

From the national bestselling author



Sudeep Nagarkar

A Second Chance



The truth was, he didn't have extra money to spend on such luxuries. His family was poor, and he had a part-time job after school to help with expenses. Raghav knew this, and would usually just buy his friend whatever he was having.

'Here's your sandwich,' Raghav said as he handed it over to Dhruv. He unpacked his own and took a bite of it.

'I told you I was not hungry,' Dhruv said defensively.

Some people saw Raghav as insensitive and self-centred, but when it came to Dhruv, he always made sure that nothing would upset his friend and went out of his way to take care of him.

'I know. Don't act smart. If it were in my hands, I wouldn't allow you to do that part-time job. Anyway, how was your paper?'

Dhruv walked beside Raghav, taking a bite of his sandwich. 'I won't say it was great, but it wasn't bad either. What about you?'

Before Raghav could answer, their English teacher passed by. Then she stopped and looked back at Raghav, with a naughty smile. The way she did that immediately made Dhruv feel that something was fishy. He couldn't understand why such looks were being exchanged between them. At first he felt a little embarrassed, and in the next moment, he was curious to know the story behind those glances.

'I hope you answered all the questions easily.' The teacher bit her lower lip and gave him a mischievous grin.

'Yes, ma'am. Thank you,' Raghav replied with a smirk on his face. Dhruv was speechless.

'I am equally thankful to you,' she said and left.

Dhruv couldn't hold back any longer. 'Why the fuck did she thank you? What's going on between you two?'

'I called you yesterday saying I know the questions that would appear in the paper, right? But you didn't take me seriously.'

'Do you mean she leaked the paper to you? Are you serious?' Dhruv's curiosity only increased with every revelation.

Raghav narrated the entire story to Dhruv as they walked towards his car.

continued to bicker, stopping only when Disha's grandmother spoke up.

'Will you both just stop and act like mature adults? Let me live the last days of my life peacefully. Every single day starts with a fight and ends with one. Can't you think even once about Disha's feelings?'

Finally, her parents were silent, and a relieved Disha took her grandmother's blessings by touching her feet. Her grandmother hugged her and wished her good luck for her exam. Disha was very close to her, and she in turn cared for her granddaughter tremendously. Amidst the constant conflict at home, they found comfort in each other's company. They were inseparable, to the extent that Disha's parents feared that their daughter would suffer a breakdown if something happened to her grandmother. Since she was a child, her grandmother had been a source of happiness and a refuge from the endless fights between her parents. Seeing them argue so much, she had become apprehensive about relationships, and never made friends easily. The environment in her house forced her to be guarded, and she dreaded opening up in front of others.

'Disha, you better hurry up,' her mother yelled as she laced up her school shoes.

'G'morning,' Disha said, ignoring her comment as she sat down to eat her breakfast. She quietly finished what was on her plate and stood up to leave.

'There was an A-minus on your report card last year. Don't let it happen this year,' her mother said irritably. 'Next year you have your boards. It's time to get serious.'

'Shouldn't you be heading to school?' her father said curtly. She nodded and, as she walked out the door, she could hear her parents start arguing again.

Her parents said they stayed in the marriage for her sake. Theirs had been a love marriage but it had fallen apart to the extent that her mother wouldn't even let her breathe in a boy's presence or have friends outside of school. She was afraid Disha would make the same mistake and end up trapped in a loveless marriage. By now Disha

'What happened? You look stressed and sound so low. Not done with exam preparations ... or some other reason?' Kajal asked.

'Nothing new. Same old fights between Mom and Dad. They just don't care about anything else when they get into one of their ugly spats. I'm so fed up with their behaviour. If they can't be happy, why are they together?'

Kajal shrugged as her eyes moved from the road ahead to Disha. 'They say it's because of you, right?'

'Yes. But what's the point in that? It's not adding to my happiness, even a little bit. Their dislike for each other makes me nervous; I don't feel like staying in that house anymore. Luckily, while these exams were going on, Dad was out of town on work. I could study properly. But ever since he got back yesterday, the atmosphere at home has been tense. After every brief silence, there's loud shouting outside my room. No one cares about my feelings, my needs. I am their child and I need them; I crave their love and care. I long for all those moments that normal children enjoy with their parents. But all I get is pain and suffering.'

Reaching school, Disha and Kajal parked their cycles and walked towards their exam rooms. Kajal pulled out her notes for a last-minute revision, but instead of going through the pages, she looked at Disha. Holding her hand tight, she said, 'Just relax. Anytime you need a friend to talk to, I'll be there. You're not alone. You can always turn to me, and open your heart and soul. But right now, let's turn the pages of the book to avoid getting our asses kicked.' She laughed and tried to lighten the mood.

Kajal always sensed exactly what her friend was feeling. She had never turned her back on Disha or let her down. She was always there for her, ready to offer an ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on, a hand to hold and a heart to feel. A true friend is someone who listens, supports and can be counted on; Kajal was one such friend. Disha felt loved in her company, and treasured their friendship.

Disha smiled. 'To have a friend like you is like finding a silver heart in a bag of sand. Thank you for everything.'

harder it is to connect, feel loved and give love. The past, with its deep wounds, shapes us all. The reason I am the way I am is not only my own failed relationship, but also that of my parents. Most kids idolise their parents, and they want their marriages to be like the one their parents have. Not me. I have always seen my mother and father arguing and fighting over the smallest things, and their constant bickering meant that I was not allowed to have a happy and carefree childhood like others.

Love will eventually happen, I tried to tell myself, and those who were close to me told me the same thing. Of course, love and attraction aren't everything, I concluded. Understanding and patience go a long way. Life is good, and life is going to get better, I convinced myself. So I pretended to be happy. I pushed away those feelings of apprehension and stopped my heart from sinking at the thought of my marriage being just a blink away. I forced a smile on my face when people expressed their happiness at my getting married, and prepared myself to look at my life partner as my love. To try and keep 'I' aside and think of 'We'.

There are days when the illusion melts. It takes only a moment for it to break down. And it's something as small as a movie or a song, letting loose that clogged-up river of tears and fears. And I realise how much I miss love. How much I miss being in love. How important love is. It is easy to fool the world, but fooling oneself is next to impossible. My heart shouts aloud, asking me to resist for some more days. The realisation hits that in the coming days, everything will be different, changing my life completely. I will have to manage both families, his and mine; it would be my responsibility to keep them happy and be happy all the time. Am I capable of doing that? My heart's shouting aloud that it isn't ready, but it's too late. My wedding is just hours away, and here I am wondering whether my husband will be supportive, for even he will have to handle a new family, like me.

As much as I cry now in the dark, I have to remind myself that there is no turning back. I know I am looking for at least one strong reason to escape. Make others change their decision. But it is not going to happen. Marrying strangers is no new thing in our country. Many have gone

'As you know, Miss Roma started coaching me a few months back. The first few weeks were business as usual. She would come to my home after school every day and teach me. We began getting to know each other. Now, fast-forward to her becoming comfortable enough to talk about her personal life with me, which I absolutely didn't mind. One day she messaged me on Yahoo! Messenger, saying she was going on a date with our sports teacher, and my response was "use protection". She messaged back with a wink emoji. The next night, she sent me a message again, telling me about her date, and out of nowhere she asked me if I thought she was hot. She is the type of woman I'm attracted to, so of course I said yes. She asked me what was hot about her, and I told her how much I liked her butt. Our conversations gradually shifted to sexting, and she confessed that she was obsessed with virgin boys. Then she asked if I was one. When I told her I had never done it before, she responded, "I think you'll like it with me." We kissed last week and I touched her assets through her clothes. I felt totally inexperienced at first, but she made me feel comfortable. And just before the English exam, when she came over to coach me, she told me about her lust for me, and we pleasured each other with some amazing foreplay. And then she told me all the questions in the exam paper.'

Dhruv was both shocked and excited as he listened to Raghav's story. He certainly wished he were in Raghav's place, but was upset by the fact that Raghav had a girlfriend and yet felt no guilt about getting involved with his English teacher.

'What the heck is wrong with you? What if Juhi comes to know about it? She'll feel betrayed. It's not right. She is your girlfriend.' The concern in Dhruv's voice was evident.

'Dhruv, I have wanted to tell you this for some time now, but I was waiting for the exams to get over. To be quite frank, I am really fed up with Juhi. It's been barely six months since we started dating, and she keeps getting into my space. What to do, what not to do; which girl I should talk to, which one to avoid. She has a problem with everything I do, and it gets on my nerves. And I am not saying

at him. Instead, she continued writing on her answer sheet. A few minutes back, she had been wondering whether he would ever talk to her, and here he was whispering something to her.

She could hear him say something again.

'Hey ... can you show me the letter-writing section please,' Raghav whispered.

