

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
LOSING MY VIRGINITY AND OTHER DUMB IDEAS

Advantage Love

*Madhuri
Banerjee*



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Love may be hazardous to your health!
A delicious but inconvenient, messy and tiring truth.
But also the best feeling in the world, one that you need to experience at least twice in
your lifetime.

To Neha:

You are a strong, brilliant and incredible woman, and the best sister ever. May you be blessed forever.

To Ariaana:

For being such an amazing girl, despite my parenting.

For my parents:

For teaching me that love can exist forever if you find the right person and treat them well.

1



Dang! Trisha couldn't believe she was late. She was never late. If anything, she was always early. But of all the mornings her alarm wouldn't go off, it had to be today, on the most important day of her life. Today was when the most talked-about debate happened at the university, and she faced off with the best orator in all of JNU, Vedant Kirloskar.

She rushed out of the shower, barely having had any time to wash her hair and cursing herself for not doing it the night before. But she had been preparing her speech repeatedly till very late and had then quickly crashed, hoping to get an early start. She wore her new dark red Anokhi kurta on a white churidar with her standard silver earrings and a few bangles of the same hue. She adjusted her diamond nose ring, the one her father had paid for when she had aced the tenth boards, and felt quite pleased that she was at least looking confident enough to cream Vedant Dheeraj Kirloskar.

Vedant was the son of noted Maharashtra politician, Aamod Dheeraj Kirloskar. He roamed the campus with security guards and had a BMW parked outside JNU at all times. His family had deeply rooted political connections that went as far back as Independence and they had ruled Maharashtra for what seemed like eons. His father could come to Delhi to meet the PM as he pleased. Maybe it was all that money and power that gave Vedant a chip on his shoulder, Trisha thought; today, though, she was determined to make him eat humble pie. It had only been a month since the new term started and everyone had heard of Vedant but no one knew of Trisha Mathur. All that would change, Trisha promised herself.

'You are the queen of debates,' she muttered confidently to herself as she walked from her dorm room to the debate hall. She knew the hall would be packed with over four hundred people and all the faculty members and she needed to make a good impression. But then the nerves took over; she felt a film of sweat form on her upper lip. She gently dabbed it with her dupatta, knowing that if she appeared even a bit nervous, half the battle would already have been lost. She had nearly reached the hall when a new

friend, Juhi, met her outside.

‘Everyone is waiting for you,’ said Juhi to her. ‘Why is your mobile off?’

Trisha’s eyes widened. ‘My phone is not working?’ Definitely a bad omen.

‘You need to buy a new phone!’

‘Well, if I win this debate,’ Trisha winked as she replied, ‘I will use some of the prize money to buy myself a new one. You know my parents. They’ll never buy me anything new if the old can be fixed.’

‘Yes, yes, I know all about your middle-class folks. No time for that,’ Juhi rushed her to the side entrance from where she would get on stage. ‘Now go!’

As Trisha entered through the green room, she immediately spotted Vedant sitting with his teammate on one side of the podium; the three judges were sitting on the bottom row and an entire audience cramming for space in the auditorium. Her entire class of 2011 was squeezing into seats and aisles to hear this debate. Suddenly Trisha felt as though the wind was knocked out of her. Four hundred? More like a thousand people! *What was she doing?* Was she even capable of handling this magnitude of debate?

As the thought crossed her mind, Vedant looked over and caught her eye. He wore formal clothes—a white shirt, white trousers, Paul Smith shoes and a tie. Downloaded from dot org. A day-old stubble completed his look. While he was not extraordinarily tall, his dark brown soft curls, toned body and impish smile lent him a certain charm. This morning, though, he was more than charming—he was irresistible. His proportionate shoulders were relaxed and his sunglasses rested on his head, making him look more like a Greek tourist than the great campus debater he claimed to be. Trisha tried to gauge if he was as nervous as she was. What she saw was a cocky smile and a nod of the head that said to her: You can’t beat me.

Trisha squared her shoulders and walked onto the podium. Her classmates, ever loyal to her, started clapping their hands. Others fell silent, and a few began muttering how she might just actually defeat JNU’s best orator. Everyone had heard of Vedant. When he had given his first speech on politics in the first week of his arrival, he had established himself as a powerful voice with something important to say. They were captivated with his wit and his great looks. Most were already fans.

But Trisha knew she had more than good looks: she had the facts, and that’s what separated the effective debater from the mere charmer. At least that’s what she thought.

‘Shall we get started, people?’ announced the moderator over the microphone, shaking Trisha’s thoughts off their meanderings. Everyone settled down as the moderator, a senior student, continued: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we have with us today the first of many debates that will leave us at the edge of our seats and give us food for thought for the remainder of the term. Our two worthy opponents are Vedant Dheeraj Kirloskar...’ He had to pause as the assembly erupted in applause and wolf-whistles. ‘Vedant belongs to the Political Studies batch of 2011,’ the moderator continued. Vedant gave the cheering crowd a little bow and a quick wave of the hand.

Trisha’s blood boiled. It was as if he thought he had already won and everyone had come to see the slaughter of his prey rather than a magnificent hunt. It was her turn to be introduced. ‘And from the Sociology batch of 2011 is Trisha Mathur.’ A few people clapped their hands and Trisha felt slightly better. But butterflies continued to flutter

inside her stomach and, quickly regretting that she skipped breakfast, she started to feel queasy; she was sure her blood pressure had dropped. She could almost hear her mother's voice scolding her for forgetting to eat properly. She looked over at Juhi and pointed to her stomach.

Juhi rolled her eyes and mouthed, 'Now is not the time to be thinking about your stomach, you foodie!'

Trisha ignored her as she heard the strains of the last sentence of the moderator, '...come to the front for a coin toss.'

The two contenders walked to the moderator and Trisha called, 'Heads.' As the coin landed on heads, Trisha silently cheered her first lucky break and said to the moderator, 'I'll speak first.' Trisha gave Vedant a look as if she had already won. He sulked at losing the chance to draw the first blood and went back to his chair.

The moderator announced, 'Trisha Mathur shall speak first on the topic: Is vigilante justice the only solution for crimes against women? She stands against the motion. Give her a big hand.'

Trisha walked up to the podium. She didn't want anyone to notice how nervous she was or how faint she was feeling. It was only a matter of five to ten minutes before she ended her speech. Then it would be his turn, the rebuttals, and the vote and award ceremony. The whole thing would be over in two hours. She knew the next two hours and the immediate five minutes would seal her fate at this university. She had no idea what the outcome would be.

'Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for being here this early morning to hear me and my worthy opponent,' she began her speech. 'For me, vigilante justice means the decline of a system, the death of a democracy, the ruin of a nation. We need to find new ways of keeping our streets safe and our women protected. Taking justice into our own hands is not an answer.' She could see people nodding their heads. From what she could glean from the judges' faces, they, too, seemed to be agreeing with her points and were suitably impressed. When she finished, there was a huge applause.

But an even bigger applause awaited Vedant as he took the mike. He started in Hindi, 'My friends, I am a true blooded man with many women in my family. If someone hurt any one of them, I would not wait for the inefficient cops, the bought witnesses and the lackadaisical judicial system to give them justice. I would do it myself.'

There was thunderous applause. Trisha thought it was a horrible opening statement, and quite derogatory as well. The audience seemed to love it, though, perhaps not only because of the way he had mixed Hindi with English, but also that he seemed to be speaking personally to them as he delivered the rest of his speech.

'Do you know what happened to the Jalandhar girl who was in the papers ten years ago for having identified her rapist, told her family, filed an FIR and moved the courts? Nothing! Nothing! Everyone is telling her to forget about the incident and move on. You cannot move on from rape!'

With his fists in the air and a tone too loud for the mike, Vedant held the audience captive. Trisha looked over at the judges and could tell they were impressed. She had a feeling she would lose. Her rebuttal needed to be powerful enough if she wanted a chance to get back in the game. But then her head suddenly started spinning: With the

noise, the loud voice, and her blood pressure plummeting, Trisha was definitely feeling sick.

When Vedant finished his speech, he folded his hands and bowed as the audience gave him a standing ovation. He was indeed a great orator, thought Trisha. He probably learnt from his father, whose job included making countless speeches across Maharashtra and who always held an audience enthralled until the end and would then leave the podium with folded hands. He was emulating his father, Trisha realized. How arrogant and impudent of him!

There was a pause before the rebuttals. The moderator took the stand: 'Thank you Trisha and Vedant for your powerful speeches. Most of us have already chosen sides. But let me remind the audience that this is not the end. The debate can turn around very quickly. We can have one opponent falter in the rebuttal round. We can have the judges asking questions. We have more excitement in store. I now call upon Trisha Mathur to frame her rebuttals to Vedant Kirloskar.'

Trisha was ready with her rebuttal. She knew she could take him down. She would also speak in Hindi. She was, after all, from Lucknow! This was a sensitive topic but his argument was flawed. She had to focus on the flaws and the fact that they couldn't be over-emotional in a democracy. But as Trisha walked across to the podium, her head felt heavy and the room felt like it was spinning. She held her hand to her head to stabilize herself as she felt the floor shifting underneath her. *What is happening?!* Trisha could feel her world going black around her. Juhi looked, from the side of the stage and shouted, 'Trisha!' In slow motion Trisha could see Juhi rushing on to the stage and Vedant looking at her strangely.

Trisha fainted. On the stage, during her first debate at the university. Now no one would know who the winner was. It would have to be concluded another day, once Trisha recovered from this humiliation. Even as she was fainting, she was vaguely aware that she would now be remembered for this forever!



When Trisha came to, she was in the infirmary. There was silence all around. She opened her eyes a little more and noticed the curtains fluttering, the clean white sheets on her bed. She had a drip attached to her arm and a blood pressure kit lay on the bedside table. Trisha knew she should have eaten something in the morning. But a combination of nerves and lack of time had made her forget. This had caused her blood sugar to drop, which had further caused a drop in her blood pressure and she had fainted.

‘Hello?’ she called out to no one in particular.

A few feet away, behind a curtain, she could hear the muffled voice of a man who sounded like he was on the phone. She called out again, ‘Excuse me?’ She was desperate for some water.

The man emerged from behind the curtain. *Vedant*. She felt sick again and tried to close her eyes. *What was he doing here?* He was the last person she wanted to see. She had humiliated herself in front of the entire university and he had come here to rub more salt on her wounds?

‘Leave,’ she said coldly. She closed her eyes and wished he would magically disappear.

Vedant merely smiled and sat on the chair next to her. ‘The nurse left after she connected you to a glucose drip. Apparently, your blood pressure had fallen quite low and that’s why you fainted. It wasn’t because of my win,’ he teased.

She groaned.

‘I’m sorry, Trisha, I know I was the last person you would have wanted beside you. Your friend was here—Juhi? But she had a class to attend and since I was free, I told her I’d watch over you.’

‘You don’t need to. You can leave.’ She really didn’t want him there. He thought no end of himself and she had no idea why he was here in the first place. They had always passed each other on campus without acknowledging each other. He was always surrounded by a group of hangers-on who were only looking for a free meal, she had

presumed. And she was with Juhi who would comment on how rich and arrogant Vedant seemed to be. Trisha had had nothing but negative thoughts about this man even before she had met him. And then the debate, and all that humiliation.

She was done with debates. She was done with Vedant Kirloskar.

Vedant sat back and smiled. He shrugged his shoulders. 'I have no place to go really.'

For a few moments they sat in silence, and Trisha took a good look at him. He was extremely good looking and she could see how his striking looks would appeal to many women on campus. With the dimples on his cheeks, the tanned body that stood out against the crisp white of his shirt and the well-rounded butt that she couldn't help but notice as he had stood on the podium, he was the dream man for any woman. Except Trisha. She was more interested in a man with a mind.

She asked him, 'What are your real views on vigilante justice?' She wanted closure on the topic.

'You don't let anything go, do you, Trisha Mathur?'

She shook her head.

'I like that about you. You're not like the other girls who have nothing to say most of the time and are afraid of my power.'

His words made Trisha flinch. *So pompous! But what kind of a man was he behind this tough exterior?*

'I agree with what you said actually,' he said. 'If we all take law and order into our hands, we'll become a banana republic. As a next generation politician, I can't let that happen. I need to uphold a system.'

'Aha! I knew it. I win!' Trisha lay back with her eyes closed at the sweet sound of victory even though there was no one around to give her any trophy.

'What is it with you and winning? How does it matter?' Vedant was puzzled. Instead of wanting to spend time with him like most people on campus would do, and listening to him talk about his workout regime or else bragging about themselves so he would be impressed, Trisha had told him to leave—twice!—and wanted to beat him. He was intrigued. All his life, no woman had ever beaten him in a debate. In his own family, the women were not great intellectuals; the men preferred it that way. But he had always wanted someone to have intelligent conversations with. At college, all his friends looked up to him—many for obvious reasons, almost like it was an obligation. And he could sense that the women around him were intimidated by his presence and constantly tried to please him. Vedant often felt frustrated that his father's political clout preceded his own identity: that even before people could get to know him, they already presumed who he would be.

And now he looked at this pretty woman in front of him who didn't hesitate to speak her mind. His pulse quickened. Her seductive young body and wholesome good looks, fine hips and shapely thighs, made her even more desirable. And he thought her opening speech had been incredible. The data she had in her head was impressive and she had hardly consulted her notes as she spoke. And she had spoken from her heart! He, on the other hand, had had to quickly modify his speech and speak in raised tones as he had seen his father do to rouse the emotions of the people. He had learned enough from

his father about the importance of using one-liners, buying enough time for the applause to die down as he composed what to say next in his mind. He could never remember an entire speech. He had three or four bullet points to throw at people. He rode on charm. That was his thing. But Trisha was a natural.

Trisha sat up and pulled him from his thoughts. 'Winning is everything! My parents and I had a topic of debate every evening. Either they would argue or I would argue with one of them and the third person would be the judge. The winner always got a prize. It was anything small like a promise to walk the dog the next morning or to buy ice cream for all of us on Sunday. I loved winning! Every win meant a new book and these books are a treasure to me. Today, I needed to know in my head if I beat you.'

'You seem to have an awesome family.'

Trisha nodded. 'Sure, I do. The way they raised me allowed me to become a self-made woman. They've encouraged me to stand up to anyone and anything. They've taught me that with logic and determination, you can succeed at anything. You can be a winner.'

Vedant laughed.

'Are you mocking me?' She couldn't hide her annoyance and her eyebrows furrowed.

'No not at all! It's just that sometimes even with logic and determination you don't get to choose what you want. You're lucky to have such parents.'

'I gather your parents weren't so liberal?'

'Well, you could say that. Everyone in my family is in politics. At least the men are. I shall be as well. The only thing is...' Vedant paused for effect and Trisha looked at him intently before he said, 'Sometimes it would be nice to be able to give a speech in Armani clothes instead of wearing khadi kurtas. I mean the government really needs to change its uniform! This white shirt is unbelievably cool!' He grinned.

She was feeling more at ease with him. He was a great orator, she thought, making people listen. He didn't claim to be great, though, and that was his trick. In her head she felt she had him figured out. Soon he was cracking more jokes about politicians and their clothes, and mimicking their speeches. Trisha was in splits. Before she knew it, the bag of glucose was empty, and she and Vedant were friends.

The nurse came and checked Trisha's blood pressure and temperature for the third time since that morning. She removed the IV needle from Trisha's hand and gave her instructions for the rest of the day. Vedant followed the nurse's every move, and Trisha watched Vedant. When she felt a pinch when the needle came off, Vedant jumped from his chair to the bed and held her hand. Right at that moment, Trisha saw him in a new light—he didn't seem so distant at all. He had been sitting there for a few hours to look after her and keep her company. He didn't need to but he chose to. Trisha appreciated the sweet gesture.

'You may go,' the nurse said to Trisha. 'Please eat something immediately and have something every two hours. Your blood sugar comes down very rapidly.'

'Thanks, Sister.' Trisha got up and collected her purse. To Vedant she said, 'Well, I'm sure you have better things to do...'

'Actually, I don't.' He smiled and ran his fingers through his hair. 'I heard the

nurse say you must eat something immediately. Do you want to go grab a bite?’

Trisha hesitated and measured her feelings. He was undoubtedly attractive but what could this lead to anyway? But she listened to the tiny voice inside her heart, telling her to go with the flow as there were no guarantees in life. She faintly nodded her head, unable to express in words the gladness she felt.

‘Great, my car is waiting outside. Let’s go to V.V. and get something in a nicer place.’

Trisha had never been in any car bigger than her father’s i20. When she saw the gleaming black BMW with the driver and bodyguard waiting for them outside, her heart leapt into her mouth and she wondered what she was getting into.



Over the next few months, Vedant and Trisha became an ‘item’, as their friends liked to call them. Even though they had separate majors and had no common classes, they made time for each other. He lived in a penthouse apartment off campus at Vasant Vihar that was being paid for by his father while Vedant finished university. Trisha, meanwhile, lived on campus in a small one-room kitchen hostel. Her old roommate had graduated, and no one else was assigned to her room; she quite liked the solitude. Most of the time, Trisha and Vedant hung out at his penthouse, giving them privacy against the prying eyes on campus. Their connection had created quite a buzz and she didn’t know how to deal with it. But she was happy in the relationship because even though at first there was mostly this raw attraction, they had soon realized how much they had in common. From poetry to literature, music to food, Trisha and Vedant were deeply connected. Soon they were finishing each other’s sentences. Trisha had never felt a deeper bond with anyone before. It didn’t take too long before she admitted to herself that she had fallen in love with Vedant Dheeraj Kirloskar.

Trisha liked to think she had had a generally normal, obscure life so far and had never been in the spotlight for anything. Her family had always lived a regular middle-class existence in Lucknow. While she had excelled at her debates at Loreto Convent and IP College in Lucknow, they had never been a big deal but rather simply extra-curricular activities that kept her busy. She had also never lived in a hostel since her parents rejected the very idea of their only child being far away from them. Being brought up in an exclusive all-girls’ school and college all her life, she had had a very sheltered childhood.

Vedant was her first boyfriend. Often she didn’t know how to behave in front of him or react to him. More so because he belonged to a privileged family that spoke of money, power, and a world full of dark secrets that someone as naive as her found intimidating. She couldn’t even speak to her parents about it since she didn’t share that kind of a relationship with them. Her parents didn’t know about Vedant till the last semester when she finally opened up to her mother. Her mother had warned her to stay

away from politicians—she called them ‘a tricky bunch’—and Trisha had dismissed her mother’s advice and never spoke to her again about Vedant.

It was her friend, Juhi, who became Trisha’s occasional confidant about Vedant. At about the same time, Juhi had also started seeing a boy named Sulekh. But still Trisha didn’t feel comfortable discussing sex and other taboo topics. She knew how society dictated that ‘good girls’ from decent families didn’t talk about sex or men, or even their own bodies. It was the custom in Lucknow and so it was here in Delhi.

When Juhi’s parents came to visit, she introduced Sulekh to them and they had all got along quite, well. After Juhi narrated the sequence of events to Trisha, it got her thinking about her own relationship with Vedant. One evening over tea at Vedant’s place, she asked him, ‘What is your family going to think about us?’

‘Why do you ask?’ Vedant replied as he ran a hand through his hair, the light falling on his muscular shoulders. He came closer to her and looked at her carefully. Her long black hair cascaded down her back in waves and her deep, dark, piercing eyes had an obvious look of worry.

‘Why are you so worried? We have a long way to go before our parents ruin our lives.’ Before she could reply to his flippant remark, he had taken her in his arms. He ran his fingers down her back, sending a shiver down her spine. He bent down to kiss her softly. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer to fall deeper into the kiss. He lifted her slightly to feel her beautiful breasts press against his torso.

Trisha felt complete and didn’t need any more words from him. The kiss was enough. Long after it was over, the fresh smell of his cologne lingered on her clothes and she savored it.

Vedant didn’t want to stop with a kiss and was moving her towards the bedroom. Trisha resisted. She wasn’t ready. It had only been a few months, after all. She had heard tales of how men leave their girlfriends if they gave in too early. She was mortified at the thought of losing Vedant like that. ‘Not yet,’ she whispered into his ears. He nodded. He removed his hands from around her and went to pick up his single malt from the bar where he had left it. The ice had melted and drops of condensation clung to the exquisite piece of cut glass. How he wished he could take an ice cube and run it on Trisha’s bare back, her hair to one side and her body lying naked on his cool cotton sheets. The thought aroused him and he had to take several gulps before he could calm down. Trisha was not ready and he understood. She was a simple Lucknow girl who had never had a boyfriend before him. The thought of losing her virginity was frightening to her. He, on the other hand, had had a few girls before coming to JNU. He had never told her that, though. He was convinced that her conservative mind would not be able to understand that sometimes, sex was just sex, not love. Did he love Trisha? He didn’t know. He was definitely attracted to her. She kept him on his toes and from what he could tell, she admired him for who he really was.

Trisha looked out the window, biting her lip as she watched the magnificent sunset that in Delhi one saw in its glory only from a high-rise building. She wondered if she should just give in to Vedant. *What was the harm?* A part of her said she should wait until she got married. *You’re too emotional. You will get hurt.* A voice inside her became reason that she wanted to cling to. But the kiss. Ah, it was sweet and so right.

She had never felt so connected to anyone.

Vedant's voice interrupted her thoughts. 'She walks in beauty, like the night. Of cloudless climes and starry skies,' he recited Lord Byron as he sat next to her. 'And all that's best of dark and night, meet in her aspect and her eyes.'

'Vedant Dheeraj Kirloskar,' Trisha gushed with immense love. 'You might be majoring in politics but you could easily master literature.'

Vedant laughed, showing off his dimples. 'I love literature. I can't make a career out of it, though.' He stroked Trisha's hair gently. They were sitting in his living area, on a large white sofa in front of a 42-inch TV hanging on a wall, a quaint Turkish rug decorating the wooden floor. There were large windows that overlooked the entire Vasant Vihar area with lights that went as far as India Gate. It had an open kitchen on one side and a well-lit bar unit on the other. A small passage led to the bedroom where sat a large bed, another television, and photographs of his parents occupying pride of place on the night stand. Trisha could only find her peace in a small corner on the sofa overlooking the magnificent sight of Delhi. The only time she had ever ventured into his bedroom was when he had given her the royal tour after the campus debate.

That day had gone by so fast. As had the rest, she thought. Vedant was so easy to talk to. They debated about things and he often let her win. Vedant did what her parents used to do—letting her choose a book after winning a debate. Then they would drive to Khan Market where she got to pick out a book she wanted. They spoke about politics, religion, literature and travel. About their families, though, they hadn't spoken and it played on Trisha's mind.

'What do you plan to do once you graduate?' Trisha wondered if he would stay with her; she wanted to gauge what she needed to do to be with him.

Vedant didn't hesitate. 'Go back to Maharashtra. Get actively involved in politics and take the family legacy forward.'

'What happens to us?' She looked down as she asked.

Vedant tilted her head up. 'We will figure it out.' His voice was strong. 'What you want to do in Mumbai is up to you. I can easily get you a job wherever you want.'

'Vedant,' she said firmly, drawing away from him. 'I cannot take up a job where you would have to pull strings for me.' She spoke carefully, hoping her tone and words would not cause a fight.

She continued, seeing the puzzled look on his face. 'All my life, my parents have supported me with whatever I've chosen to do. They've taught me to work hard and to never take a free ride from anyone. Even them. They've never taken advantage of whatever connections they had for my sake. I came first in my class because I worked hard. Other students would get into schools or colleges with the help of donations, but I would get a scholarship on merit. I need to stand on my own two feet. I need to graduate first from JNU and find a job on my own.'

'That's fine. I won't put in a word in Mumbai. You can try to find a job on your own then.'

'Mumbai? What about Delhi?' Trisha wasn't sure if she would want to move that far from her parents. Not yet, anyway. Delhi had been growing on her. She had mastered the Metro and she knew all the roads when she took an auto. After living her entire life

in Lucknow, she was feeling extremely independent and certain of herself in Delhi. She was coming into her own ever since she had joined JNU. She was not willing to give all that up so quickly.

‘Mumbai is where my family is.’ Vedant got up from his seat and began pacing the room. ‘It’s where my career is. I have no option. I cannot stay in Delhi after getting this degree. My father let me come here only because he wanted me to understand Delhi politics.’ He paused before continuing, his next words sounding truly genuine. ‘And I desperately needed a break from my family for a while. It’s taxing to continuously be in the limelight since you’re born without having done anything. There was once an attempt to kidnap me when I was a child that was foiled and since then I’ve had bodyguards around me all the time. The threat is less in Delhi, thankfully, because in Mumbai, sometimes it was difficult to just breathe.’

Trisha was shocked to hear about the kidnapping attempt. But that was a politician’s life if he was high-profile, she thought. That was Vedant’s destiny. Not hers. She couldn’t move to Mumbai. It was so far away from Lucknow. And while her parents had given her wings to fly, she didn’t really want to fly so far that she might forget her way home. Living in Delhi was convenient as she could go back to Lucknow whenever she wanted to. She could have her mother’s homemade biryani and her father always brought her fresh flowers for her room while she was there. Travelling back home from Mumbai involved far more expenses and she knew that it was the kind of city that sucked up people’s time to such an extent that nothing more was left for visiting family.

Vedant sensed her discomfort and realized it was too early in their relationship to discuss the future. He tried to change the topic. ‘Hey, let’s not worry about that now. As Albert Einstein said, “I never think of the future. It comes soon enough.” Let’s instead talk about the rally that we’ll be doing next month. How do you think we should plan it? I know what I want to say but I have no clue what we would need.’

Trisha agreed. There was no point in discussing something that seemed so far off. She seemed quite excited at the thought of arranging an entire rally for Vedant for the first time. ‘I have a few ideas. Bring me your laptop and let me show you.’

They worked late into the night. They made plans for the rally, ate some takeaway food and finished a bottle of wine, and in between shared deep, passionate kisses. They lay next to each other on the sofa, stroking each other’s hair, caressing each other’s arms and running fingers down each other’s back till the next morning’s sunrise. They avoided the topic of family that hung over them like the sword of Damocles.



‘We won’t go! We won’t go!’ Trisha led the chanting as she marched with several of her classmates from JNU, her college campus, to IIT Delhi. She had been riling everyone up for the past few weeks to get into gear for this protest march. She had planned every detail and had hoped the media would take notice. She had even bunked classes to go from dorm to dorm to get people motivated for this day. And she had done it all for a man.

‘No more corruption! No more corruption!’ Trisha shouted even harder until her throat hurt and she started coughing. Vedant quickly left his position to come to her side. He put his arm around her and gave her a bottle of water. She took the bottle, a little too eagerly that she spilled some water on her kurta, and smiled at Vedant. He looked at her with increased admiration. He had joined JNU to understand politics better and hoped to become a politician one day. What he hadn’t bargained for was falling in love with this gorgeous woman who was as passionate about politics as he was.

‘Off with that girdle, like heaven’s zone glistening, but a far fairer world encompassing. Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear, that th’eyes of busy fools may be stopped there,’ Vedant recited the poem by John Donne that they had read together the previous night while he was removing her clothes and fondling her breasts. Trisha shoved him teasingly. She knew what he wanted but they needed to focus on the task at hand. She felt flattered that in the midst of this rally, with all these people waiting to hear his speech, all Vedant wanted was to whisper to her a sensuous elegy.

Trisha didn’t believe she was a ravishing beauty and had often wondered what Vedant saw in her. She was of average height, dusky with long black hair cascading down her back in waves that moved gently when she walked. She had been told countless times how desirable she was, but she was oblivious to all the attention from men who admired her almond-shaped eyes, her irresistible full lips, ample bosom, and the diamond stud on her sharp nose. Vedant had told her how her soft giggle and intense look had bowled him over. He had never thought he would be so attracted to her passionate speech at the debate. And when he had sat at her bedside watching her sleep,

he had felt this overpowering feeling of peace. He had just come in there to check if she was okay but had sat down and stayed until she woke up. Even her resting 'energy' had compelled him to be around her.

Vedant was grateful to have Trisha around. He was astute enough to know that a pretty woman got people's attention—and that meant for Vedant as well, which would translate to votes. He felt elated. She had been able to expertly organize a rally for him without the help of his highly connected family. She had told him, 'Let's try this without any baggage. Let me do it my way and if it doesn't succeed, we will do it your way.' And she had succeeded. Her parents had given her enough courage to be able to rely on herself. Vedant had always taken help from his family because it was just that much easier to do.

'Okay, guys, we can stop here.' Vedant said to the marchers. They had reached IIT and more students had gathered to join them.

Vedant stood on a small podium and spoke about how corruption had overtaken every section of Indian society. It was a speech that he prepared with Trisha's help. With his brilliant oratory skills and her ability to structure speeches peppered with data, Vedant had become the undisputed leader of public speaking in their college. He spoke of how the youth needed to change the situation and be taken seriously. He spoke with great lucidity, in short but powerful sentences. Trisha stood to one side, admiring him in a different way. She was glad that she could help him write all his speeches. It just meant he depended on her that much more. She was fascinated by his oratory skills. She marveled at how he could transition so smoothly from a boy who loved designer clothes to a politician who could wear khadi. When he ran his fingers through his dark brown curly hair and smiled at her for a moment, her heart melted. In a sea of people, he wanted her approval. How could she have been so lucky to have this great guy fall for her? The light stubble on his set jaw and his twinkling brown eyes made him extremely appealing. His intelligence had attracted her to him but his kindness had made her stay in this relationship for two years.

He received a thunderous applause followed by chants from the students of how Vedant was their undisputed leader. Then an OB van came and a reporter emerged, seeking out Vedant for an interview. Trisha was thrilled. All her hard work had resulted in them finally getting some media coverage. The rally went on for a few more hours until people retired for the evening. It was a huge success. Vedant and Trisha decided to go celebrate in the evening at their favourite restaurant close to their college.

Trisha had never thought that she would come so far so quickly. Here she was in love with the most charismatic, handsome and motivated man on campus, who was hopelessly dependent on her. She felt as though he gave her strength and courage to live life just the way she wanted—something she hadn't been able to do when she was in Lucknow and under the shadow of her hugely accomplished parents who were professors of biology and history at renowned colleges in the city. She had felt like a nobody there, she had no identity of her own. She was just a studious girl who always excelled in her studies but never in real life. Life on the JNU campus with Vedant gave her the strength to try new things. Politics was completely new to her and it was quite exciting to be vocal about issues concerning her generation.

‘We had such a victory today,’ Vedant said as he dug into his pasta. They were sitting in a small Italian restaurant that had checked table cloths, dim lights, and pretty waitresses. The food was delicious and a pleasant change from the Indian food they had all week. Vedant knew how to spoil her.

