally oblivious to till now. My mom kept on consoling me while I kept on sobbing, but she never asked why I didn't tell her everything before.

“Beta, Waheguru will make everything alright,” she said finally before she switched off the light in my room at 3 am, so that we could sleep for some time before again leaving for the hospital at 6.30 in the morning.

---

The very first rays of the rising sun entered my room through the window and awakened me up from the sleep. I rubbed my eyes and looked at the time in my phone. It was 5:48, and without wasting a second, I rushed to take a bath.

My mom was already awake and she had prepared the breakfast to be taken to the hospital for all. After a cold-shower bath, I moved to the hall and stepped towards the small-temple where the photograph of “Guru-Nanak Ji” was kept.

I joined my hands and kept on chanting the name of God for the health of my Aarohe. My mom looked at me while she was still in the kitchen. She moved forward and picked the parsad that she had kept before God in the morning and put in my mouth.

“My son is really changed,” she said with wetness in her eyes.

Without wasting the time, we left our home at 6:20 and within 15 minutes we were there at the hospital. As soon as I reached there, I touched the feet of Kanika parents.

“Your son is really a gem.” Uncle told my mother. It was a proud moment for her but she didn't say anything except smile.

“Who is inside?” I asked Kanika's father.

“Kanika,” he replied.

15 minutes later, Kanika came out of the I.C.U and on the forcing Kanika's parents; my mom went into the I.C.U to see Aarohi. I managed to get inside with her by again using my charm, as earlier.

“Hey, baby, see who has come to see you?” I said, promising to control my choice of words next time. Aarohi rolled her eyes to see us. My mom looked at Aarohi and tears started rolling down her eyes and as she sat on the stool, I clasped her arms and placed my face on her shoulder.

“Mamma, she will be okay na?” I asked as I trusted my mom the most and her words were the last words for me.

“Beta, she definitely will be absolutely fine. The one who has stolen the heart of my boy can never be not fine. Good things happen to good people,” She consoled me.

Aarohi was looking at me. Her eyes were in mine and they were in a deep talk.

Aarohi: Aarush, she is your mom?

Me: Yes, baby, she here for us.

Aarohi: You told her everything.

Me: Everything about us.

Aarohi: Is she agreeing to our marriage?

Me: She is ready to discharge her daughter-in-law and take her to her house from here only.

Aarohi: Aarush, I love you for everything.

Me: I love you more, baby.

The nurse informed us that the visiting hours were over and while my mother waited outside the I.C.U, I stole a few minutes with the doctor to ask about her well being.

“Aarush, everything is okay, but...”

“But, what doctor?” I sounded harsh and I lowered my voice as I realized I was still in the I.C.U

“There is no movement in her.”

“Will she be alright....?”

“Aarush, it is a psychological effect .It happens sometimes after accidents. It is a miracle that she survived the accident but she is still psychologically affected by it.”

“Means what, doctor?”

“She can listen and she can see everything but her reflex to response is not working. It's like a shock.”

“Will she be okay, doctor?”

“Aarush, she will be okay but we can't say how much time it would take. In some cases, it is about two weeks and in some cases, it extends to years.”

“Doctor...”

“Aarush, we will be shifting her from ICU to a private ward. You all need to encourage her and we will treat her best. The more she wills, the earlier she can recover,” he advised and told me that he will be shifting her the next day.

I moved outside the I.C.U where my mom was waiting for me and we took the elevator to reach the ground floor. My mom rested her face to my chest and said-

“Beta, you love her so much...and so does she. I could see the depth of love in your eyes.” She was a mom and moms know everything.

A day later, she was shifted to the ward. She was in her good health recovery stage but her movement was still limited to the movement of her eyes. Her uncle and aunty and my mom decided to get her married to me as soon as she recovered.

I intervened, “Mom, we can marry later but we can get engaged?” It was surprise to them but I explained to them that 1st December was her birthday and it was the day that we had decided to get engaged. Her guardians agreed and so did my mom. Kanika and my mom went to purchase a ring for me as I already had a ring for her in my pocket since the time I came back from Nigeria.

As my ring arrived, Kanika came forward and touched her hand to move it and to put the ring on my finger. Afterwards, I took the ring, on which AA, the initials of our names was etched, out of my pocket and gently put it on Arohi's finger.

Having done that, I moved on to kiss her hand and then her forehead. There were tears in everyone's eyes.