Disha still couldn't gather the courage to look up and continued to stare down at her answer sheet. *Should I help him? What if I get caught? But if I don't help, what will he think of me? He will never ever talk to me again. But he doesn't even know my name. How would it matter? Anyway, I am not his type.*

Finally, Disha decided to show him the answer to the question. She liked him, and couldn't hold herself back from helping him out. There was something about him that made her heart beat faster. After the exam, Raghav thanked her and walked out of the classroom. Disha was still grappling with the fact that he had actually spoken to her. She couldn't stop smiling even after he was gone. Anyone who has had a crush on someone would comprehend exactly what her emotions were. An entire romantic novel couldn't have expressed how she felt at that moment.

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'Raghav ... wait for me!'

Raghav was on his way to the canteen to grab a sandwich before heading home when he heard Dhruv calling out to him. He immediately turned and asked Dhruv to join him. He was Raghav's closest friend, and they often went back home together after school. Raghav was one of the few students for whom a car along with a driver would be waiting outside the gate after school hours.

'Will you have something to eat?' Raghav asked as they walked into the canteen.

As always, Dhruv refused. 'No, thanks. I'm not hungry.'

PROLOGUE

In a few hours, I'm going to be married. Only I know what my heart is going through. Seeing the moon, full and bright amidst the dark skies, gives me hope. It feels like a sign that everything will be fine. And that gives me strength. Yet ... I can feel the turbulence in my mind and in every ounce of my body. Does every girl have these feelings or is it just me? I am not sure. But I am sure that not every girl has second thoughts on the night before her marriage.

She looked up from the page on which she was writing, a sea of emotions inside her. Her bedroom door was locked, and she was all alone, sitting at her table near the window, glancing at the bridal outfit on her bed every now and then. She could hear her parents talking excitedly outside her door. The bedside clock in her room struck twelve. With a heavy heart, she scanned her bedroom, reliving memories of all the years she had spent in it. The sound of a text message brought her back to reality; it was her fiancé, sending her best wishes for their D-day. She put the phone down without replying and continued scribbling in the diary.

Marrying someone you don't love isn't easy and that's the sole reason I avoided giving in to my parents' appeals for a long time. Ever since I experienced the emotion of love, and understood what love means, I have wanted to marry someone I was friends with or had feelings for. Eventually I yielded to the pressure. There's an age for these things, people said, including my parents. And so I agreed to marry a guy they chose for me. I'm not sure if my decision is right or whether it is the right time to do this. Will he come in the way of my dreams or will he stand by me? A part of me is hopeful, a part lost, not fully understanding what

this because I've gotten close to Miss Roma; that's very casual—nothing serious about it. I don't know how to tell Juhi it's over. But I have to.'

'I had no idea you guys were on the verge of breaking up,' Dhruv said as he got into the car with Raghav.

As the driver started the car, Raghav continued, 'Dude, she doesn't even allow me to hug her properly, forget about getting more intimate with each other. She feels we're too young for all this. After being in a relationship for months, she isn't even comfortable with me kissing her. And that pisses me off.'

'Don't you feel she is right on her part? We are still in school and taking our boards this year. You never know what might be going on in her mind. It must be the first time for her,' Dhruv said, trying to pacify his friend. However, Raghav was in no mood to listen.

'I understand, and I try to make her comfortable each and every time we are alone together. Isn't it natural on my part too, to have such feelings towards my girlfriend, and for me to expect her to understand my needs? I mean it's just a kiss here and there—not sex.'

'I feel you're being too harsh with her. You need to concentrate on your studies and let time decide the fate of your relationship,' Dhruv said.

'Anyway, chuck it,' Raghav said. 'It's an endless discussion. Listen, we're all going out to celebrate the end of exams in the evening. Will you join us?'

'You guys carry on. I have to go to work today; can't take an off,' Dhruv said as the car pulled up outside his home.

'It's just one day, come on. You deserve it after all the studying,' Raghav said.

Dhruv shook his head. 'I have to look after my own schooling expenses. Even one day's pay matters a lot, brother,' he said with a small smile and got out of the car.

Raghav and Dhruv were poles apart when it came to their personalities. Dhruv was studious and extremely hard-working. Having grown up in a family that struggled for every penny, he understood

had created a shell around herself, which was extremely difficult to break. The only saving grace in that house was her grandmother, without whom she felt she couldn't have survived.

Stepping out of the house, she thought, every morning I fight a battle within myself to get out of bed. Some days I prevail easily, and other days the trauma wins. The day continues, and I feel a constant pull within me to go back to bed. My love for school has vanished; it has simply become another area where I let myself down. My mind doesn't work like it once did, and I can't seem to keep up. I make bad choices in my never-ending search for mere moments of happiness. I have started to feel that there's no true love left in this world, and that all relationships will fail and fall apart at some point in life. Will I ever feel loved in my life? These thoughts break me, and I feel like running away and hiding in some corner of the world.

As she rode her bicycle to school, instead of thinking about what she had studied the previous night, she kept thinking about the trauma she had to go through every day, not because of her own mistakes or bad behaviour, but because her parents felt caged in a marriage that made them unhappy. Disha was lost in her thoughts when she heard a familiar voice.

'Hey Disha, all geared up for the exam?'

It was Kajal, Disha's best friend for the last five years. They lived in the same area, went to the same school and shared everything that happened in their lives. There was not much they didn't know about each other. All these years, no arguments could come in the way of their friendship.

As Kajal rode alongside on her cycle, Disha said, 'I think so. Let's hope for the best.'

Kajal could sense the dullness in her friend's voice, and saw that the twinkle in her eyes was missing. No matter what the situation was at home, with Kajal, Disha would usually manage to smile and be present in the moment. However, today, Kajal could see that Disha's mind was elsewhere.

CHAPTER 1

April 2006

'Wake up,' Disha's dad said softly as he opened her bedroom door. It was the day of her last exam.

'What time is it?' she asked sleepily, rubbing her eyes and trying to see what the time was on the alarm clock by her bed. Her books and notes were scattered all across her room. She had fallen asleep while studying in the wee hours.

'Time for you to wake up. Your alarm has gone off four times already. Hope you are prepared for your exam,' her father said before leaving.

Disha got up and stumbled her way to the bathroom, careful not to slip on the wet floor. After a quick shower, she walked into the living room. Her parents were arguing about something.

'How many times have I told you not to touch my work files! I have an important presentation today and now I can't find a document. Can't you be a little more responsible? I am so fed up with you. If it were not for Disha, I would have just moved on!' her father said angrily.

'Stop blaming me for every problem in your life. Before calling me irresponsible, just look at yourself once. If I start, I could go on forever about your carelessness, but I'm not selfish like you. Disha has an exam today, and I don't want her to get distracted by all this.' Her mother was equally furious.

As if they care about me and what I'm going through, Disha thought, as she walked quietly towards the dining table. Her parents

through it and are ‘happily settled’ now. If they can do it, I should be able to, as well. I must persuade myself that the work of marriage is not about finding and keeping your ideal counterpart. Marriage is about what you do when you discover you can be with the most perfect person for you, and still find yourself frustrated, exhausted, dragged down and at your wits’ end.

We choose the right person through unconscious love maps. These are signs, thoughts and recommendations we pick up over time to piece together a concept of the ‘right’ partner. We gather these through various experiences—failed relationships, trauma, other people’s beliefs and our own ideas. Years ago, I had dreams about my wedding—the man I would marry, the joy I would feel, the ceremonies, the clothes. I thought about how happy and how excited I would be to share the good news with the whole world. How I would show off my husband-to-be to everyone. I never dreamt that I would be dreading the drastic change, perceiving it as an ordeal and my marriage as a threat to my life, identity and individuality. Elders have always told me stories of how they married strangers and adjusted to that concept, that person. I often tried to put myself in their place and my only thought was—no, I can’t do it. That’s just not me. But here I am. About to marry a guy who is more or less a stranger.

There is an atmosphere of celebration all around. Relatives and friends call me to ask how the preparations are going, how much I interact with my future in-laws, what plans I’ve made with my fiancé. These phone calls create a panic within me. I am marrying a guy who doesn’t know the real me. It’s not that I am being forced to get married—I do want this—but I am scared. Is this feeling acceptable? Is this normal?

the value of everything that came his way, including relationships. Raghav, on the other hand, had a casual attitude to everything and everyone because of his rich parents and lavish upbringing. The only thing they had in common, connecting them strongly, was their friendship and respect for each other.

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Before Dhruv could ring the bell, his father opened the door for him. He had heard Raghav's car drive up, and since not many cars entered the lane leading to their chawl, he had figured it was his son's rich friend. Dhruv's home was on the ground floor, and as he stepped in, his dad—who was at home on his lunch break—helped him with his school bag.

'Baba, I'm finally done with my exams.'

'I'm sure you will pass with flying colours. So, what should I get you if you score well in your exams?' His dad smiled sadly, knowing he couldn't afford to buy him any gifts.

'It's okay, Baba. Give something to Priya when her results are out.'

Priya was his sister, a year younger than him, and he loved her with all his heart; he felt he would do anything to see her happy. She smiled at him now, as she handed him the clothes she had ironed and kept ready for him.

'You weren't feeling well last night... are you better now?' Dhruv asked, with an affectionate pat on her head.