‘Completely. I had invited some newspaper journalists but they didn’t come. But this was even better. We were on TV!’ Trisha nibbled on her lasagna. She made sure to eat like a proper lady in front of Vedant. She looked up and caught Vedant admiring her figure. Colour rose to her cheeks. She fiddled with her silver necklace and took a sip of her ice tea. They had been out in the heat and dust all day and had barely had the time to shower and change before they left for dinner. Trisha wore her hair in a ponytail and was wearing a soft blue chikan kurti and a pair of dark blue jeans. She was aware that Vedant was observing her sheer kurti. His eyes spoke to hers.

Then he recited Tennyson with a gleam in his eye as he leaned in and caressed her cheek: ‘And I would be the necklace, and all day long to fall and rise, upon her balmy bosom, with her laughter or her sighs: And I would lie so light, so light, I scarce should be unclasp’d at night.’

Trisha understood the hint. She smiled back and pointed to the ice tea. ‘Drink,’ she said with a mischievous smile. ‘It’ll keep you cool.’ Just to tease him a little, she untied her hair and let it fall glamorously. She liked being desired by this man. She was new to the game of love and had never had any boyfriends in her sheltered existence in Lucknow. But when Vedant had stormed into her life like a Grecian warrior, she had felt her heart and body respond to an intense, overpowering feeling that she would only later recognize as love.

Now Trisha wasn’t so certain of her resolve to keep her virginity intact before marriage. Vedant stirred something raw and passionate within her—something she had never felt for any other man. Though she and Vedant had done plenty of other things, had kissed and touched and explored each other’s bodies, they had not yet had sex. Trisha was firm that she wanted things to be ‘perfect’ before she took that step. She didn’t want her first time to be casual. Vedant had waited patiently all these months. But as she studied his lustful expression at the restaurant tonight, she could see he was losing patience and desperately wanted her. Trisha knew her momentous ‘first’ time was fast approaching and she dreamily wondered if tonight would be the night she had secretly been waiting for.

Vedant took her hand in his. His gaze was as soft as a caress. He spoke softly, almost lyrically, ‘Trisha, I am so proud of you. Without you, I wouldn’t have been able to do all this by myself. I think I’m falling in love with you.’

Trisha was stunned. He had never actually said the words. He had always kissed her when she had confessed to being in love with him and he would reply, ‘Sure’, whenever she had asked him if he loved her back. He had once even given a rather lengthy explanation as to how difficult it was for him to actually utter the L word. He had been in many flings before, he said, and to those social-climbing women he could never say, ‘I love you’. For him to say those three words tonight made her feel extremely special.

As the evening wore on, the last traces of resistance in her body ebbed away. She

felt the moment had arrived to take this relationship to the next level. She felt a burning physical desire for Vedant in her every vein of her body. 'Let's go back home, Vedant,' she whispered and clasped his hands. She called for the check. She couldn't wait any longer. She needed to reward Vedant for his love. She needed to adore the honest words that had taken so long to tumble out of his mouth. Vedant took her hands in his and they left the restaurant in the gathering darkness of the night. Neither spoke a word.

Inside Vedant's penthouse, Trisha stood in the hallway and took a deep breath. She was finally ready to go into his bedroom, as his girlfriend, as his lover. Vedant walked over to her and gently put his arms around her waist. He pulled her in for a long, passionate kiss that lifted her body ever so slightly. Her breasts heaved against his chest as she pulled away. She touched his face, looking deep into his eyes. What she saw was a raw, animalistic passion, waiting to break free. The smouldering desire she saw in his eyes startled her. He had wanted this for so long! The stubble of a few days felt warm under her fingers as she grazed them against his cheek, sending tingles through his body. Slowly, steadily, she could feel her desire mounting like a giant wave. 'Make love to me,' she whispered, taking herself by surprise.

He gave her a deep, lustful kiss, his fingers roaming her body, finding every curve, taking in every groove. His teeth found the soft spots on her lips, delicately biting and pulling—a rhythm he gracefully extended to the nape of her neck, and the little beauty spot that adorned it got all his extra affection. His teeth found their way to her bra strap. Expertly, he slid each strap down, perfectly timed, not too fast and not too slow. The bra fell to the floor with one twist of his hand. He cupped her breasts, caressing her nipples with his thumbs. He turned her around to move strands of her hair from her bare back and kissed her skin. He'd wanted to taste her for so long. And she smelled so good. He caressed her lower back with the tips of his fingers until she arched her back, ready for more. Vedant moaned softly as Trisha's hands found his hardness. She touched him in a way that made him shiver.

They left the hallway and proceeded to the bedroom. Vedant laid her on her back on the cool soft cotton sheets and slowly moved on top of her. Trisha threw back her head as she felt an electric pulse course through her every nerve. He whispered softly, 'I'll be gentle. Just enjoy yourself.' She felt his every move as he went harder and deeper inside, deeper than she thought possible, and it was almost overwhelming feeling as he faded into her. They danced to each other's rhythm. She was in a place she had never been before. She buried her face against his throat as waves of ecstasy throbbed through her viens, all the way to her fingertips and toes, and she finally collapsed as he did, their bodies collectively heaving next to each other.

Vedant was mesmerized by her. She held him in a way that nobody had ever done before. The slow rise and fall of her breasts lulled him to sleep. Trisha closed her eyes, satiated and happy. She knew this would last forever.

That night, she slept more blissfully than she ever had before.



Vedant and Trisha's romance blossomed in the two years they were together at JNU. To her parents, she appeared to live in her little room on campus, but in reality she had moved in with Vedant and used his penthouse as her own. She also had his car and driver at her disposal. The two of them increasingly relied on one other. He needed her for his rallies, gathering votes and acknowledging him as a new politician. She loved his attention and the constant need in his life for her to fix everything. He felt helpless without her. She even picked out his clothes. She managed his routine, his life. He loved her for her independence, her passion and her logical head. She loved him idiotically, madly, passionately. She lost herself in him and was happy doing so. After all, she figured, this was true love—where one is able to give to the other unconditionally.

Neither of them had told their parents that they were dating each other. Vedant felt that it was too soon to tell and Trisha wasn't sure how her parents would react so she kept the most important part of her life hidden from them.

Trisha had fallen in love with Vedant in spite of his very conservative family and background. Having been brought up as the only son of a powerful, highly ambitious politician who had made it from rags to riches, Vedant had seen the real world. His mother was a simple middle-class Maharastrian housewife who knew little else aside from making amazing bondas and loyally supporting her husband's career. His father had groomed Vedant in the art of politics from an early age. He used to go for party meetings with his father instead of playing football with his friends. When the time came, Vedant was sent to New Delhi by his father to learn the inner workings of Delhi's youth and political culture. His father had told him to gain confidence and become street smart before he came back to Mumbai and joined him as a political ally. Vedant's father had thought everything through. He was keen to present his son as a graduate from JNU—an intelligent, educated politician who cared about the people and was smart enough to usher in changes for a brighter future.

Vedant had come to the politically rife climate of JNU to do just that—learn the ropes by getting involved in student politics. His entire upbringing had prepared him for

this phase in his life. He could never think of a life beyond politics. Or, for that matter, ever saying no to his parents. How could he? They had given him everything and had made huge sacrifices for his happiness. There was no question of becoming anything but a politician. If his parents had been aware of his flings with women, they had chosen to ignore it. His father was convinced that Vedant would not be stupid enough to throw away his promising future for a woman. So if he told them now that he was in love with Trisha—a nobody with no political connections in their eyes—they would not only be mighty disappointed in him, they could disown him. Vedant knew his father was capable of taking such a harsh step. Trisha was from a middle-class family and such an affiliation wouldn't help Vedant's political career at all. The entire family had been having arranged marriages and had most probably already set up a match for Vedant. If he went against them, Aamod Kirloskar would have a fit!

Though Trisha had led a sheltered life, her parents were, thankfully, liberal in their views. They didn't have any preferences regarding what career she chose as long as she spent enough time with them and focused on her academics. They had been proud of the way they had brought her up. Instead of indulging her every whim as an only child, they taught her to fight for what she wanted in life with logic. They had always told her to apply her brains and exercise logic in her judgments. They had high hopes for her and knew she would make it, whichever career she chose. Somewhere, they wanted her to remain in Lucknow, but didn't object when Trisha wanted to become independent and find her own destiny in Delhi. They were extremely proud of her academic accomplishments and lauded her for her strong, independent way of thinking. Trisha felt deeply indebted to her parents for trusting her enough to give her the freedom to live life the way she wanted. She didn't want to upset them now by revealing a liaison with a politician's son. Even though they were liberal-minded academics, they knew a politician's son spelt trouble.



Trisha loved children and she spent much time in orphanages and the School for the Blind. She gave her time and energy to undertaking projects for them. Sometimes she wished Vedant would understand this aspect of her but he never did. 'You're spreading yourself too thin, honey,' he would say when she was all flustered about a new project. 'How are you going to do an art charity at the blind school and write your thesis for Goyal's class? You don't have time. Give up your social work. You have to help me for the next rally as well.' He had come to realize what an asset she was for him in his fledgling political career and didn't want her to waste time in charitable activities. He was gearing up for the next big rally on campus and desperately needed her support. He was trying to take over the JNUSU president's post from the All India Students Association's Subhavna De. If he succeeded, he would prove his mettle to his father and he could be quickly anointed as the party's youth leader.

But Trisha was adamant about her ability to balance academics and charity work—after all, her passion lay in joining the development sector some day. In her heart she knew that organizing rallies for Vedant was the least of her priorities. She had successfully pulled off one rally when she was new at JNU, and the challenge had ended

on that day itself. Even though she found his speeches and politics exciting, and had attended every one of them, she had finally figured out over the course of two years spent at JNU that politics wasn't really her. She needed something more to feel complete. When she tried telling Vedant this, he had sulked and said, 'But we're so good together as a team.' It had led to a fight as she wanted him to desperately understand that she couldn't only be doing rallies or writing speeches for him.

But Vedant had always been the consummate charmer. Even when he didn't understand her point of view, he would always make her feel better after a fight by reciting Tennyson or singing a song by The Beatles. And Vedant's version would always be better as far as Trisha was concerned. He had a soulful voice that connected with her own. When Trisha fought with him, she would leave 'I'm sorry' notes in his room and in his books where he would find them. She would be the one who would buy him presents, surprising him with her little gestures. She didn't have too much money but she would diligently save and go hunting for something that would cheer him up—a shirt from Sarojini Nagar with Elvis (his favourite rockstar) on it or Osho chappals from Pune that he loved wearing. She believed that small things went a long way in keeping relationships alive. She loved how he had come to depend on her, not only for his speeches and rallies, but for every small thing he needed on a daily basis. *Isn't this what true love is about?* she would think. She was ecstatic that she had finally found true love, the kind that made her breathless like the heroines in the novels that she had grown up reading. Trisha craved stability, family, love, togetherness. All of that, desperately. Most of all, she just wanted him. All the time. She wanted to be the person who brought his life together. She loved how he made her feel like a complete woman: beautiful, smart, motivated and grounded.

One evening when Vedant and Trisha were listening to Elvis in his penthouse, she started giggling. He looked up from his book and saw that she was staring out of the window and stifling a laugh.

'What's up?' he asked.

She snuggled next to him. 'I was just thinking how funny you would look if you had "Hound Dog" playing in the background while you were giving a speech in a white kurta pajama.'

'You know I can't listen to Elvis at home. I'm not allowed to.'

'What? Why? But you love Elvis!'

Trisha was incredulous. It dawned on her that he had never shared intimate details of his home life, always giving her the larger brushstrokes of the family history that most people read about in the papers. He never mentioned childhood memories or his parents' likes and dislikes. This was the first time he had told her something that gave her a whiff of how his family really was.

She pulled away from him and gave Vedant a look that asked him to tell her more.

'My mother is very conservative and listens only to bhajans,' he said. 'I have my own room and I can listen to my music on my ipod but she thinks it corrupts my brain. I don't argue with her so I rarely listen to the music I like. Once I wanted to get a tattoo and she cried for two days, blaming the music I listened to and herself for not bringing me up correctly! I just let the idea go. Why create unnecessary complications? And my

father got angry for making my mom sick after that. So I didn't think it was worth pissing my parents off.'

Trisha remained quiet. His family was so different from her own. *How would I fit into it?* Fear pricked her as she thought about it. But then Vedant hadn't really popped the question either. Even after almost two years of being together, she was still waiting for a proposal. She knew she was only twenty-four years old but if they got engaged now, they could wait for a few years before finally getting married. This would give them both sufficient time to ease into their careers. She needed more of a commitment from him and Vedant always behaved as though he was unaware that she needed it. His indifference had started nagging at the back of her mind. She looked over at him as he lit up a Marlboro Light, his recently acquired habit that she absolutely detested.

He caught her expression and smiled apologetically. 'This is the last one for today I promise. After graduation, I won't be able to smoke without my family looking over my shoulder. My parents would just kill me if they found out.' He flicked the ash into the ashtray.

Trisha found whatever he was disclosing about his parents today a little absurd. 'Why?' she asked. 'You can live your life the way you want to. If you want to smoke, you should be able to. Even though it's a disgusting habit! But still, it's your choice. If you want to listen to music, wear particular clothes, or have a drink occasionally, why can't you do it without pretending?'

'Because politicians don't do that. It vilifies their image. And my parents don't expect it out of me. Besides all this will change when I move to Mumbai. No more of the old Vedant. The new khadi-kurta, seedha-saadha Vedant will take over. The good boy who doesn't smoke, drink or wear Armani.' He chuckled softly.

'But I love the real Vedant. When will he ever stand up for his rights before his family? And besides, today's younger generation of politicians do wear the occasional Armani.'

Vedant didn't have ready answers for her questions. He didn't know any other life.

Trisha tried hard to hide her disappointment. She had wondered for the last two years if Vedant would ever figure out what he really wanted from life. Was he truly happy being groomed as a politician or did he want to embrace some other career? She had tried asking him this a couple of times only to receive ambiguous replies. She also wondered how he would stand up to his parents' dictatorial regime once he was back in Mumbai.

'Well, I have to go,' Trisha said as she prepared to get up. 'I need to start packing up whatever is in my campus apartment.' She collected her purse but he held her hand.

'Graduation will be in a week,' he said. 'I don't know where we will be post that. Stay tonight please. You don't need to start packing till later.' He let go of her hand as she moved away from him. They stared at each other, letting the reality sink in. They would be going their separate ways in a week if neither of them took a step right now that will alter their lives. He had to propose to her and stand up for himself to his parents. He had to introduce her as the woman he wanted in his life. And she had to decide to be a part of his life in every way. Even if it meant giving up her dreams in Delhi and moving with him to Mumbai. But Trisha couldn't take that step if he didn't

take it first. She was truly in love with Vedant. She was willing to make it work with his family if he just proposed.

She moved away to sit on her favourite place on the sofa. He stubbed out his cigarette and went to sit next to her. He flicked the remote of the music system on and a song from The Doors came on.

‘Did you know,’ he said as he slowly walked up to her while turning down the lights in the apartment with a remote control, ‘the 1960s California rock n’ roll band, The Doors, took their name from a William Blake quote.’ He stood within inches of her, not touching her but breathing softly and whispering, ‘They originally called themselves “The Doors of Perception” at the suggestion of lead singer Jim Morrison, who was studying film and literature at UCLA at the time.’

He started kissing her neck, softly, gently. His fingers lightly caressed her nipples through the shirt as he let her hair lie to one side over her breasts. She was transfixed by his words and his touch. ‘The band simplified their name to The Doors for marketing reasons, as it was easier to advertise, billboard and remember.’

He started unbuttoning her blouse. ‘The full length quote that inspired Morrison with the band name is taken from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and is as follows...

Vedant opened her blouse and cupped her large breasts in his hands, nestling his face in her cleavage, taking in her warm, lavender scent mixed with fresh soap. He gathered her waist and drew her close, wrapping his arms around her. He pulled her head back gently and kissed her deeply. It was warm and tantalizing as he moved down slowly to her breasts and blazed a trail of kisses from the curve of her neck to the roundness of her breasts while she surrendered to his passion. Open-mouthed, his kisses vividly betrayed his hard-driven desires which coursed like lightning through her body, exposing her own primal needs.

Trisha was breathless. ‘Vedant, I don’t really care anymore about The Doors. Take me to your bedroom right now.’ His head rose slightly, and his tongue passed slowly along her parted lips, then penetrated to softly search and languidly possess every inch of her mouth. He pressed fevered kisses along the warm column of her throat, arching her backward over his arm, while his other hand stroked the roundness of her buttock and shapely thigh. She gasped in sweet agony. He felt the urgent need to know and touch every part of her, to claim her as his own, to let his lips wander at will over her soft flesh. She felt her defences weakening.

‘Are you ready to have some makeup sex?’

She breathed into his ears, ‘Oh, yes. I so deeply want to make up.’

He made his way easily into the bedroom and shut the door behind him. He was sure she would always remember the night he told her about The Doors.



Sun rays streamed through the windows. The smell of freshly brewed Colombian coffee wafted in from the kitchen. Trisha lay sleeping under the soft white duvet in Vedant's bedroom. She moved her hand to the space beside her, hoping to find his smooth, bare body that she could ravish once again. He wasn't there. She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. What a wonderful night it had been. Just then, she felt him standing at the doorway, looking at her, and she opened her eyes to see that she was correct. Somewhere in the course of the last two years she had reached harmony with Vedant.

There was something that was not in harmony, though, and she knew she had to address it today before it was too late.

'Coffee, my love?' Vedant said as he brought over a dark blue mug of coffee for Trisha with two spoons of sugar. Just the way she liked it.

The sheets moved as she sat up, leaving one of her legs exposed. He sat next to her, sliding his hand up her naked thigh. She giggled and then said seriously, 'Vedant, before we get into anything, there is something we need to talk about.'

'Oh, those are never good words for a man to hear at any time of the day. Especially when he's aroused and just dying to do all sorts of naughty things,' he said, trying to distract her.

But she was determined to have this conversation. She took a long gulp of her coffee. Yesterday they may have made up, but the issues they fought about lingered.

'Vedant, what's going to happen to us after graduation?'

'I don't know,' he sighed.

'What do you mean, you don't know? Should we get married?' Trisha felt bold enough to broach the subject, hoping for a positive answer.

What she got instead was a long laugh. 'Married?!' Vedant took a sip from the glass of water on the night stand. 'You're just twenty-four years old. I'm barely twenty-seven. We haven't even met each other's families. We don't know if they will like each other or...or...if they will even like us. It's kind of complicated right now, don't you

think?’

Trisha drained her coffee in one gulp. She was seething with anger and she knew she shouldn’t say anything in haste. She took a few calming breaths then said, ‘Are we getting married or are our families getting married?’

‘In India, a marriage is between two families and never only about the two people exchanging vows,’ Vedant said, defiant.

‘Suppose we get engaged now and then decide if we want to get married later in a few years?’

Vedant shook his head. ‘I can’t get into politics if I’m engaged. It would ruin my career. People would think I care more about romancing around trees than I do about their suffering.’

‘Get real, Vedant.’ Trisha tried to maintain her composure. ‘There are so many young politicians these days who are engaged. It’s not like you’re joining Bollywood! People don’t think love is about romancing around trees.’

‘Yes they do,’ he snapped. ‘You and I live in ivory towers and we can afford all the luxuries of the world. But for the common man—and that’s eighty per cent of this country, by the way—they think love is what they see on screens. That’s why they emulate their heroes and get into trouble later. They need a leader who can rescue them from their suffering, not a lovelorn politician who is romancing his fiancée. I have been trained for so many years to be that. This is my start. I can’t give that up.’

Vedant got out of bed and moved into the kitchen.

Trisha deeply disliked this behaviour of his. *Typical!* He makes a defiant statement, as if in a debate, and then leaves the room and awaits the applause from his audience. But has he forgotten who he’s arguing with? She got off the bed, grabbed her robe, and followed him outside.

‘But you’re ready to give us up?’

‘I honestly don’t have a solution.’ Vedant sounded nonchalant. He poured breakfast cereal into his favourite fancy cut-glass bowl. *Bah. Talk about serving the poor of the country.* She felt bitter. She couldn’t believe he was being so selfish. This was not the Vedant she knew, the man who would have Italian food delivered to her apartment to fulfil her whim and recite English poetry from another century to woo her.

‘Well, do you think we should have a long-distance relationship then?’

Vedant sat on the high stool in the large open kitchen counter and poured milk into his cereal. ‘I would prefer that we take it a bit slowly. Let’s meet the parents at graduation. See if they hit it off and they like us. Then you think about when you want to shift to Mumbai and find a place. I mean, I could help you but you are the type who never wants anyone’s help! Let us continue seeing each other and then decide if we want to take it a step further and get engaged.’

Trisha was shocked. She had thought that Vedant would be ready to be engaged after two years with her and they would at least try to make their relationship work long distance. He knew that she was planning to take up a job in Delhi. Once she could establish herself at a job and finally ease out the distance part—from travelling from Delhi to Lucknow to Mumbai to Lucknow—in her head, she would be ready to join him. However, it seemed as if Vedant was calling this off right now and was being so clinical

about it! Suddenly Trisha had a terrible thought in her head. *Had he just been playing with her these two years?* Maybe he had just used her for all his rallies and thanked her in bed. Now that she recalled, he hadn't bought her anything except books in these last two years. For all the money he had, he had never bought a piece of jewellery or an item of clothing for her. Meanwhile she, with her limited savings, had bought him everything from leather wallets and designer shirts to Elvis mugs! *She* had moved into his apartment because she wanted to spend more time with him and he had agreed. He had never offered.

Her head started spinning. She had been a pawn in his game. He was so good at politics that he didn't know when to stop. He had used her and she had let him. She had lost her virginity to him. She felt so ashamed at the thought that she tried to hold her head as she felt faint. She grabbed the kitchen counter.

'Trisha, you're going to fall.' Vedant jumped off his seat and caught her. He guided her to the sofa, brought her some juice, and put two slices of bread in the toaster. She knew that her blood pressure was falling. Memories of their encounter at the infirmary came back to her in sickening waves.

Trisha drank the juice slowly. She stared at him as he walked back with the toast. 'Vedant Dheeraj Kirloskar, did you really love me at all?'

'What are you talking about?' Vedant looked at her as if she had gone mad.

'Well, I said I love you first and you only said it back when you knew I would agree to sleep with you.' Trisha felt there was no other way to get through to him except by being blunt.

'Just eat your toast, will you? One has nutella and one has plain butter. It will help with your blood pressure. You're just working yourself up for no reason. And if you don't remember, I was the one who waited till you were ready.' He went back to the kitchen counter and picked up his cereal bowl.

'I need to know!' Trisha was crying as she yelled.

'Trisha, you're just being hyper. Of course I love you! We'll figure something out. I don't have all the answers right now. We have a week till graduation and you know the number of things we need to do before that.'

Trisha finished her juice and stood up. She didn't touch the toast. She found her jeans lying in a heap in the drawing room, which reminded her of the wonderful moments they had shared just a few hours earlier. But now, in the light of day, the room, the man and her life looked very different. A relationship cannot exist in a status quo. It can change its nature, structure and meaning. But it can't be about what it was when it started.

She wore her clothes, grabbed her purse, and decided to leave.

'Where are you going? Trisha, don't be this way. Come on. Please, baby.'

Trisha shook her head. Sometimes you need someone who can match your voltage, not fuse your light. And Trisha realized that she needed answers from him right then and there, not a feeble 'we'll see where it's headed'.

'Have your driver send over my things to my room. You're right. I have a lot of things to take care of before graduation.'

She stormed out. She knew it would be the last time she would ever be in his

house. She had needed answers right then and Vedant had refused to give them. It wasn't as if it was the first time they had had this fight. This had been the most volatile, though, and Trisha was aware that it might be the last.



Trisha didn't do much that day except sob into her pillow, thinking about what a fool she had been. In the days that followed, she was careful to avoid Vedant. She thought about their argument and wondered if she had overreacted. But then he hadn't called either and she was extremely annoyed about that. They only had a few days left and they should have been making the most of them. She had finished packing up most of her things and all families—including her and Vedant's parents—were due to arrive the next day for graduation. Trisha thought she should leave her ego and anger aside and give Vedant a call.

'Hello.' He picked up the phone after one ring.

'Want to meet for coffee?' She was suddenly nervous. Why was it that a person you knew so intimately could turn into a stranger after a breakup?

The slightest pause. 'Yes. Our favourite place in Vasant Vihar. Shall I pick you up in an hour?'

'No, I'll meet you there.'

She hung up, feeling oddly excited about seeing him again. Maybe what all couples needed was a little distance in their relationship so that they could find perspective before they got back together again. Fights are meant to give you space. Space is meant to make you realize how much you need the other person.

Trisha had packed most of her clothes except for a few things. She saw a brand new sleeveless maxi dress given to her by Juhi, her best friend on campus. Juhi had told her how she had gotten bored with Trisha's wardrobe of salwar kurtas and jeans and decided to gift her with this dress. But Trisha never wore anything sleeveless as she felt extremely conscious about her arms. And even though it fit her perfectly and showed off her curves beautifully, she felt odd about wearing it as she had never been into dresses. Finally she threw it on with a shrug. She then applied some makeup and looked extremely glamorous for a day outing. She didn't really know if they would get back together but she was hoping they would come to a reconciliation and figure something out. She couldn't leave their relationship in such a fragile state, much less broken up.

The thought of living without Vedant was unbearable. How she had missed him that week!

She arrived at the coffee shop to find Vedant already there, reading a newspaper. She could see that he was wearing a pair of Givenchy slim khaki pants and a crisp white shirt. He was sporting his trademark stubble, and looked imminently handsome in the glow of the warm sunlight that bathed the shop in hues of golden and orange. Suddenly, seeing him and being reminded of how attractive he really was—looking like a younger version of Marc Jacobs, in fact—and she felt a pang of separation. But she knew that you could only do so much to hold on to a person and keep them in your life. Sometimes destiny has other plans.

She rushed into the shop trying to outrun the thought when Vedant looked up at her. His jaw dropped.

‘You look gorgeous,’ he whispered to her. She smiled at him as their eyes held each other’s, and both of them mouthed the words at the same time: ‘I’m sorry.’ The need to press her lips to his was so strong that she felt light-headed with the effort to restrain herself. He stood up and held her tightly. Turning his head, he brushed her fingertips with a kiss before he captured her hand and held it to his chest. She was never into public displays of affection but somewhere in her heart, she knew that this might be the last time that she would ever be with him. The thought killed her.

They began talking. It seemed like all the anger and frustration was melting but somehow they couldn’t get themselves to approach the topic of the fight, tiptoeing around it as if it was a bomb waiting to explode, threatening to shatter them both yet again.

‘When are your parents coming?’ Vedant took her hand in his.

‘Tomorrow.’

The waiter came with her steaming hot black coffee that he had ordered for her. She took in the rich aroma of a dark roast and looked at Vedant. Oh, how she adored this man! And how well he knew her. Would anyone know her so well again? For a brief moment, she thought that maybe she should just move to Mumbai. After all, if she could find a job in Delhi she could find one there, too. Was losing the love of your life worth the career choice you needed to make?

The answer came from Vedant himself. ‘Dad has planned a Maharashtra tour for me for the next couple of months. I will be visiting all the rural areas to gain their votes. It’s going to be an extremely tiring trip. Nothing like a vacation at all.’

Then why am I even thinking of moving to Mumbai when you’re not even going to be there? If he had already made his plans about the future, she was far better off staying in Delhi where she had Juhi, her friends, career opportunities and a family that was a short train ride away. Trisha bit her nails and didn’t say a word. She nodded her head and smiled. Her heart was breaking into little pieces but she couldn’t show him the fear that lurked in her heart. They had indeed become strangers. Trisha didn’t ever think she would come to a point when she could not show her feelings to him. Even though she had nothing to lose by saying what was in her heart, she was afraid of another rejection. He had already told her he didn’t want to get married. He didn’t even want to get engaged. If she told him that she would move to Mumbai, maybe he would shoot that down as well. After all, he did mention that he would be touring rural Maharashtra for

the next few months. It was best that she kept her mouth shut and protect her heart—even though it felt like her stomach had clenched and she desperately wanted him to take her in his arms and tell her that he couldn't live without her and would come back to marry her.

Vedant kept talking, almost rambling. He was uncomfortable with Trisha's silence. He didn't know what was going on in her head so he told her all about his plans, hoping that she would stop him and say what she really felt. He knew that she wanted to get married but it was too soon for him. It wasn't as if he loved her any less or was afraid of commitment. It was just too complicated with a family like his. They wouldn't be able to deal with the idea of him in love and won't know how she could fit into his life. His parents had always dreamt of marrying him off to a beautiful, docile 'Maharashtrian mulgi' with great connections, so how would they react to Trisha? He needed the time that she refused to give. And if she couldn't move to Mumbai, how the hell was he going to make a long-distance relationship work?

Finally he stopped talking. They finished their coffee in silence, having run out of topics for small talk like packing, the traffic, thesis papers, friends, plans, travel and parents. Only one more topic needed to be covered. The goodbye. The one they both knew was imminent but neither wanted to bring up.

Trisha knew that if she said anything, she would only end up breaking down. Vedant leaned across the table and took her hands. 'Trish, I want you to know that I will always love you.' Trisha could feel her eyes tearing up. *This was it.*

'We've had such a wonderful time,' he continued. 'I will cherish these two years forever. But our timing is all wrong. We don't know what our future holds. *I don't know what my future holds.* My family has that planned for me. If it were in my hands, I would want to spend it with you. But it's not. Our situations and circumstances are very different. Please try to understand.'

'That this is the end of us?' A single tear rolled down her cheek.

Vedant nodded. He took out a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to wipe her tears. 'Don't go away sad. We have today and we have our graduation tomorrow. Let's part as friends. Let's keep in touch through email. We have technology and that won't let us separate so easily.'

'That will only make it more difficult, Vedant. What good will that do?' She stifled her sob.

'We can be there for each other.'

'If our relationship has no future, our friendship doesn't matter.'

'How can you say that? We *do* matter. The two years we've spent together matter. How can we just give that up?'

'After some time, your family will find someone for you.' Trisha began to cry again. 'They will want you to get married to a nice Maharashtrian girl from a business family and take their families' bonds further. Where will I be then? As a friend? It's better that we break away now than when it gets messy. I will always want more. I want to get married and have children and work and travel and I want to do it all by myself. Without help. Without pressure. At my own time, at my own pace. Will your family allow that? For me? With you?'

Vedant put his head down. He knew the answer as well as she did but he refused to put it in words. His family would always put pressure on him. They wanted him to lead, travel, be the way they wanted him to be, and while he was okay with the idea, he knew Trisha would never agree with some of the things his family might expect from her, like dressing only in saris while travelling with him for rallies, and maybe even giving up her career to support him. If there was ever an argument between his parents and Trisha, he would be torn and might take his parents' side. That would shatter her. It wouldn't be fair. He needed to be honest now. He knew she was strong enough to handle the pain. There was nothing more he could do.