Now, she was mine, mine forever.

—

As I read the last page of Aarush's diary, my curiosity to know him more increased. I went to Harshit to tell him everything about that I had read about Arush and AaroHi.

Harshit never knew Aarush very well although they had shared a few conversations. But now, I was feeling really attached to him and I wanted to know if he was still at the hospital and what happened to AaroHi.

We went to the hospital to meet him and enquired at the enquiry counter for him. When we did not a proper reply, I asked for AaroHi instead.

“She was discharged from the hospital today morning.” The man at the enquiry told me.

“Could you please give me their number?” I asked humbly.

“Sorry, we can't disclose the patient details.”

“Please, I know them but I have lost their number,” I lied and a doctor, in his fifties, noticed us asking for AaroHi.

“How do you know AaroHi?” He asked with a deep, concerned voice.

“Sir, I am Akansh and we use to sit with Aarush. I found his diary which I need to return to him,” I replied pointing him the diary in my hand.

“What is in it?” He asked to know it more.

“Sir, it is his diary, his whole life is written in it,” I told him to assure him how important it might be to return it to Aarush.

He was convinced and asked us to accompany him to his cabin so that he could give us the details. We followed him.

“Beta, I have never seen someone so much in love...” he said while we were walking. He considered talking to us when I told him that I knew how AaroHi was admitted here through this diary and wanted to know if she had recovered.

“It is nothing more than a miracle that she is recovering so well.” That relaxed me a lot and I was happy to hear that.

“I remember, AaroHi was admitted here for three months and was fighting with her life but his belief and love for her turned everything.”

He began to tell about Aarush being with her every moment and how he used to encourage her to live. He also told us about his one-sided conversations that he overheard sometimes.

“Here is the number,” he said looking at his diary. Thanking him, we left the cabin and I asked Harshit to call Aarush so that we could meet him. I also wanted to tell AaroHi how much he loved her.

Calling Aarush, we came to know that Aarush was going to be at Kanika's wedding that night at Hotel Jivnesh. Harshit decided to meet them in the morning after the marriage but my curiosity led me to land there without any invitation. I went to the marriage hall at 9.00 PM and started to look for Aarush and AaroHi. Aarush was standing on the stage and on his left side there was AaroHi on a wheelchair. Her impeccable beauty adorned the stage.

“Kanika weds Rohit” I could read on the banner behind them and I smiled looking it. It was as if I was unintentionally connected to them and knew everything about them.

I decided to walk to the stage to meet Aarush and AaroHi. As I neared the stage, I stopped myself to look again observe them at close distance. Aarush was holding the handle of the wheel-chair caringly and AaroHi was looking prettier than anything else in the world. She held a beauty that could attract anyone towards her and my eyes twinkled with happiness to see them together but just as I reached them, I froze as I realised that AaroHi was completely immobile; only her eyes had any movement in

them.

My heart took a summersault in shock and I quickly withdrew my steps and as I turned, I accidentally bumped into someone. He was Arun, my elder brother's classmate and one who I considered almost a brother.

“Arun bhaiya, aap...?” I asked with surprise.

“Akansh...?” He placed his hand on my shoulders.

“Bhaiya, one minute please,” I asked him to come to the corner as I wanted to share Aarush's diary with him.

“Has Aarush written this?” He asked me. I nodded my head.

“Give it to me. I will give it to him,” he said just as a girl in a blue sari came to call him.

“Prachi...?” I asked him as she left.

“Yes, how do you know?”

“Everything is in here...” I pointed towards the diary with a smile. He smiled back in return.

I was happy to know that Arun bhaiya was the same Arun, who was mentioned in the diary, and I was happy to hand over Aarush's precious diary to him.

—

It had been three months since that incident took place in my life but the eagerness to know what happened afterwards always remained in my heart. I once asked Harshit to call Aarush in order to meet him but he told me that Aarush had moved to the United States with AaroHi.

I also called Arun bhaiya to get in touch with Aarush but he also told me the same thing. He also told me that Aarush and AaroHi had got married the same night that I went to Kanika's wedding to return the diary. I was happy to hear that but that further aroused my curiosity to know more. I asked him for Aarush's contacts and managed to get his e-mail address. I decide to send an e-mail to Aarush to introduce myself and to tell him how touched I was after accidentally reading about his love for AaroHi and his fortitude in adversity. I was thrilled when he very promptly responded to my e-mail

Dear Akansh,

Thanks for writing to me, and thanks a lot for your love. I wanted to meet you that night when Arun handed over the diary to me but you had already left.