'I'm better—maybe the anxiety about the exams got to me,' Priya said, sitting down beside him. She too had come from school a few minutes before him, after writing her last exam.

'How did your maths exam go? Did you manage to solve all the problems correctly?' Dhruv asked.

'Yes, bhai. When I have someone like you to teach me, how can I perform badly?' Priya replied with a smile on her face.

is happening. For the past few weeks, I have skirted around reality, not acknowledging it till it stood in front of me and punched me in the face. Here I am. Face me, it said.

I tried to swim against the storm. I fought a battle that I knew I was going to lose some day or the other. Foolish girl, trying to fight fate.

I've grown up thinking the hardest part is to find the 'right' person, and I assumed all these years that this person would be the key to a happy life. The more 'right' a person is for me, the less suffering I would undergo. But how does one find that 'right' person? I've been in a relationship in the past, believing I would be happiest with the person I was with—isn't that the way one is supposed to feel? Is it too much to ask for? I thought that was the least I could expect, but I found I was wrong. I ended up all alone, and with my heart broken. Silly me. I had unrealistic expectations, and believe me, these expectations can wreck you if you let them. You feel lost, and ill-equipped to cope with life, unless you are strong enough to face the world all alone despite your shattered dreams. Every time I felt I had overcome the worst, things got even worse. And that was when I was with the person I believed to be the 'right' one for me.

So it scares me to think that I am going to spend my entire life with someone who hardly knows me. My hopes have been crushed in the past. And although I know I should not judge myself on the basis of my broken relationships, what if I fail once again? It would result in a broken marriage. How would I handle the stress that comes with that?

What if the old wounds hurt again by stealing into my new relationship? They can prevent the connection from taking off, disrupt the bonding, or slowly suffocate it until it's gasping for air. Relationships require openness, which means we have to let ourselves be vulnerable. The wall needs to fall and the armour needs to soften. That is my dilemma, as always: let go off the armour and risk getting hurt, or don't let go of the armour and risk the relationship I deserve.

Already, I have wrapped an armour around myself to stop the things that have hurt me before from ever hurting me again. It isn't a bad thing—we all need it—but the tougher and tighter the armour, the

Dhruv not only managed his studies along with work, but also kept track of his sister's academic progress, often helping her out before exams. Sometimes, he felt overburdened with responsibilities for a boy his age, but he never cribbed or backed away from his duties. He made his parents proud by being the kind of son he was, and everyone in their chawl admired him for being so mature at such a young age.

'Where's my work uniform? Please iron that for me too,' he requested Priya as he washed his face. He only had an hour to have lunch before he got ready for his afternoon shift at McDonald's.

Dhruv's father drove a taxi, and although he worked hard to give his children a better future, they had always struggled to pay the bills. Now, as Dhruv entered his tenth standard, they couldn't afford any luxuries.

Dhruv picked up a glass of water and looked out of the window facing the main road at the back of the chawl. All he could see was his neighbour's bungalow, which blocked his view of the green belt that lay beyond. He sipped the water, dreaming about what it would be like to live in a palace like that, when he saw a face looking back at him through one of the bungalow's windows. He slowly turned away, hoping to forget about that awkward encounter, and sat down to have lunch. His father and sister joined him as his mother served the food.

'Eat properly and then leave. Don't just rush through your meal,' his mother said, smiling at him. Every word she spoke reflected the immense love she felt for Dhruv and her family. She and her husband were progressive in their thinking despite having lived in a chawl all their lives. They wanted their kids to study and be able to achieve all the dreams they cherished. It was something they hadn't been able to do for themselves. They led a hand-to-mouth existence, but their children never felt deprived of affection.

Both Dhruv and Priya were mature enough to understand the financial situation of the family. At lunch, Dhruv could sense his father was worried about something.

'Wait ... that line is from Unit 6, Human Relations, in the chapter on friendship. That means you have thoroughly studied for today's English exam.' Kajal laughed.

Disha laughed too. 'Shut the fuck up now and concentrate on the exam. Good luck!' She waved as she stopped outside her exam room and Kajal walked on towards hers, which was on the same floor.

All the students were huddled in the corridor, waiting for the exam to start. Some were talking to each other, others were reading and revising their lessons, and a few just stayed silent. Disha was in the last category—the silent one. Her eyes moved over the grey walls, where the list of students taking the exam was displayed. Then her eyes went to the dark brown door, willing it to open. When it did, the students headed towards their respective desks after taking everything they needed out of their bags. Disha went towards her seat, which was at the back of the room by the windows.

When the students had all settled in, the supervisor passed the answer sheets around. Disha wrote down her details and looked up, waiting for the question paper to be distributed. In that fraction of second, she saw a boy entering the classroom and felt an instant adrenaline rush. It was Raghav, the boy she had a crush on. She stared at him, forgetting all about the fact that her exam was about to start.

Raghav was someone any girl in the school would be attracted to, with his good looks and a body that was well-built for his age. He took his seat, which happened to be adjacent to Disha's, in the row to her left. Disha hadn't been expecting him to sit so close to her.

He's so handsome, I could just keep looking at him the whole day. Will he ever talk to me? Will he at least smile at me once? I love everything about him so much.

As the question papers were distributed, Disha could only focus on the fragrance of Raghav's perfume, which she could smell from where she was sitting. Half an hour into the examination, Disha heard Raghav whispering something to her. Her heart skipped a beat and nervousness engulfed her; she couldn't bring herself to look

father was sitting with the professor, and it was clear that he knew everything.

Noticing the professor looking at the door, her father turned and saw Disha standing there.

The moment he saw her, he exploded. 'I hear that you haven't attended classes for two days, and your professor has also told me what you are up to in his classroom. Do you have anything to say that will justify your behaviour? Is this why we enrolled you for classes in one of the best coaching centres?'

'I am so sorry, Dad,' Disha said softly.

Once things were sorted out at the centre, Disha's father took her home with him. All the way, he didn't say a word. Disha knew that it was the silence before the storm, and she wasn't wrong. Once they reached home, her parents scolded her and shouted at her. From not attending classes to writing a love letter, from being irresponsible about her studies to not taking anything seriously in life, she was guilty of every crime in the book. Only when her daadi interrupted and ordered them to calm down, did they stop. Disha didn't retaliate even once as she felt guilty, but what hurt her the most were their last words.

'I wish we had a daughter like your cousin who is not only studious but also knows what her ambitions are.'

That was the breaking point for her and she said angrily, 'Then go and adopt her but leave me alone. I have already said sorry so many times, but you two won't stop. You will never understand me—I hate you both!' She stormed off and locked herself inside her room.

Disha felt awfully lonely, as if the whole world was against her, and she cried for hours. She refused to have her dinner and her parents left her to herself. However, her grandmother was worried. Later that night, when everyone had gone to sleep, she knocked on Disha's door and requested her to let her in. Disha could never be angry with her daadi, and on hearing her voice, she immediately opened the door. Her daadi stepped into the room and locked the door behind her. She gently led Disha to her bed and made her sit down.

I feel that true love is a myth, only meant for books and movies. In reality, it just breaks you emotionally. And I don't want to hurt myself by getting into all this shit.'

Kajal took a deep breath and said, 'Not every guy is bad, Disha. You can at least give it a try. Of course, you have to be a little cautious —I have heard a lot of stories about Raghav. I don't know if they are true or not, but I know you're not so naïve as to get taken for a ride. That's why I feel you should tell him.'

Instantly, Disha said, 'I won't be able to do that. I am dumbstruck even when he walks past me in school. I don't think I will ever be able to gather the courage to go and bare my heart. Moreover, he hardly knows me.'

'Don't just assume things. You never know. And you don't necessarily have to walk up to him and say it. You could write a letter and put it on his desk or hand it over to him. Also, I heard he has joined the same batch as ours for the Vidyasagar coaching classes. So, you have a good chance before school starts,' Kajal finished with an impish grin as they entered McDonald's.

After placing their order, they sat at a table near the counter. Kajal's eyes fell on Dhruv, who stood behind the counter, preparing the orders of other customers.

'Isn't he in our school? I have seen him in the corridors a few times,' Kajal said, looking at him closely.

Disha had already seen him while placing their order, and she nodded. 'Yes, that's Dhruv, Raghav's best friend.'

Kajal was surprised but didn't miss the chance to pull her leg. 'Oh, my ... you have so much information about Raghav. Bitch, such a stalker you are.'

'Please, there's nothing stalker-like in it. I've just seen him with Raghav many times,' Disha clarified.

'Then I think I should go and have a word with him regarding you and Raghav. Give me a moment.'

Before Disha could stop her, Kajal had already got up and was walking towards Dhruv. Disha's heart was in her mouth as she

CHAPTER 2

'It's been a couple of weeks since our exams got over and we haven't gone out anywhere.' Disha received the IM from Kajal on her Yahoo! Messenger when she was scrolling through Orkut profiles on her computer.

'Let's just stay at home; it's Sunday and I'm feeling lazy. I haven't even had my breakfast yet,' Disha replied.