Trisha desperately wanted him to say something that was contrary to her deep beliefs about him and his parents. But he kept quiet and she knew there was no hope. And somewhere deep down, she was disappointed. After all that she had done for him, supported his political career on campus, she had expected him to take her side, to at least try to see things from her point of view.

Words tumbled out of her mouth that she didn't believe in but that felt logical. 'I will love you, too, Vedant. But I think we know what's best for both of us. Let's not keep in touch. A clean break is better than a messy one.'

Vedant acquiesced. If that's what she wanted, then he presumed he needed to respect her wishes. And all she wanted was for him to go against it.

They walked out of the coffee shop and headed towards his car. He had insisted that he would drop her back to her place.

Before she got out of the car, they embraced each other for a long time. He devoured her with passionate kisses and she sobbed while kissing him back. She didn't want to see him for the rest of the day. An ending had never been this bittersweet. They would remember it forever. Finally, she got out of the car and, without looking back, ran to her room. She couldn't bear to watch him drive away.



Graduation Day.

As the sun rolled into the last day at college, it changed the colours of the sky from an inky blue to a deep, luscious magenta with flecks of gold and splashes of bright orange. Most students were looking forward to leaving college and starting a completely new life. Not Trisha. It meant that it would be the last day she saw Vedant. While it killed her, they would go their separate ways. Trisha wanted to prove to herself that she was her parents' daughter, after all. They had raised her to nurture her own identity and self-worth. She wanted to prove to them and herself, most of all, that she could make it on her own. She didn't want to live under Vedant's shadow in Mumbai. Many things were left unspoken when they had last met but from whatever was said, he sounded like he was asking her to choose between a job and him. He might as well have asked her to choose between keeping her own identity or merging it with his!

As she got ready in her room, ironing the light blue kurta she was wearing for the graduation ceremony, she remembered the first time he had said 'I love you.' She had been wearing the same kurta that day, and they had gone to that cozy Italian restaurant after successfully organizing Vedant's rally. It felt like a lifetime ago.

At that moment in his own room, Vedant thought of Trisha as he got dressed for the ceremony. Secretly, he had hoped that she would decide to make a leap into a far better place of independence and opportunity by being with him in Mumbai. He recalled his words to her once in the early days of their relationship: 'I don't need to find *myself*, Trisha. You do. I have not been brainwashed. I choose to be this. Is it wrong to know what you want from life early on? Who says we only realize the truth later in life? Maybe I am confident about myself. I want to be a politician. I don't want to hang around in Delhi to find a job and then realize at the end of it that I don't like it and want to be a politician.'

That had been the problem since the beginning of their relationship. After two years, though, it was far more difficult to let go than it would have been if they had

resolved this conflict in the beginning.

Vedant's eyes wandered around his empty room and landed on a row of designer shirts hanging in his cupboard. He knew how easy it would be for his peon to pack everything and send it to Mumbai. But with growing sadness he wondered how he was going to wear them once he got home. The tour across Maharashtra's rural belt would take up all his time in the coming months and once in Mumbai, he would have to don his khadi kurta ensemble. Vedant ran his fingers across the shirts. It made him miss Trisha more. He missed her picking out his shirts for him. He missed her in this room, his life, his space. And tomorrow their world will change forever.

Today their parents would meet for the first time. He hoped they would love Trisha. That would make it easier for him to tell them that he loved her and maybe he could give her the answer she was looking for. And if she saw how much they liked her, maybe she would be convinced to come to Mumbai instead of staying in Delhi all by herself.

Trisha wasn't looking forward to meeting Vedant's parents but she knew it was inevitable. She showered quickly and got dressed. Her parents had already arrived and checked into a hotel and would be reaching the college soon. She hoped her father would not be his usual self—the professor who behaved condescendingly towards anyone he found to be of inferior intelligence. She knew how her father looked down on people who were less educated. Would he make a comment about Vedant's parents who had barely finished Class XII? To begin with, he had no patience for what he called 'politician types'.

She finished getting dressed and checked out her reflection in the mirror. She was pleased to see that she had lost some weight. The blue kurta was looking too old, though, she thought, and quickly changed out of it. Was this a metaphor for her relationship with Vedant? A tad old? Had she seen their relationship through just the newness of love rather than the logical conclusion that it would always have come to?

She decided on a dark green, three-quarter-sleeved kurta with a black churidaar. She pulled on a stack of wooden bangles on her right hand and fixed a red bindi on her forehead. A pair of bright red kolhapuri chappals completed her attire. She thought she looked like the Indian 'bahu' that any parent would approve of, especially those who were particularly orthodox. *Take that!* She muttered a challenge for Vedant's parents. Somehow, she desperately wanted them to like her. How conflicting it was to be a woman in today's times. While she had an independent spirit and believed in herself, she also wanted to be accepted into a man's family and cherished as the perfect daughter-in-law. But in today's India, do you have to be only one or the other?

She looked at all the boxes that contained her belongings and was easily reminded that this room had been her space for two years. The room held so many memories.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of her mobile phone ringing. She picked it up and saw an SMS from Vedant, a poem by E.E. Cummings: 'I carry your heart with me (I carry it in my heart); I am never without it (anywhere I go you go, my dear; and whatever is done by only me is your doing, my darling); I fear no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet); I want no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true); And it's you are whatever a moon has always meant; And whatever a sun will always sing is

you; Here is the deepest secret nobody knows.'

Trisha sat and wept. Her makeup ran but she hardly cared. Why did it have to end this way? Maybe if the parents' meeting went well, she could alter her plans, find a job in Mumbai, and move for Vedant.

Her mobile rang; it was her dad this time, telling her they had reached the lawns. She composed herself and reapplied her makeup, locked her room, and headed towards the lawns. With deep breaths Trisha held her head high, ready to tackle the new problem and let go of the old one.

The lawns of JNU were already abuzz with activity. The stage was large and decorated with flowers. The microphones were in place, and rows of plastic chairs had been placed opposite for the audience. An archway stood on the right side of the podium and was decorated with orchids; it was there for graduates and their families to take photographs.

Trisha quickly spotted her parents. Her mom was resplendent in a cream and gold sari with antique jewellery adorning her neck and ears. Her father was in a pinstriped suit, fiddling with his phone. She took a calming breath, smiled and walked towards them, hollering, 'Mom!'

She gave them a tight hug and asked about Bruno, her beloved dog in Lucknow. Trisha's father, Dr Rajiv Mathur, was an impressive man. He stood almost six feet tall and had a stern demeanour. Once upon a time, he had been Trisha's whole world—they did everything together and he would drop everything if Trisha called him. He stood up and gave her a warm hug. Trisha's mom, Neha Mathur, was short like her but with a dazzling smile and lustrous long hair that Trisha had inherited. She, too, had a diamond on her nose, but a bigger stud than Trisha's, and when they stood side by side, they looked like sisters. As her parents chatted, more people came and filled the lawns and soon she saw Vedant sitting with his parents. They caught each other's eyes and he indicated that she should come over.

She took her parents over to where Vedant's family sat and his parents stood up to greet them. Trisha was first to make introductions: 'Mom and dad, I want you to meet a good friend of mine, Vedant Kirloskar.'

Trisha's parents immediately recognized Vedant's father and polite greetings were exchanged. Trisha could sense the curious eyes on their families. Bodyguards surrounded them and a few press people began clicking photographs. She began feeling uncomfortable with the attention, balking at the thought of living this kind of life on a daily basis if she were to marry Vedant.

Vedant's father, who was dressed in a khadi kurta and white pyjama, asked her, 'So what are your plans after you graduate?'

'Uncle, I plan to stay in Delhi and work with children. I'm hoping to get into UNICEF.'

'But these organizations don't make a difference, beta.' She couldn't reply as Vedant's father launched into a speech. 'The only thing that makes a difference is power. When you have power you can do anything you want. Only politics gives you power. Vedant tells me you managed many rallies for him?'

Trisha was surprised. *So he had spoken about me to his parents, albeit*

indirectly. She could see Vedant grinning sheepishly.

‘Why don’t you come to Mumbai and join our party?’ Vedant’s father continued. ‘We could use a good-looking girl like you to help in the party.’

Oh, so he’d spoken of her as someone who had helped him with his work. Not of her being his girlfriend.

Trisha was mildly offended but chose to not say anything. It was her mother who replied: ‘Politics is not everyone’s cup of tea, Mr Kirloskar. Change can only take place in a society when intelligent people lead the way.’

Bravo, mom! Spoken like a true history professor.

Vedant’s father couldn’t hide his distaste for such a reply. His nostrils flared as he replied, ‘Intelligent people cannot lead. They can only lecture. The masses understand only power and money. A labourer who doesn’t have enough to feed his family hardly cares whether he makes a change in society. All he cares about is food.’

What followed was a quick repartee.

‘There is a severe drought in most areas of India. How are the politicians helping with that?’ her mother asked.

‘We are trying to irrigate land. Agriculture is of prime importance in our country.’

‘And yet, the farmers are still committing suicide.’

Before Vedant’s father could reply, an announcement was made asking students and guests to take their seats. Trisha led her parents away. She could hear Vedant’s father muttering, ‘Women in our society are not supposed to show such display of opinion. Who was she? I hope you’re not close to that girl.’ Vedant and Trisha managed to lock eyes for a brief second. The moment said a thousand words. Her heart sank. Even the miniscule hope she had had about Vedant’s parents liking her was now gone. She knew now that she would have to fight a bigger battle if she chose to move to Mumbai. With their parents not liking each other, no commitment from Vedant and no job interviews lined up in Mumbai, her hopes of their relationship surviving were slipping away.

Her only consolation at the moment was that the ceremony went off beautifully. She could tell how happy her parents were, cheering her on eagerly. When she cheered the loudest for Vedant as he received the Obama Prize, her parents gave each other a knowing glance.

After the programme, her father told her he was leaving by the evening flight back to Lucknow while her mother would be staying on for a few more days in a guest house. Trisha was extremely disappointed as she had hoped to spend more time with her father. But she knew he was a busy man, and he promised to be back soon to celebrate her job at UNICEF.

‘I know you’ll get the UNICEF post, beta. I’m proud of you for coming to Delhi and doing this all on your own. You’re an extremely independent woman and I’m glad nobody and nothing can influence your judgment of what’s right or wrong.’ Her father gave her a tight hug.

Trisha had tears in her eyes. He was right. She needed to make them proud. How could she give up her job and independence only to follow Vedant and his dreams? They hugged tightly and then he left.

She took all the boxes from her room and loaded them in the cab that was to take

her mom back to the guest house. She would join her later. First she needed to be with Vedant for what she guessed would be the last time.

They met up at the podium and sat on the steps.

‘When do you leave?’ Trisha looked away, already knowing the answer.

‘Tomorrow morning.’

‘Why does it have to be this way Veda?’ Trisha felt her whole world collapsing. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

‘What do you want me to do? We’ve discussed this. This is the only way. Once you finish with your interviews, come to Mumbai and stay with me.’

‘Yeah, given how your parents loved me so much? Or my mother even more.’

‘You just got off on the wrong foot.’ Vedant took her hands in his. ‘My dad didn’t say anything about you. He and your mom just had a difference of opinion. That’s all. You should meet my parents separately. They’ll like you, I promise.’

He didn’t know that she had heard his father saying those things about women not being allowed to voice their opinions. How could she fit into a house like that? They didn’t even give their son enough freedom, so what would they expect of a daughter-in-law! How could she possibly keep her ideas and opinions to herself when she was overflowing with them? When debating was what she loved to do and who she was. Which century did his father live in? Fear gripped her heart. Would Vedant turn into another version of his father? Maybe Vedant wasn’t like that but he came from a very traditional family, after all, and was deeply influenced by his parents’ thought processes.

Vedant leaned over and gave her a gentle kiss. She held on to his hair and reciprocated more passionately. He moved his body closer to hers and held her tightly, their lips locked in a deep kiss that sent shock waves through her body. It was a farewell kiss, the last kiss, the one that she would have to hold on to forever. And that made it even more special. He titillated her with his tongue, biting her ever so lightly at the corners of her mouth. His mouth left hers and settled at the edge of her throat. He savored the delicate hollow and absorbed the sweet smell of her skin as she held back a moan.

Trisha was suddenly aware of where they were and stopped him. He agreed reluctantly.

‘Thank you for the poem.’ Trisha did not want to let him go just yet. They embraced.

‘I meant it,’ he said. ‘I wish I could write poetry for you, Trish. But all I can do is quote it.’

‘That’s wonderful enough for me, Veda.’

Soon they knew it was time to pull away. Heavy sadness hung in the air.

‘I guess I’d better be going,’ he said.

She nodded. He gently kissed her again and got up. And then Vedant Dheeraj Kirloskar, the love of Trisha Mathur’s life, left her sitting alone on the podium.

She couldn’t bear seeing Vedant walk away. She wanted to scream for him and tell him to stay with her, that she was willing to change, that she needed him the most in the world and couldn’t carry on alone. But her cries were only in her head. She couldn’t get herself to say those words aloud. With a broken heart and a blurred vision she watched

Vedant walk away. She realized then that they never did end up resolving any of their arguments. They merely brushed them under the carpet and gave up on them till it came to a bitter end. The worst heartbreak and the noblest move is knowing you need to walk away while you still love the person, and when you are doing so for the larger cause of a brilliant career, when you have your whole life ahead of you, full of promise.

In that moment, she knew that nothing in her life would ever be the same again.

9



It would take some days after graduation for Trisha to feel like her life still had purpose. She received her appointment letter from UNICEF, asking her to join immediately. She immediately told her parents, who were of course jubilant, and she knew she had made them proud. Her new job provided great opportunities for her to do well and travel the world. This was a turning point in her life and she knew she would seize this chance to succeed. UNICEF's letter felt like nothing less than a message from God: this was her destiny and she should go along with it.

After a week of living with her mother in the guest house and trying to find places to stay, she moved in with Juhi into a two-bedroom place in Green Park and prepared to join UNICEF. Even though Trisha wanted to confide in her mother about her feelings of loss about Vedant, she kept her thoughts to herself. Her mother was an extremely opinionated woman and the altercation between her and his parents during graduation day was still fresh in Trisha's mind. If they had somehow got along, maybe Trisha's life would have been different?

But right now, UNICEF beckoned, and she swore to herself she would do herself proud. She was entering a highly prestigious organization, after all, and her position might be at a junior level but it came with tonnes of opportunity, including domestic travel. This would keep her active and perhaps keep her mind off Vedant.

Her mother went back to Lucknow with a promise from Trisha that she would visit them in a few weeks. But a few months had already come and gone since then and Trisha had still not found the time to visit them. She realized that work life was completely different from college. It sucked long hours from her life and when the weekend rolled by, all she wanted to do was sleep or read a book. She barely went anywhere besides the office. She lost contact with all her friends from college, though this was not just because of a lack of time—she wanted to avoid their questions on the death of her relationship, which they had seen blossom on campus before their own eyes. She even went off Facebook for this reason.

Her past association with Vedant thrust new surprises along her way. Once in a

bookshop, a TV journalist recognized her. 'Hey, aren't you the girl who had called me to cover the rally for Vedant Kirloskar?'

Trisha nodded, completely taken aback, and proceeded to browse through the bookshelves, but the pesky journalist continued, 'How is he? In his interview after the event, he had praised you quite a bit. Are you managing his career now? I would like to get an interview with him. Can you arrange that? Are you visiting from Mumbai?'

Trisha felt the tears welling up in her eyes right then. 'Excuse me, I have to run,' she mumbled and left the store. She sobbed the rest of the evening alone at home.

In the following days she withdrew into a shell, plunging herself into work and staying late hours in the office long after everyone had left. She refused to get cable or an internet connection at home, knowing it would only cost her money. She wanted to be a prudent young working woman who could manage her finances smartly.

Juhi had also got a job at *Hindustan Times* and was working as a journalist for their lifestyle edition. It was a blessing that she had found a place and asked Trisha to move in with her. Otherwise, Trisha would have had to stay alone and that was something she didn't want to do at this point in her life. Juhi was the only one who knew everything about Trisha's love story. She had seen it develop, and eventually crumble, in the two years they were together in JNU. Trisha never asked her for advice then and she didn't give any. But she had shown her support by asking Trisha to move in with her. Since then their friendship had become stronger, and now they talked about almost everything. Trisha felt she had finally found someone to open up to. Juhi tried to cajole Trisha into attending some parties with her but the most that Trisha would do is have coffee with Juhi in a nice restaurant. It wasn't that Trisha was afraid of men, it was just that she didn't want to make herself vulnerable to anyone once again. She hung out at home with Juhi and her boyfriend, Sulekh, whom she liked and with whom she was very comfortable.

Sometimes Trisha stayed awake at night, feeling a kind of resentment towards her parents. They had such demanding careers and an equally exhausting social life. They worked constantly and partied just as hard. She started feeling that maybe it would have been easier if they hadn't put so much pressure on her to become an independent, modern woman of the world. What was the harm in just being someone's wife? Why was there such a need for the modern woman to constantly prove herself? If a woman was educated, was it necessary for her to do something with her life? Couldn't she just sit at home and read and improve her mind just for herself? Wasn't happiness and evolution meant to be an inward journey? Trisha had all these questions but she knew no answers were forthcoming.

Juhi understood her sorrow but scolded her for over-thinking her life. Maybe she was right. So she made a decision to invest her energies into her job. She read about all the work being done by UNICEF in India and started writing proposals for her seniors on ways to improve their ongoing projects. It involved staying long hours at the office. While she was getting better at her work, the heaviness in her heart didn't go away. Tears would suddenly spring to her eyes. There didn't even have to be a specific memory attached to the tears, Vedant's face didn't have to appear in front of her. It was just the sorrow from her heart that made her feel like she was in the depths of despair

suddenly. She could always shake it off but it came back repeatedly. It was nuggets of memory that hammered at her mind and heart. Often when she heard a song from The Doors, she would remember him. She refused to go to Vasant Vihar even with Juhi. And Trisha never went back to JNU. She asked Juhi to collect her marksheets that proved she had graduated and was a topper of her class.

Months went by and Trisha's heart still hadn't healed. She wondered why. Wasn't time supposed to ease the pain? But the hurt lingered like a sad song stuck on repeat.

One day she received an email from Vedant where he told her about his rallies across Maharashtra. The mail brought tears to her eyes; she was touched that he had taken the initiative to keep in touch. She could hear him say it to her as if she was there with him.

Dear Trish,

Life took a 180-degree turn after I returned from Delhi. Started the campaign almost immediately. Went around to different towns to speak to people and tell them that I was the new leader. Papa was always with me so they could understand that I would lead once he handed the reins of the party over. It's funny that we call ourselves a democracy when, in reality, people want the same bloodline to follow. Ideologies hardly matter to the masses. They just want their lives to be a little better. They don't even ask for too much. It's sad to see their state of affairs and I'm pleased that I'm getting into a job where I can help them. I know it's my legacy but I'm only appreciating it now. I'm also appreciating why politicians wear cotton kurtas. With the heat in India, it is actually more comfortable than Armani. Hahaha.

You'll be glad to know I've given up smoking. I listen to whatever music I like. My mother is less horrified now. I gave people your logic—this is who I am and they should accept me for that. And they have started doing so. You taught me that. So thank you.

I miss you in each rally. I miss you every time I don't know what to wear. I can hear your voice telling me what to pick. I miss you in my bed. I remember the last time we made love. If I had known it was the last time, I would have never stopped holding you.

I hope you are happy.

Love,

Vedant.

Memory cripples us more than circumstances. If we can't let go of the past, we can't tackle the present. Trisha read the letter over and over, each time either laughing or crying at the thought of Vedant doing so many different things with his life. He still loved and missed her and she felt terrible that they weren't together. But he hadn't said that he wanted her to join him or that they should try to make the relationship work again. He was moving on with his life. He might have been remembering her and the good times they shared but he also understood how different their lives were.

Trisha spent several days trying to compose the perfect reply. She didn't want to give away too much. Could she really tell him that she had not moved on? That she was still in love with him and that she thought of him every day. That maybe he was the one great love of her life? That she cried thinking of the choices they could have made and chose not to be together. No, she decided. She could not write any of that drama as it would only open a can of worms. Casual and breezy it will be.

Hey,

So glad to hear from you. It's wonderful that you're doing so well. I always knew that you would make a great politician. Sometimes a legacy is exactly what we need to show us who we have to become. I am proud of you, for all your rallies, what you want to do for our country and its people. We need more people like you.

I'm happy to hear your family accepts you for who you are. You are a wonderful person and you should never have to change. Smoking was a terrible habit. Don't know who you picked it up from. Probably that dud of a boy you used to drink with—Rahul, was it? Happy you have quit.

I'm always there with you, my sweetie. I am there right now to whisper in your ear and tell you that whatever you're wearing looks gorgeous on you and I find you terribly sexy.

Work keeps me busy. I moved in with Juhi and we're terrible cooks. We end up ordering in on most nights. I went with a few friends to our favourite Italian place once. It wasn't the same without you.

Wish you were here.

Ciao for now.

Love forever,

Trish.

Trisha read it and wondered if he wanted something more from her. She had deliberately left out anything about their lovemaking or her daydreams of the two of them frolicking on a secluded beach far away. She did think that he looked sexy in everything he wore and had wished that she could wrap her arms around him that very minute. She added a smiley to keep it friendly.

Oh, how she longed for them to change the course of their destiny! She hoped he would keep in touch more often. At least she had felt better these last few days with this one correspondence. She hit the Send button after reading it and making corrections.

But Vedant didn't write back again.

She checked her mail constantly every few minutes in the next few days. And then every few hours in the following weeks till slowly she stopped checking for his response. But he never did write back.

She read her mail and wondered what she could have said to annoy him. She even sent him another mail that just said, 'Hi. Long time, no news. Keep in touch!' but even that he hadn't replied to. She was pained, and she couldn't suppress it no matter how hard she tried. She realized that the only way to get over her pain was to accept it, embrace it, and then release it. Only then would she get closure.

And then six months after their breakup, Vedant was engaged. Trisha read about it in *Outlook* magazine. The article said Vedant was going to be engaged to a homely Maharastrian girl of his parents' choice. The girl was slim and beautiful, with curly hair and light eyes. In the photograph accompanying the article, she was dressed in a lovely red sari with a golden border, with green bangles adorning her slim wrists. The typical bahu, just as Trisha had predicted. Obviously Vedant would have fallen in love with her. They looked so good together. Trisha felt a fresh wave of pain tearing at her heart. Hot tears stung her eyes as she tried to tear them away from the picture. It took her an entire hour to gather her wits and calm her heart.

She opened her computer to read his last mail. Then she deleted it. That mail was

his way of finding closure, but it had only left her vulnerable once again.



It was the first Saturday of November, a month after Trisha deleted Vedant's mail. Juhi asked Trisha to go shopping with her but she said no. 'Please, Juhi. The past seven months have been so hectic and I've finally got a chance to relax this weekend. Can't I just be cozy on this sofa and read my book?'

'What are you reading anyway?'

'*Poetic Justice*. A book on Tennyson.'

'Oh God, he's not even Indian! Come on, Trisha. Your clothes are looking ragged. You can't wear the same old kurtas every day. UNICEF will fire you!' Juhi said it with such drama that Trisha thought she was actually serious for a moment.

'Let's go shopping with all this money we've made and blow it up on a whole new wardrobe!'

'I don't know, Juhi. Maybe we should save it and just stay home today.'

'Save save save.' Juhi rolled her eyes. 'What do you want to save for, Trisha? Life is about now. Life is here. Wake up and see it. You've been moping for months. Vedant has moved on.'

Trisha sighed. She knew Juhi was right but she wasn't ready to face the truth. She hadn't even gone back to Lucknow for the last two months and her parents had been constantly asking her to just hop on a train and come home to them. She wanted more time to grieve.

Juhi sat next to her on the sofa. 'Trish, it's time you go out and do something good for yourself. Get some new clothes, get your hair coloured, whatever makes you happy. I'm not saying get a makeover, but simply start enjoying life again! Live life the way women should live. Not run from home to office and back home. I know you're not in a glamorous industry but sometimes doing something for yourself is important. You work hard. You have proven whatever you needed to whomever you wanted. And you're on the right path. Now take a deep breath. Even if you read a book a day, you're not going to finish reading all the books you want in this lifetime. So, just for one day, don't read a book. Don't think about Vedant. Don't think about saving for fifty years down the line.'

Think about what makes you happy and let's go do that.'

This time Trisha heard Juhi. She had become quite reticent in the last few months and had barely interacted with anyone. She was afraid of living a full life in case she got hurt again. She hadn't flirted with anyone and refused to go online to post things on social networking sites. She didn't want anyone to find her or break her heart again. But she was lonely. Although she spoke to Juhi when they were home, they were very different individuals: Juhi loved going out in the evenings to party and was out practically every weekend with Sulekh, and Trisha loved to sit at home and read books. The only time she would go out would be for a walk for several hours if Juhi's boyfriend Sulekh came over and they needed some space. Juhi's relationship was going strong from their JNU days. It was a bitter reminder to Trisha that hers had died.

A part of her felt like a huge failure. Nothing seemed to make her happy. Even though she had got the job of her dreams and made her parents extremely proud, there seemed to be no reason for her to enjoy life anymore.

'Seize every opportunity you get regardless of what you fear,' Juhi said. 'Let the magic of endless possibilities enter your life.'

Maybe Juhi was right. She needed to go out and do something more. Trisha knew she was falling into depression and if she didn't heed Juhi's advice now, several more months would go by aimlessly. She needed to take stock of her life and plunge into a day of reckless abandonment to feel alive again.

'Okay. Let's go.'

Juhi squealed and hugged her. 'Grab your purse. We're going to have lots of fun!'

At the mall, Trisha tried to buy the regular kurtas that she loved but Juhi would not have it and made her try on dresses and heels. Trisha felt completely uncomfortable in those clothes and shoes but she decided to go along for a ride. She ended up buying a few dresses. If nothing, it was a way of making Juhi feel good. Juhi had been good to Trisha and she couldn't ever refuse her.

Over lunch in a quaint café in Chanakyapuri, Juhi did most of the talking, telling her stories about her new friends. It reminded Trisha that she hadn't made any new friends. *Could it be why I'm feeling so lonely?* The wider a circle of friends you have, the less you remembered just one.

'You should come meet our JNU friends some time,' Juhi said as they sipped their carrot and apple juice.

'That sounds like fun.' Trisha suddenly started to feel better. She looked down at all her new clothes. 'I don't know if I'm going to wear half these things that you've made me buy. Dresses? Skirts? This is so not me. Maybe we should buy some more slacks and coats. After all, winter is almost here.'

'It's not. And all these are on sale because the season is going. Trust me. You need to wear more variety. You're as predictable as winter in Antarctica!'

Trisha scowled. 'And you're as unpredictable as the weather in London!'

Juhi was right, though. She had not bought a single new outfit since she had put on some weight after the breakup. She had been helping herself generously to comfort food. She had been recycling things because she didn't want to spend on a larger size.

'What's new with you at work?' Juhi asked.

Trisha started talking about her job, her projects, her boss. Soon she found herself opening up about her parents, and the letter from Vedant, and their relationship. She spoke for a long time, until there was nothing more to say. Juhi listened, giving Trisha the occasional advice. It was one long, cathartic session and they both were surprised to see that it was almost 8 p.m.! They had ended up spending the whole day at the cafe.

Trisha realized that the trigger to her getting everything off her chest was the shopping. Retail therapy is what they call it, she thought. Doing something different helped her want to get rid of the old baggage from her heart as well.

‘Do you want Vedant back?’ Juhi asked softly.

Trisha thought about it for a while. ‘You know, a few hours ago I would have said yes immediately but now, I’m not so sure. I might still love him but maybe I love the idea of him more than the real him. I love what he and I were and what he did for me. But if we were to marry and have a life, we won’t be the same way as we were. So the new idea is not as appealing. Maybe I’m just holding on to the memory of our love rather than understanding what love can be.’

Juhi let Trisha continue. ‘I’ve seen a strange love between my parents. They don’t hug or kiss or are intimate at all, at least not in front of me. But I can tell that there’s a deep understanding between them. It’s stable and strong. I want that kind of love. Romantic love fades over time and the charm of marriage wanes. But true love is more than that. A true companion will be there for you even in your old age.’

‘But your identity is not because you’re single or married,’ Juhi replied. ‘It’s the power of your personality.’

‘I know that. But we all still need companionship in our life. Still, I don’t want to be the only one who sacrifices for that. Love has to be both ways. Not once has Vedant wanted to sacrifice anything.’

‘Then why are you still holding on to his memory?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Your worth cannot be measured by how important you are in someone else’s life. It needs to be determined by your place in your life.’

‘I didn’t feel that. I wanted to hold on to something that had already gone.’

‘Or wasn’t there to begin with. He may have loved you passionately but a relationship means sacrifices. Compromises. You were always the one to adjust to his life. He never adjusted to yours. You’re middle class, Trish. He roamed around in a BMW for Christ’s sake. You would have to top that in your dowry!’ Juhi teased.

Trisha laughed—the first proper laugh she had in months. Juhi was right. How would Vedant fit into her social circle and roam around in Lucknow in her parents’ i20? For all his hankering about the deprived sections of society, he did have a chip on his shoulder about his powerful political lineage! Somehow, the idea of him unable to fit into her middle-class life gave Trisha much solace. It was these pieces of logic that helped her release him from her heart.



Trisha muttered a prayer and broke into a run. *Oh God, please let me catch that train.* She reached the gates of the Metro station and there was the last train, just leaving the platform. She looked at her watch: 11.10 p.m. She was a minute too late. She sat on a bench, panting, feeling defeated and thinking of what to do next.

The station wore a deserted look, making her more anxious. She should never have taken such a late appointment here in Noida but work demanded that she travel for meetings and follow up with people. As the Communication for Development Specialist, after all, her job description said she 'was responsible to lead the design, management, monitoring and evaluation of strategic communication for behaviour and community-led social change.' She was very proud of that fact and she took her job seriously. And this meant she needed to coordinate with government officials, programme staff and other UNICEF partners most of the time. A partner had called her to his house to meet today. She had taken an extensive interview that lasted way longer than she expected. But she had been out to prove she was the best, and if she had to take public transport late at night, so be it. After that cathartic chat with Juhi several weeks ago, Trisha had felt lighter and gone back to being her old self, though she hadn't met anyone new despite Juhi insisting that she go out on a date. She still wasn't ready for that.

She rummaged through her handbag and found only fifty rupees. Clearly that wasn't enough to get her home to Gurgaon. She admonished herself for this bad habit of carrying very little cash. A cab ride would cost her a bomb. Should she call Juhi for help? She was working the night desk at her paper and her office was in ITO. Should she call another friend? But she realized with a pang that she didn't have too many friends she could call in the middle of the night. Where was the time to socialize anyway? *Focus, Trisha,* said a little voice inside her head. *It's late and you know how everyone says Noida is unsafe! What can you do?* She looked around to see if there was an ATM machine anywhere so she could withdraw money before she caught a cab.