I am happy to know that you wanted to know more about me. So, I am attaching a file here that has the chapter that would tell you how my life changed forever.

Regards,

Aarush

## **I Can't Leave Without You**

I took the bath and came out of the washroom in my towel and there she was on the bed, looking her best. The nurse had just helped her to change and she was looking gorgeous as ever; my fiancée.

She moved her eyes to see me while I was moving in search of my clothes kept in the closet of that ward. There was a feeling to embrace her right there, to squeeze her into my arms but I could not. Wearing the white shirt with blue denims that Aarohi said suited me the most, I prayed in front of Lord Ganesha and turned towards her. If she could have moved, she would have kissed me on my cheek seeing me like that with my hands joined in front of her God.

I took my place near her bed and sat down to talk with those drowsy eyes. I cleared my throat and started telling her everything that was in my mind.

“Aarohi, I am so much happy that we are engaged.” I said, filling the gap of her fingers with mine.

“So I am Aaru...” said her voice that I was dying to hear.

I looked into her eyes and her eye balls that were black enough for me to be lost in them, were looking towards me.

“Aarohi, you know I still remember the day I met you, the way we got to know each other, and the day I fell for you. Maybe, 'fell for you' is not the right expression here because it was not a fall; it was an emanation for me. I woke up the day I realized that I had found you.” My lips were quivering but still I continued despite the constant lump in my throat.

“Baby, see this,” I moved my laptop screen; “I have finally got the promotion and posting to America. You just get okay; we will fly to USA forever. You always wanted to go there, and now, America is calling us”

Each word of mine was heartfelt and in the hope she might respond to something.

“Baby, move a bit.” I carefully moved her to rest with her on the bed. I moved her head and placed it in my arms. Her touch was divine and now I could listen to her heartbeats more loudly.

A call on my phone interrupted our conversation. It was Kanika. I moved the phone screen in front of her eyes and said naughtily, “See, your sister- she won't let us live...”

“Yes, Kanika...” I said.

“Aarush, papa-mummy are coming, are you in the ward?” She asked.

“Hanji, I am here only,” I said and moved back to the stool in respect for uncle and aunty and within a minute or so, they were there. I stood up to greet them and touch their feet.

“Namaste, uncle, Namaste, aunty” I said.



“Namaste, betaji...” Her uncle said, putting his hand on my shoulder. He took the seat on the sofa, while I poured the tea in plastic cups from the thermos. We started a general conversation which later turned into a serious one.

“Beta, your mother told us about your promotion and that you have a very good opportunity out there in America,” he said me in his deep voice. I shouldn't have told my mother, I thought. “You should not miss that opportunity, son.”

“Uncle, I can't leave Aarohi.” I raised my voice a bit to let them know that I meant it.

“We are not saying that...” I kept quiet. After a little while her uncle broke the silence.

“Beta, we are really thankful to you,” he said emotionally.

He stood and walked to Aarohi, moved his hand on her forehead and started talking to her, “We could not have found a boy like him for you.” He said quietly. He removed his spectacles to clean tears in his eyes while Kanika held him from his hand to make him sit.

“Beta, if she was alright, we would have sent you both to America, but today, you should go, she will come as soon as she recovers,” Her aunt advised me.

The conversation ended with lot of advice which I ignored. I came to know that it was my mom, who wanted me to go to America who had asked them to help me make up my mind. Why? But why was she doing so? She knew that I was engaged to her and she was okay with it, so why she was asking them to manipulate me to move to the US without her? A series of questions left unanswered which I decided to ask after they left. The fruits they bought with them were neatly kept in the fridge by Kanika.

“It is your decision, we are just here to advise you, beta, don't take us wrong, but you have already done so much for us.” Kanika's father explained.

“Uncle, don't say like that, she is my fiancée.” I claimed my rights to her as they were leaving the room.

They left the room and I was back with my love.

“You see, everyone wants me to leave, but why can't they understand that if I can't live without you, how could I leave without you?” I aggressively move towards her. My eyes were in a deep sorrow. I sat again near her and was lost in emotions. I couldn't understand why my mom wanted me to leave to America.