'Then let's go somewhere nearby for brunch. I am so bored. And our coaching classes are starting tomorrow. We just have today for ourselves,' Kajal said.

'Let's skip it, please. It's not often that I actually want to stay home and relax. My parents have gone for some function and I'm all alone with my daadi.'

But Kajal was in no mood to listen. 'Now, that's great. I'm coming over, get ready by then.'

After sending her the message, she went offline without waiting for Disha's reply. Disha continued scrolling through profiles on Orkut. Her heart skipped a beat and her eyes sparkled when she saw Raghav's profile in her friend suggestions. She immediately clicked on his profile and opened his scrapbook. It was flooded with girls and his flirtatious messages to almost all of them. Reading these conversations, she felt jealous of each and every girl he interacted with. For a moment, she even felt like adding him as a friend and sending him a casual 'Hi'.

No, Disha, don't act like those desperate girls. You are different from them. What would he think of you if you did that? Your first conversation can't be so random.

'Aren't we getting late for brunch? Move your ass away from my computer right now.' Disha pushed the chair Kajal was sitting on away from the table.

'So my baby is in *love* ... and look at you—blushing like a maniac. Ahem, ahem!' Kajal couldn't stop teasing her.

'I'll kick your ass now, if you don't stop.'

'Okay, on a serious note, do you have feelings for him? Come on, you can tell me. I won't go and tell him,' Kajal said, with a serious look on her face.

Disha was still blushing, and her face revealed everything that was in her heart, yet she wasn't ready to acknowledge it. 'I don't know ... it's just a passing infatuation maybe. Nothing more than that.'

'Look in the mirror and see your face—to hell with infatuation. I know you better than yourself. You love him,' Kajal said.

They said goodbye to Disha's grandmother and walked towards the McDonald's in their neighbourhood. Disha's mind was still on Kajal's words. Did she really love Raghav, and was that emotion so apparent on her face? Somewhere deep inside, she knew that she had feelings for Raghav, but was it love? The more she thought about it, the more concrete her feelings seemed to become. She realised that she could no longer run away from the never-felt-before emotions that she was going through.

Kajal sensed what Disha was thinking and broke the silence. 'If you like him that much, why don't you go and confess your feelings to him? I know that you haven't really interacted with him, but you'll never know unless you go for it.'

'Should I be honest with you?' Disha said in a low voice.

'You don't need to ask.' There was an assurance in Kajal's tone which made Disha feel better and she opened up to her friend.

'I like him. I don't know when I developed such strong feelings for him. I'm sure he would never be interested in me, but even if he were, I am really afraid of relationships. They only hurt. My parents got married because they fell in love, and when I look at them now,

'You should be more involved in his upbringing and how he spends his time,' Raghav's father said tauntingly.

'He isn't just *my* son—you too are responsible and accountable for his behaviour,' she retorted.

'I don't go around wasting my time at kitty parties like you. I work day and night so that the two of you can live a good life. Listen Raghav, I want you to concentrate on your boards and stop roaming around with girls. Yes, I saw you with a girl the other evening. If you think I don't keep an eye on you, you are wrong.'

'Okay fine, Dad. Whatever. I'm going to my room now. I'm tired,' Raghav said, and walked out of the room.

Ψ

Disha woke up with a feeling of exhilaration. Last night she had called Kajal, and they had spent hours talking about her feelings for Raghav. The more they talked about Disha and Raghav being together, the closer and more connected she felt to him. Disha really opened up to Kajal, and confessed that she didn't like it when he was with other girls.

Kajal listened to her friend, and while she could gauge that Disha had strong feelings for Raghav and suggested that she express them, she was also apprehensive as they barely knew each other. She didn't want Disha to get hurt, particularly because she already had such negative notions about romantic relationships.

Both girls had barely slept that night, as they spent it gossiping and stalking Raghav's profile, which is how they got to know that Raghav had broken up with his girlfriend. That was indeed the cherry on the top for Disha!

She got up, and played a song on her computer, singing along happily.

*Every night in my dreams, I see you, I feel you
That is how I know you go on
Far across the distance*

Dhruv had already made up his mind about what to do, and hoped that his parents would accept his decision without any fuss. He would often say, 'So what if I can't enjoy life today like most of my friends? One day I will face the world with pride and give back to my parents all the happiness that they have sacrificed for me.'

It wasn't the first time he had felt so low; he had gone through such phases before when family had faced financial setbacks. But with every hardship, he had matured like no other kid of his age.

His mother opened the door for him and said warmly, 'Go freshen up and I'll serve dinner. Baba and Priya are waiting for you. He has to leave for work afterwards—one of his regular clients needs to be dropped at Mumbai airport.'

He saw Priya sitting on the sofa in a corner of the room, watching television. Silently, Dhruv put his bag down, removed his shoes and prepared to take a bath. In the bathroom, he had different thoughts running in his mind. He was afraid for his father's health, as he was already going through a lot of stress. Dhruv didn't want him to take on any more unnecessary worries.

As they were about to eat, Dhruv said, 'Baba, I have to tell you something. Can we sit for some time and talk before dinner?'

Initially, he had thought he would tell his father after dinner, but he knew that the more he delayed, the more difficult it would be for him to bring up the subject.

With a concerned look on his face, Dhruv's father nodded. He had not heard this tone in his son's voice before. After summoning up his courage, Dhruv revealed that the school fees had been hiked and also conveyed his decision that he would appear for the boards privately. So they would have to pay admission fees only for Priya. His parents were shocked. There was some discussion and debate, during which Dhruv managed to convince both of them that this was the best option available. Finally, they agreed, though they were saddened by the fact that, despite their best efforts, they hadn't been able to fulfil this dream for both their children.

watched, and she wanted to run away. At first, she thought that Kajal was just playing around, but her nervousness reached a peak when she actually went up to the counter and started talking to Dhruv.

Holy shit, I am so screwed. Damn, why do best friends always put you in such embarrassing situations? I am so hating this. Can I just hide under one of the tables right now?

Disha kept her fingers crossed, hoping that she would not disclose anything to him. But the next second she saw Kajal pointing towards her and Dhruv smiling.

Now what the fuck just happened there? Did she really tell him that I like Raghav? No, she wouldn't do that ... or maybe she would. Why is he giving me that wicked smile? Kajal, I am going to kill you!

She held her breath as Kajal walked back towards their table with the burgers she had collected from the counter. As soon as she sat down, Disha pounced on her.

'Are you out of your mind? What did you tell him? And don't lie!'

Kajal grinned and said, 'I told him you're my best friend, Disha, and you love his best friend, Raghav. I asked if we could fix a date sometime this week so you guys can get to know each other better.'

That was too much for Disha to believe, and she tried to insist that Kajal tell her exactly how the conversation had gone. 'Don't give me that crap. Tell me the truth!'

'Trust me, I just told him about your feelings and he agreed to fix a date with Raghav,' Kajal stuck to her story till they had eaten the last bite of their burgers.

When Kajal didn't change her statement despite continuous probing, a desperate Disha went over to the counter.

'Dhruv ... Hi, I'm Disha ... please don't take my friend seriously. She was just joking,' Disha stammered.

'Sorry, I didn't get you?' Dhruv looked baffled.

'My friend, Kajal ... she was just pulling my leg by saying that I want to date Raghav. I just told her that you are Raghav's best friend and that I have seen you in school ... and she made up a story. Just ignore whatever she said. That's it, and I am sorry to bother you.'

the professor who was scheduled to take the next lecture had already entered and was standing right next to them. There was pin-drop silence in the class, and when they sensed trouble, Kajal immediately tried to hide Disha's notebook, but the damage was already done. The professor snatched it from her and put on his spectacles to read what was written in it.

'Let me also read what's so funny and captivating that you did not even realise that I was already in the classroom,' he said sarcastically.

Disha was terrified seeing him read the note. She just hoped that the professor would let it go as it was their first day. After reading the last word, the professor looked at both girls with a stern gaze, and Disha knew that there was no chance he was going to let it slide.

'Who has written this?' he asked in his deep voice.

Both Disha and Kajal stayed quiet with their heads down, but when he raised his voice and repeated the question, Disha stood up and said she had written it.

'If you don't want me to read this out in front of the entire class, get out right now and hand over your identity card. Also, if you don't come along with your parents tomorrow, don't enter the classroom, and don't blame me if I put this note on the notice board. You can leave now.'

Disha felt utterly humiliated, and had no choice but to leave the classroom, teary-eyed and with her head down. She was horrified at the thought of confessing what had happened to her parents. Tears continued to roll down her face as she thought about what they would say.

What am I supposed to do now? What will Mom and Dad think? Mom doesn't even like me talking to boys, and if she finds out about the note, she will beat the shit out of me. And Dad ... he will not even allow me to attend the classes. And what does Raghav think of me now—getting thrown out of class on the very first day. Why the hell did I have to write that note?