Just then she saw a striking man sitting on a bench a few feet away. He was dressed in wedding finery and looked like a model. He must be over six feet tall, had

honey-kissed skin, a lean body with a taut torso and biceps that were outlined under his sherwani. His thick, jet-black hair fell over his eyes and he was sitting forward with his elbows resting on his thighs. He looked up and straight at her with his piercing dark brown eyes. A gasp escaped her lips. He looked vaguely familiar but she was unable to place him. And he seemed quite out of place at a Metro station. Trisha looked the other way and started walking towards the station master's office. It was closed. Damn people who leave early, she thought. She came out of the station and couldn't find a cab or an auto on the dark streets. She suddenly realized that the man had followed her. She started getting nervous. She looked inside her purse for her pepper spray but could only find kajal, some chewing gum and a hairbrush. *Seriously, Trisha, her inner voice said, do you not think before you leave the house? It's India, for God's sake!*

'Are you looking for a cab?' The man asked, walking towards her. He had a refined voice that spoke of a cultured upbringing. He checked his watch.

'What's it to you?' Trisha snapped.

The man smiled as he put his hands in his pockets, probably to give Trisha a signal that he wasn't going to attack her. He maintained his gentle tone while coming closer. 'Well there are a couple of cabs across the road. I doubt if the lazy buggers will go, though.'

'What?!' Trisha was aghast. 'Why?'

She saw that he was clean-shaven and had a very easy-going demeanour. His accent hinted at him being South Indian but Trisha couldn't be sure.

The man looked across the road at the cab drivers. 'Because they're all drinking. I think they're having a party and don't want to break it up. It could be unsafe if you insisted that one of them take you.' His dark eyes flashed a gentle but firm warning.

Trisha held back a sob and sat down on the nearest bench. The man stood a little distance away. His appreciative eye travelled from her sandals to her soft peach salwar kameez and the hint of collarbone that peeped from behind the white chiffon dupatta.

'If you like, I can drop you to the next cab stand.'

Trisha panicked. She was ready to burst into tears though she tried not to show it before this stranger—who happened to be gorgeous, incidentally. She didn't know if she should get into a car with him or take her chances sitting at a station. And what would people say? Juhi would be furious. She rummaged through her purse and found her mobile phone. It had died. Today was just not her day. The man was still waiting outside his car to figure out if she would be okay. He was fumbling with his phone as well. She had no option but to ask him, even at the risk of appearing ridiculous.

'Um... Excuse me... Can I borrow your phone? Mine has died.'

He suppressed a laugh while he gave her his phone. 'It's not safe to be out so late *and* have a dead phone. This is Noida!' he teased.

'Yes, I'm aware of that. Thank you.' *I'm not stupid.* She called Juhi but she didn't pick up. She then sent her a message, looking up while typing, 'What's your name?' He answered politely, 'Abhimanyu.' She composed her SMS telling Juhi that it was Abhimanyu's phone and she was taking a ride with him. After the message was delivered, she deleted it from the sent message box. If Abhimanyu knew what she was doing, he didn't show it. The she gave the phone back to him.

‘Can I take you up on that offer please? Just drop me to the next available cab, one without a drunk driver, preferably.’

‘You’re not scared of me anymore?’

‘I have pepper spray, in case you try anything funny.’

‘You’re not supposed to tell people you have pepper spray, silly! It defeats the purpose!’ He laughed. ‘Okay, get in. I’ll drop you to a cab.’

The huskiness lingered in his tone and made Trisha realize she was getting attracted to this stunning, confident stranger.

They got into his Honda City before Trisha asked, ‘So did you also miss the last train?’

‘Actually, yes. I was in such deep thought that I didn’t realize where the time went!’

‘Thinking about what?’

He grinned. ‘I was running away from my wedding.’

Her eyes widened.

‘I hate weddings,’ he continued. ‘Marriage. It just kills the romance, you know? Two people really love each other and then bloody families get involved and they are no longer just two people. They’re several people who are supposed to love each other without question. Kills it.’

‘But why were you taking the Metro if you had a car?’

‘I see you’re quite logical! Well, I hadn’t thought the entire thing through. I thought I would take the Metro to the airport and then just zoom off from there.’ With his right hand he mimed an aeroplane taking flight.

‘Yeah, I’ve run away from my wedding once, too.’

‘Really?’

‘No, you loser!’ she laughed. ‘Who runs away from their own wedding?’ She suddenly felt as if her dormant wits had awoken.

They both laughed heartily. ‘Why did you offer to drop me?’ Trisha asked.

‘It’s just the right thing to do. You don’t leave a woman alone anywhere. I have offered all sorts of strange women a lift in my car!’

It was Abhimanyu’s turn to laugh as he looked at Trisha’s shocked expression. When she realized he was pulling her leg, she laughed as well, feeling her defences beginning to crumble.

‘Where do you stay?’ he asked.

‘Gurgaon.’

‘Right, you mentioned that earlier. And you were trying to catch the last train? That’s pretty smart of you.’

Trisha didn’t mind the sarcasm at all, feeling at ease with this stranger. ‘People travel for work, you know. Or do you not travel at all?’

‘Oh, yeah, I travel. I travel a lot!’

They drove and continued chatting, and they both completely forgot about their arrangement for him to drop her off where she could hail a cab. He followed the road to Gurgaon and insisted that it was late and he needed to take her home for his own peace of mind. This made her feel warm and fuzzy but she didn’t show it.

As the reflected light from the passing cars glimmered over his handsome face like beams of icy radiance, she stole glances at him, carefully noticing how he held his head high, how his profile was masculine, strong and rigid. Trisha was shocked to find herself drawn to him in a way she had never been with anyone—not even Vedant. There was a warmth about him that she liked. With Vedant, she had felt some kind of animosity on the debating stage, and it was only later in the infirmary when she realized he could be a fine chap that she began feeling at ease with him.

It was a long drive from Noida to Gurgaon. Abhimanyu and Trisha talked about weddings, families, living in Noida versus living in Gurgaon, the places they'd travelled to—everything except work. There didn't seem to be enough time. Soon, they reached Trisha's house. As she prepared to get out of the car, she silently admonished herself for having revealed so much to a complete stranger. *Am I so naive?* Even though she knew she was intelligent, she sometimes felt like a stranger to the ways of the world. Her father had often warned her against trusting others blindly but she believed in the innate goodness of humanity and never felt threatened by people. It would only be later, of course, when she would realize that she had been hurt.

'So, can I take you out for coffee sometime?' Abhimanyu asked.

'But didn't you just buy me coffee?' she joked.

'Okay, then.' He rode along. 'Tea maybe?'

'I'm not sure but I might be busy this week.' Trisha thought it best not to say yes. She was reminded of a warning from a friend in Lucknow: 'Don't be a loose girl. If men think you're fast and easy, they'll take advantage of you.'

Abhimanyu nodded. 'Well, it was nice meeting you, Trisha. Take care.' And he zoomed off.

When you've tackled your inner demons and let them go, they will not look back to find you. Because it doesn't happen in a second. It takes a lifetime. And Trisha hadn't let go of her fears of starting a new relationship just yet. Abhimanyu was quite good-looking, though, she thought as she entered the house. A shame she would never see him again.

She entered the apartment and found Juhi fast asleep. *Great. So much for my scheme of being safe.* If something had indeed gone wrong, Juhi would have not known until the next morning when she woke up! She prepared to go to bed, already thinking of the explanation she would give Juhi about her unexpected night.

But another unexpected surprise greeted her in the morning: Abhimanyu's face in the newspaper.



Trisha shrieked. That's why he looked familiar! She thought about the man at the Metro station, the stranger who had driven her home: Abhimanyu Laxman was a famous Indian international tennis player and she had of course read about him before.

How could she have been so stupid? The least she could have done was gotten his number. Just then Juhi came in from the kitchen and asked why Trisha was looking like a ghost. Trisha didn't know where to start with her explanation, so she quickly finished her cup of tea and went for a shower. She was about to wash her hair when Juhi began banging her fist on the door, rattling off an interrogation: 'Who was this Abhimanyu? Did he drop you home? How could you have forgotten to charge your battery? How dumb of you to miss the train! And you had no money in your wallet?! Miss Mathur, you better finish your shower fast and give me an explanation!'

Trisha sighed, and decided she should step out of the shower and tell Juhi the whole story. So she did. She punctuated her tale by flashing before Juhi the front page of the newspaper. Juhi's eyes almost popped out.

'You mean you went on a date with *this* Abhimanyu? The hotshot tennis player? Man, how lucky can you get?'

'Not lucky. And it wasn't a date. He was just being chivalrous and dropped me home. And then when he asked me for coffee I said I was busy.'

'Are you mad?' Juhi exclaimed. 'You turned him down?!'

'I didn't know if he was a nice guy or not. I mean, I don't know what he wants from me. He may be a national level tennis player but he probably has tons of skeletons in his closet. And, frankly, I'm not in a space to go out with anyone. I just want to be single.' Trisha finished getting dressed and headed to the kitchen.

Juhi followed her, carefully balancing her coffee cup in her hand as she walked, berating Trisha. 'No one is asking you to sit on a mandap, Trish. You've been single for the last seven or eight months now. That's like attaining nun-hood in this time and age. It's nice to have friends and even male admirers. He's not an ordinary guy. He's decent. He dropped you home. That counts for something.'

Trisha poured herself some muesli in a bowl and added milk. She took it to the living area, sat down and began eating, while using the remote to switch on the TV. She completely ignored Juhi who followed her like a lost puppy.

‘I blew him off,’ Trisha said finally. ‘So let’s just think of this as a closed chapter and move on. I will go on dates eventually. I’m just giving myself some time before I fall in love again. Okay?’

Juhi finished her coffee and got up. ‘Okay, your call. If you want to be Sylvia Plath, that’s your life. You don’t have to go out with Abhimanyu, but I can fix you up with some of my colleagues if you do want to make new friends or have a life while you’re young. Let me know.’

With Juhi out of her line of sight, Trisha thought about what she wanted to do. She definitely did not want to get her heart broken again. She still thought about Vedant even if he was already engaged. Not a single day went by that she didn’t think of him, in fact. Even if it was just for a moment. Loneliness is not wanting many people in your life; it is wanting just that one person. She thought about how she would have changed that letter. She thought about how she should have reached out to him more. But now she no longer knew how. There was just too much distance. He’d gone and found his closure.

But how can you really have closure on true love? She had hoped and prayed that he would come back to her. That he would come to his senses and realize that he couldn’t live without her. But he hadn’t. She knew she couldn’t lose herself and the things that were important in order to run after a man who was emotionally unavailable.

She needed to move on, too. Maybe Juhi was right. She didn’t need to fall in love but she did need to go out and meet new people. It wasn’t as if her heart was ready to fall in love again, or that these new people she’d meet would instantly like her, either. It was about hanging out with a bunch of fun people and listening to their stories. It might be nice, really.

‘Okay, I’ll do it,’ Trisha said as Juhi emerged from the bedroom. ‘I’ll go on a date. But he had better be nice. And handsome. With a sense of humour. And preferably let’s start with going out in a group. And I just want to be friends. Please make that clear. I’m not looking for anything serious. Let him know.’ Her sentences were deliberately clipped, like she was ticking off a list.

‘We’re in our twenties, honey,’ Juhi smiled. ‘No one wants to take anything seriously so quickly.’

Trisha nodded, satisfied that Juhi seemed to understand what she wanted.

Just then, she got a phone call from her mother. She picked up as she collected her things from the bedroom. ‘Hello, Ma. Why’re you not at the university? What? The maid took off again? How’s my Bruno? Put him on the phone. I want to hear him bark.’

She chatted with her mother all the way to the Metro station. Somehow the events of the previous evening and the thought of making new friends had lifted her spirits, albeit ever so slightly. She had been having very limited interactions apart from work, and even those were mostly with Juhi. Her conversations with her parents, though regular, had always been brief, even terse, as they would ask her about work. Today she felt different. She was aware that she was responding better to her mother, that she was also having more patience while listening to her stories.

At the other end of the line, Neha Mathur, too, felt different. As she ended the call with her daughter, she felt a deep satisfaction she hadn't known for some time. Unknown to Trisha, she had been asking Juhi about her daughter quite often. It had started innocuously enough. One day, Trisha was not picking up any of her calls and Neha had got worried and called Juhi. Juhi told Neha that Trisha was in a conference the whole day in a place where she had no network. She had casually let slip that Trisha had some good-looking colleagues who could take her mind off Vedant for a change. Neha then asked for more details about Vedant, and Juhi ended up telling her everything about Trisha's life. Neha finally understood what Trisha had been going through. She requested Juhi to keep her informed about her daughter's love life. Juhi had agreed, but on the condition that it could not reach Trisha. They had made a deal.

So Neha had started calling her daughter every day. Since Trisha had almost stopped coming to Lucknow, she would drop in to meet her daughter every month for a weekend and bring her a care package of home-cooked food and lots of pickles from Aminabad that Trisha loved.

Every morning at the same time, Neha would call her daughter while she was on her way to work. She was happy with a few minutes of conversation, as she would want only to hear Trisha's voice and make sure that she was not depressed. After this morning's conversation, she knew her daughter sounded different, better.

Neha had lived life long enough to know that circumstances played an important role in success, whether of a relationship or work. Intention was not the only thing that mattered. That, of course, didn't mean we should give up. Only that we needed to be patient and forgive the Universe for not giving us what we wanted, *when* we wanted it.

Almost as soon as Neha finished speaking to her daughter, she got a text message from Juhi: 'T is ready to go on a date.' Neha smiled, and hoped Juhi's efforts at playing cupid would work. Only then would she know that Trisha was really moving on.



Juhi was careful while guiding Trisha into meeting new people. One wrong move, she knew, and Trisha might just go back to being depressed. She remembered the days after graduation that Trisha withdrew into her shell after the breakup. Whenever she would ask Trisha to go out with her and her boyfriend Sulekh to party, or just for drinks, Trisha would refuse. There were times when Juhi would ditch Sulekh altogether and force Trisha to go out with her, but Trisha preferred to sit in her room and read. Once, she had successfully dragged Trisha to a poetry reading after a long cajoling, and when there, Trisha had started bawling in the middle of a Byron poem. Juhi was clueless as to why it had happened, but of course they had to leave immediately.

So Juhi didn't want to make a mistake now that Trisha had agreed to go out on a date. She called the one person she thought would be perfect. She had never met the guy and it was an awkward conversation, but she asked if he was willing to go on a blind date with Trisha. He said yes. Juhi fixed their meeting for the night of the coming Saturday at a hotel lobby that he agreed to.

That night as Trisha got dressed, she still couldn't believe she had let Juhi force her into going on a date with a man. She had thought they would all go out on a group date, but Juhi had insisted that a date alone with him would be more special. 'If you're going to take the plunge, you've got to jump into the deep side of the pool,' Juhi advised.

'That's the worst philosophy in the world!'

Juhi made her wear one of the dresses they had shopped for some time back and that had hung in Trisha's closet untouched. It was a little black dress with dark-red piping around the neck that showed off Trisha's bronzed cleavage beautifully. She adorned her ears with long silver pieces that shimmered as she moved her luscious black hair around her shoulders. She wore a pair of silver high heels that she borrowed from Juhi.

Looking at her own reflection in the mirror, Trisha felt extremely exposed. She hated showing her legs, and she had never been comfortable in heels. She put on her long black overcoat that could hide almost every part of her body. Juhi made her promise that

she would leave it unbuttoned. 'And take off the damn thing when you sit!'

At the hotel lobby, which seemed particularly quiet as it was virtually empty, Trisha felt nervous. She was fully aware of how her legs showed under her unbuttoned coat, and she felt emotionally vulnerable, too, as she realized she had never been on a blind date before. She had plunged into the deep side of the pool with nothing except the man's name, Dhruv, and the fact that he liked sports. *Which man didn't?* Trisha made up her mind right then to not like him. I bet he wouldn't even know the full form of UNICEF! Jocks were stupid, Trisha thought, pandering to the stereotypes. She would never date a stupid man.

To entertain herself, she thought about how hot she looked tonight. She had decided to be daring and use a bronzer on her neck and breasts till her ample bust shone at the plunging neckline of the dress. She had always been good with makeup; she knew what colours looked interesting, not only on her but on others as well. In college, she had been her friends' makeup artist. In fact, if it wasn't for UNICEF, she would have happily gone into that profession. She had rimmed her eyes with a dark kohl and used two coats of mascara and a light lip gloss to bring out her full lips. She had put some baby oil on her legs to give them a shine. Juhi had ironed her hair and it shone in the light.

Just then she noticed a man standing a few feet away looking mesmerized by her. He slowly started walking towards her and, to her surprise, she recognized him. With a slight smirk, he said, 'So, you're not running for a Metro today?'

Trisha looked around to see if anyone else had recognized him. A few passers-by did give him a second glance. She said, 'Abhimanyu! What are you doing here?'

'I came to have dinner with a girlfriend.'

'So soon? Didn't you just run away from your wedding last week? Are you sure your heart has healed?'

Trisha was surprised at how merrily her tongue was running away from her. This man seemed to bring out her garrulous best.

Abhimanyu laughed so hard he had to hold his sides and sit down. 'I wasn't really running away from my wedding. I had been attending my cousin's wedding when I got a call from my coach about something important. I needed some air to digest the fact that I had a new partner for the mixed doubles at the Australian Open, and that my old partner was injured and couldn't play. Since I was surrounded by all my relatives at the wedding, I needed a moment alone to contemplate my strategy.'

'Oh, yeah!' Trisha exclaimed. 'You're that famous tennis player. Why didn't you tell me when you were dropping me home?'

'Well, I may not be that famous at all if a pretty woman like you don't even recognize me.'

Trisha blushed.

'Between all your chatter or afterwards when you blew me off, I couldn't put in a word about my profession, could I? Do you still have that pepper spray?' He grinned.

Trisha looked embarrassed and said, 'I'm sorry about that. I was just being cautious. It was a tough night. Maybe I got scared that it was so easy to talk to you. I would love to have that chai with you sometime.'

‘I’d like that.’

Suddenly she remembered she was on a blind date. ‘I’m supposed to meet this guy here. Can we chat later? Otherwise he’ll think I’m on a spree, meeting men in this hotel lobby!’

‘No, he won’t think that. Because I’m the one you’re meeting here.’

‘No, no. Stop being silly. We’ll have chai another time. You aren’t Dhruv!’

‘I am Dhruv. It’s my pet name. Juhi called me and fixed up this date.’

‘What do you mean? She wouldn’t have your number!’

‘She did. You had texted her from my phone, remember?’

She was slowly getting it: Abhimanyu was her date, it wasn’t really ‘blind’.

‘But Juhi said you were Dhruv from her office who loved sports!’ She still could not believe Juhi would pull off such a stunt without telling her.

‘I do love sports.’ He laughed, and Trisha couldn’t help but notice how wonderful it sounded.

‘You were playing me? I thought tennis was your game!’ She said with a naughty smile.

‘Oh, smart-alecky, huh? Now will you please have dinner with a *loser*?’ He got up and took her arm. She suddenly felt embarrassed at having called him that name at the Metro station.

As she walked beside him to the restaurant, she glanced at his strong muscular arms that could only be the result of constantly thrashing tennis balls across the court. She gulped in delight. She had already seen how good-looking he was the night that they met, but tonight he was thoroughly desirable, with a hint of stubble that made his set jaw seem stronger, his taut chest outlined under a thin white Dior shirt. The lovely Armani cologne helped, too. So this is why Juhi had sent her to a five-star hotel instead of a Barista. An international tennis player would never be seen in a roadside coffee shop on a date.

A few people loitering around the lobby came up to them while they walked and asked for Abhimanyu’s autograph. Trisha stood back while he spoke to all of them. He smiled for the phone cameras, turned on his charm, was dashing and collected all at once. Trisha wondered if this was who he really was.

She was glad she looked wonderful tonight. A glitzy tennis star couldn’t be seen with a Plain Jane in salwar-kameez. They disengaged from his admirers and continued walking towards the Chinese restaurant. She admired his long strides, obviously the by-product of all his athletic training.

They sat and pored over the menu, with Trisha trying hard not to stare at him too much and resisting the primal, raw desire that suddenly overwhelmed her. She had a barrage of questions but she didn’t want to seem too eager, confused or, worse, stupid. She decided she had made enough of a fool of herself and should keep quiet for a change. She turned her attention to the menu and, seeing how pricey it was, quickly remembered where they were.

‘Let’s have soup?’ Trisha said as the waiter came.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. The menu is amazing. Let’s indulge a little. I don’t get to eat heavy food every day. Training keeps me on a strict diet. But I’m not playing tomorrow

so I'll just go for a long run to burn this off.'

'Oh well, thank God I never have that problem,' Trisha said dramatically. 'I'll sleep off the calories and let them all go to my hips.'

He broke into an infectious laugh that had the adjoining tables glancing at their corner. Was he playing to the gallery or was he really this good-humoured? Trisha couldn't gauge.

They ordered steamed dimsums and some grilled vegetables with chicken. She would have gone for heavy noodles, rice and some lamb, but she didn't want to upset him or his diet regime. *This was indulgence for him? They wouldn't last if they got together!*

Abhimanyu took a sip of his chilled water and admired Trisha in the candlelight. Her figure was curvy and regal like a queen's. Her features were soft and round, a welcome change from the stick-figured women he had dated before, or the athletic women with veins popping out of their temples he played with on the courts. It was pure coincidence that Juhi had called him and he was happy that the universe had brought them together again. She hadn't seemed too happy when he had proposed a date a week earlier when he dropped her home and he was never one to impose. Women fell for him, not the other way around. So he had let things be. When he looked at her across the table, he could see that her smooth skin glowed with pale gold undertones. Her luscious hair cascaded down her supple breasts. She could be as playful as a girl, or as composed as a worldly-wise woman. Her demeanour at the station had captivated him but now her beauty mesmerized him.

Trisha tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and looked earnestly at Abhimanyu. *Dear God, he is so handsome.* Even though she felt an instant attraction to him, she spoke with restraint. She asked him about his life on the court and off it. The answers he gave were standard. His parents and sister stayed in Delhi. His parents were originally from Chennai, but since his grandfather, joined the Railways, the family had moved to Delhi. That's where his mother was born and so was he. His mother was a doctor and his father, an engineer. He had a younger sister who was still in college. He had been officially training since he was ten years old. He had risen to fame when he had won the Wimbledon Junior title and become the darling of the country. He had reached the semi-finals in the Junior US Open that year as well. He had played many Davis Cups for India and had won, gone to the Olympics and won a bronze, and even played doubles in the major grand slams—to different results. Winning and losing were a part of his life. Tennis was his entire life.

He had never had a steady girlfriend. He didn't mention the film actress he had been linked to in the press a few years ago and Trisha didn't think it was right to bring it up. Instead she asked, 'So what is your ATP ranking?'

Abhimanyu looked surprised that she even knew what ATP was and answered, 'Twenty-six.'

It was Trisha's turn to be surprised. 'At such a young age you're already in the top fifty? That's incredible. Cheers to that!' She said and raised the glass of wine he insisted she had.

He gazed at her more intently after a sip of his water; she blushed deeper.

‘This is so not like you,’ he said with a twinkle in his eyes. ‘You’re a chatterbox. You berated me quite a bit on that drive. Told me how living in Noida was so unhealthy for me, teased me about it. You were never this quiet.’

She immediately felt very conscious because she felt that something was expected from her. She didn’t know what but she knew it wasn’t to be a chatterbox. ‘What would you like me to talk about?’

‘Besides having an opinion on everything, what do you like?’

‘I love Rumi.’

‘The poet?’

‘Of course! You haven’t read Rumi?’

He shook his head and replied, ‘Nope. Don’t like poetry.’

‘What about Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, John Donne? None of those?’

‘Nope. Never heard of any of those dudes.’ He laughed. ‘So we don’t have poetry in common. What else do you like?’

‘Debates. Growing up, my parents and I would have debates all the time. It was a lot of fun.’

Again, she remembered Vedant. How different could these two men be? With Vedant, it hadn’t take long for them to click. They had so much in common and that’s why they had a competitive edge. Both were always trying to outdo one another, whether in debates or poetry. Would she have an intellectual connection with this man at all?

‘My God!’ Abhimanyu was saying as she began thinking of Vedant. ‘It must be tiring to argue every day. Didn’t you guys just have dinner in front of the TV? It’s a great way to bond—watching sitcoms and laughing together. Pop would always come back late and we would have finished our dinner by then so we didn’t really have dinners together as a family. If we were home on weekends, we would love to be in front of the TV or play cricket in the field outside our house. I don’t think we used the dining table much except to hang our towels on the chairs after our baths.’ Abhimanyu’s lips broke into an unconscious smile as he recollected his family life.

‘You call your father Pop?’

Abhimanyu nodded and smiled with beautiful candour. She found it sweet that he seemed to have a strong affinity towards his father.

‘My parents have always supported Namrata and me to do whatever we wanted. They’ve kept us grounded.’

From what she could gather, there seemed to be no pressure for Abhimanyu to be the best or to prove a point to the world or his family. He made it look very easy.

‘What else do you like?’ His eyebrows arched. Trisha found it appealing.

‘I also like long drives.’

‘I have car sickness. What else?’

‘Wait. Really? So if you had to run away from your wedding, you would do it in a Metro and not your flower-decorated car?’ She laughed at her own joke. He found it funny, too.

‘Well, I’m from Lucknow,’ Trisha continued. ‘I came to Delhi only recently to study at JNU. I did an MA in Sociology and got this job at UNICEF.’ She took a pause before she continued, not wanting to reveal too much of her sordid past to Abhimanyu.

They'd just met, after all.

'Do you have a lot of friends?' Abhimanyu asked.

'In Lucknow I had a few close friends. We all grew up together. In Delhi, though, I don't have too many friends. Except Juhi. I have work colleagues. I made some friends at JNU but we've all gone our separate ways.'

'It's difficult for me to make new friends as well. I train most days and I travel too often. Most women don't seem to understand that I can't be there for them on birthdays and anniversaries. I don't drink so I can't party the night away on New Year's and everyone in their twenties around my age loves to go to pubs and discos. I hate it. Sports, I love. When I'm not playing tennis, I'm playing cricket. When I'm not playing cricket, I'm watching films.'

'What sort of films?'

'From across the globe. Not too much of Bollywood. Mostly films by Majid Majidi, Kurusawa, Bergman, Fellini.'

'Nope. Not seen any of them!'

Now Abhimanyu was astonished. 'Not even Godard, Truffaut, Tarkovsky?'

'They're old,' she shrugged.

'Old? Old?!' Abhimanyu didn't know what to say, opening his mouth, closing it again, clasping his hand over it. 'Wha...'

Trisha found his expression extremely hilarious and giggled.

'Some day, Miss Trisha Mathur,' he said in all seriousness, 'I shall have to show you all these films!'

'I'm looking forward to it, Mr Abhimanyu Laxman!' She gulped her last bit of wine.

He asked the waiter for another glass of wine even though she said she didn't need it. He wanted to be chivalrous and gallant. He also needed to show off a little in front of her so he asked for a wine list and asked about their specialties. Then with a flourish he said, 'Bring us the best. Life is not meant to be ordinary.' The waiter gave him a little nod and left while Abhimanyu turned back to Trisha. She wondered if he put these brief 'performances' for people in order to feel important. Or was it really just his nature?

'Do you like music?' Trisha asked, again remembering Vedant and how he loved music.

'Yes, I do have a fondness for jazz. Love listening to Wynton Marsalis, Ella Fitzgerald, Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane. Absolutely brilliant.'

'You really are an old soul, aren't you? So you're not into Bollywood music or English pop?'

Abhimanyu laughed his deep, throaty laugh. 'Old is a state of perception. Young is a state of mind.'

Just then the waiter came with their food. They began eating. Abhimanyu took small bites while Trisha gobbled her food at a demonic speed. Trisha was pleasantly surprised to discover how much she liked these dishes which were not oily or heavy. 'I've never had this. It's so good.'

'Yes, I've only been here once but the chef made this for me and I thought it was wonderful, too. The chefs all over the place make special food for me. Anything I like.'

‘All five-star hotel chefs cook whatever you like?’

‘Actually, I don’t like going to five-star hotels. I think they’re overpriced. I’ve been raised in a middle-class family and I think it’s criminal to spend so much money on chicken when you can get the same at a regular restaurant.’

Trisha almost choked on her chicken piece and started coughing violently. Abhimanyu got up to pat her on her back and make her drink some water. Trisha understood that he was going to spend a bomb on this meal and she immediately regretted Juhi fixing her up at such an expensive place. My stupid friend couldn’t have set up the date at a coffee shop? She could have then split the bill with him! She decided she still would. It might cost her half of her savings but she wouldn’t let him think she was hoity-toity.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Abhimanyu said when she had calmed down. ‘I can afford to pay for expensive meals. I just feel that it’s unnecessary.’

Trisha grasped the fact that his ideals were extremely simple. Even though he had a great flourish and flamboyance in his demeanour, his values seemed very basic. His family meant the world to him, for one. He was confident about what he loved, what he wanted to achieve and whom he wanted to spend time with. It was unusual for a national level tennis player to still want to stay with his parents when he could easily afford a house of his own. He spoke about how they were getting old and they needed their son around. And he loved his mother’s cooking. Even when he went home after a date, she would have food in the fridge for him in case he was still hungry. He seemed to be quite a ‘Mama’s boy’ as he spoke fondly of her cooking.

Trisha just had to ask him the question that every woman who ever dated him must have asked, too. ‘How do you date then? Do you take the woman home?’ Her double entendre raised a laugh from Abhimanyu as he replied, ‘I figure something out. I’ve only taken one woman to meet my parents. We broke up eventually.’

‘Really?’ Trisha wanted to know more about his relationship with Sara Malhotra, the prominent actress who was Miss India once upon a time and the scandal that had broken them up. But she remained quiet. Maybe it wasn’t a topic to be broached on the first date.

He took a deep sigh. ‘It’s hard to know who is genuine and who isn’t. I don’t know if women are just latching on to a celebrity to bask in the fame and fortune. A girl I knew was approached by a television channel for us to star in a reality show together. She was very interested but I told her I had enough limelight playing matches and she said to me exasperated, “But what about my limelight?” So I have been quite weary. It’s not as if I’m Roger Federer but I’m still recognized by a few people if not by women who are trying to catch the Metro!’ Abhimanyu joked and Trisha felt sheepish.

She said, ‘You’re right, you’re not Roger. You’re Novak Djokovic! You should be proud of who you are.’ She took a large mouthful of her second glass of wine and could feel the tingling sensation in her head. Slowly her defenses were being broken by both the alcohol and this devastatingly good-looking man.

‘Very funny. Eat!’ he said with a grin.