I looked into her eyes and her eyes started to roll. I read what she was trying to say. Our eyes started to talk.

She: She loves you, Aarush.

Me: But she knows that I love you.

She: Aarush, you should listen to them, I don't want you to spoil your career. I am okay and as soon as

I recover I will be there.

Me: Baby, this is final, I am not leaving anywhere without you.

Me: Shona, have you heard about Kanika and Rohit; they are getting married next month. I want you to be there, my baby.

I looked deep into her eyes. A tear rolled down her eye.

“Baby, what would you wear?” I asked, scrolling the images of some Lehngas on a website.

“This one, I love this.” I said pointing at a brown lehnga and clicking the same, the link management of the site led us to look over some skinny girls in shorts. I was shy to look those bare legs with my girl.

“Aarush...” She would have shouted if she could.

“Baby, it was not intentional,” I said safeguarding myself.

The door bell rang; it was the time for the routine check-up by a doctor. He came with a pad in his hand and wrote some of the readings from the CPU kept near Aarohi.

“Doctor, how much time would she take to recover?” I asked with a voice that carried my pain.

“Aarush, don't worry about her treatment from our side. She is in one of the best hospitals. Just pray to God and she will be fine soon.” He carried a practical approach but was still too dependent on God.

“God please...!” I whispered to myself.

Kanika came back to us at six as she was willing to stay there that night and we started a conversation with a cup of tea in our hands.

“Aarush, you love her so much...”

“Just a little more than love,” I said with a wicked smile on my face.

“Sorry, I always misunderstood you.” She was still carrying her guilt.

“Aarush, you must leave, I am here to take care of her.”

“Kanika, there is no single moment that I can think of myself without her now.”

“Aarush, you are the pillar of support and strength for everyone but you should take care of yourself too.”

I moved out to have a puff of smoke and on the way out, I called my mom who was waiting for my call each day at this time of the day.

“Mom, you told Kanika's parents?” I shouted in an upsurge of emotions.

“Beta, you should take care of yourself too. You should not forget your life for her.” She sounded a

little low.

“Mummy, she is my life.” I argued back.

“But you can't do anything; the doctors are doing their best. Her uncle and aunty are there. I am there. You should not miss this opportunity.” She always wanted me to be happy. But when a child is grown up there is a difference in the definition of happiness for him as defined by him and as defined by his parents.

“Mom...”

“You always wanted to go there.”

“Mom, I always wanted to go there with her.”

“Aarush, I can't win this argument but all I need is for you to be happy.”

“Mom, I will be happy the day she will be with me at our home.”

“Take care of her, beta,” She said and disconnected the call and I thought that even though she was forcing me to leave her, her priority still was for me to take care of her.

Reaching the Medical Canteen, I decided to write every single moment that we had been through. I wanted to write it. I wanted somebody to listen to it. I wanted someone to know what I was suffering and I found the notepad to be the best audience.

## **They Are Getting Married, Let Us Do The Same.**

It was three in the morning and I was sitting and smoking cigarettes one after the other at the Medical Canteen when I received a call from the doctor telling me that all the tests and reports were okay. I ran towards the ward to share the good news with AaroHi and by the time I completed the formalities and signed the discharge papers, it was morning.

“AaroHi, we are going home, finally. Baby, it was my dream to take you back home and now my dream is coming true,” I said and dialled Arun's number to ask him and Prachi to pick us from the hospital. I saw AaroHi rolling her eyes, but by now I had begun to understand the language of her eyes and could easily understand what she wanted to convey.

“Baby, will you go like this?” I pointed towards her patient clothes.

“Let me help her change.” I heard Prachi say from behind my back.

“Oh, you are here...” I said as I turned back.

“Hi, Aarush,” Arun called out and, both, he and Prachi hugged me warmly with wide smiles on their

cheerful faces.

“Aarush and Arun, you both get out,” She ordered us as she pulled out a white dress from her bag for AaroHi.

“Prachi, I can stay if you say...” I said impishly.

“Aarush...scoot...” She was louder this time, and we moved quietly out of the room.

“Aarush, what doctors are saying?” Arun asked with a concern.

“They are saying that she will recover with time but how much time it will take, even they can't predict.”

“And what are you palnning to do?”

“Not much, yaar, I have asked Mr. Rachit for an extension of one more month to join in the US, but...” I stopped and looked at him for advice.