*And spaces between us
You have come to show you go on
Near, far, wherever you are
I believe that the heart does go on*

She dressed in a white top and jeans, applied black eye-liner, and looked at her reflection in the mirror for the umpteenth time to triple-check that her ponytail didn't have too many fly-away hairs. While she would deny it to anyone else, she was feeling slightly nervous. She was expecting Raghav to notice her at least once during classes that day. It was why she had dressed up.

When she was ready, she went outside. Kajal was waiting for her at the gate. The moment she saw Disha, she gushed, 'Wow, you look amazing today. Didn't your parents wonder whether you were going on a date or to class?'

'Shouldn't one look presentable on the first day of class?' Disha said and winked as they set off.

'I'm sure Raghav will fall head over heels for you today.'

Disha had a plethora of emotions inside her as they walked to the coaching centre. She was still confused about whether her feelings for Raghav were genuine. Or had they become so intense all of a sudden because Kajal was linking her name with his?

Everyone had taken their seats when Disha and Kajal arrived, and even the professor had entered the classroom. They sneaked in quietly and took the second bench which was vacant. Each time the professor turned towards the blackboard, Disha's eyes would search for Raghav but she couldn't spot him.

How is that possible? Kajal was sure that he had joined the same batch, she thought. She managed to scan every bench behind her, and even Kajal looked around, but Raghav was nowhere in sight. Disha was dejected as she had dreamed about seeing him the entire night. Now, all of a sudden, her hopes had come crashing down. Mid-way through the class, Disha couldn't help asking Kajal, 'Were you sure about him joining our batch?'

'I feel helpless that our children have to struggle so much. We cut down on our expenses all these years so that you could study in a private school and have a great future. And yet it has come to this. God knows when our misery will end,' Dhruv's mother said with tear-filled eyes.

Dhruv's father was also dejected. 'Now, when I am running short of money, God is testing us with more hardships. It's not fair. I don't want you to give your boards privately. I don't want your studies to suffer during this crucial year. Should I talk to the school management? Maybe they could waive your fees considering the circumstances?'

'Baba, you know they will never agree. Don't worry, I'll study hard and I won't let you down. Just pay Priya's fees. Together, we can save for her board fees next year so that my little sister doesn't have to face any problems.' Dhruv hugged his sister, who felt proud to have such a brother by her side.

'We are proud of you, Dhruv,' Dhruv's father said in a voice saturated with emotion.

Dhruv comforted all of them and made them promise that they would not cry anymore but keep smiling. Though they had faced many adversities, Dhruv's was a happy family who would do anything to ensure each other's well-being. They didn't have luxuries, but lived lavishly in each other's hearts; they didn't have surplus money, but their wealth lay in their love and care for each other; they didn't own expensive clothes and cars but had the priceless possessions of dignity, righteousness and self-respect.

The landline rang and Dhruv answered. It was Raghav.

'Hi Dhruv, I have some news to share with you.'

'I wanted to tell you something too. But you share your news first. What happened? Did you have another opportunity to get intimate with Miss Roma?' Dhruv asked teasingly.

'No dude, not that lucky. But guess what ... I finally broke up with Juhi. We have decided to part ways. I can't tell you how relaxed I

She was so occupied with browsing through his profile that she lost track of time, and it was only when she heard her grandmother calling her name that she realised it had been more than an hour since Kajal had messaged her.

'Disha ... Kajal is here. Are you going out with her?' her daadi asked.

She heard Kajal say, 'Daadi, isn't she ready yet? Such a lazy girl she is.'

'Go to her room and see for yourself. Now only you can make her understand. I am telling her to freshen up and have breakfast,' Disha's daadi said.

Disha instantly minimised her Orkut profile and kept the computer on standby. Kajal's frustration was evident when she walked in. She had expected that Disha would be ready to leave as soon as she came, but here she was, still in her pyjamas.

'Give me ten minutes, I'll get ready!' Disha said, rushing off to take a bath. She knew Kajal would eat her brains if she lay around lazily for even a few seconds.

'Better be quick,' Kajal said as she sat on Disha's bed and switched on the television.

When Disha came out after her bath, she froze. Kajal was sitting in front of her computer. She recollected that she hadn't logged out from her Orkut profile and that Raghav's scrapbook was still open. Before she could react, she saw the wicked smile on Kajal's face and realised it was already too late.

'So ... you've been stalking Raghav since morning! You never told me that you like him. When did it begin?' Kajal teased.

'Shut up, I don't like him or anything. I clicked on his profile by mistake.'

'Yeah ... yeah ... and by mistake you went through the last five months of his scrapbook. You are reading conversations from January, and it's May. Now, how did that happen?' Kajal asked mischievously.

'Maybe you're right. Maybe we can try and apologise to the professor, saying it won't be repeated, and request him not to inform my parents,' Disha said.

'Perfect. Then let's go.' Kajal got up and Disha willed herself to follow.

It didn't take them long to reach the coaching centre, which was about a kilometre away. While they walked, Disha rehearsed her apology several times. Her hands were trembling and heart was palpitating as they took the elevator to the floor where their classes were held. Nervously she headed for the office, repeating the words in her mind.

I am really sorry, sir. I am really sorry for what I did. I had written the note after the end of the previous lecture. It wasn't meant for any particular person. I am fond of writing and I was just giving a writer's take to a situation in a movie that I saw yesterday. This is the first and the last time; such behaviour won't be repeated ever again. Please forgive me.

'Do you want me to come with you?' Kajal asked.

'No, I have to handle this myself,' Disha said, trying to summon up some courage. It faltered the moment she heard familiar voices from inside the office.

'It's her board year and your daughter should be concentrating on her studies rather than on love stories. You have to ensure that she doesn't fall into bad company.' It was the professor who had caught her.

Daughter? Who is he talking to? Is this about me? Apprehension flooded her mind. With shaking hands, she knocked on the door.

The office boy opened the door. Before she could enter, she heard someone say, 'We are really sorry on her behalf; please allow her to attend the classes. Henceforth, we will be extra careful and keep an eye on her.'

Her heart stopped. Her face began to sweat despite the air-conditioning in the room. It was her worst nightmare come true. Her

CHAPTER 3

'Disha, we haven't gone to the coaching centre for a couple of days. This will only complicate things. I think you should talk to your parents. What is the worst thing that can happen? They'll scold you and tell you not to behave like this again,' Kajal said. The girls were sitting in Shivaji Park instead of attending their classes.

Stress had been eating away at Disha every minute and every second for the last couple of days, and she couldn't think of a way to cope with the hell that would break loose when her parents found out. They had noticed that she was tense, but thought it was because the exam results were due soon. She had woken up that morning feeling hopeless, like nothing was going right, and wondering why her life had to be such a mess. She thought about Kajal's suggestion that she should confess to her parents. In a corner of her heart, she did feel that it might not become a big issue, but fear stopped her from telling them the truth.

Kajal tried convincing her again. 'I really think you should talk to them,' she said.

'No, you don't know them. They won't even allow me to step out of the house if they find out what I did. I can't tell them the truth.' Disha's fear was apparent in her tone.

Racking her brains for an alternative solution, Kajal could only think of one way out of the mess they were in. 'Then I think we should at least talk to the professor, and try and sort things out. By avoiding classes, we aren't making things easier for ourselves. How many days can we afford to bunk classes?'

'Of course,' Kajal whispered back. 'One of his friends mentioned it to me a few days back.'

Disha nodded and tried to pay attention to the lecture. However, she wasn't able to keep Raghav out of her thoughts, and instead of taking down notes from the blackboard, she scribbled something for him.

I never believed in love but I fell for you. At first, I thought it was an infatuation that would fade away with time, but it only grew stronger. I used to be an introvert—and I am one even now, but there is a sense of freshness in my soul, and that's because of you. I wish I could express my feelings to you, but I can't. I am too shy for that. I stalk you on Orkut. And you don't even know it! You're just sitting there being cute and crush-worthy, not even aware of the joy you've been giving me. I may sound weird, but that's how I am. I even know that you will never find out about my crush, though I secretly wish that you will get to know. Oh, I do want to talk to you. I want to throw hints at you so that you understand how much I want to be with you. But my heart stops me. I know I am nobody to you, though you are everything to me. You don't know me, and I don't know you that well, which is kind of great because it allows me to run wild with my imagination. I still remember the day when I first noticed you—you were on the sports ground with your friends. I was right in front of you but you were too busy to notice. I hope one day you will notice me, because whenever I see you coming towards me, I get nervous and turn the other way. I hope someday you will be friends with me, if nothing more than that. That will give me some comfort.

Before she could complete her letter, the lecture got over. She looked up and was shocked to see Raghav enter the classroom. She was dumbstruck and couldn't stop blushing as Kajal pinched her playfully. As he walked past her, Disha closed her eyes to inhale his scent. When she opened her eyes after a few seconds, she noticed that Kajal was reading the note that she had written during the class. She leaned forward too, and they both read it, smiling and sometimes laughing; they were so engrossed in it that they didn't realise

'Story? What date? What are you talking about?' Dhruv asked, confusion writ large on his face. Disha turned to look at Kajal and saw that her friend was rushing to the door.

'Didn't she just tell you that I want to go on a date with Raghav and all that shit?'