Trisha had never eaten so much and had not had such a good time in what felt like ages. It had been eight months since her break-up with Vedant and here she was on a first

date with another man and enjoying it. A part of her felt guilty for 'betraying' Vedant but then she reminded herself that he was the one who was engaged. He was obviously okay with it and here she was feeling bad that she was having a conversation with another man! Nostalgia holds people back more than love does. Sometimes love fades but the memories spiral us back into unwanted territory. She shook off the feeling. She understood now that transitions are by necessity full of sadness, especially if the past is made up of some happy memories. We just need to be kind to ourselves and embrace the new circumstances to move forward.

Abhimanyu's look burned her. She could feel her face flush with the thrill of something about to occur. 'I would love for you to come see me in training one day,' he said. 'Would you have the time to watch me knock a few balls around in court?'

So *this* was the boy in him, smiled Trisha. The world saw the side of him that was the ambitious and driven tennis player. His other side, however, was soft and caring, had middle-class values, was unsure about life, women, or love, and desperately sought companionship through friends and kind-hearted people.

Trisha's heart went out to him and she surprised even herself by putting her hand over his. 'I would like nothing more than to see you play.' He beamed.

As they finished dinner, Trisha was certain that they had made a connection and that as friends, this could work out for her. When she offered to pay for the meal, he objected, and they had a friendly argument about gender equality and him wanting to be chivalrous. It was rather cute. Finally, Abhimanyu won, and it was agreed that 'the next time', Trisha would pay.

She wondered when that next time would be. With his hectic schedule, could she even ask? Or was it 'whenever we meet again'? She felt all alone once again. She had a deep longing to connect with someone and when she seemed to have found it, she began to build walls to shield herself from hurt.



‘You’re not this quiet are you? Say something? Seriously!’ Abhimanyu said as they walked along the lawns around the hotel, close to the pool.

‘I’m enjoying the lovely weather and you’re ruining it by talking.’

‘But silence makes me uncomfortable,’ he said. She just smiled and they continued walking.

It was a crisp, clear November night. A thousand stars lit up the black sky. A draft of cool breeze gathered up dark strands of Trisha’s hair and lifted her skirt slightly. Her nipples stood erect in the cold air and she quickly buttoned her coat before he could notice. Her face blushed at the thought of how her body was reacting to him.

Abhimanyu would have blushed, too, if he knew how to. He couldn’t help but admire her beauty, which was so natural that she didn’t need to try too hard, unlike other women he knew. She was naturally enigmatic. He ogled at her gorgeous legs.

‘But why are you afraid of silence?’ Trisha asked and quoted Rumi: ‘Silence is the root of everything. If you spiral into its void, a hundred voices will thunder messages you long to hear.’

Trisha realized that she spouted poetry when she was nervous, when she needed words to tide over an awkward silence or steer a conversation to another topic. She had learnt it from Vedant.

Now, she thought, where is this date headed? Did she really want to just have fun? She wasn’t that type of a girl, even if that’s the impression she had tried to convey to Juhi and Abhimanyu. She had always wanted a serious relationship. And maybe Abhimanyu, like most celebrities, was just playing around with her, an ordinary girl.

Yet she couldn’t deny this palpable, crackling chemistry between them. He came closer, looking down at her intently, his lithe body standing erect in front of her. ‘Should we go?’ Trisha asked suddenly. Abhimanyu leaned in. She could feel herself buckle but she didn’t want to make any moves. He was standing so close that she could smell his cologne mingling with the night air. He ached to take her in his arms. She moved her body ever so gently closer to his.

He realized in an instant that she was reciprocating his ardour. He leaned in, tilted his head and closed his mouth on hers.

Trisha's whole being swam in an ocean of pure lust, with waves of desire washing over her. She clasped her hands around his neck and pulled him closer as she kissed him deeply. She could feel his strong arms around her, her breasts pressed against his chest, their desire fusing together in a passionate, long, heavenly kiss. They stopped only to come up for air.

When they untangled themselves, Trisha turned her body away to straighten out her dress and wipe the tiny trace of lipstick that had smudged with their kiss. Her cheeks burned as she felt moistness between her legs. She shuddered with the recognition of a primal emotion that she had almost forgotten. She was shocked by how easily it had all happened. But she couldn't get into another relationship yet; she had decided to wait. What was this then? She was confused, intoxicated, aroused and dizzy, all at once. She wanted to sit down. Abhimanyu pulled up two chairs from the poolside.

'I think I should go,' she said shakily.

'Go where?' he asked, smiling at her. What they had just done was unlike anything he had ever done before.

Trisha smiled back, speechless. She had lost control of all lucidity and logic. She felt unconsciously concupiscent with Abhimanyu around. There was great possibility at this stage of them going to the next level. And Trisha would have been eager and ready. But Abhimanyu understood that Trisha was slightly tipsy. He didn't want to take advantage of that.

'Would you come and watch me play this weekend?' He put his arms around her shoulders to keep her warm.

'While you're training?'

'Yes.'

Trisha considered. 'Yes, but first you have to answer five questions.'

Abhimanyu looked intrigued. 'What five questions?'

'Well, since this was a *blind* date, I never got to question you like they do on websites and through relatives. I generally assess whether or not I want to go out with a man properly on the basis of his answers to all these five questions.'

'You assess all the men?'

She nodded.

'How many men have there been?' He was most curious to know.

'Okay, you're the first with whom I've gone on a blind date. And there's only been one man in the past, but that's a different story. You want me to watch you play or not?'

'Okay. Shoot.' He sat upright.

'If you could go anywhere in the world on a first date, where would you go and why?'

'With you?'

'With anyone.'

'I would fly you to Monte Carlo. The French Riviera. Make love on a yacht. Twinkling stars in the sky. Champagne on ice. A warm breeze in the air. You in that dress. Wow. I'm getting excited just thinking about it!'

She felt her lips curling into the serene smile she had missed for so long. ‘Second question. If you had to do anything else besides play tennis, what would it be?’

‘Well, that’s a tough one. Tennis is my life. But if I couldn’t play for some reason, I would want to be a teacher. Teach tennis. Or any sport. To children. Make them more active. India needs youngsters to get off their mobiles and get on their feet. They should be using their thumbs to throw a ball, not to send text messages.’

Trisha laughed with complete abandon. Then moved on to the third question. ‘Would you pick family over love or love over family?’

Abhimanyu thought whether such a personal question was coming from some deep insecurity that Trisha may have. ‘Family will always be there for you but a deep love completes you. If it came to that, then I would have to pick the girl. I have to live my life with her. I have done so much for family and I will continue to do so. But if they don’t realize that my love makes me happy...well, I will spend my whole life in trying to convince them but I will never let go of her. Love needs to succeed without marriage in this country. We’re a nation obsessed with the legality of marriage. Why? People should just be happy that two people have found happiness in each other. But the government and society are moral policing every park and empty space, killing the concept of love completely. Let them be, I say.’

They both stayed silent for some time. Abhimanyu cleared his throat. ‘Did I pass the test at three?’

‘No! Fourth question, mister! Are relationships about spontaneity or stability?’

A faint light twinkled in the depths of his black, piercing eyes. ‘All relationships need a spark of spontaneity in them. The minute they become predictable, they become boring. But stability is required to feel secure. You need both.’

Even in her tipsy state, she could tell that his eyes spoke the truth and his words came clearly from the heart. He gently brushed her hair away from her face and she felt a spark surge through her.

He had to remind her to ask the next question. ‘Are we done?’

‘Question number five.’ Trisha made herself sound as if she was a game show host. ‘The most important question that shall decide if I will come out in the heat, sit in the sun and clap while you play next Saturday.’

Abhimanyu moved his head from side to side as if he was getting ready for the serve in a tennis game.

‘Do you think success is a matter of time or chance?’

‘I tasted success very early and it went to my head. Then it all went away with a series of defeats in the next five tournaments. I changed my coach. I kept working hard. I believed in myself. But I realized, when you stand up to your failures, you’re one step closer to finding success. It won’t come if you don’t face your fears. Success comes and goes. It shouldn’t affect your core.’

Trisha smiled.

‘Did I pass? Will you come see me next Saturday?’

Trisha nodded. He may not know poetry but he knew the important things in life. Trisha was bowled over. Maybe sportsmen weren’t so dense after all.

He leaned in. ‘Can we seal that with a kiss?’ He was almost unable to bear the

prolonged anticipation. Trisha acquiesced, moving her body towards him as he planted a deep, soulful kiss on her mouth. She felt as though she was wrapped in an invisible warmth. Her heart fluttered wildly as he swept her weightless body into his arms, her soft curves pressing against his lean torso. His touch was firm, persuasive, inviting more. She kissed him back with a hunger that belied her outward calm. He cupped her face and drank her in.

Abhimanyu felt completely drawn to Trisha from their first encounter. It was refreshing to see a woman who enjoyed his presence without the baggage of his being a celebrated tennis player. He would have to see where this relationship went. He had known several of his relationships to die because of his constant travel and training. Women couldn't handle him being away for long periods of time and, till date, he had never really wanted to make the effort to try the long distance scenario. But somehow Trisha felt different. He found her five questions, her consciousness about her beauty and her uncertain demeanour extremely endearing. He wanted her to like him—a first for him, because he had never tried before. It was a different feeling. He now understood when men told him how wooing a woman was the biggest challenge in the world.

Trisha was already imagining how hot he would look in his tennis outfit, thrashing the ball down the court. She didn't know where this relationship was headed either but if she could meet him one more time for a kiss just like this one, then Juhi's efforts would not have all gone to waste.



Trisha turned the key to the door as she felt a deep flush rising to her face, her heart beating erratically. She found Juhi, in front of the TV, obviously waiting for her to return and tell her all about the date. Juhi turned and watched Trisha's face to see if her plan had succeeded.

‘Dhruv. Really?’ Trisha was sarcastic but seemed pleased.

Juhi shrugged her shoulders. ‘If I had said Abhimanyu, you may not have gone, knowing the chip on your shoulder for famous people and the fact that you’ve been burned by one.’

Trisha dropped her purse on the couch and headed to her room. ‘I’ve not been burned. And Vedant isn’t famous yet. And I would have gone out with Abhimanyu anyway. So there!’

Juhi followed her and sat on Trisha's bed. ‘Tell me everything!’

Trisha told her about the date as she changed into her pyjamas, not wanting to sound too enthusiastic and leaving out the intimate details.

‘So when are you meeting him again?’ Juhi needled as Trisha proceeded to the bathroom. She waited, listening to the opening of the tap, the sound of teeth being brushed and face being washed.

Trisha came out and sat on the bed. ‘I don’t know when. Now move. I want to sleep. He has my number now so we’ll take it from there. He needs to make the next move.’

‘Fair enough. I’m glad that this date worked out, though. So I don’t need to set you up with anyone else, do I?’

Trisha picked up a pillow and threw it at Juhi. ‘Out!’ She said, giggling.

Juhi was satisfied. She left the room and sent a text to Trisha's mother: ‘T seems happy with the date.’

In Lucknow right at that moment, Neha was up waiting for word from her daughter's friend. She was pleased that, after months of being a recluse, her daughter had gone out on a date and it hadn't turned out to be a disaster. She hoped it meant that her

girl was ready for a new relationship, at least to move on. Though she wasn't sure if Trisha should immediately get involved with Abhimanyu, it was good enough for her that she was meeting new people.

The more she thought about it, the more she believed that Trisha was an emotionally vulnerable child. She clung on to anyone who gave her even a little appreciation. In the process, she had her heart broken easily as she expected more. Neha had tried to teach Trisha that people eventually moved from the core of your heart to the periphery of your life. It didn't make them less important, only less visible.

She remembered when Trisha was little, maybe four or five, and she would cry when it was time for playmates to leave her house and go back to their own homes. When Trisha was ten, she wanted to spend the night over at her friend's place for the night and Rajiv was against the idea. He was extremely protective of her. That was probably the first time Trisha had demanded to be treated as an equal. But Rajiv had put his foot down. Ever since this episode, thanks to an environment that always encouraged discussions, Trisha wouldn't hesitate to argue with her father.

Neha sighed. While it was fascinating to watch her daughter's mind at work, somewhere it left a hole in her relationship with her father. Even though Trisha loved her parents deeply, she started becoming less dependent on them. As she grew up to be a teenager, she increasingly displayed an independent mind of her own, never balking at discussions and debates that they had themselves encouraged as parents. Trisha's convincing and well-researched arguments often left even them flummoxed. She seemed to have learnt not just from her parents but also their fellow professors with whom they socialized. The paradox of it, Neha thought, was that even as Trisha's mind became sharper, she had remained, somehow, a loner and an extremely sensitive girl.

Would it have helped Trisha if she had a sibling? Neha thought as she sat in the kitchen, looking at the framed family photos hanging on one wall of their house. But Rajiv and Neha had never had time for a second child. They had been too busy building their careers to care enough about their only child. Waves of guilt hit Neha as she guessed that maybe, growing up, Trisha had felt neglected by her and Rajiv. Was this why Trisha needed a man in her life to anchor her?

And this is why Neha considered Juhi to be such a blessing. Neha knew Juhi was a wonderful influence on Trisha and gave her enough space at the same time. And for Neha herself, Juhi was the one who had told her about Trisha's failed relationship with Vedant—that Vedant had only used Trisha through college. She wasn't surprised, having briefly interacted with his father who seemed like a typical male chauvinist. She guessed how Trisha could have come under Vedant's spell, probably because he was her first boyfriend. Neha had seen this pattern in many of her female students. Neha had often advised Trisha, 'Define who you want to be, where you should go and what you want to do in life. When you focus on that, everything else won't matter.' Neha had hoped her advice would help her daughter focus on her studies rather than aid Vedant in his rallies. But it had backfired and Trisha stopped speaking to her about Vedant altogether.

Neha found her thoughts meandering to more regrets: Should she have sent Trisha to a co-ed school instead of Loreto Convent and then IP College for Women? Maybe it would have done her some good in terms of interacting with men.

‘There is no point in thinking like that now!’ Neha said out loud, mostly to convince herself. She was aware of her need to feel better about the decisions she had made while raising Trisha. She knew she had tried to be a good mother despite the demands of her career. She had made sure she gave time to Trisha, had always attended her school functions, and indulged her very often. It was Rajiv who had played the disciplinarian, and later it was only because of Neha’s insistence that Rajiv had eventually allowed Trisha to leave Lucknow to pursue her studies in Delhi.

Neha thought again about Trisha’s date with her new friend, Abhimanyu. She hoped Trisha would stop holding on to fleeting moments of happiness from her past when she deserved joy in the present.



The week flew by. Trisha didn't know how she managed to clock in so many hours at work when all she could do was think about Abhimanyu. They spoke to each other several times on the phone, and once Abhimanyu took his turn to ask her his five questions. Meeting Abhimanyu seemed to have revitalized her. His presence in her life reminded her that we don't really choose the people we love—love chooses for us and brings us to them through coincidences.

Even to Juhi, it was clear how Trisha's mood had changed. Trisha seemed brighter and less lonely. She made sure to convey this to Trisha's mother, who seemed quite pleased.

At work, Trisha displayed a quiet confidence that impressed her colleagues and superiors. One day, after making a thorough presentation to the board about malnutrition in India, her boss had told her, 'Never seen you so driven and motivated, Trisha. Keep up the good work.' Trisha was elated, feeling renewed vigour in life. She went back to her desk, took a marker, and wrote on the white board behind her computer: 'If you feel like you've been "chosen" to be happy, then nothing can bring you down.' She honestly believed in it.

Soon Saturday came, the day she was supposed to watch Abhimanyu play. He had told her it would be a friendly match with his friend and that she can come to the Vinay Marg sports complex at any time between six and ten in the morning, but that earlier would be better so she could see him 'crush' his friend.

Trisha took a quick shower, got dressed in a dark red velvet kurta and a white churidar, and threw on her beige coat. She accessorized with silver hoops and flat red kolhapuris. She grabbed her large white purse, stuffed it with a book, and left the apartment at around 7 a.m.

She reached the court in half an hour and was shocked to see who Abhimanyu's 'friend' was: Leander Paes, the international tennis star! She looked for a seat as Abhimanyu waved at her. The umpire shouted, 'Love-forty.'

Abhimanyu served to Leander and it was an Ace. The umpire shouted, 'Fifteen-

forty.’ Abhimanyu had been losing until Trisha came. He knew he couldn’t lose in front of her. He served again and Leander returned down the line but Abhimanyu was already at the base line, ready to lobby back. Leander hit it back and went running towards the net but it was already declared ‘Out’ by the umpire. ‘Thirty-forty’ the umpire shouted, probably for Trisha to hear. She clapped. Trisha was grateful to her father for being a tennis addict and making her watch all the Grand Slams every year since she was ten. Whatever little she understood of the game was thanks to that. So far, she had only read tabloid stories of tennis stars and suddenly wondered if her budding romance with Abhimanyu would also hit the tabloids soon. Her parents might just wake up one morning to read about her affair in the papers!

Abhimanyu served again and Leander hit it into the net. ‘Deuce!’ The umpire declared.

Abhimanyu had gotten back in the game. They were even. Trisha shouted, ‘Go Abhimanyu!’ Leander looked up at her and said across the net to Abhimanyu, ‘The stakes are higher now, huh, Abhi?’

Abhimanyu smiled and served. Leander deliberately put the ball in the net.

‘Don’t give it to me, man!’ Abhimanyu shouted. ‘Let me earn it.’

Leander smiled and nodded. The next two points were long rallies that were pure A-class tennis. Trisha was enthralled. She had never enjoyed a tennis game as much as she did just then. She felt as if she was at Wimbledon watching the final match between two extremely talented players.

Abhimanyu won the game. He rushed over to Trisha, jumping the seats and grabbing hold of her to plant a deep, sensual kiss on her lips that took her breath away and made her heart race.

‘I want you there at all my matches,’ he whispered. ‘You’re my lucky charm!’

Trisha was delighted.

Leander called from his chair, ‘Are you going to introduce me to your lucky charm?’

Abhimanyu looked back at him and yelled, ‘This is Trisha. My girlfriend!’

Trisha’s heart hammered. She had never heard that word spoken about her before. When she was with Vedant, he had always skirted around the word. They had a deep connection and said ‘sweetheart’ to each other but ‘girlfriend’ was never said; Vedant said it was juvenile.

Right now, at the tennis court, Trisha was touched to hear the word. It meant that she was someone’s significant other. It felt nice to ‘belong’. She couldn’t explain it. Even though she had been one-half of a ‘couple’ before, it felt extremely special for Abhimanyu to declare it.

It was a tough match and one both Abhimanyu and Leander were very pleased with. They showered and changed as Trisha waited outside the locker rooms, reading her book. Although it was a chilly December morning, Trisha felt warm. She felt a cosmic connection with Abhimanyu that she never had with Vedant. Even though she had spent two years with Vedant, she could feel how much she had changed since she left the university. She now understood the things she needed from a man was exactly what Abhimanyu was giving her: a deep sense of security and a strong sense of

acknowledgement in his life. After Vedant, she never thought that she would be in a relationship so soon and be able to tell her Mom or Juhi that she had a boyfriend this early.

Abhimanyu came out and walked towards her. His blue jeans were tight, showing off his strong muscular thighs and slim hips. 'You carried a book in case you got bored of watching me?'

'No.' She shut the book and kept it in her bag. 'A book is like my keys or my phone. I never leave home without it,' she said with a smile.

'Look, about earlier,' Abhimanyu said shyly. 'I got caught up in the moment and was so glad to see you that I kissed you and called you my girlfriend. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.'

'No, it's fine.' She paused. 'So, am I really your girlfriend?'

'Of course,' he whispered, wrapping his arms around her. 'I would really like to see where this goes. Is that fine?'

'Yes, Abhimanyu, me too.' She closed her eyes and buried her face in his shoulder.

'Well, as promised, I shall take you to breakfast but do you want to wait for my friend who's flown in from Mumbai just for me or do you think we should ditch him?'

Trisha laughed and replied, 'Let's wait for Leander.'

'Oh, you know Leander but you didn't know me, huh?'

Trisha took his arm and squeezed it. The smell of his fresh cologne, the muscles rippling under the crispness of his shirt, quickened her pulse, and she kissed his clean-shaven cheek and said softly, 'I know you now, *darling*!' She couldn't believe that with just one meeting and a few conversations she could have such an instant connect with someone. Was it destiny? She had thought she would take forever to get over Vedant but here was someone who was loving and nice, despite being a huge sports star, and she felt completely drawn to him. Her heart felt that what she was doing was right. Somehow, she felt whole again—as if the loneliness was ebbing away and a new hope was taking its place.

Trisha could feel her body becoming warm and her primal desire swelling up with just his arm lying gently around her waist. The compelling brown eyes, firm jaw and confident set of shoulders made him imminently desirable. He looked deep into her eyes, wanting to fulfil every thought that ran through her mind.

'You look so pretty,' he said softly. He trailed his fingers down her face, her slender neck, her smooth skin glowing with the golden undertones of the sun's rays, to the back of her thick, dark hair. He removed the clip that was holding her hair in place. 'You look even better with your hair open.' He bent down to softly kiss her lips. He projected an energy and power that undoubtedly left her breathless and overwhelmed each time they met.

'You're not wearing a jacket,' she murmured. 'Aren't you feeling cold?'

His warm breath left her cheeks and settled on her ears. 'I'm quite hot right now.' Neither of them was willing to let the other go. But just then, Leander came out and they hastily pulled away.

The three of them considered where to go for breakfast and finally decided on the All American Diner at the Habitat Centre.

At the diner, Trisha was delighted to discover that, despite his international stature, Leander Paes was funny, down to earth, and quite a normal guy. He was courteous with the servers and posed for pictures graciously with anyone who asked. Trisha had never met a celebrity before and liked how it felt to be sharing breakfast with not one but two of them.

As soon as the autograph-seekers had left Leander turned to Trisha. 'Abhi has never introduced me to any of his girlfriends before. You must be special.'

She blushed. 'Well, I don't know about that,' she replied. She could see Abhimanyu smiling indulgently as she continued, 'Maybe there were just too many of them for him to have introduced everyone to you.'

Leander teased, 'Yeah...maybe I should tell her some of your stories.'

'Do we really need to get into these stories?' Abhimanyu said.

Trisha nudged him. 'Let him speak.'

Abhimanyu desperately tried changing the topic. 'I don't think we've ordered enough. Should we order some drinks?' He spotted a waiter. 'Excuse me? Can we please have the milkshake menu?'

Trisha and Leander chuckled. She wondered, though, why Abhimanyu should feel so uncomfortable with Leander telling her about his previous relationships. Was there more than just one Sara in his life? Was Abhimanyu truly a ladies' man? She was confused and suddenly her walls were up again.

She didn't want to be a spoilsport so made small talk with Leander. 'So, what's brought you to Delhi?'

'Abhi and I are doubling up for the Australian Open in January and then again for the Monte Carlo Rolex Masters in April. We need to practice together on clay. The professional courts at Siri Fort Complex were getting renovated today so we had to play at Vinay Marg. It was just to get warmed up.'

Trisha's eyes widened. 'Wow, Australia. And Monaco! It must be beautiful there.' Trisha vowed to read up on tennis so she wouldn't come across as a complete ignoramus in the august presence of tennis stalwarts like Leander and her boyfriend. If Abhimanyu was going to show off his 'girlfriend' to more friends, she needed to brush up on her knowledge of the game.

'It is,' nodded Leander. 'Monaco is one of the most gorgeous places I've seen in the world. I won the championship there in 2005.'

'I didn't know that,' Trisha said. 'Belated congratulations!'

'Thanks. We're hoping to win this year too. And Australia. Well that'll always be special for both of us.' He winked at Abhimanyu as if they shared some secret. Seeing the gesture made Trisha go more into her shell. She began imagining skeletons tumbling out of Abhimanyu's closet. He was, after all, a huge tennis star and female adulation was something athletes were used to.

As if on cue, some girls who were seated some distance away came up to them and shyly asked, 'Abhimanyu and Leander, can we have a photo with you?'

The two men got up while one of the girls asked a waiter to take a photo with her mobile phone. The girl stood next to Abhimanyu, who casually put his arm around the girl's waist and tilted his head towards her as the group posed for the photo. Trisha felt

jealous, wondering if dating a glamorous sports star was the right thing for her to do.

Soon the waiter brought over their breakfast. Abhimanyu and Leander immediately dug in as they discussed their game, while Trisha picked at her food, lost in thought. She tossed her hair back and tied it with a clip. Then she picked up her fork again. She didn't expect what happened next. Swiftly, as if he were a magician, Abhimanyu put his hand behind Trisha's back, removed her hair clip and kept it in his hand. He continued speaking to Leander while doing that, his movements smooth and rapid.

From the corner of her eye, she could see Abhimanyu smiling. She stifled a grin. There was a lull in the conversation and he turned to her, his eyes filled with a compelling, curious longing. His smile was disarming. Trisha's doubts disappeared in an instant. She realized how foolish she had been to judge him so quickly. *Just go with the flow!*

The three of them finished their meal and engaged in friendly banter. After an hour, Leander said he was 'going to make a move.'

Abhimanyu laughed. 'Sorry for boring you.'

Leander waved his arm to dismiss him. 'No problem. I remember when I was dating Rhea. It was exactly the same. I'll leave you two alone. I'll see you at Coach's place later this afternoon. Trisha, it was lovely to meet you.' Trisha returned the compliment.

Leander grabbed the check before Trisha and Abhimanyu could, paid the bill, and said goodbye.

'He's a nice guy,' said Trisha.

'Yes, he is.'

Trisha took the hair clip from him and kept it in her bag.

'Will you be travelling much through the year?'

'Yes, baby.' His eyes searched her face. 'It's going to be a lot of back and forth this year. Need to win a lot of championships for India.' He paused. 'I'm really reluctant to leave you, but it is my job.'

Trisha knew the distance would be tough on both of them, but she appreciated Abhimanyu's honesty right from the beginning. She realized that in matters of the heart, you had to stop playing games if you were really in love. And with Vedant, there had never been an honest answer.

Trisha felt a pang of sadness. They had just started dating and he would soon be leaving on long tours across the world. But this was to be expected of an international tennis player, she reminded herself. But what concerned Trisha was that she didn't know when she would meet Abhimanyu again. All she knew that here was another man who was not going to be around her just when she had started getting close to him.



Two weeks passed before Trisha and Abhimanyu met again. He got busy in Mumbai, training for the Australian Open that was in January. But not a day passed when he didn't call Trisha. They would speak on the phone about their day, Trisha would quote some poetry that she read that day and Abhimanyu would listen intently and then make jokes. She missed seeing him. Often, though, the phone calls were more like monologues rather than conversations. She would tell him about her day, what she read, what happened in office, or he would talk about his training and what he ate. It seemed as though neither of them could give any input to each other's lives. She had no clue about diets, fitness and training. She had never done it her entire life and she didn't know how they could connect. But something kept making Abhimanyu call her and something made her long to hear his voice often.

She often wondered what they could have in common. Would it be enough to have a life together? Was he just enjoying her company for the short haul and would eventually leave, like Vedant did? But what kind of a commitment did she want anyway? Questions were tumbling around in her head. She had no answers.

She was thankful for work, though, which had suddenly become very hectic. She had been asked to raise funds for the proposal that she had presented a few weeks earlier. When her boss had called Trisha into her office to give her the news, she had said, 'Your deck on malnourished children was extremely impressive. We want you to lead the team in raising the funds. Your appraisal will be based on this. Don't let me down, Trisha.'

Trisha was extremely pleased with this development, even if it meant working late hours and dedicating all her time to putting the analysis together. This meant she had to raise money from a vast network of people within a short time. This would guarantee her a raise at the end of her first year and a promotion as well. She needed to buckle down and work hard instead of getting distracted by thoughts about her love life. She gave herself a pep talk and remembered why she had remained in Delhi instead of joining Vedant in Mumbai and living in his shadow—for her job, and her determination to prove

herself.

The project consumed her, and it would take her from the beginning of December until April of the following year to complete it. First, Trisha sat for two weeks doing a psychosocial and geographical mapping of donors in Delhi. She needed to do an analysis of individuals who were active in giving to charities and companies who had a running corporate social responsibility programme. Then she trained her team on the effective ways of reaching out to these individuals and groups and how to ask for money without being aggressive. She liked being a leader, she liked the attention from her peers. When they came back with half-measured responses, she went back to doing further research and tried to track FMCGs who would be interested in contributing. She found agencies, clients and individuals who would be interested and personally went to all of them with individually made presentations and obtained donations from each of them.

In the middle of all the madness at work, she got a call from Abhimanyu one evening. 'Hello, my hotshot tennis player. Missing me?'

'Too much. When can you leave work and talk to me?'

'Well, I can take a few minutes right now and chat with you.'

'Or you could come outside and meet me!'

She was stunned. She asked her boss if she could take a leave for the remainder of the day. Her boss said yes and Trisha dashed outside.

And there he was, leaning against his car. A soft gasp escaped her as she ran into his arms. Her soft cheeks flushed with pure happiness as she buried her head into his shoulder. His broad shoulders filled the coat he wore and he stood tall and straight like a towering spruce. A swath of wavy hair fell casually on his forehead. His dark eyes twinkled down at her animated reaction and she was captivated by his presence. His large hands took her face and held it gently. A delicious shudder ran through her body as he leaned in. He claimed her lips, a profound, unrelenting desire emanating from his body. The kiss sent the pit of her stomach into a wild swirl. Raising his mouth from hers, he gazed at her intently and whispered, 'Merry Christmas.'

She had almost forgotten it was Christmas Eve. He had come to spend the holidays with her! He guided her into his car, his hand resting dangerously low on her back and sending her thoughts into an amorous spin.

She was glad she had dressed up that day in her favourite dark blue jeans, a white shirt, a gorgeous Satya Paul scarf, and a smart black blazer. Ever since she started dating Abhimanyu she had realized she needed to be a little more stylish. Even though she couldn't splurge on major luxury brands, she could add a bit of chutzpah to her ordinary clothing with some designer accessories. She had Juhi to thank for that. She had gone shopping with her again and this time allowed Juhi to pick things that would suit Trisha's new avatar as Abhimanyu's girlfriend. He looked at her admiringly as they sat in his car.

He looked tough, lean and sinewy, every bit the international tennis star he was. He had become even more handsome and powerful, if that was even possible. His face was bronzed by wind and sun and it made his eyes shine like the night. The smell of his aftershave was tantalizing.

Abhimanyu leaned over to plant another smouldering kiss on her lips that left her

longing for more. His eyes drank her in and her heart pounded with molten desire. *Couldn't they skip whatever he had planned?*

‘When did you come from Mumbai? I’m so happy you’ve come to see me.’

‘Just landed,’ he answered as he started the engine. ‘Told the driver to scoot off so I could be alone with you before everyone... We’re already late. I wanted to take you to this place that I know you’re going to love.’