“Aarush, why don't you ask for a transfer to local office in the meantime? You can join them in a morning shift as somebody is always there with AaroHi during that time.”

“Arun, I have lost the courage to leave her for even a second.”

“This is not the way life runs.” He continued to advise me.

Then, suddenly, the door opened and there was AaroHi all dressed up and looking divine in a white salwar suit. She was looking her best and looking at her like that; I fell in love with her all over again. I went up to her and planted a kiss on her forehead. Prachi and Arun too hugged each other in our happiness.

“Shall we move?” Arun asked and pushing the wheel chair carefully, I walked beside Arun while Prachi matched my steps hold AaroHi from the side. We were supposed to go to AaroHi's house but I changed the plan at the last minute and decide to take her to my house.

It was eight in the morning when we reached home and as soon as we opened the main gate; my mom opened the door even before we could ring the bell. I don't know how she knew but I guess moms are like that. They can sense things about their children.

There was a huge smile on her face and as I touched her feet, she asked me to stop there. He called Prachi for help and within five minutes, she was back with a Thali of Aarti.

“Greh-Parvesh?” Arun poked me in ribs, jokingly.

A smile appeared on my face when she was moving the Thali in circles in front of me and AaroHi and applying tilak on AaroHi's fore-head. I bent to hug my mom lovingly for being so wonderful, considerate and nice.

We took AaroHi to my room and settled her there comfortably. Then, mom asked Arun and me to freshen ourselves while she organised breakfast for everyone. Prachi decided to stay with AaroHi in

the room and as I was walking out of the room, I could hear Prachi tell AaroHi about how much I loved her.

“Arun, when are both of you getting married?” I asked.

“Aarush, I had a talk with my parents and they are ready but Prachi is a little afraid to talk to her parents yet.”

“But she should talk to them.”

“I know, but we are not in a hurry. Whenever she wants, we will get married.”

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“Aunty, Prachi, get ready. We are getting late.”

Prachi and my mom were busy doing their makeup and also in helping AaroHi dress up. The Lehnga that I had ordered was the dress of the day and AaroHi was looking like an angel in it. Her eyes were sparkling as never before and her lips were tempting me to kiss them.

Had she not been on a wheel chair, we would have hugged and kissed right there but as I saw my mom looking at me, I suddenly felt embarrassed as I knew she was reading my mind.

She applied Kajal on AaroHi, as per the the Indian tradition, to safeguard her from evil eyes.

---

We reached the banquette hall at 9, and AaroHi's uncle and aunty welcomed us. Everybody was pleasantly surprised to see AaroHi arrive in wheel chair as nobody expected her to come in her condition but I wanted her to be there.

“Aaroh!” Her aunt squealed in pleasur and hugged her and her cousins crowded around her. Somebody told Kanika about her and she especially came to receive my angel, leaving her groom on the stage. The moment was joyful and even though she was not able to move or to say anything, her presence there was more than enough for everybody.

Kanika hugged me warmly and told me that she was grateful to me for everything I did for AaroHi. Her father too came to me and there were tears in his eyes.

“If her parents were alive, they would be the happiest parents to find a son-in-law like you,” he said emotionally.

“Uncle, I did everything for myself and for my love and there had been anybody else in my place, he would have done the same.” I said humbly. I knew it was my love for AaroHi that gave me the courage to face up to the challenge that life had thrown at me, so in a way, the credit was all AaroHi's.

“Kanika, let us go, Rohit, must be waiting for you,” Arun said to her.

“Let him wait. The love of his life should not be granted to him so easily,” she joked and laughed loudly.

“Aaro,hi, I am very happy that you changed my friend totally,” she said while wiping her tears. “Beta, have a seat there...” Her Aunt directed us to the first row opposite to the stage.

A lot of eyes were looking at us, mainly to inquire about Aaro,hi but there were some who wanted to know more about me.

“They are looking good together, aren't they?” Arun said as he walked up to the stage with Prachi to wish Kanika and Rohit and give them their wedding gift.

“Shona, aren't they looking good together?” I asked Aaro,hi.

“I think Prachi and Arun should marry too, they look great together.” My one sided conversation with Aaro,hi was on.

“But wait a minute; they don't look better than us, do they? We are the best, darling, aren't we? I said jokingly to Aaro,hi.