Dhruv laughed as he realised that Kajal had played a prank. 'No, she just said that she has seen me at school and that she was here with you, her best friend. Relax,' he said.

Disha was horrified. *How stupid I am! Why on the earth did I have to say all that? Shit, I must look like such a dumbass.* Disha awkwardly apologised for her silliness and walked away from Dhruv.

'You love him ...!' Kajal shouted as she got into an auto and left with a big smile on her face.

Disha couldn't help laughing herself as she walked back home. She loved him, she certainly did. One thing that kept going through her mind was whether Raghav had really joined their coaching class. Or was it just one of Kajal's pranks?

After dinner, she lay in bed reading for some time, her mind still on Raghav. When she finally switched off the light, she lay awake for a long time, tossing and turning, unable to sleep, wondering if maybe, just maybe, he was awake and thinking of her too.



After he was done at work, Dhruv rode home, parked his bicycle outside his chawl and walked towards his door. Anyone who knew him could tell from looking at his face that he was unhappy and something was bothering him. It had been two weeks and he still hadn't been able to bring himself to tell his parents about the fee hike. The burden of this new anxiety was too heavy for his young shoulders and he had been carrying it alone all these days. However, he knew that, he would have to tell them before the night was over, as the next day was the last date to pay the admission fees. He didn't want his parents to get a nasty shock when they were in the school office.

Instead of heading for work, he changed direction and went back to school. He wanted to check the notice board himself. All the way, he wondered what he would do if the fee hike was real. Somehow, he managed to keep a level head until he reached the school premises. Parking his bicycle, he rushed towards the notice board only to see that his classmate wasn't joking. As he stared at the notice issued by the principal and the management committee, his world crashed in front of him.

Should he skip the boards for his sister's sake? Was there any other alternative? With a heavy heart, he went to McDonald's, but he could hardly concentrate on his work. How would he convey the news to his father, who had just told him how bad things were financially? It's often said that human existence is an everyday struggle, but only those who are unable to make ends meet know the real problems that life can throw at you.

'Is everything all right, Baba?'

Dhruv's dad looked hesitant before he said, 'Things are a bit rough right now, because of the work that was needed on the car. I don't have much of my savings left.' Before Dhruv could say anything, he continued, 'It's okay, I'm planning on selling a gold chain that I had given your mother when we got married, so that you can take the coaching classes for your boards.'

'No Baba, you are not going to sell anything. I'm going to work longer hours during the vacation and come up with the money myself. You don't need to worry. Just take care of your health and don't drive the taxi overtime.'

Dhruv looked down at his food and ate the rest of his lunch before he headed off to work on his bicycle. He had just crossed the lane when he met one of his classmates on his way home from school. He looked dejected, and Dhruv stopped to ask, 'Hi, what happened to you? Vacation has just started and you look so depressed.'

His classmate looked at him with eyes that clearly said something was troubling him. Dhruv asked again what the matter was.

'Didn't you read the new notice on the board today in school?' he said finally.

Confused, Dhruv shook his head. 'No, it was our last paper and in all the excitement I actually forgot to check. Was there anything important?'

'Yes. The school has decided to hike the annual fees. It will be one and a half times what it is now. I don't know how my parents are going to manage. I'm so stressed about telling them when I get home.'

Dhruv was shocked. If what his classmate was saying was true, then he too was in the same boat. Rather, his boat would drown as the hike meant that either he or his sister would have to leave school. There wasn't the slightest chance that he or his parents would be able to manage the fees for both of them. He did not want his sister to suffer, nor did he want to face a setback in the year he would take his board exams—the year that would lay the path to his future.

am feeling right now! I always felt like I was caged and under continuous CCTV surveillance in that relationship.'

'Are you serious? When did this happen?'

'This evening, when I met her. I just got back home after sorting everything out. Anyway, you wanted to share something. What is it?' Raghav said stepping inside his house.

'Yeah ... you might have heard about the fee hike? I won't be able to afford it and so I've decided to give my boards privately. That way, I'll be saving on school fees, and will only have to pay examination fees.' Dhruv paused for a moment, but before Raghav could respond, he added in a lighter tone, 'So, there will be no one to control your raging hormones anymore.'

Raghav ignored his last comment. He was completely taken aback to hear that Dhruv was leaving school. 'What are you saying? Don't do that. Do you want me to help in any way?'

'No, trust me, I'm good,' Dhruv said, and making an excuse, disconnected the call. He felt that if he continued to talk to Raghav, he would be tempted to accept his offer of financial help.

Raghav put the phone down, feeling bad that Dhruv wouldn't be with him at the start of the next academic year. Disheartened, he was about to enter his room, when his father called him from the living room. That came as a surprise to him; his father generally didn't bother talking to him unless there was a specific reason. Raghav went to his father and stood in front of him, waiting for him to tell him what he needed. His dad looked at him sternly for a few seconds.

'What's happening in your life? I see you coming late every now and then. You don't seem to care that your board exams are next year. When will you get serious?'

'What's wrong, Dad? Why do you feel an urge to find out what's going on in my life all of a sudden? I'm sure Mom must have told you something.'

His mother immediately interrupted from the kitchen. 'Don't involve me in your father-son conversations. I haven't told him anything.'

Disha burst into tears and hugged her grandmother tightly. Daadi's warmth comforted her and she wished she could stay in her arms for her entire life. Her grandmother consoled her and tried to make her feel better.

'I know how you feel. You may think I don't because I do not belong to your generation. Indeed, the world was different when I was your age, but the feelings were the same. You are constantly changing yet wanting to stay the same; you want to be older and more mature even if your parents and the world say you are not. I get it. I felt all these things, too.'

'I love you, daadi. I am not sad because they shouted at me, but because they didn't even try to comfort me later. Why can't they understand my feelings? I shouldn't have written that letter and I shouldn't have bunked classes, and I am really sorry for all that. It was a rash impulse—and then I was scared and didn't know what to do.'

Her daadi held her hand. 'Disha, raising a teenage daughter is no easy task. You and your mother will definitely get on each other's nerves for some time, but you must try and understand. Not only in hers, but even in my mind, you went from fifteen months to fifteen years in about two weeks. But trust me, she loves you. Both of them do.' An innocence shone in Daadi's eyes as she recalled the old days. Being the oldest person in the house, she also had the wisdom to handle this situation delicately. 'Their biggest responsibility is to ensure that you grow into a responsible, good person. This means that they can disagree with you, say "no" to things you may want and punish you for irresponsible behaviour. You may think they're unfair, and you may curse them for the pain they inflict on you. And that is okay. But remember, they are willing to be the bad guys to prevent you from growing up to be a bad person.'

'But does that mean that they shouldn't trust me? I don't feel like telling them how I feel and what my needs are.'

'It's normal at your age to feel the way you do. You may want to hide your thoughts and emotions, and you might like to sneak

friend. Meghna ... why don't you tag along too?' he asked Meghna, who was sitting next to Disha.

Okay, wait—why is he asking her too? Is this supposed to be a date or a picnic? This is happening too quickly. I don't know how to handle it. Someone please guide me—what am I supposed to do in such a situation?

Meghna looked at her, and, out of nervousness, Disha said, 'Yes, why don't you come along, Meghna?' As soon as she said the words, she felt she had made a mistake.

I wish I could take my words back. Damn, how can I be so silly. Please, please—don't say yes. I need some alone time with him.

'I don't mind,' Meghna said, shrugging.

That was the last thing I wanted. Can I just kick my own ass? Such an idiot!

'Okay great, see you all tomorrow at five. I'll pick you guys up outside the school gate.'

While this entire conversation had been going on, Kajal watched dumbstruck. She wanted to slap Disha for letting a date turn into a get-together. Disha knew exactly what Kajal was thinking, and when they were alone later, she said, 'It isn't that bad for a start.'

For the rest of the day, Disha couldn't stop thinking about the time she would be spending with Raghav. She hugged her pillow as she lay in bed and looked at the calendar on her bedroom wall. June 24. She had marked the date as she knew it would be a special day.



'Kajal, I'm certainly not going to wear this,' Disha said, standing in front of her mirror. She was in a black top and skinny jeans.

'Why not? You look gorgeous! Just let your hair loose and I'm sure Raghav will go mad for you. If I were a boy, I would have proposed to you right now.'

'Well, it's just darker than what I usually wear. I prefer light colours,' she said with a shrug.

'That's a good idea. Let's go to McDonald's before going home.'

Disha and Kajal immediately set off for McDonald's. Countless thoughts ran through Disha's mind on the way.

What if he isn't working there anymore? We don't even know where he stays. If we don't find him, I will have to express my feelings to Raghav directly, and that will never happen except in my dreams. No, it cannot end like this. We are destined to be together. Be positive, Disha!

'Can I ask you something?' Kajal's voice brought Disha back from her thoughts.

She nodded and Kajal continued, 'What if you start dating Raghav? Will you spend less time with me because you'll want to be with him all the time?'

'What nonsense. We are and will always stay best friends. I don't want to date anyone at the cost of our friendship. You mean much more to me than anyone else, and you know that.'