Trisha was puzzled. ‘Where? What do you mean by everyone?’

‘It’s at Habitat.’ Abhimanyu smiled and was obviously not about to spoil his surprise.

Trisha was wrapped in a cocoon of euphoria. She didn’t really care where they had dinner. She was glad to spend every minute with him. *How she had missed him!* He found a parking spot in the basement and shut the engine before saying, ‘You look gorgeous,’ and making her smile.

They got out of the car and he put his arm around her as they walked towards the venue. She was surprised that despite having a driver, he would choose to drive and park himself. It was a very down-to-earth gesture that resonated with her middle-class upbringing.

He looked gorgeous himself. He had shaved and was wearing a black bandgala and white churidar and a splash of Gucci cologne. She had never seen him in Indian attire and it made her heart skip a beat. His fingers were cool and smooth as they interlaced with hers while they walked up the steps.

They reached the lawn where a podium was set up with some chairs facing it. Several people were sitting, candles were lit all over the lawn and there were large urlis with jasmine flowers floating in them. There was a rangoli on either side of the stage, decorated with bamboo lamps and marigold malas. The whole setting was beautiful and serene. She wondered what it was all about. Abhimanyu left her side and said he would be right back. He went to the side of the stage where he spoke briefly to a few people, then he called Trisha over. They took seats in front. The emcee, a woman dressed in a black sari with a barely-there blouse, came on stage.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to our special poetry night, “Ek Shyam Gulzar Ke Naam”. Without much ado, I would like to call on stage the most prominent poet of our times, Gulzar Saab.’

The audience broke into a thunderous applause and Trisha’s jaw fell. Her eyes widened at Abhimanyu. He smiled back at her while clapping. She mouthed to him, ‘This is the best thing ever!’

‘I know,’ he replied.

Gulzar Saab recited a few of his poems. The audience, especially Trisha, were enraptured. At the end of his reading some members of the audience stood up to ask him questions about his work and his inspiration. He replied graciously, telling the audience many anecdotes from his life.

The emcee then introduced Abhimanyu and asked him to come up on stage. Trisha was caught off guard. Abhimanyu took his place next to the emcee, folded his hands before Gulzar and then the audience. The audience clapped. His smile widened in approval and he played to the gallery. The emcee asked him to speak a few words to

close the event.

Abhimanyu's voice was rich and intense. 'There is no one as versatile as Gulzar Saab. Even though I have no ear for poetry, from today I shall read every poem ever written by this man.'

There was a thunderous applause.

'Sir,' he turned to Gulzar. 'I am blown over by your creativity, your humility, your words. You have this man,' he held his hand to his heart as he said the line. 'You have won this man's game, set, and match for life.'

He shook hands with Gulzar and left the stage. Several journalists encircled Abhimanyu and asked him questions and took photographs. He took his time with the reporters, leaving Trisha alone for almost an hour while she fiddled with her phone.

A few young female fans recognized Abhimanyu and asked to take a photo with him. He was more than prepared. It was as if he was born in the spotlight and he posed for all the cameras and laughed with everyone, making every person there feel extremely special. Suddenly, Trisha felt that twinge of jealousy again. Even the emcee was flirting with Abhimanyu. She was a tall, lean, gorgeous model in a shimmery backless blouse and a black sari that revealed her navel and cleavage. And he basked in all the adulation. Trisha's thoughts spiralled into doubt once again. *Why did the most ridiculous thoughts enter her brain at the most inopportune moments?* She shrugged off her doubts and reminded herself to have a wonderful time. Abhimanyu had done something very special for her, after all.

Finally, they were alone again in his car. He asked her, 'It's pretty early. Where do you want to go for dinner?'

But first Trisha wanted to know how he had pulled this entire evening off. She asked him how he came to hear about it and why he was the chief guest. A poet and a tennis star were quite the chalk and cheese, in her opinion.

Abhimanyu laughed. 'My father loves poetry and is a member of The Poetry Society of India. They've invited me as a chief guest a few times but I've never had the time. He mentioned that they were organizing this some time back. I immediately wanted to be a part of it so that I could take you.'

Trisha was amazed. How could a man think so far ahead and want to do so much? 'Thank you, Abhimanyu. I'm truly touched.'

He was glad she appreciated his gesture. 'So where do you want to go grab dinner? I'm quite hungry now.'

Trisha had other plans, though. 'Why don't we order in today?'

Abhimanyu understood. 'What about your roommate?'

'I'll send her a message to leave us alone for the night.' She reached for her phone and began texting Juhi. 'I've done it for her several times. I suppose she can return the favour tonight.'

Abhimanyu started the car and they headed towards Trisha's house. They had both been waiting for this day. For Trisha, she knew that this night was exactly what she needed. After almost a year, she was finally going to be with a man again—a man she was falling in love with and a man who cherished her like Vedant never had.



Trisha had suppressed her desires for a man. Somewhere deep in her mind, she felt that she would never have sex that was as good as it was with Vedant. And before him, she had vowed to wait till she got married, and then had broken it for his love. For an entire year she went back to that philosophy, and did not want to do anything with anyone else. But after being with Abhimanyu, she understood that sex wasn't just a giving of a body, it was also a merging of souls, a display of love, a connection of spirits. A marriage might only sanctify a relationship, but it didn't solidify love. Love came from the heart, a desire to be with someone even if they had a tremendous number of differences between them. A need to give yourself completely, body and soul, to someone and experience the feeling back. And only sex could achieve that. So when she suggested that they come back to her place, she meant she needed to experience being alive and in love again.

Trisha's room looked different in the moonlight. A glint of light touched their bodies, the smell of a lavender candle burning in the corner, cool, crisp sheets on the bed, an old song playing from a nearby apartment. And in the midst of darkness, they could see each other clearly as they gazed into each other's eyes. Abhimanyu leaned in and kissed Trisha gently, not wanting to rush her into anything she was uncomfortable with. She was breathtakingly beautiful. They gently began to sway to the tune of the music, holding on to each other as they felt their bodies getting warmer with anticipation. She wrapped her arms around his head and stood on her toes to get closer to him. She breathed in his cologne, and kissed his lips unabashedly. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her closer, wanting the moment to last as he kissed her back. His magnetism was so compelling that a spark surged through her. He slowly took her clothes off as she turned away and let him see her back first. He ran his fingers down her back, softly caressing her neck with his mouth. She let out a soft moan.

He explored her body with his eyes and mouth, gently stroking the curves of her back. She felt pressure from his hands as he pulled her hips into his hardness. Her body melted into him. She swivelled around, her bare breasts touching his chest as she undid

the buttons on his shirt. He was even better looking without his clothes. His bronzed skin and toned chest looked powerful and inviting. He gasped as she pulled away and he saw her completely. A thin gold chain lay between the moist satin of her breasts. The soft curves of her body were seductive and wholesome. The look in his eyes communicated how much he desired her. Suddenly, her body ached for him, her yearning mounting unbearably. He ran the back of his fingers down her hair and her breasts. He slowly bent down and kissed her passionately. Wisps of hair flew around her face as a gentle, cool breeze wafted in from the window. He brushed her hair from her face as they slowly moved to the bed. Her softness and sweet, fresh smell was exciting beyond his wildest dreams.

She could not mistake his deep hunger as he laid her down on the soft, cool sheets. The sweet intoxicating musk of his cologne had quickened her pulse. The caresses of his mouth on her lips and along the side of her body set her aflame. Her heart raced wildly as he moved slowly and steadily, reaching into the depths of her soul with deep, long, powerful movements, their bodies in exquisite harmony. For a long moment, she felt as if she was floating. He increased his pace gradually and they succumbed to the rising waves of passion. He held her tightly as their mouths met for another searing kiss. Her pulse quickened as his movements became faster, until her body began to shiver with liquid fire. Finally, she cried out his name as the world shattered around them.

Trisha awoke at eight the next morning with a warm and fuzzy feeling. Abhimanyu wasn't in bed but she could still feel his presence. She had found a love that made her whole and complete again. Presently, she heard muffled voices coming from outside her room. She got out of bed, wore her robe over her satin negligee, one she had purchased on a whim and had not even used. She walked into the living room. Abhimanyu and Juhi were in deep conversation with mugs of steaming coffee in their hands. A part of her was suddenly jealous that they were talking in her absence until he looked up at her and smiled, showing her an irresistibly devilish grin that warmed her heart.

'What are you guys doing so early in the morning? It's not even nine o'clock!' Trisha said bleary-eyed, walking towards Abhimanyu.

Juhi turned to Abhimanyu. 'The girl is not used to waking up so early on holidays. She can sleep till noon!'

Abhimanyu laughed and said, 'Really? I'm an early riser every day.'

'Oh, God!' Trisha groaned. She sat next to him on the sofa, like a dog marking her territory. She also wanted Abhimanyu to know she still wanted to be close to him. He pulled her close to his side and wrapped his arms around her. She was home. She closed her eyes and nodded off to sleep.

Juhi's voice woke her. 'Abhimanyu was telling me how difficult it is for athletes to get grants.'

'You see, this is a cricket crazy nation,' said Abhimanyu. 'So we train all our youngsters to play cricket unless they show a keen interest in other sports. And even then most parents consider that other sport as just a hobby, nothing serious. And when these kids hit tenth standard, the parents discourage them from pursuing the sport altogether, telling them, "It's not going to get you anywhere. You might as well study hard and become something else."'

‘That’s just wrong.’ Juhi felt very strongly about what Abhimanyu had said.

But Trisha was in no mood to have any serious conversation at such an ungodly hour. She just wanted to savour the night she and Abhimanyu had just had. *How can Juhi be so perky this early?* She didn’t even know what time she had come home after Trisha had texted her and she had left the apartment. Trisha was partly annoyed that Juhi was there so early in the morning but didn’t show her displeasure.

‘Trisha, if you had a kid, would you let him get into sports or make him study for the board exams?’ Juhi asked, wanting Trisha to join in.

But this was just too heavy a conversation for Trisha. First she needed caffeine. She replied with her eyes closed and her head on Abhimanyu’s shoulders, ‘When Abhi and I have two kids, I’ll let them choose what they want to do in their life.’

Abhimanyu was shocked. He looked at Juhi and blushed. Juhi didn’t know how to respond. There was an awkward silence. Then Abhimanyu cleared his throat. ‘Well, I have to take a shower and head back home before I fly out. Must meet the folks for a bit, you know.’

Trisha did not miss his reaction. In a flash, her sleep evaporated and she realized that she had made a blunder. ‘Abhimanyu,’ she said sweetly. ‘Do you really have to go? We can have breakfast. Shall I make you something?’

‘No, no, don’t worry about it.’ Abhimanyu got up, went to the sink, and washed his coffee cup before placing it back in the cupboard.

Juhi’s eyes widened. ‘I know I fixed you up with him,’ she whispered to Trisha. ‘But you had said you didn’t want anything serious and that’s what I had told him. Now you want to make babies with him? Have you lost your mind, woman? It’s only been a few months since you started dating!’

Trisha looked dejected. She did mention that to Juhi but she thought that by using the word ‘girlfriend’ to refer to her, Abhimanyu had already committed to her. *Or had he?* Trisha knew that she should never have mentioned anything about children. But it’s just that this was the first time that anyone had ever asked her about kids. She had never given it any thought and she was sleepy and groggy and those words had just spilled out of her mouth!

She was frantic. ‘I swear I didn’t mean it! I don’t know how it came to my head. It’s all your fault, you ass!’ Trisha was suddenly angry with Juhi for asking her the question in the first place. She was angry with her for having coffee with *her boyfriend* who seemed in a rush now to leave the house. He had packed his things and washed his face and come out of the room.

Trisha went up to him. ‘May I please talk to you alone for a minute?’ Before he could protest she dragged him inside her room and shut the door behind them. She made him sit down on the bed. ‘I didn’t mean we would have children. There is no pressure on you. Oh, God... I don’t know where that came from. It was stupid. Please don’t be angry or upset? I don’t know where all this is going and, frankly, that’s perfectly fine. Please don’t take what I said to heart. I’m just way too sleepy. And I had such a wonderful time yesterday and last night... Last night was like a dream, Abhi. It was magical. Please don’t go away like this.’ She spoke rapidly, a desperate plea in her tone to hold on to something that she felt was fast dissipating.

‘Finished? Said what you needed to?’ Abhimanyu smiled.

‘Yes.’

He got up and put his arms around her. He pressed her closer to him and breathed in the lavender scent of her hair. While he pulled away, he cupped her chin tenderly in his warm hand. ‘I had a lovely time too, silly! Let’s not think too much about children right now. We’re very young!’

She was relieved. She wanted to speak some more but he gently shushed her lips with his finger. ‘Let’s talk about all this later when I get to the airport. I really need to head home and spend some time with my parents and sister. I’ll be back for New Year’s Eve. We’ll do something special then.’ He was in a hurry to leave, like he wanted to remove himself from this uncomfortable, sticky conversation. He gave her a quick peck on the forehead.

While she didn’t want him to leave, she knew he was a dutiful son who would always need his family around. He had made her his first priority by coming straight to see her after landing from Mumbai. She could not resent him for going. Still, she knew it would be another five days before she saw him again. She stood motionless in the middle of the room until she felt the hot tears well up in her eyes. This was not how she had wanted the night to end. She looked away from him to hide the tear rolling down her cheek.

He said bye to Juhi and opened the front door. He picked up the newspaper and gave it to her, who sat and began reading it. She gave a small yelp as she flipped through *Delhi Times*. Trisha came running from her room. ‘What happened?!’

She tried to hide the paper from Trisha but it was too late. Trisha snatched it from her and saw the screaming headline: Vedant Dheeraj Kirloskar’s Engagement Broken.



The story was not front-page news but it was newsworthy enough to make page three in *Delhi Times*. Trisha read the article a few times, trying to understand what had happened. Apparently, Vedant had called off the engagement after a month, saying he wanted to focus on his career rather than getting married at such a young age. The reporter, though, had gone on to hint at an affair, saying Vedant ‘might be in love with someone whom his family disapproves of.’ *Could it be me or someone else he had found?* She wasn’t sure how to react to the news: to be indifferent—Vedant was in her past and she had moved on since their breakup; or to be deeply affected—after all, he was her first boyfriend, the man she had lost her virginity to.

She pressed her hand to her forehead. Why did the news of Vedant’s broken engagement affect her so much? Had she not moved on and found Abhimanyu? Why did this news leave her feeling confused and torn? As if reading Trisha’s thoughts, Juhi asked, ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

Trisha walked back to her room. ‘There’s nothing to talk about.’

Juhi followed her, cup of chai in hand, and sat on Trisha’s bed. ‘Do you think it was because of you? Are you the one being alluded to in the article?’ Juhi wanted Trisha to talk. Otherwise, she feared, Trisha would again retreat into her shell and possibly throw a good relationship away.

‘I doubt it,’ Trisha said.

‘Do you still love him?’ Juhi hoped to hear a negative answer but Trisha fell silent.

‘Come on, Trish. He was long gone. Let him go. You have Abhimanyu now. He’s a great guy. He’s stable, secure, he belongs to a lovely family, lives in Delhi. And rich for God’s sake!’ she completed with a giggle. ‘All the things you needed in a man.’

Trisha took a deep breath. ‘I know people move on. And I’m glad I have Abhimanyu. But the fact that Vedant moved on too is unnerving. It feels like there’s this stone wedged in my heart. I wish we had left on better terms. Then maybe this news wouldn’t have affected me so much.’

Juhi decided to keep quiet and just be there for her friend. They sipped their tea.

Then Juhi eventually said, 'You will not always get the man you want, Trish. But you will always get the man you need. The one thing I didn't want in a man was for him to share my birthday and have light eyes. And guess what? Sulekh is just that. What are the odds, right? We're polar opposites. But we still make it work. Let's not be too idealistic like JNU taught us to be. We live in the real world now. You need to trust in the process of age and time. People break up for a reason.'

'Reasons change, Juhi. We are not the same people we used to be. We've changed. And maybe first loves deserve a second chance.' Trisha surprised even herself with her response. Why did she want Vedant to feel the same?

Juhi was stunned. 'You would give up something that was beautiful right now for a chance at something that may happen in the future? That's ridiculous! Live in the moment. You have a wonderful man. He loves you. Don't spin stories in your head.' She was starting to get cross with Trisha. She had a feeling her friend would end up playing around with Abhimanyu.

'Maybe Abhimanyu was a rebound relationship.' Trisha's words were soft, unsure.

'No he isn't, Trisha! What's wrong with you?' Juhi was stern. 'Maybe you loved Vedant. But that doesn't make him your one and only love. He scoffed at any form of a commitment. Abhimanyu is at least thinking about it, he makes an effort to value your opinions. A marriage is not just a commitment to stay together forever. It's a pact to nurture, cherish, love and respect each other each day of your life. You gave Vedant two years to give you an answer. Give Abhimanyu time as well.'

'I do remember him sometimes, though. If a song plays on the radio, or I cross our favourite place in Khan market. A fresh wave of nostalgia takes over. I mean, I shrug it off because I have Abhimanyu but it still comes.'

Juhi stared at her. 'Maybe the idea of someone and the memory they invoke in you is more appealing than the person himself. Maybe you need to take a hard look at reality once again and contemplate why he left you when he could have chosen not to.' Juhi's words were as cool as ice.

They sat in silence for some time before Trisha let out a deep sigh of melancholy. 'You're right. It's just that I feel terribly jealous when Abhimanyu speaks to other women. Maybe I can't handle his fame? He had a Bollywood girlfriend before me, so where do I count in his scheme of things? I'm just a regular working girl. I feel so inadequate sometimes. Completely insecure.'

Juhi found her illogical but understood what Trisha was trying to say. 'Is he with her now?'

Trisha shook her head.

'Is he with you now?'

Trisha nodded. She understood what Juhi was getting at.

'Well then, give your new relationship a try rather than thinking about a past failed one. And stop doubting yourself. He wouldn't be with you if he didn't like you for who you were. Sometimes it's far more painful waiting for something to happen than losing something that was already there. You just need to be strong and patient.'

Juhi gave Trisha a hug before leaving the room. 'Now I have to get ready for work.'

Alone once more, Trisha couldn't shrug off the feeling that she was inadequate for Abhimanyu. And this morning when she had made that mistake of mentioning children, he had balked at the very thought of it. Was he just having fun with her? Didn't he want to be with her for the long haul, marry her, have children with her?

Trisha didn't want to think about this anymore. She decided to take the rest of the day off and stay home and sleep.



Abhimanyu flew back in after three days and they had a lovely celebration on New Year's Eve with Juhi and Sulekh.

Trisha could not help but be thankful for having Abhimanyu in her life. He was not only attractive and had an easy laugh—compared to Juhi's Sulekh, for instance, who was short and chubby and a bit stiff. Abhimanyu was laidback and amiable.

He put on a mask in public, though: that of a successful tennis star, a celebrity. He suddenly would have a glamorous look about him and would turn on his charm, especially with female admirers. Trisha sometimes found his public persona fake and she still had not gotten used to dating a celebrity. She often felt that the demands were just too much for a regular Lucknow girl like her. She tried to remind herself that this was how celebrities would normally behave. Even Juhi had tried to reason with her: 'A celebrity has to be a little fake with his fans, laugh louder, smile broader for the cameras, even if it goes against his personality,' she told Trisha.

After New Year's, Abhimanyu flew back to Mumbai. He resumed his training for the Australian Open and his visits to Delhi became sporadic again. They exerted efforts to make their long-distance relationship work, keeping in touch regularly through emails and phone calls. When Trisha had a crisis at work, she called him and he took the time to listen to her rant.

When he was getting ready to leave for the Australian Open, he asked her to come with him as his 'lucky charm.' But Trisha had to say no as she had a lot of work and a two-week holiday was something she couldn't afford. While in Australia, Abhimanyu committed himself to being available for her and made sure to regularly call or text.

Life went on and Trisha was starting to feel content. She had a vigour she had missed for a long time, and had even started engaging in a serious physical workout, going for a walk every morning. The results were already showing as she glowed. She would also, in fact, eventually realize that she had almost forgotten about the news of Vedant's broken engagement. The time she remembered Vedant again was when she thought of how hard Abhimanyu was working to make their relationship work. *Could it*

have been the same with Vedant? After all, Vedant could have also made the effort to travel and visit her often. Abhimanyu never asked her to quit her job ever and tag along with him. What he had only asked was for her to travel with him on holidays but she had declined each time. His ATP calendar was chock-a-block: from Barclays to the Davis Cup to Qatar and Brisbane, Abhimanyu would only end up spending more time with his coach than her. Besides, she reasoned, she was too caught up with work that it didn't make sense to leave the city.

She didn't want to make the same mistake she did with Vedant: giving all of herself and getting nothing in return. She had to hold back. At least until she knew where the relationship was headed.

February came. As soon as Abhimanyu returned to Delhi from the Australian Open, he immersed himself in his training and then left for a match in Buenos Aires.

The long distance began to take its toll on Trisha, and she began to get tired of their phone conversations. She didn't want to hear his voice: she needed him to hold her! The end of each phone call only left her with a vacant, empty feeling. She began to think whether her job was worth not having Abhimanyu around with her.

Abhimanyu, meanwhile, was working hard to make her happy. One weekend in Delhi, he decided to take her to meet his family for lunch. Trisha was extremely apprehensive. She had a morbid fear of boyfriends' parents, remembering how it had been at the graduation when Vedant's mom and dad had been completely unimpressed with her. Abhimanyu eventually managed to make her say yes, assuring her that nothing would go wrong.

When he came to pick her up, Trisha had still not decided what to wear. Juhi, who opened the door for him, commented. 'See? It's as if she's going for the Miss India pageant. Her room is a mess.'

Abhimanyu walked over to Trisha's door and knocked. 'Can I come in?'

Trisha came out, dazzling Abhimanyu with her beautiful long chikan kurta in lavender, a white churidaar, and silver jewellery, all of them fitting her perfectly and accentuating her face and body.

Abhimanyu gave out a low whistle in approval. But Trisha said, 'Maybe I should change.'

Abhimanyu quickly grabbed her hand before she could go back to her room. 'You look fine. Now, can you come and sit for a moment.'

Trisha obliged him and sat down on the sofa. Juhi went inside her room to give the couple some privacy.

Abhimanyu took out a box. 'I have something for you.' Trisha's heart stopped. It had a Geentanjali jewels logo on it. *Jewellery*. Her first thought was not to accept anything. Then he himself opened the box, and in it were nestled a gorgeous pair of diamond hoops on gold.

She was speechless while Abhimanyu looked at her tenderly. 'I know you love silver jewellery but I thought these were really pretty and you might like them.' She could tell he was desperate for her to appreciate the gesture.

Trisha said what was truly in her heart. 'Abhimanyu, they're gorgeous. But I'm sorry. I can't accept such an expensive gift.'

‘Why not? I picked them myself.’

Trisha didn’t know what to say. How could she tell him that such a present was given only to a fiancée? Diamonds symbolized a deeper relationship, certainly a more serious one than theirs. Did he really still want to get deeper into her life? The thought of Abhimanyu racing out of her apartment at the mere mention of marriage and children also bothered Trisha. ‘I just can’t accept this gift.’ Her voice was flat.

‘That hurts. It means you don’t consider me worthy enough to give you something precious?’

Trisha shook her head, about to reply but Abhimanyu interrupted. ‘Please take them or I shall be offended. I bought them because I love you. And I hope you’ll wear them because you love me too.’ His voice was warm, his words were genuine.

Trisha’s doubts cleared as tears welled up in her eyes. She nodded her head and took off her silver earrings, replacing them with the diamond hoops. She was overjoyed that he had bought her a piece of jewellery of his choice instead of simply giving something he knew she would pick out. And she liked that it was gold and diamonds. Her heart danced.

She leaned forward and planted a deep and sensual kiss on his lips. He held her in a strong embrace. They sat that way for some time, before Abhimanyu said, ‘On second thought, maybe we *should* get you out of those clothes.’ Trisha rapped his arm. ‘No, we’ll get late. Your parents are expecting us.’ Abhimanyu drew her close to him and her pulse quickened.

‘Let them wait.’ He took her hand and led her to her bedroom. ‘Let’s be quick okay?’ Trisha nodded as her heart hammered in her chest and he shut the door behind them.

They emerged from the room after some time, ready to leave, with Trisha wearing a new kurta, brighter and prettier, and none of her favorite silver jewellery. Juhi was coming out of the shower and smiled upon seeing the glow on Trisha’s face. She also noticed the diamond hoops that shone brightly behind Trisha’s long silken tresses. Juhi was relieved that Trisha seemed happy. ‘Best of luck,’ she whispered to Trisha as she stepped out with Abhimanyu. Trisha smiled at her. *I’m meeting the parents!*

The Laxman house in Noida was large yet simple and cosy, beautifully decorated in the classic South Indian style. The two-story place had a large drawing room with an open kitchen, a dining area with a patio and lawns attached on the ground floor; on the top floor were three rooms and a study. A rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted in from the kitchen as soon as Trisha and Abhimanyu entered. His father had met them at the door.

‘Come, come,’ said Mr Laxman with a wide smile. To Abhimanyu he said, ‘Your mother has just made some fresh coffee.’

Abhimanyu’s mother came out from the kitchen and gave everyone a warm smile. Trisha folded her hands. ‘Namastey, aunty.’

‘Namastey, beta.’

Trisha slid gracefully into a wicker-back chair while Abhimanyu made himself comfortable on the nearby sofa. A woman came and served them some coffee and snacks.

Abhimanyu's mother said, 'Don't fill yourself with too much of this because I've made lunch.'

But Trisha found all the homemade snacks so delicious that she took second helpings. 'Aunty, these are so good,' she said to Abhimanyu's mother. 'Please teach me how to make them?'

'Don't bother, Ma.' Abhimanyu was quick. 'She doesn't know how to cook!' Trisha glared at him from the corner of her eye.

She addressed his mother, 'Actually, aunty, I enjoy cooking but just never have the time. I've never been able to cook for Abhimanyu and that's why he doesn't know I can cook.'

'You cook?' Abhimanyu was surprised. She casually turned to him and nodded.

Abhimanyu's father laughed a deep laugh that was uncannily similar to his son's. 'See, son, the beauty of a relationship is that you uncover a new mystery about each other every day!' He looked at his wife fondly.

Abhimanyu's mother seemed pleased. Trisha and Abhimanyu locked eyes for a brief second as a wave of love passed through them.

Soon, Abhimanyu's sister came downstairs, her hair freshly washed and lying loose around her shoulders. She was as thin as a stick but as cheery as a summer's day. 'Hello!' she said brightly to Trisha as she flopped onto the sofa near her brother.

'Hi!' said Trisha.

'This is my sister, Namrata,' Abhimanyu said to Trisha. 'She's in her third year at LSR. We put her there so she can study more and play less.'

'Well, he wants me to study more because if I do play, I will beat him at his own game!'

Trisha was incredulous. 'She beats you in tennis?'

'Yes!' Namrata quickly replied. 'In straight sets!' She laughed a jolly guffaw that made Trisha giggle as well.

'Well, I let her beat me, really.'

'Yeah, right,' Namrata shoved her brother playfully. 'If this country had more opportunity for women in sports than it did for men, maybe I would have won the Australian Open!'

Trisha found Namrata very interesting. 'But there's Sania Mirza, Saina Nehwal, Mary Kom...umm, who else? There are quite a lot of women athletes, right? And they've won medals for our country, too.'

Namrata nodded her head. 'Sure. One tennis player. One badminton player. One boxer. Do you know of Shikha Uberoi? Rushmi Chakravarthi? Tara Iyer?'

Trisha shook her head at the mention of each name.

'I could go on and you would still say no. And they all play tennis for India. See, unless you have media backing and some Bollywood hype, you're a nobody in sports.' Namrata seemed to know what she was talking about.

Abhimanyu pretended to box her. 'I'm a celeb! I reached the semi-finals didn't I? I just needed my lucky charm to give me an edge.' He folded his hands together in a comfortable gesture and gazed intently at Trisha who tried not to blush a beetroot red.

Their father spoke and everyone shushed. 'The sporting camps are not that great

for women. Namrata played until her twelfth boards and was excellent. But then we couldn't find sponsors who would help her take her game further and honestly, the expenses are skyrocketing nowadays.'

'So I dropped out of playing tennis five times a week,' Namrata said. 'And instead studied hard to get into a girls college.'

Trisha was intrigued. If Namrata was as good as she claimed, did they give up simply because of the money? 'But you *did* want to become a world champion?'

Namrata's mom answered, 'Well, how long can she play? She will eventually have to get married and settle down. And you can stay professionally in a game like tennis only until you're about thirty years old. After that, your body starts giving way. Then it becomes difficult to find someone.'

Trisha was disturbed by these remarks, which she found sexist. What if Namrata didn't want to get married?

'Honestly, I got tired,' Namrata said. 'There were just too many politics and all I wanted was to play. Everything in this country is political! Politics, media, hype—they all take away from the game. It wasn't about getting married. I hardly care. Well, not as much as my brother here, anyway!'

Abhimanyu playfully whacked his sister who squealed and ran into the kitchen. Trisha laughed. He sat beside her. 'Don't listen to her. We don't pay much attention to that brat.'

'He's right,' Abhimanyu's father agreed. 'She's quite pampered!'

'But so are you, Abhi!' Abhimanyu's mother said. Everyone laughed. 'All we can do is love and support our children. Right?' Trisha nodded. Abhimanyu watched her closely.

Abhimanyu's father said, 'And yet we are proud of both of them. We have a trophy case for Abhi and Namo there.' He pointed to a large wall that had a cabinet with lights that shone on several trophies, awards and certificates that both children had earned over the years. If you didn't know it, you wouldn't think that Abhimanyu was an international level tennis star who got more recognition in the house than his sister. Trisha was pleasantly surprised.

This seemed a very liberal household, she thought, where both siblings were treated equally. She had seen some examples of skewed parenting in her life, with her own parents pushing her to excel in studies or with Vedant's, who exerted pressure on their son to become a politician even though he wanted to study English.

Abhimanyu's mother excused herself to check on the kitchen. Trisha had a brief chat with Abhimanyu's father about poetry, remembering that he was part of The Poetry Society of India and had arranged the Gulzar night for them. They quoted 'shayaris' to each other.

Abhimanyu's father remarked, 'Thank God! I now have someone I can speak to about literature and poetry. This family is all into sports and films!' He said to Trisha, 'You must come see me more often, beta.'

Before she could reply, Abhimanyu's mother came out of the kitchen. 'Lunch is served.'

They got up and started for the dining area. Abhimanyu put his hand on Trisha's

back as they walked. His hand was firm and protective. 'Dad can continue with his shayaris after lunch. Let's go eat. I'm starving.' Then he whispered in her ear, 'I tend to be really hungry after a quickie.' Trisha giggled and followed him to the table.