“Who is that boy?” A lady in her late 40's asked Aaro,hi's aunt and uncle who were standing near us. They came closer to us and uncle put his hand on shoulder, replied, “He is Aaro,hi's fiancé.” His words made me feel proud and gave me recognition in her family.

I touched his feet and he hugged me tightly. “Aarush, thank you for being there for Aaro,hi.”

When the time came for Kanika and Rohit to exchange rings, I looked at Aaro,hi's kissed her hand that had my ring on it. “Soon, we too are going to be there on the stage,” I said, looking deep into her eyes which were intense.

Her cousins came to sit near us and started asking us about how we met and all the little detail of our time together. I answered them with a smile as their probing helped me in remembering each and every lovely moment that Aaro,hi and I had spent together. I couldn't wait for the day to see her as my bride.

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“Aarush, why don't you have something?” Arun said, breaking my chain of thoughts and my dreaming about the day that I would make Aaro,hi my bride. I looked around and saw her sitting motionless on her wheelchair and it broke my heart to see her like that. A lump formed in my throat and I motioned Arun to carry on and that I would eat later. Aaro,hi was still unable to intake anything orally and her surgical pipe for feeding her was also removed for a few hours, so that she could attend the marriage. How could I eat when my love couldn't?

I was standing with Arun with my hand on the wheelchair when I felt a touch. It was a touch I will never forget in my life. It was magical. It was the touch that I had been waiting for so long.

Her trembling hand was touching my hand!

I bent down on my knees to look at her face and realised that tears were flowing from my eyes.

“Aaro,hi...?” I said loudly.

Arun looked at me and asked, “What happened?”

“She just moved...” I said in excitement. He was equally excited to hear that. I was looking deep into Aarohi eyes and realised that she was trying to say something. Her slack lips were trying to move and fighting to say something. I moved my ear closer to her lips to listen what she was trying to say. Arun too witnessed that she was trying to say something and shouted for Prachi and Kanika and they all come running there. Her uncle and aunty also came to see what the commotion was all about. Aarohi's lips were trembling.

“Aaru...” she whispered and my heart beats accelerated.

“Aarohi...” I said slowly to make her feel at ease.

“They...” she was trying hard to speak.

“...are...” her lips were still trembling.

“...getting...” she was trying harder.

“...married...” she completed her sentence in a cracked and weak voice. Her words were trembling and tears were rolling down my eyes. I placed my palm on her right cheek and said- “Yes baby... they are!” I said tenderly.

She was silent again and was breathing heavily. Everybody was looking at her and so was I. After a few seconds, she tried to move her lips again. I could feel that she was applying a lot of pressure.

“Let's do...” she said and stopped. “...the same...” she completed her sentence. She was smiling with one-half of her face. I held her in my arms. Her face was resting on my chest and my heart was beating abnormally. My face was all wet with my tears as I held her face in my hands and kissed her on her forehead. I knew that everyone around us were trying to control their tears of happiness at this miracle.

Arun, being the practical chap, called the doctor, who was there within 10 minutes. During those 10 minutes she was trembling to talk and was trying her best to recover but her all efforts were going in vain.

The doctor arrived and advised us to take her back to the hospital as she was recovering and needed rest and proper medication.

“Now, we are sure, she will recover very soon,” he told her uncle on his query.

“Thank you, so much, doctor,” he said holding both his hands in his.

“Thank Aarush instead. He is the one who has always believed in her recovery,” he answered and we all moved her to the hospital.

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Three weeks had passed since Kanika's marriage and each day, her recovery was getting better.

Aarohi was able to speak now but her voice was still weak though it was less cracked now. Also, there was an improvement in her movements. I called Kavar for advice and he suggested that we take her to America where he could treat her under his supervision. This was something that made everyone very happy as they all wanted me to go to America and join my new assignment there.

We left for America on the 11th November and that day shall remain the most memorable day of my life. Arun and Prachi came to drop us to the airport. I was driving the car and Aarohi was sitting on my left holding my free hand in hers. On the way, not a single temple passed where I didn't bow my head and thank God for everything he had done for us.

“How mean you are?” She taunted in her weak voice with a smile, reminding me of the first day that we met and of my saying the same thing to her as she bowed her head at every temple that we passed on the way. I laughed and loved her even more for it.

I looked at her and without saying a word; I raised her hand and kissed it.

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