'Everyone says that before getting into a relationship,' Kajal joked.

'Don't worry, the three of us will go on dates.' Disha laughed as they parked their bicycles outside McDonald's.

They didn't see Dhruv anywhere, and Disha begged Kajal to go and ask for him at the counter. Kajal went up and spoke to one of the boys, 'Does Dhruv still work here? I had some urgent work with him.'

'Yes, he does,' he said, looking over his shoulder to see if he could spot Dhruv. 'Maybe he has gone to the washroom. He'll be out in a minute. Do you want to order anything in the meantime?'

'Sure. Two McAlloo Tikkis please—actually, make that three,' Kajal said, deciding to wait near the counter. In a couple of minutes, Dhruv appeared. He smiled when he saw her.

'Hi, I'm Kajal—remember me?' Kajal said.

'Of course,' Dhruv said. 'You're coming directly from school?'

'Yes. Actually, can you spare a couple of minutes? My friend Disha is here too. We wanted to have a quick word with you,' Kajal said, pointing towards Disha who waved to him shyly.

Disha's mother served her breakfast and asked Kajal, 'Do you want some?'

'No offence to you, Aunty, but my stomach just hates breakfast,' she said with a smile.

Seeing the happy mood her parents were in, Disha told herself, *Seems like a good start to the year. For a change, they aren't fighting.*

She ate her breakfast quickly, slung her bag over her shoulder and said, 'Well, time to start a new year.'

As soon as they reached school, Disha's eyes searched for Raghav. With every passing day, her feelings for him had only grown stronger. Every day while walking to the coaching centre, she would think of approaching him, breaking all the nervous strings around her heart. However, Raghav barely attended any classes, and when he did, she never got a chance to interact with him.

Knowing Raghav wasn't serious about his grades and would not attend classes regularly, Kajal suggested that she hand the letter she had written for Raghav to Dhruv, so he could initiate the meeting. But Disha wasn't ready to make that move yet. Though their first interaction was yet to happen, Disha loved the sensation of admiring him secretly and was enjoying every moment of it.

'10 B ... we're both in same class, on the first floor,' Disha said happily. She was about to move away from the notice board as the first session would start soon, but Kajal stopped her.

'Not just us two,' she said excitedly. 'Raghav is in our class this year! Maybe the two of you are destined to be together.'

Disha turned towards the notice board again to see for herself in case Kajal was teasing. When she saw his name, she almost jumped, unable to control her excitement.

'This is really a great start to the year, I must say. And you can make it even better by initiating a conversation with him today,' Kajal said as they settled down on their assigned benches in the middle row.

'Shut up,' Disha said and chuckled. She looked around the classroom, trying to spot faces she knew. There were a few students who

around and figure out things on your own; I felt the same way once, too. I cannot force you to share everything with me. But consider me as your friend and not your daadi.' Her grandmother smiled, and listening to her words, Disha was already feeling better.

After a brief silence, Disha said, 'Daadi, can I ask you something?'

'Yes, of course.'

Disha hesitated for a second, and then asked, 'Did you love someone when you were my age? Did you ever express your feelings to someone?'

The moment she asked the question, she crossed her legs on the bed and leaned forward to listen, curious to hear her grandmother's reply. Daadi laughed and said, 'I did love someone, but we were not allowed to express these feelings openly back then. He got married to someone else and I married your grandfather. He never found out that I loved him. Even today, the mindset hasn't changed that much. You know how callous society can be, when it comes to girls. Instead of minding one's own business, people are keen to poke their noses in the lives of others. And God forbid if a woman tries to pursue her desires.'

Noticing that Disha stayed silent, her daadi understood that she liked someone.

'If you like someone, express it. There's no harm in saying what you feel. However, you should stay focused on the right things in life. Rejection in love is not the end. You have to make sure that you don't give anyone permission to break you emotionally.'

'I don't know if it's love or not, but I like him and want to get to know him better.'

'So, what's stopping you... go ahead. But like I said, be cautious and don't let anyone hurt you.'

'You are the best daadi. I love you so much.'

Her grandmother's words brought relief and peace to Disha, and they continued to talk about when Daadi was young. Eventually, Disha fell asleep resting her head in her lap.

coincidence that his eyes had fallen on her. But that split second raised her hopes and she kept thinking about it throughout the lecture. Occasionally, she glanced at him to see if he was looking at her, but there was no indication of it. The only person who noticed her anxiety, apart from Kajal, was Meghna, who eventually asked her, 'Is anything troubling you? You seem to be disturbed about something.'

'No ... nothing. Just ... I slept in an awkward position last night and my neck is hurting, so I'm stretching it a bit,' Disha babbled.

'You should have applied a spray or taken some painkillers.'

Kajal overheard this and couldn't stop chuckling. 'You don't need a painkiller; you need to apply some Burnol to your burning desires,' she whispered.

'Fuck off.' Disha made a face at her.

Time passed in a flash, and one after the other the classes got over. With every lecture, Disha's hopes faded and eventually got washed away when, even at the end of the school day, there was no reaction from Raghav's side. She almost felt she was going to break down, as in her mind she had already started visualising herself with him, dancing to love songs together with the sea in the backdrop. But now, there were only sad waves of reality hitting the shore.

'I don't think Dhruv has given him the letter yet. Maybe he hasn't met Raghav since yesterday,' Kajal tried to comfort Disha.

'Do you really think so?' Disha asked, a ray of hope igniting her mind.

'I can only guess. But why don't we confirm it ourselves by talking to Dhruv?' Kajal suggested.

Disha immediately agreed and they promptly headed to McDonald's. On reaching, they found out that Dhruv hadn't come to work that day. Disheartened, they walked back; there was no other way to contact him or check if the letter had been handed over.

Maybe I'm just not lucky in love. Maybe it's not meant for me. It's okay if he doesn't feel the same way about me—I never expected it in the first place. There's nothing to get sad about. Disha tried to console herself. However, all she wanted to do right then was cry or scream

'Fine,' Kajal said. 'Change.'

Disha smiled and changed into a light blue top and a pair of regular jeans. She looked at herself in the mirror once again after applying her eye-liner and lip gloss.

Give it a shot. Relax, Disha, you can do it.

Disha and Kajal checked the time and rushed to the school. Meghna was already waiting for them at the gate. Seeing her in her red top and jeans, Disha felt a bit insecure, as Meghna looked really beautiful. Disha's jealousy was evident on her face, and Kajal signalled to her to act normal.

It was supposed to be my date ... why is she looking so glamorous? Wasn't she supposed to just tag along? And that too for no reason. Such a bitch.

Meghna said to Disha, 'You're looking stunning. This is the first time I'm seeing you without your school uniform, and I must say, you look really sexy.'

Now does she really mean that, an insecure Disha wondered as she responded with a half-hearted smile.

'You're looking amazing too,' Kajal said, wishing Disha's jealousy wasn't so obvious. But that didn't go down well with Disha, who gave her a stern look.

'You're my friend, not hers,' Disha whispered in Kajal's ears.

'There he is,' Meghna said, seeing Raghav arrive along with his driver in his car.

'Hi girls. Get in.' Raghav got out of the car and opened the back door for them, 'I feel really lucky today to have the company of three lovely-looking girls.' He smiled and took his seat in the front once the girls had got in.

It was only once they were seated inside that Disha observed Raghav closely. In his black t-shirt, jeans and sunglasses, he was looking smart as usual.

Wanting to be the first to start a conversation, Disha hastily said, 'Isn't this the same black T-shirt that you're wearing on your Orkut display picture?'

and let it all out. Sometimes your heart needs time to accept what your mind has already perceived.

A few days passed but nothing changed for Disha. She spent sleepless nights, writhing in a pool of emotions, her unrequited feelings and unfulfilled desires pressing heavily down on her. Every day she visited McDonald's, but neither did she find Dhruv nor could anyone tell her where he was. She was overwhelmed with loneliness even though she was surrounded by family and friends. The inability to share her pain made her even more fragile. She started to feel unwanted and wished she could run away from everything. Her heart felt empty but for the sharp pain that jolted it each time she saw Raghav. And when she noticed him going on as he always did, every day, she felt hopeless.

It was Friday and the last lecture had just ended when, out of the blue, Raghav came up to her desk and stood in front of her. Her heart was in her mouth seeing him stand so close and look straight into her eyes. She could hardly bring herself to make eye contact.

'Do you have any plans for the weekend, apart from our coaching classes? Actually, my friend Dhruv and I are planning to chill, go bowling maybe. Would you like to join us?' Raghav was asking her out point-blank.

Am I dreaming, or is this for real? Whose face did I see in the mirror this morning? What happened to him all of a sudden—did he only read the letter just now? Whatever it is, I am on cloud nine!

It wasn't the first time Raghav was asking a girl out, and he knew exactly what she was thinking. So, before she could make her own assumptions, he cleared the air.

'Was that too direct?'

'Kind of,' Disha stammered, still not able to believe it was happening for real.