As they all found their seats around the dining table, Trisha looked around at Abhimanyu's family. He seemed to be moving to take their relationship to another level, she thought. He wanted to see how she got along with his family and she appreciated how he was making her feel at home. *Was he preparing her to be part of this home as well?* Trisha felt warm and fuzzy with the idea. This was exactly what she needed to feel complete again. She wished she could have Abhimanyu with her every day. Phone calls can simply never come close to his mere presence.

His mother had laid out a lavish South Indian meal. Namrata began passing the dishes around, telling Trisha about each one of them, and pointing out which ones she had made. Apparently, Namrata enjoyed being in the kitchen and it made Trisha like her more.

Their conversations were jovial. Namrata spoke about her friends, while Abhimanyu told them about travelling to Mumbai to prepare for the Monte Carlo tournament. No one talked about anything heavy and serious. There were no debates, no winners. It was a simple yet wonderful lunch with family, made more special by the warmth of the conversations among them.

Trisha suddenly realized that maybe this was what she had been missing all her life. A normal family lunch where one could talk about their life, rather than having to have an opinion on everything.

After lunch, Abhimanyu took her upstairs to see their movie den. The room had a large L-shaped sofa on one side and a fifty-two-inch plasma TV on the other. It sat right in the middle of a wall that was stacked with thousands of films that were arranged neatly, by alphabetical order. 'Abhi, this is incredible. I've not seen any of these films.'

'Really? You haven't seen *Citizen Kane*?'

She shook her head.

'What about *Casablanca*? *The Bicycle Thief*, *Rashomon*?' She shook her head.

She turned around to read the titles that were adorning the shelves.

'May I ask why?'

She shrugged her shoulders casually. 'They're black and white films. I find them boring.'

He laughed. He was, after all, only six years older than her but he felt much older. He dropped down on the sofa. 'Then we can watch so many films together.'

She settled into the deep white cushions next to him.

'Well, my father is busy with work,' he continued. 'My mother has a charity that she's involved with and as you can see, my sister pretty much wastes her time. We'll have the entire house to ourselves.'

'Why do you say that about your sister? She's great! She plays tennis, she cooks, she's a brilliant student.'

He took her in his arms. 'Oh, so now you're taking her side, are you?'

Trisha tried to wriggle out of his embrace, worried that somebody might walk in. 'What are you doing?'

Abhimanyu planted a brief but luscious kiss on the lips that kept her tingling long after it was over. He looked deep into her eyes to insinuate that he would like to take this kiss further but she pushed him away, ignoring the look in his eyes that said he wanted more. Trisha felt warm and extremely appreciated in this family and in his life.

They hung out a bit more before she got up to say goodbye. As they walked her to the door, she said to Abhimanyu's parents, 'Thank you for the lovely lunch aunty, uncle.'

'You're welcome, beta,' Abhimanyu's mother said.

Namrata hugged her and they promised to stay in touch through Facebook.

In the car, she kept thinking about the afternoon. 'That was magical, Abhi. Thank you for such a wonderful time.'

'I'm glad you all got along.'

They didn't say much to each other the rest of the way. They quietly listened to some light music from the radio and Trisha got lost in thought with what Namrata said Abhimanyu wanting to get married.

Am I ready for marriage? she thought. She knew she had told Juhi she wasn't, but somehow the last four months with Abhimanyu had made her feel a deep sense of belonging in his life. She had broken up with Vedant because of professional goals and she didn't want to get into a marriage and let those personal ambitions die. But a part of her wanted something more. Something was missing in her life and she couldn't put a finger on it. Was it marriage? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that she needed to find a balance between her dreams and her true love.



At the end of February, Abhimanyu left for Mumbai, where he and Leander would train for the Monte Carlo championships. Trisha's workload also increased, leaving her with hardly any time to miss Abhimanyu.

She had completed a fresh round of research for her fundraising activity. She decided that instead of sending out a team like she had done a month ago, she would do all the communication personally, call and meet with fifty or so people and convince them to make donations for her cause. She was determined to do well and it was not only to impress her superiors; she truly believed that malnutrition was one of the country's biggest problems and it needed to be addressed by as wide a section of the population as possible. Moreover, if she succeeded, then her recent decisions would be validated and she would not regret staying in Delhi.

As Holi was a month away, she decided to combine the festival's colours with her fundraiser. Trisha's boss was sceptical at first but agreed. Trisha spent a month preparing for the elaborate party. The venue was the poolside of a five-star hotel in the city, with a lunch buffet, rain dance, and entertainment to be graced by the hottest DJ in all of India. She sent out invitations to a select list of wealthy people, teasing them with the event being 'exclusive' and 'free of the press'.

The RSVPs pleased her: from the Mittals to the Modis, everyone said they would be coming. It didn't surprise Trisha, as such events were always a fun way for these corporate bigwigs to interact with their peers. Even if, say, they made a blunder with their speech, they could always blame it on the alcohol and nobody would blame them.

Thus March was flying by and both Trisha and Abhimanyu were extraordinarily busy. They both tried to keep in touch but whenever they called each other, one or the other was working or distracted and couldn't speak. Why was it, Trisha thought, that they seemed unable to carry over their amazing chemistry to their phone conversations? This long-distance relationship was tougher than expected.

Soon their telephonic conversations began to deteriorate, and gradually, they

simply stopped talking about anything important. The 'I love you' at the end of each chat became less frequent too. After long work days that drained her energy, Trisha would stand under the shower and despair: *Where is my relationship with Abhimanyu headed?*

She thought of the last time they had met. It was long ago, almost a month now, at his parents' place. She missed him. She needed his companionship, not his text messages.

One evening, Trisha felt particularly low and asked Abhimanyu, 'Are you going to come to Delhi anytime soon?'

But she had caught him at a particularly bad time, as he had just had a fight with his coach and was in a bad mood. His reply was brusque. 'No. My parents have come to spend time with me. And I can't leave in the middle of training.'

Trisha was stung. It was clear that Abhimanyu couldn't even be bothered with being careful with his tone. And while rationally she knew that she had to accept Abhimanyu for everything that he was, her emotional side longed to hear his soothing, romantic words. Quickly, her insecurities about him meeting glamorous women surfaced once again. Truly, she thought, it takes tremendous amount of faith to keep a long-distance relationship strong. Trisha knew that unless they met face to face and she cleared all her doubts, her insecurities would always come back. There was an awkward pause in the conversation.

Then he said, 'I'm so happy to have my family around.'

Trisha was annoyed but didn't say anything.

He asked, 'Have you seen any movies lately?'

'No,' she replied tersely. She didn't need him to make small talk about movies; what she wanted was for him to understand that she was lonely and she needed him. That she had no way of getting to Mumbai to see him and it was killing her.

Still completely oblivious to her feelings, he continued, 'I saw the new Tom Cruise film. I didn't like it too much.'

'I've just been working,' she replied.

Neither Trisha nor Abhimanyu realized that a vital part of a relationship was growth and belief. That required more than happiness of togetherness. It required thought and work when you were apart. And most relationships dwindled because no party was willing to put in the effort when one was apart.

He continued trying to make small talk, 'Our game has improved,' he replied, as if disjointed from what she had just said. 'But I'm worried if it will be up to the mark. I want to really win the doubles there. It will improve my rankings. Then when I head to the French and US later, I can be at a better level.'

He rambled something about his coach, his rankings. The conversation became one-sided and Trisha was hurt that he wasn't asking about her work, her preparations for her charity event. She thought he was being totally unsupportive of her and what she did professionally.

Abhimanyu continued with his monologue until there was nothing more to say. They hung up and she realized something about their relationship: they didn't talk, as in *talk*. If she searched her heart for what it was that made her happy, she found that it was the need to engage in discussions, debates even. That was how it was when she was

growing up, and with her old boyfriend, too. A conversation wasn't just about exchanging information about each other's day, it was an exchange of feelings about the day. She didn't want to just hear what Abhimanyu did but how he felt, and wanted to reciprocate with her thoughts and feelings as well. Obviously, one couldn't do it over the phone.

With Abhimanyu, it felt as if only the romance part was nice when he was around. The little romance that they had on the phone had also dwindled. Even though they had spent ample time together, they had never had any debates. She spoke about her life and he unfolded for her the mysteries of tennis. Their lives were vastly different. They hardly had a topic they could deliberate on.

Nor had they gone anywhere to explore the possibilities of their relationship. It had been five months but he had always been travelling and she had been in Delhi. Sure, he had asked her to come with him to the Australian Open in January and The Dubai Duty Free Championships in February, but she had no choice but to decline as she was not ready to take a leave from her job at that time.

Their 'magic' was waning.

A few days before Abhimanyu had to leave for Monte Carlo, it was the last leg of all of Trisha's planning for her fundraiser. She was nervous, tense and extremely agitated.

He called her late at night as she was still at work and everything seemed to be going wrong. The caterers said they couldn't serve an entire Mexican table because one of their chefs had gone on leave. Her actual count of RSVPs had exceeded her estimate. To top it all off, the colleague who was helping her wasn't picking up her phone.

Thus, when Abhimanyu called, she was flustered. 'Hey, babe, what's up?' he said, sounding chirpy.

'What's up?' Trisha was too perturbed to be polite. 'Well, besides my career that's going up in smoke, nothing much.'

He chuckled softly, not realizing that she was not joking.

'Abhimanyu Laxman, I'm serious,' she snapped.

This made him guffaw even more. Apparently, in long-distance relationships, it was difficult to sense when the other was serious or not. She gave up and ended the call. *If my man didn't understand me by now, what was the point in taking this relationship further?*

He rang again. She let it ring a few times, took deep breaths, and picked up.

This time he was no longer perky. 'No one has ever hung up on me. Please don't do it again! It bothers me.'

'Okay,' it was all that Trisha could muster, seething in fury. She had thought he would apologize for his behaviour, yet here he was reprimanding her. She wanted to hang up on him again but decided against it.

There was a silence, then she said, 'God, I can't find Smita's number. She should be helping me with the collections tomorrow and she's not here.'

She could tell that Abhimanyu softened. 'Oh, so sorry to hear that. But how are the preparations going?' Abhimanyu was genuinely concerned.

'I'm going berserk because the chefs are backing out and we have to figure out

how many more people are coming. The alcohol has to be adequate. I have to make sure that my boss and I do not get drunk tomorrow so we can socialize properly with the guests. It's the only way we'll get them to give to my cause.'

'Darling, I'm sure you won't be drunk. Just don't drink! In any case, I wish you would leave all that and come with me to Monaco. I would love to have you as my lucky charm.'

Maybe he meant well, but what Trisha heard on her end did not please her at all. 'What do you mean, Abhi? If this goes well, it will mean so many things for me—like respect from my peers and superiors. I may even be given a raise. I've been working really hard for this. This is my life. If you can't respect that then I don't know what to say.'

'I didn't mean it like that,' he replied quietly. But what transpired next was something neither of them anticipated. 'I only meant that it would be nice if we were together. I really wish you a successful party. But it's just a party.'

Just a party! Trisha boiled with rage. This wasn't just a party. This was an opportunity of a lifetime and she had created it.

'Well, at least it's not just a game where all you do is play. How long is your career going to last? Another ten years? Mine will last until I'm sixty. Not all work is fun and games, Abhimanyu.'

Now Abhimanyu was angry. He didn't need this woman to insult him or his game. 'I didn't mean that your party was nothing, Trisha. I meant it wasn't the last thing you'll ever do. You will still have a career. But if that's the way you feel about my work, then why are we even together?'

Trisha was stunned. 'I don't know. Abhimanyu, I need someone who is around most of the time. Who understands me. Who knows my work.'

'And I don't?' His voice was steely.

'Do you? I don't know if we understand each other. I don't know if I can continue like this. I need passion. I need poetry. I need someone who I can have debates with. We have none of that. You're always talking about coaching, and diets and all that stuff that doesn't matter to me.'

'I'm telling you because I'm sharing my life with you. That's who I am. You knew this before we went out!' Abhimanyu said in haughty indignation.

'Well, maybe I don't know if I want it anymore.' Trisha's voice betrayed resignation.

Abhimanyu remained cold. 'I do get you. I try to show you a different part of life. I tried to welcome you into my world. I made as much effort as I could. But tennis is my life. And if you can't respect that then you're right, we shouldn't be together.'

There was no reply from Trisha. 'Goodbye, Trisha,' he said. Still no reply came, and he hung up.

Trisha felt horrible. She had momentarily frozen when he was speaking. A thousand thoughts had entered her head and left her tongue-tied. It felt like déjà vu. She didn't know what had got into her. He had been so nice. She wanted to call him back but just at that moment, her colleague Smita walked in, apologizing. 'I'm so sorry. My battery died and I didn't even realize while I was in the auto on the way here.'

Later, Trisha would realize that most misunderstandings in relationships happened because of a power struggle and miscommunication. The only way to rectify it is to not waste time in apologizing. But she had. She lost the moment to call Abhimanyu back. And she would realize that it would be the biggest mistake she ever made.

For now, Trisha felt relieved to see Smita. She tried to not think of Abhimanyu as she and Smita set down to fix all the knots in the preparations. They worked late into the night and when Trisha finally reached home, she was too tired. She looked at her phone and wondered if Abhimanyu was still awake. She still didn't know how to make it up to him. All she could do at the moment was to send a message and say sorry. Then she needed to sleep.

Tomorrow was a big day. What she didn't know was that it was going to be a party that would spin her life out of control and throw her into a confused state all over again.



Trisha reached the hotel and made her way to the poolside. She saw that almost all the decorations had been put up. She gave orders to the workers in charge. ‘Make sure that the floor is secure and absorbs water, so that no one slips while dancing. Check on the alcohol in stock, nag the supplier for the new shipment. Get all the snacks ready. Tell the security guards to take their positions. Manage entry and exit routes for guests and the media. Book enough rooms for guests who may want to freshen up.’

Trisha was eager and anxious. She wanted the evening to go well.

Smita reached some time later and began supervising, making sure that all of Trisha’s commands were being followed precisely. Their boss came at around ten o’ clock to marvel at Trisha’s arrangements. ‘Trisha, I didn’t think it would be such a good idea but it’s certainly looking like the bash of the century. I hope we can all gain from this in the end.’ The funds they would raise tonight would go for the advancement of the country’s underfed children. Trisha was, personally, also aiming for recognition not only from UNICEF’s India office but also the New York headquarters. *A trip to the HQ wouldn’t be bad at all.*

The boss looked at both Smita and Trisha. ‘I don’t think I need to tell you that as we socialize with our guests, we don’t bring up the fundraising objective at all. Their invitations had clearly stated the reason for this party. Everyone knows why they are here. After the party, we shall assess and proceed to follow up with them. We’ll just have to see.’

Trisha’s fears were once again stoked. *What if these truly wealthy people were actually extremely stingy?* Instead of making money from this event, they could actually end up losing and that would surely put her job in jeopardy. She knew her boss was too shrewd to take any blame and so it would be on Trisha’s neck where the axe could fall. *I might even get fired!*

She tried to protest meekly, ‘But, ma’am, if we don’t plant the idea in their mind, how will they even know what that idea is?’

Trisha’s boss didn’t bother to reply directly to her query and instead walked off to

the bar. Then she muttered, 'Impatience is the mother of all failures. It's power dynamics. Leave it be.'

Trisha and Smita both felt very anxious but they had no time to think. Within an hour, the parking lot filled with guests. The DJ started playing some Holi songs and guests filtered into the venue, squealing with joy at seeing old friends among the crowd. Colours were thrown, and snacks and alcohol were served. The rain dance began, signalling the start of the party. Trisha took a spot in one corner and eyed the crowd. Everyone seemed to be having a fabulous time.

Trisha and Smita took to the dance floor. In between dances, they entertained anyone who had questions for them; they, in fact, made sure to wear their UNICEF ID cards over their clothes. The party was in full swing. A few drunk women were being escorted quietly to the rooms in the hotel so they could rest.

By two in the afternoon, Trisha was completely drenched and Smita was exhausted. They had been on their feet since seven in the morning. Trisha decided to take a break and change her clothes before playing again.

She found her way into one of the rooms that had been booked for UNICEF staff and took a quick hot shower. She got dressed in a short white kurta that she had especially bought for this occasion, with a colourful Patiala salwar. She slipped on some silver bangles and tied her hair to one side in a plait. She applied some kajal and lipstick and headed back to the party. She hurried as she needed to arrange for the lunch buffet to be organized.

She was crossing the lobby to go back to the pool area when she saw something that made her heart skip a beat. Vedant. Their eyes locked, both of them hypnotized. Her heart began to race.

His dark eyebrows arched mischievously and his mouth curved into a wide smile. He strolled gracefully towards Trisha as she stood, motionless with expectation. His eyes were serenely compelling and he looked devilishly handsome in a white T-shirt and dark blue jeans. With a hint of stubble and dark aviators on top of his head, he seemed to not have changed at all from when she had seen him for the first time on that podium three years ago.

'Hello, Trish.' His voice was low and smooth. 'You look gorgeous.'

The walls she had kept around her for so long shattered. 'Vedant.'

Should I hug him?

But before she could decide, he had wrapped his arms around her and held her close. She smelled him, his aftershave, and that alone made her wonder if she could really still be deeply in love with him.

'I am like a scorched rock that suddenly sings when you are near.' Just like old times, he whispered a poem in her ear, this one a sonnet by Pablo Neruda. 'Because it drinks the water you carry from the forest, in your voice.'

How did he still know exactly what to say? She felt alive again.

Dangerous territory, Trish! She heard a voice in her head and unfolded herself from his embrace. 'What are you doing here?'

'You invited me.'

'Excuse me?'

‘For the Holi party. You sent out an invite and I’m here. Wait, don’t you want me here?’

Trisha was confused. She flicked rogue strands of hair from her face and wondered whether she really had sent him an invite. Was he bluffing? He certainly knew enough people in the city to know she was organizing this party. Maybe he just showed up to see her. Or was this because she had passed on a huge mailing list (that she received from her boss) to Smita? That list had names of certain famous people who might be interested in this party and Vedant could have been on that list. In hindsight, she may actually have invited him, albeit unconsciously.

‘You’ve come all the way to Delhi because of this invite?’

Vedant smiled and didn’t say anything.

‘So come on then. Let’s have some fun.’ She took his arm.

They reached the poolside and she excused herself. ‘First, I need to check on the food arrangements. Will you wait here?’

‘No, I’ll come with you.’

So he followed her around, admiring her, noting her composure as she straightened out the littlest details of the party. She was even babysitting some guests who were drunk!

The attention did not escape Trisha. *Did the old Vedant shower this kind of attention on me?*

He came closer to her and whispered in her ear, ‘You were always good in organizing events. Remember my rallies?’ Yes, she did. She remembered when he relied on her for everything.

He felt a deep longing for her. She was looking more fit and toned and her hair, pinned to one side in a style he had not seen before, was still as luscious as he remembered. He could tell from her eyes that she was still deeply captivated by his presence.

He had lied to her—a white lie! There was no invitation, not even one sent by mistake. It was by sheer chance that he was staying in the same hotel and, at the reception, had overheard some people talking about the UNICEF bash. He had waited in the lobby for almost two hours before he had seen her. If he had to, he would have waited a lifetime to be with her again.

They moved across the lawns so Trisha could see to the needs of the guests. Meanwhile, Vedant bumped into a few people he knew and had a brief chat with them. The party was in full swing. She had everything under control. He knew this and took her by the hand to where the rain dance was happening. His touch was ever familiar; the electric shockwaves, too. Memories flooded her brain. He rubbed colour on her face and embraced her repeatedly. It was obvious that the sexual magnetism between them was still very much alive. As she got soaked, Vedant’s gaze travelled over her face to her shoulders, downwards slowly and seductively over the kurta that clung to her to her ample breasts and her toned belly. His nearness was overwhelming and she tried to get away by dancing more vigorously. But she got so caught up in the dance, the music and the rain that when he caught hold of her waist, she didn’t resist. She felt the electricity of his touch and their eyes locked as their breathing joined in rhythm. He cupped her face

and pulled her close. She could feel his warm breath, his smell permeating her every pore. His touch was strong. His passion swelled.

No, Trish! She pulled away. She knew it wasn't right. Even if she had a compelling need to be held by him once again, like a moth being drawn to a flame. Seeing him had made her realize how her love for him had never really died.

She walked to a chair and he followed.

'I've missed you so much, Trish.'

How could she tell him how much she had missed him too? Should she tell him she was with someone else? Would he even care? He'd soon leave this party and head back to Mumbai anyway. What was the point in revealing anything to him now?

Vedant drew her close to him and whispered, 'I tried so hard to be this different politician, but I don't know if I want it.'

Trisha was surprised. She didn't want to mention his supposed engagement. The alcohol was loosening his tongue and he seemed to be on the verge of telling her things she might not want to hear anyway.

'My father wanted me to campaign,' he continued. 'I campaigned. He wanted me to be engaged. I was engaged. He wanted me to become the leader of the Youth Seva and I did. He even wanted me to create a controversy so people would remember my name and I did that.'

Trisha hadn't heard of that one. 'Which controversy?'

His fingers slid sensuously over her bare arm. 'Oh, I protested against some books being taught in universities, I said they were derogatory to Indian culture. It mingled with religion and education and it created such a buzz that my name was instantly famous. I got a lot of votes from the elderly who believed what I said.' He was nonchalant, as if creating controversies was something that was now second-nature to him. His hands slowly started exploring the hollows of her back, finding the trigger points that always made Trisha moist between her legs. Only Vedant knew that. Trisha took a sharp breath in and let him continue. She couldn't stifle a slow moan.

He felt so good. But this was wrong!

Trisha tried to focus on what he was saying while he ran his fingers down her spine. She didn't really agree with his viewpoint and if were still a couple, she would have called him up on the right to educate anyone on everything and then giving them the right to choose what they believed in and what they read. He read her thoughts.

'I'm sure you would have said something about that topic. God! Remember all our debates? That was awesome. The spark, the intellectual high. Your speeches. They always aroused me, baby.' His free arm reached recklessly to her neck as he moved in closer to her face. 'I've never had that with anyone. Certainly not with my ex-fiancée. Anu was this homely woman who would have been happy following me around. I got so bored after a month of being engaged.'

His hand brushed the hair from her neck and rested on her collar bone, lingering there too long.

She brushed his hand away. 'Then why didn't you call me? Why didn't you write back? Why did you even get engaged in the first place?'

Vedant shook his head and looked away. The tenderness in his expression amazed

her. 'I was scared. It felt as if you didn't want me in your life. Remember the email you wrote me? After that, I got so busy with listening to Papa that I didn't know if I should start something with you again. I didn't have any answers.'

'I don't believe you. I waited for you to reply to that email. To say something, anything. It's been a year since we broke up, Vedant. I've moved on.'

'What do you mean, you've moved on?'

Hope pushes you forward, Trisha wanted to say. Nostalgia pulls you back. Only love keeps you in the now. *Am I really in love with Vedant? Or was this simply lust?*

'I have a boyfriend.' She wanted to sound defiant. She wanted to see how he would react, if he really felt the same about her or he was just intoxicated and feeling licentious.

'I don't believe you.'

Trisha could see the jealousy in his eyes and she liked that. She decided not to tell him the truth, that she *did* have a boyfriend but that they have just broken up a few hours earlier. Let Vedant stew. And he did. He became a man possessed with her. He yanked her off the floor and held her close. He whispered ruthlessly in her ear, 'You will never love anyone as much as you love me. And no one can ever love you as much as I do.'

Trisha pulled away and stared into his eyes.

'How would you know? You went off and got engaged. For all I know, you would have been married to her as well. Didn't you think of me then?'

'I thought of you all the time.' She could see his jaw tightening in anger. 'I had to find myself before I came to you. You were the one who didn't want to leave Delhi. I wanted to give it all up for you. And now you tell me you have a boyfriend?'

Trisha had heard enough. She wanted to get back to the party. She turned to leave but Vedant gripped her hand. 'Stay, Trish. I'm sorry. We haven't seen each other for a year.'

'And whose fault is that?' she said sharply. 'If you will excuse me. I have a party to look after and my guests are leaving.'

'Let's talk about this?' Vedant pleaded. 'Don't go away mad.'

When she didn't reply, he said, 'Can I at least see you again? I'm staying at the Sheraton. Will you come there tomorrow night? Please. We need to talk.' He then quoted Trisha's favourite poet, Rumi, 'Lovers don't finally meet somewhere, Trisha. They're in each other all along.'

Trisha was unable to understand her own compulsion. What was it about him that made her listen to everything he had to say? She knew that she shouldn't agree to something like this but it felt like some powerful force was commanding her to hear what he had to say. It had been so long since they had met. Her mind was working overtime again. Her heart spoke to her: love doesn't need any adjectives like unconditional, tender, true or universal. It's simply either there or it's not. Maybe his love had never died while she had moved on too quickly.

She walked back to the party. When she turned around, he was gone.

The last of the guests streamed out of the venue at six in the evening. Trisha's boss came around and praised her for all the hard work she had put in. The party had been a success but Trisha was simply too exhausted to talk about funding with her boss. All she

wanted was some clarity in her life. Yet there was nothing but dark clouds above the horizon, promising rain. It was truly going to pour.



Trisha went home and crashed. She slept heavily, fatigued from work and the emotional turmoil stirred by Vedant. When she finally awoke at eight the next morning, Juhi was still fast asleep.

Trisha crept quietly into the kitchen and made herself a cup of coffee and some toast. She spotted two birds sitting on a ledge, happily chirping away, and gave them some crumbs from her toast. The scene gave Trisha a strange sense of comfort. *As of this moment, I am truly alone.* I am single again. Her composure was a fragile shell all around her.

Her ex-boyfriend had showed up, wanting to come back to her life, just as another man had let her go. Maybe this was destiny. Maybe it was the Universe's way of saying, *Get back with Vedant, no one else can make you feel the way he did.*

Coffee cup in hand, she went back to her room. She didn't know whether or not to visit Vedant that evening. She wanted to, but she wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do. She decided to go to Lodhi Gardens for some fresh air and to collect her thoughts. She got into her comfortable jeans and sneakers, tied up her hair in a plait, and wore dark sunglasses. She slung her purse over her shoulders and left. Trisha roamed the entire jogging track of Lodhi Gardens, mulling over her options.

She called her mother.

Neha was taking the dog for a walk when her phone rang. She quickly picked it up. 'Hi, darling. How come you're up so early? Isn't it a holiday?'

'Yes, Ma, it is.' Hearing her mother's warm voice made her feel better. 'But I've slept for twelve hours straight and just woken up. Thought I should tell you that my event was successful and my boss was pleased. Though I'm not sure if she was drunk when she heaped those praises on me.'

'Nonsense. I have full faith in you. I'm sure she was genuinely overwhelmed at the stupendous success of your party.'

'Well, let's hope it results in a few cheques heading our way.'

'Yes, I do hope you get that fat cheque for yourself as well when your appraisal

happens.'

Trisha mumbled something that Neha couldn't properly hear. She could sense that her daughter was preoccupied with thoughts other than her fundraising event.

'Tell me more?'

Trisha took a moment. 'Vedant came.'

Neha was silent. She hadn't expected this. She knew her daughter was still vulnerable to Vedant but had hoped that Abhimanyu's presence in her life had made her forget about that old infatuation of hers.

She measured her words. 'Trish, did something happen between you and him?'

'No, mom. Nothing happened.'

Neha guessed that Trisha had just wanted to hear her voice and was unsure whether to tell her mother more. 'You want to talk about it?'

'No, Mom.' Trisha then fell silent and Neha respected that.

Trisha realized how complicated mother-daughter relationships were in this era in India. On the one hand, she wanted to be close to her mother but on the other, there seemed to be a huge generation gap between them. Trisha knew that she could never speak to her mother about love, sex, or other serious issues about men. She could perhaps mention that she was 'interested' in someone. By doing that alone, she would already bridge a gap between the two of them; she didn't think her mother had that with her own mother when she was her age. The modes of communication had changed, too. She could easily send her mother a text message or a photo of herself and they would already be connecting without having to speak to each other. She could also ask her mother for advice, which she knew her mother never did with her own parents. She was from small-town India, after all. No matter how progressive everyone thought they were, her parents lived in an old world where they didn't talk about intimate details of relationships. It's the kind of family where the TV would be switched to another channel when a kissing scene came on screen.

Finally Neha spoke again. 'Don't be a woman who needs a man. Be a woman that a man needs.'

'Yeah, I know that, Ma.' Her voice was fragile. 'Ma, why were we always arguing around the dining table? Why were all those debates important? Is that who I am now?'

'You don't remember, do you?' Neha's voice was soft, like Trisha was five years old again.

'Not really.'

'Your father and I were having a massive argument once and you walked, in. You must have been five or six years old. We saw this puzzled, innocent look in your face and we didn't want to upset you and told you that nothing was wrong, Mom and Dad were only having a debate. You thought it was something fun to do. Eventually when you got a little bigger you did start debating with us and it became a challenge for you. Your father and I argued a lot, so whenever you overheard us having a fight, we would say...'

'...it was a debate.' Trisha finished her mother's sentence as she realized that her parents did have fights as she was growing up. And how they hid it well.

'But you guys argued with me on so many points on whichever topics I came up with.'

‘I know. We were so glad that something good came out of our fighting.’

‘But it wasn’t good, Mom. I thought everything was okay between you and Dad. And now you both have made me into this overly opinionated person and sometimes people don’t appreciate it,’ she said, her voice choking.

‘Trisha,’ her mom said gently after a bout of silence. ‘People have different ways of saying I love you. No one has the monopoly of defining for everyone what love is. The idea is to accept it, respect it, and still give what you can. Your father and I worked out what love meant to us over the years. We made sacrifices for you without asking you to give any of it back. I call you every day because I care. We care. We want you to be happy—at work, in your relationships. You don’t need to argue all the time. Especially with Abhimanyu.’

‘Abhimanyu broke up with me yesterday. I guess we took each other for granted,’ Trisha said, her voice smothered by tears.

‘There is no relationship that has not been taken for granted at some point. The good ones rectify it immediately. The bad ones let it slip. You know what you have to do. And I will support you in whichever way I can.’

‘Thanks, Mom.’

They ended the call and she went back home in a far more confused state than when she had left. She found Juhi sitting on the sofa, sobbing.

‘Juhi? What happened?’ Trisha completely forgot about her own woes.

‘Sulekh and I broke up.’ Trisha could barely understand her words through the crying.

Trisha wrapped her arms around her. ‘What? Why?’ *They had been such an ideal couple.*

‘I don’t know. It was a crazy fight. We had made a plan to meet this morning but I overslept. He got angry. He said I made excuses whenever he had time off. And I said he worked too much and never had enough time for me.’

Trisha tried to console her but she didn’t have too much advice. After breaking up with Abhimanyu, and having a heart-wrenching conversation with her mother, Trisha’s emotions had wrung out to dry. She said, ‘You can’t expect someone to give up their priorities just because you think you should be one of them. He’s mad! Well, you’ll find someone else. And for now you can plunge yourself into work and excel at it.’

Juhi composed herself. ‘I don’t want to find someone else. I’ve invested in Sulekh. I’ve spent three years of my life with him. We know each other. We love each other. The love hasn’t died. You don’t let go of someone to make them happy. You hold on to them tighter because you know they won’t be happy without you.’

Trisha tried to understand.

Juhi continued, ‘You don’t say I will let you go if that makes you happy. If you knew *you* made me happy, you would never let me go! I don’t want to plunge myself into work. I need to work to earn a living. I need a relationship to feel alive. Sulekh gave me that.’

‘But how do you know he is the one you want to spend your life with?’ Trisha asked. ‘There could be many men out there for you.’

Juhi wiped her face. ‘Because we have a fabulous time when we are together.’

Because even silences are completely normal. Because we have so many differences that we're discovering something new about each other every single day. And when we find something in common and connect, we are ecstatic. And now, we have moulded ourselves to each other. We do things that the other person likes.'

'So why did you break up?' Trisha was confused.

'Because even though we love each other like mad, our families don't want us together. They've been against this relationship from the beginning. And now it's come to a point where he had to choose. Because we weren't finding time for each other to take it to the next level. I don't know what to do.'

'Do all relationships have to end in marriage? Is that what a successful relationship is about?' Trisha asked in all sincerity.

'No, it doesn't. The success or failure of a relationship is not if you got married or divorced. It's how you find yourself in the relationship and make each other happy. Love should add layers to your identity, not take it away. The differences make it exciting and challenging. And when you do something for another person, that the person knows you're doing just for him, he appreciates it. He understands the compromises, the love and the effort. And that's when you connect. Not if both of you keep telling each other how much you love the other. Superfluous words don't make it solid. Romance is the art of creating a small space of love in the domestic minutiae of everyday life with the *same* person.'

Trisha weighed her friend's words and wondered if she had that with either of the two men she had been with. She knew she had a crackling chemistry with Vedant from the first day she met him. Then they spent two years together and because of egos and misunderstandings, they fell apart. With Abhimanyu, it had only been five months and maybe there was no great chemistry, but there was something deeper. She couldn't quite put a finger on it just yet.

'So let's look at it the other way around,' she asked Juhi. 'You think Sulekh is the perfect guy. You get married to him. Then after a few years you realize that he wasn't the right one. Then? Won't you wonder what would have happened if you had met other people? What if you had met the right person then?'

Juhi pondered over Trisha's words. 'There is a difference between an affair and a relationship. One feels like a vacation while the other feels like home. Sulekh will always be home.'

Trisha liked this analogy.

'Personally, I never want to get married,' Juhi continued. 'I don't want to procreate. And I don't want to have any regrets. I don't know if we'll grow in the same direction over the course of years. No one does. Hell, even railway tracks that are laid parallel straight have to change course or be replaced. We are all continuously changing. But as long as we know that this is the path we want to be on and this is the person we want to share today and the now with, tomorrow and the future will sort itself out. When you say "I love you", it's meant as forever. There is no time limit that comes with love.'

Juhi started feeling better as she spoke. Trisha's questions intrigued her. 'But why are you asking all these questions? Has something happened between you and Abhimanyu?'

Trisha didn't reply and instead got up. She got two glasses of water for Juhi and herself. She didn't know if she should tell Juhi what had happened. After all, it wasn't nice to burden a friend who was going through her own troubles.

As soon as she came back into the room, Juhi said, 'Tell me!'

Trisha sat down. 'I met Vedant.'

Juhi's eyes widened. 'Where?'

'At the Holi party.'

'He was there? Why?'

'Apparently an invite had gone out to him or his father from our office that I wasn't aware of. He caught me in the lobby. We played Holi, and talked. He wants to meet me at the Sheraton tonight. He's flying out tomorrow. He was here for some work I presume. I don't know what to do.'

Juhi took a deep breath. 'But what do you want to do?'

Trisha shrugged her shoulders. She didn't have any answers.

Juhi softly placed her hand over Trisha's. 'Trish, sometimes the "idea" of a person is more appealing than the person himself. Maybe it's just this image you have of him. The perfect guy. The person you lost your virginity to. The man who quotes poetry. But for your future, maybe those things are not what's important. Don't hold on to a past, Trish, when a brighter future awaits you.'

Trisha bit her lip. She knew that Juhi had always been more fond of Abhimanyu than Vedant.

Trisha flung her arms in the air. 'Honestly, Juhi, I am confused. What if Vedant was the one true love of my life that I let go? Maybe this is my second chance with him?'

'Sometimes, some relationships feel like they need another chance. But it's a dangerous path that will leave you broken again. You may be drawn to Vedant but Abhimanyu tries to love you the way you want to be loved. He makes an effort. He sees what you like and goes along with it. A great sacrifice might not lead to great love. But great love needs great sacrifices to survive. Have you gone to his sporting tournament? Have you tried to see what he loves? Have you even seen any of the movies he watches and talked to him about it? Why is this relationship only about you? What *you* want? What *you* can't have? And what *you* feel?'

Trisha was taken aback. She hadn't seen it like that. Juhi continued, 'Vedant never made any effort. If he had wanted to, he would have kept in touch. If he had wanted to, he would have stayed back and told his father he wants to live the life he wants. Or even just explore what he wants to do for a year. He enjoyed you in college and then left. And, when nothing worked out for him, he came back to reclaim you, hoping that he could still win you back with the same stupid excuses he gave you when you were together.'

Trisha didn't like it that Juhi was being harsh. She thought it was time to break the news to Juhi. 'Abhimanyu broke up with me yesterday. And I think it's the right thing. We have nothing in common! He calls and we have nothing to say.'

Juhi was shocked but kept her calm. 'At least he was calling you to make the relationship work.'

Trisha didn't reply.

Juhi repeated, 'At least he calls. To hear your voice. To connect. To figure out the next step. At least he calls, Trisha! Each and every friggin' day. And with time you will have something in common if you just open your goddamned heart to someone who cares deeply for who you are—not for someone who wanted you to change.'

Trisha understood what Juhi was trying to say. She had been so blindsided by what she wanted that she never thought about how to give in the relationship. She was always the one 'taking' and wanting something different, something new, something more. But she wondered, wasn't love supposed to be easy? If it was all this hard work, was it worth it?

'It's over now,' Trisha said as her face fell. 'There's nothing that can be done about it. Abhimanyu is probably on his way to Monaco. He'll meet some girl there and forget about me.'

'He never wanted someone glamorous. And you never got it. If you didn't have emotions to invest, you should not have been in a relationship.'

Trisha was silenced by Juhi's response. Her friend's words were blunt but made so much sense. She had never seen herself or her relationship in that manner.

A sudden awareness settled on Juhi's face. She changed into her jeans, put on her shoes, and grabbed her house keys. 'I have to go see Sulekh. Families cannot determine our destinies. Love cannot succumb to other people's opinions. It needs to be between two people who want to be together and deserve to be.'

As Juhi left, Trisha went into her room and tried to call Abhimanyu. His phone was off. She really wanted to hear his voice again before he left but maybe it was too late. If she went to meet Vedant, she knew that Abhimanyu would never forgive her. But if she didn't, she would wonder what he had to say for the rest of her life. Curiosity was getting the better of her resilience. Which man did she really want in her life? Trisha had no clue.



Trisha reached the hotel at eight that evening. She didn't know why she had come or what she would say to Vedant. She just knew that she needed to see him once again. She called him on his mobile. He asked her to come up to his room but she told him to come down to the lobby instead.

'Come on, Trish,' Vedant insisted. 'People might recognize me down there and I don't want to be interrupted tonight. Come up. I won't bite. At least if you don't want me to.'

Trisha had to admit that she was excited to see him again. A part of her felt this was very wrong but at the same time another part reminded her that she had waited for this moment for a long time.

Trisha went up to his suite. He met her at the door and took her in his arms. She took in the fresh cologne from his face, her soft curves moulding to the contours of his body. A passionate fluttering arose deep in her chest. He held her with a firm grasp as she felt the blood coursing through her veins like an awakened river. He made no attempt to hide his readiness for her. She pulled away and walked into the suite as he gave her body a smouldering look.

Trisha was surprised to see that the room had lit candles all around and her favourite wine chilling on a bed of rocks on the table. He walked around the place with a nonchalant grace in his crisp new white shirt and favourite old Guess jeans. Trisha recognized them as the pair she had unzipped and taken off him when they had made love the first time. Her memories were as clear as day. She realized how her feelings for him had nothing to do with reason.

He walked close to her. Tenderly, his eyes melted into hers. 'God, how I've missed you. You look more beautiful now than you ever did.' He cupped her face and leaned in for a kiss but Trisha turned away; she wasn't ready yet.

He decided to take it slow. 'Will you have some wine now?'

'A coffee please.' She set her chin in a stubborn line and sat down on the plush beige sofa.

He made a dismissive gesture and smiled wickedly. 'Sorry. We don't serve coffee. And I know this Riesling is your favourite.'

She could tell that their camaraderie was still easy and comfortable, as if they had never parted.

He poured the wine in two glasses and handed one to Trisha with an insouciant nod as if to say that she really had no option. She accepted it. Vedant gestured for a toast and as they did, he said, 'To new beginnings.'

Trisha was about to take a sip of her wine but stopped and cried, exasperated, 'Vedant!'

'What?' He was amused.

Their camaraderie was easy, smooth and comfortable. It was as if no time had elapsed between the time they had parted and met again.

'You said you wanted to talk. So talk!' She took the sweet white wine in her mouth and felt her body tingle as it ran down her throat.

'Trish,' Vedant said softly as he came to sit beside her. 'I've missed you.'

There was a spark of some indefinable emotion in his eyes that Trisha was unable to comprehend. He moved his fingers against her golden skin. The mere touch of his hand sent a electric shiver through her.

'With regards to you, I can't think straight. God, how I love your skin. How much I've missed this.'

She didn't say anything.

He asked, 'How've you been?' His top button was open, revealing a newly formed muscular chest that made Trisha's heart beat even faster. His fingers gently traced the line of her jaw, her neck, her shoulders, her arm. Blood pounded in her brain, leapt from her heart and made her knees tremble. In one rapid motion, his lips were on her neck, gently biting at the place that he knew would arouse her most.

She pushed him away gently, not wanting to encourage anything that would make her regret it later.

'Talk to me, Vedant Dheeraj Kirloskar. Tell me why you wanted to see me.' She set down her glass and stared straight into his dark eyes. She realized his bronzed face had become even more appealing. His light brown hair had sandy red highlights, his strong features held a sensuality that still captivated her. His political campaigns across Maharashtra had made him quite rugged. The rich outlines of his shoulders strained against the fabric of his crisp shirt.

His fingers stroked her bare arm sensuously. 'You look so beautiful tonight. I've never seen you in this black dress.'

She remained silent.

He ran his fingers gently through her hair and said softly in her ear, 'Oh! Little lock of golden hue. In gently waving ringlet curl'd. By the dear head on which you grew, I would not lose you for a world.'

'Stop quoting Byron. It's not going to work this time!' Trisha tossed her hair aside to reveal her bare shoulders and Vedant couldn't help but notice how much more beautiful she had become. Her figure was curving and regal. The hint of her cleavage made his blood pound through his body. The long lashes of her liquid brown eyes hinted

at desires deep within. She had always been demure. Today she seemed like a woman of the world—confident, cool and sexy. She carried herself with poise, aware of his appreciative glances, uninhibited and unafraid of his signals, as she once was. His eyes sent her a carnal message that made her body scorch with desire. His fingers were cool and smooth against her skin and she thoroughly enjoyed the power she was wielding over him. He leaned in to kiss her but she moved her head away.

‘You haven’t answered my questions.’

He ignored her statement and got up to the mini bar. ‘Do you want something to eat?’

When she didn’t reply, he continued. ‘What do you want me to say, Trisha? I like being a politician. Okay? Is that a bad thing? I’ve always wanted to be one.’

She folded her arms against her chest. ‘But you told me at the party that you weren’t sure.’

He shrugged his shoulders in mock resignation. ‘I know. I’m sorry. But that’s who I am. I like my profession. I love the fact that so many people want to listen to me. I love being at conclaves, answering journalists. This was what I was born to do. This is what I’ve been trained for.’

‘Then why do you need me?’ Trisha’s retort was cold. He had said one thing at the party and was reversing it to say the complete opposite now. Maybe he had just said those things to see if he could get Trisha to meet him. His lack of honesty was putting Trisha off.

‘Because none of it matters if you’re not with me,’ he said, pleading with his eyes. ‘All the fame, the adulation and power means nothing if I can’t share it with you.’

She surveyed him closely. *Has he changed?* Maybe he did need her in his life. He walked up to her. ‘Trish, you’ve got to believe me. I would love it if you’re by my side at rallies and a part of all my lows and highs. I need you to tell me what to wear, what to say. I miss our debates. You always kept me on my toes.’

‘And Anu didn’t?’ Trisha couldn’t help but bring up his ex-fiancée.

He pulled away reluctantly. ‘Love has endless possibilities. Depression, claustrophobia and helplessness is not love. That’s what I was feeling with her. My mother forced me to get engaged to her. My father didn’t care really. Every family member is not always going to give you support and help with your career. Maybe they’re not supposed to. They’re meant to give you roots and values. Only my mother can do that.’

‘And will your parents accept me?’

‘I don’t know, Trish. But that’s a risk you need to take if you love me. And I know you do. Just the way I’ve always loved you.’

Vedant moved closer to her. He began rubbing her shoulder with his hands in a gentle massage. ‘Tell me you have no one else. Tell me you lied about that other man. I’ve not moved on. Please tell me neither have you.’ His touch sent currents of desire through her. She couldn’t focus.

She took a large sip of her Riesling and got up. Vedant searched her face for answers. ‘Okay. Look, Trish, I don’t want you to feel trapped. Let’s talk about something else. How’s your work been?’

‘Work is good. I think I should be getting a promotion soon.’

She had indeed received an email from her boss expressing her satisfaction with the massive success of the fundraiser. Not only that, her boss had said Trisha should be up for a promotion, which they would discuss in person in the coming few days. Trisha had been ecstatic that her hard work was being appreciated. It had made staying in Delhi worthwhile.

‘You deserve it,’ Vedant said. ‘The party was amazing.’

‘Wait,’ Trisha suddenly remembered. ‘How did you really find out about the party? I don’t remember sending you an invite.’ Her eyes examined him, daring him to tell another lie.

Vedant felt trapped. ‘I didn’t. I had come for a meeting at that hotel and at the reception I overheard people talking about the party. Someone also mentioned your name to get entry. I knew if I waited long enough, I would see you. Otherwise I would have just used my own pull to crash your party.’

It became clearer to Trisha: Vedant hadn’t really come all the way to Delhi, and to that hotel, to win her back. *It was sheer chance that he was there.*

‘I’ve asked you this and I’ll ask again. Why didn’t you write to me when you broke off your engagement?’

‘I wasn’t sure if you would want to see me.’

‘That’s bullshit. You didn’t even write to me.’

‘You’re right. I was scared. I didn’t know how to approach you again.’

‘Oh, come on. You’ve always had a way with words. And if you still loved me, you would never have agreed to getting engaged in the first place!’

‘I told you I had no choice!’

‘Rubbish!’ Trisha’s voice was rising in anger. ‘You always have a choice. When you stop making excuses for your behaviour, you will grow mindful of what you really need to do, Vedant. It’s just been easier for you to make excuses. It’s your career again. It’s not what I want to do. It’s not how you will help me adjust to your family life. It’s whether I can or not.’

She paused. ‘See? We’re having the same argument we had when we were together. Nothing has changed!’

‘Trish, please calm down.’ He was crestfallen. His confidence defeated, Vedant settled into a sofa.

But Trisha could not be stopped. ‘Only when you give your actions serious consideration will you be able to face the serious consequences without fear. Have you stood up to your parents about who you want to date? Maybe your political career is important to them, but what about your love life? Am I just a piece in the puzzle that will complete it?’

‘No! You’re more than that. What has gotten into you? I need you to be more patient. It’s just a matter of time, everything will settle into place soon enough if you give us a chance. Time is of the essence here. Why do you want all the answers now? Can’t we figure it out as we go along?’

‘As we go along,’ Trisha said in a mocking tone. ‘Go along where? We can continue like this but if neither of us change who we are or the goals we have, we will

never reach a compromise. Are you willing to travel to Delhi to keep this relationship alive? Do you want to get married one day? Are you willing to help me adjust to your family? Will you come to see my parents in Lucknow whenever I ask you to?' Trisha felt she already knew the answers to all of her questions.

Vedant said, 'All in good time. Can't we give ourselves a few years to figure this out? Our careers are just starting. Why bring in parents and all that into it right now?'

Trisha fell silent, remembering Abhimanyu. How graciously he had introduced Trisha to her parents and how welcoming they were of her. She felt ashamed of her insecurities about him. *My doubts about him made me come to meet Vedant!*

All at once, she understood that what she was doing was wrong. What she felt next surprised even her: an overwhelming sense of closure towards Vedant; she had no bitterness towards him.

She spoke again, her face displaying an implacable expression that Vedant found unnerving. 'What you allow is what will continue.'

She knew that she would only matter in his life when he chose for her to matter. Juhi and her mother's words echoed in her head: Vedant could never love her the way she wanted. She would only be wasting her love, her precious reservoir of affection on a man incapable of loving anyone besides himself. He needed her for his amorous pleasures, for his political ambitions, his rallies, and to keep him on his toes. But not once had he given her what she needed. His presence, his commitment to a future. And the willingness to adapt to her life.

'Trish, let's figure this out,' he said smoothly.

She went to sit by his side, leaned in, and gave him a peck on the cheek. 'Thank you for making me realize what I need. I don't want to get back together with you. I need someone who is willing to be there when I want him. Someone who is unafraid to show his passion. Someone who can't live without me. Who will call every day. Who will make me laugh when I'm stressed. Who will understand that I just need to argue for argument's sake and still love me.'

Trisha walked to the door. 'You're not that person and you never will be. Goodbye, Vedant.'

He could only shake his head in disbelief.

With head held high, Trisha gave Vedant a smile before she opened the door and left. Trisha knew that this time, their goodbye was forever. She was now more willing to risk being alone for the rest of her life, but she would not compromise on what she needed. The cloud of confusion about who was the right man for her was finally lifting.



Trisha headed home after saying goodbye to Vedant. In the cab, she gathered her thoughts and she realized the paradox of her situation right now: she had never felt so alone and yet so alive in her life. She knew she had done the right thing. Vedant had always been a ghost in her relationship with Abhimanyu. And now she didn't have either Abhimanyu or Vedant. *The Universe is playing such a cruel joke on me!* She laughed. The cab driver looked at her in the rearview mirror.

Trisha knew she would be fine. For the first time in her life, she discovered that she didn't need anyone. She knew that her choices had to be towards securing her future, not shaking them up. If she had got back with Vedant, they would have only ended up twirling around the same loop all over again. People don't change. And worse, people's perceptions of each other don't change either. Maybe Vedant would have been wonderful for spouting poetry and cheering her up when she was blue. But he would have been out on rallies, campaigning and unable to be with her whenever she needed. And if his parents had already formed an opinion of her family, it would be mighty difficult for that to change. Acceptance doesn't come easily to people when they've made up their minds.

With Abhimanyu and his parents, though, she had made a good impression. Now she felt stupid about having said such horrible things to him. She chose to harp on their differences instead of appreciating their beauty, like the eternal principle of the yin and yang. He had never made her feel unwelcome in his life. He had always invited her to wherever he was going. He lived in the moment. And she had insulted him. Hung up on him. Thought she was better than he was. Why? Just because she was a so-called 'intellectual'? He knew more about sports than she did. He knew more about films than she did. And he probably would have revealed whatever else he knew if she had just given him a chance. She had judged him according to what she knew. Her tastes, her standards, and her life. *Why should anyone have to live up to your standards? Have you even tried to live up to theirs?* It dawned on her how ego blinds you from reality: you can't appreciate the genuine acts of kindness from people or the depths of love from a friend.

She took a deep breath and exhaled. Then she said Sorry! out loud, though to no one in particular. She needed the words to be out there for someone to hear that she had been selfish and stupid. She would never make those mistakes again. She surrendered to the Universe. She opened herself up to endless possibilities and gave up on every doubt she had ever had about herself and her relationships. She was ready to start all over again, with a sparkling, bright mind and a clean heart.



Trisha opened the door and stood frozen at the doorway. Abhimanyu looked up from the sofa and smiled at her.

He got up. 'You wanted someone who would always be around. Well, I'm around.'

Trisha was overjoyed. She ran into his arms and held him tight, as if she would never let him go again. Her breasts rose with her heavy breathing and hot tears formed in her eyes from the sheer happiness she felt on seeing him there.

After a long embrace she pulled away. 'When did you come? Don't you have a tournament to go to? Why didn't you call?' she rambled. She felt the blood surge, from her fingertips to her toes, as she held him tightly.

He peered at her intently. 'Darling, come sit down.' He went into the kitchen and got her a glass of water. She finished the whole glass, feeling the flush from her face slowly receding. He reached out and unfastened the clip from behind her hair, letting it tumble around her face. He whispered into her tresses, 'Aaah. That's better.' His smile was as warm as bright sunshine on a cold monsoon day.

'I came an hour ago,' he said. 'I wanted to give you a surprise so I didn't call. And I don't want to go to a tournament again without you.'

Trisha kept quiet, feeling more blissful with his every word. He spoke softly, 'I have no life but this, to lead it here; nor any death, but lest dispelled from there; nor ties to earths to come; nor action new, except through this extent, the realm of you.'

Trisha almost choked. 'Did you just quote Emily Dickinson?'

Abhimanyu nodded and let out a hearty laugh.

She was speechless. He was clearly uncomfortable reciting poetry and yet he had, understanding how she loved it.

'Don't ask me to recite any more, though. This took long enough. But I will learn more soon...if you still want to be with me.'

She pushed back a wayward strand of dark hair from his face and cupped his chin.

She watched his gentle face carefully. ‘Kiss me. Kiss me as though it were the last time.’

Abhimanyu’s face broke into a wide smile. ‘Did you just quote Ilsa from *Casablanca*?’

‘Do you think you’re the only one who can learn new things? I will learn more soon...if you will allow me back in your life.’

Abhimanyu swept her into his arms and planted a deep, soulful kiss on her mouth that made her melt into a river of desire. She drank in the sweetness of his kiss and prayed that this moment would never end. She knew that Abhimanyu was the right man for her. She had never felt this connected to anyone. Right at that moment, she sent out a vow to the Universe: she will be a loving and faithful partner for the rest of her life. She felt a bottomless peace and satisfaction in knowing that he had come back for her.

And to give back that love, she needed to be truthful to him, too. Their relationship could not be based on lies and dishonesty. She needed to confess everything that had happened in the past few days.

‘Abhi, I need to tell you something,’ she said as she pulled away.

He gauged the seriousness of her tone. ‘What?’

She turned away from him before saying, ‘I went to meet my ex-boyfriend, Vedant, today.’

Abhimanyu fell silent and Trisha’s heart pounded. *Will I lose him once again?* Going to Vedant’s hotel room seemed so sleazy now. How did she expect Abhimanyu to react? But Trisha wanted to come clean before she could get back together with him; Abhimanyu deserved to know the truth.

‘I met him at the Holi party,’ she continued. ‘He wanted to talk to me and invited me to his hotel.’ She bit her lip. ‘I went to his room.’

‘And?’ Abhimanyu’s voice was devoid of any emotion.

Trisha swiveled around. ‘And nothing.’ She spoke with one hand on her chest, where her heart was, to show Abhimanyu how earnest she was. ‘Absolutely nothing happened, you’ve got to believe me. I wouldn’t let it. And I ended it with him for good this time. He met me and wanted me back in his life. And I needed to end it. To find closure. For both of us. I tried calling you before I went to meet him but your phone was switched off.’

She gulped hard, a hot tear trickling down her cheek. She tried to read his face but couldn’t; it was stony cold.

‘Are you really over him? Or will you go running back to him every time he’s in town and asks you to see him at some hotel?’

Trisha shook her head vigorously. ‘No, no. Never! He belongs to the past and I have let go of it. I needed to face him before I could say goodbye. Only then would I have closure. I will never be with him again. I don’t need to.’

He spoke sharply now, getting impatient, ‘Trisha, you’ve got to be sure about this. The one thing I will not tolerate is infidelity. You can have as many male friends as you want but not an ex-boyfriend. No one can ever be “just good friends” with an ex. I’m not cool with that at all. You need to choose once and for all.’

‘I don’t even want to be friends with him. That chapter of my life is closed.’

When Abhimanyu still looked annoyed, Trisha went to sit close to him. ‘Please

know how much I love you. And how much I need you. And how I *never* felt that way about him. He was just an “idea” that was stuck in my mind all along. And I’ve shaken that off permanently. You’re my true love, Abhimanyu. It just took me a while to realize it.’

When he didn’t reply, Trisha continued, beseeching him. ‘Please forgive me.’

He still didn’t say anything and pondered over Trisha’s revelation. While he could not yet bring himself to accept her apologies, he appreciated her honesty. After all, how many times had he been taken for a ride by his ex-girlfriends? They all treated him only as the celebrity that he appeared to be, not as the person he truly was. Twice in his life, he had broken up with a girl who had taken the real him for granted. He knew he would not be able to take one more.

‘I just don’t know,’ he muttered.

Trisha watched him closely. She knew her confession bothered him a lot. Yet there was nothing she could do and she had nothing more to say. If he couldn’t accept her for who she was, then she would let it be. She had told him nothing but the truth, had apologized and pleaded. Beyond that, she had to hold her head high and move on.

It was all up to him.



They sat in her drawing room in silence, neither of them willing to yield.

‘I’ve been burnt before,’ Abhimanyu finally said, his voice so devoid of any emotion that it sent chills through Trisha. ‘I’ve been used before and I’m not sure if I want to go through that again.’

Her dark eyes showed the anguish of disbelief. She gathered herself up and realized that if that’s what he wanted, then so be it. She spoke softly but firmly, ‘I love you with all my heart. I can promise you that I will be faithful. That I will be honest. That I will try every day to make you happy. And I will never use you. But beyond that, I cannot say anything else. If you don’t trust me, believe in me and love me without a single doubt in your mind, you should go. Because I cannot keep convincing you of my love and my dedication.

‘I am who I am. I need to work. I need someone who loves only me, no matter where he is in the world, and who he is with. I want a man to hold me so tight that I will be the one to need space. Not someone who lets me have space and wait around for him to hold me tight. I want a relationship that is honest, respectful and deeply loving. You have to decide whether you want to be a part of my life or not. Because I definitely want to be a part of yours. The ball’s in your court.’

She straightened herself up to stand tall next to him. She took a deep breath and waited for his response, calm and in control despite her fragile heart.

Abhimanyu’s lips broke into a smile. ‘I liked your analogy. Quite a back hand, down-the-line kinda ball I must say.’

What was he saying? Did he want her back or not?

‘Trisha, I’m no good at being noble. But it doesn’t take much to see that the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of bean in this crazy world.’

‘Have you taken to heart all the dialogues from *Casablanca*?’ she teased.

He took her in his arms and kissed her hard. She kissed him back.

‘I will never doubt you,’ he said as they pulled apart. ‘If you stop being so crazy

jealous when I'm talking to another woman or have female fans come up to me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I've seen how you behave when there's a woman around me. You get so jealous!'

She shoved him playfully. 'Am most certainly not.'

He pulled her close and put his arm around her. 'Oh, yes you are! And I like it that you love me enough to be jealous. But please don't do it too often? Because it might become a thorn between us eventually. I mean, if we're going to be married, I wouldn't want you to be jealous of my mixed-doubles partner.'

Trisha's breath caught in her throat. Did she hear him right? 'Married?' She didn't realize she had said it out loud.

He looked at her as if he was photographing her with his eyes. 'Oh, yes. Need to ask you that. Will you marry me?' He repeated with a wide smile on his face.

Joy bubbled in her laugh and shone in her eyes. She felt blissful. She was fully alive.

'Of course, Abhimanyu Laxman, I will marry you!' Her heart overflowed with happiness. 'But will it be a long-distance marriage? How do we settle this? I'm in Delhi and you're somewhere else, always traveling.'

'No, it's not going to be like that,' he said. 'I'm going to do all my trainings in Delhi. And I shall travel only for select tournaments. I want to focus on increasing my ranking and not play too many matches that will tire me out. So I will be around much more. If you will have me.'

She threw her arms around his neck, standing on her toes. 'I shall have you every day—morning, noon and night—Abhimanyu Laxman.'

He gathered her into his arms and held her snugly. Reclaiming her lips, he crushed her to him with a fury. His kiss sent new spirals of ecstasy through her as his lips moved down to explore the soft hollow of her neck and the curve of her shoulder. One hand slid across her silken belly to the swell of her hips. She couldn't help but let out a soft moan.

He took her hand and led her to the bedroom. 'I think we need to consummate this proposal. We have a few hours before we leave for Monaco.'

She was puzzled. 'Did you just say Monaco? And did you say "we"?''

He continued to touch her, his able fingers finding all her pleasure points before he replied, 'Yes. I have a tournament to play tomorrow and I told you I won't go without you.'

Trisha didn't know whether to cry out from the pleasures of his touch or from the thought of flying to Monaco with her fiancé.

'Monaco. Monaco,' she muttered, still incredulous.

'You'll fall in love with the Mediterranean from the first helicopter ride. The flight's in a few hours.' He locked his arms around her waist. His touch sent tingles all over her body. Passion inched through her veins as he planted a moist, firm kiss on her lips. She unbuttoned his shirt and led him to the bedroom. She whispered softly as she ran kisses across his hard, bronzed chest, 'Well, then let's make the most of this night.'

Trisha Mathur knew that, finally, she was at Advantage Love.

... I Love you Rachu ...

Will today's woman give up her career for love?

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When Trisha Mathur leaves Lucknow for Delhi with stars in her eyes, little does she realize how drastically her life is about to transform.

In the din and drama of college student politics, she meets debonair politician-in-the-making Vedant Kirloskar, who sweeps her off her feet with his poetry and rakish charm. When irreconcilable differences drive them apart, a broken-hearted Trisha becomes wary of love and men. That is until the dashing tennis star, Abhimanyu, comes along and fills her life with love and laughter. All at once she finds herself in the midst of the glamorous tennis circuit which is in stark contrast to her small-town moorings.

Even as Trisha embarks on a path of love and self-discovery, fate brings Vedant back into her life, asking that they rekindle their old romance. Will Trisha dare take a second chance with Vedant or move on to play match point with Abhimanyu?

Advantage Love is a compelling and passionate contemporary Indian romance that explores the complexities of love, friendship and career in a woman's life.

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