'I have been observing you for a week ... I saw you glancing at me, so I thought I should strike up a conversation.' He paused and then added, 'Wasn't that reason enough for me to ask you out? If you are hesitating, I don't mind if Kajal joins us. I know she is your best

just tell him how I feel? Because I'll probably stumble over my words and look like a fool. But the urge to talk to him is eating me up from inside. Daadi was right—there's no harm in conveying how one feels. But how? I am too shy to approach him, and there's no way he will find out on his own.

Disha kept talking to herself throughout the entire lecture, occasionally stealing glances at Raghav. During the break, Kajal shook her by her shoulders and said teasingly, 'Are you still in the classroom or has your mind transported you into some dreamland where you are already making love?'

'I have made up my mind,' Disha whispered, leaning towards Kajal.

'What do you mean?' Kajal asked curiously.

'Let's do it your way. After school, we'll look for Dhruv and hand the letter over to him.'

'Are you sure?'

'Cent per cent.' Disha blushed again.

Ψ

'I looked for Dhruv everywhere but he isn't in school,' Kajal said as she came up to Disha, who was standing in front of the notice board.

After classes got over, Kajal had gone looking for Dhruv. She had looked for him in the library and in the cafeteria; she had even asked his friends. But he was nowhere to be seen.

Glancing at the notice board, Kajal said, 'Did you check the list on the board? If we find out which class he's in, we can ask his classmates if he came today.'

Disha replied in a disheartened tone, 'I just checked; his name isn't on any list.'

Kajal was surprised. 'How is that possible? He doesn't seem like someone who could have failed the exams. Something's wrong.'

'No clue.'

'How about checking his workplace,' Kajal suggested.

Dhruv loved her. He had never spoken to Disha, but he'd had feelings for her for years. Somewhere in his heart, he felt she was his soulmate.

Should I really give him the letter? What if he reciprocates her feelings? I wish it were me that she had these feelings for—me and only me.

CHAPTER 4

When you're in love, the world seems surreal. It makes your life worth living because you see yourself through his or her eyes and start to feel excited about everything. Disha was experiencing every sentiment that one feels when in love. Meanwhile, Dhruv was perplexed about what to do after finding out how Disha felt about Raghav. As for Raghav, he had absolutely no clue that there was so much happening around him.

'Do you think Raghav will make the first move after reading the letter, or will he just ignore it?' Disha asked Kajal as they sat in the classroom, her eyes continuously turning towards the door, waiting for Raghav.

'I certainly don't think he will ignore it. But I'm not sure how he will act,' Kajal said.

'There are so many apprehensions in my mind and it's making me uneasy. I don't know why, but I feel that he won't ever talk to me. I am not his type of girl.'

'Stop being a pessimist and don't overthink things,' Kajal said, but Disha couldn't control these thoughts.

From the moment I get up in the morning till the moment I go to sleep at night, he occupies some part of my mind. How does my brain even know to think about him as soon as I wake up? Doesn't it have more important things to worry about?

The school bell rang and the teacher entered the classroom. Raghav was right behind him, and he hurried towards his seat, but not before glancing at Disha. It happened in a split second and Disha was unsure whether he had actually looked at her, or it was just a

Disha and her grandmother laughed, loved and shared a bond that was not of a single lifetime.



A few weeks later

This feels familiar.

Disha stared at her reflection in the mirror for what felt like forever. She picked up the previous year's school identity card, which carried a photo of hers. She was the same person, but everything felt different now. She had grown a few inches taller and her school uniform seemed to fit her better.

Her mother called out to her from the kitchen. 'Disha ... come, have your breakfast.'

Drawing in a breath, she put the identity card down and gave herself a parting glance in the mirror. 'Board exams this year ... why does it feel like school never ended to begin with?'

During the vacation, Disha had managed to regain her parents' trust after scoring good grades in the previous year's annual examination and ensuring there were no more complaints from the coaching class professors.

Kajal was waiting for her when she emerged from her bedroom.

'Morning,' Kajal said and coughed loudly as Disha entered the living room.

'What's up with you?' Disha asked.

Disha's father, who was having his breakfast, said, 'She was just saying that she doesn't have the same enthusiasm about the first day of school that she usually does.'

'I feel your pain, my friend. But I thought you would be excited like every year,' Disha said as she took a seat at the table.

'I feel like the summer holidays were too short because of the coaching classes,' Kajal said as she sat beside Disha.

had been in her class the previous year. She just hoped someone familiar would sit beside her.

Just then, a girl approached her bench. 'Excuse me, can you shift your bag a little? That's my seat.' She pointed at Disha's bag.

Disha hastily looked up, anxiety bubbling inside her. 'Oh, sure,' she replied.

'Hi, I'm Meghna,' the girl introduced herself.

'Hi, I'm Disha ... Ni-nice to meet you,' she scrambled to find words.

Meghna tilted her head in confusion. 'Do I make you uncomfortable?'

Chill, Disha! You can have a conversation without panicking.

'Not at all. It's just ...' She sighed. 'Sorry, I have a hard time communicating with people I don't know ... please don't mind.'

Meghna nodded. 'I understand. I can try and shift if you—'

'No, you don't have to do that,' Disha blurted, face flushing. 'I'll need some time to get used to things, that's all. It's really nothing to do with you and I am sorry if I am making it seem that way.'

'No worries, I'm not offended,' Meghna said with a smile.

Maybe this won't be so bad, after all. 'Thank you,' Disha mumbled. 'Not many people are this patient with my social anxiety.'

'Doesn't that make it worse?'

'Exactly.'

They both laughed.

'I think we'll be great friends.' Disha smiled.

'Me too,' Meghna responded.

Disha was about to introduce Meghna to Kajal, but just then, the door opened and Raghav entered. He took his seat a few benches ahead, in Kajal's row. Kajal glanced at Disha and saw her blushing. The lecture started, but Disha couldn't take her eyes off Raghav. She had the greatest urge to get up, walk to his bench and sit next to him.

Why does he have to look so cute always? Whenever I see him, I just forget everything that's bothering me—all the worries and all the tensions. There are so many things I want to say to him ... why can't I

Dhruv nodded and followed Kajal to the table. A brief and awkward silence followed. Eventually, Disha broke the ice saying, 'We tried looking for you in school, but didn't see you there. So, we thought of coming here.'

Dhruv told them about the fee hike and the financial crunch at home. 'So, I'm giving my boards privately; I won't be attending school this year,' he finished.

Disha and Kajal empathized with him, but before they could say anything, Dhruv asked, 'So why were you girls looking for me?'

Disha handed him the letter and narrated the entire story. When she was done, Dhruv looked slightly baffled.

'Are you sure you want me to give this letter to Raghav?'

'Yes, why do you ask that?' Disha hesitated a bit.

'I mean ... you know he had a girlfriend, right? And—'

'Yes, but we saw on Orkut that they aren't together anymore,' Kajal said.

Dhruv took a deep breath and continued, 'And ... he isn't really ready to get serious about anyone. I am his friend but I think you should know these facts about his nature.'

Kajal could sense that something else was bothering him. His expression had changed all of a sudden, on seeing the letter. She assumed he was just uncomfortable about getting involved in the situation. 'I understand that you are reluctant, he being your best friend, but we really want you to give this letter to him. Please.'

He agreed immediately. 'If you are sure, yes, I'll give it to him.'

Disha thanked Dhruv and left the restaurant with Kajal. She had mixed feelings as they stepped outside—she was excited but also nervous, wondering what Raghav's reaction would be after reading the letter. However, she even savoured the butterflies in her stomach, which she was experiencing for the first time. Falling in love for the first time is truly a special feeling that can never be replaced.

Once they were gone, Dhruv opened the letter and read it with a heavy heart. *I wish she had written this letter to me. I wish she had the slightest hint that I like her.*

he was miserable about that. He had never shied away from acknowledging his feelings for Disha. However, the last few days had been difficult not just for her, but for him too.

As he walked away, his heart cried, *My mother always told me never to make decisions I will regret. I can't tell you with confidence that I followed her rule this time; I can only hope I did. I'd be lying if I say that I don't want to be friends with you and that I don't love you—I still do. However, I can't hold on to you. Eventually, physical and geographical distance, with no means of seeing each other on a regular basis, will most likely turn us into strangers. Perhaps there is still hope. What they say is true: we can have everything in this world, but never all at once. Even if time is currently not on our side, perhaps our paths will cross someday in the time to come.*

Ψ

There are times when life is so hard on you that it seems like everything is crumbling around you. Just a couple of weeks ago, Disha had been so optimistic about things. But in the last thirteen days, her life had felt like a plane crash. *How can things fall apart in such a short span of time? It's like a freefall.* Disha felt like someone who had risen from a deep slumber to find that all that mattered to her had been stolen.

Looking pale and depressed, she walked up to Kajal and Meghna, who were waiting outside the stationery shop for her. Kajal put her hands on Disha's shoulders and said, 'It's all my fault. I should have stopped you. I shouldn't have let you talk to him.'

'All this is too much for me to handle right now. Dhruv just told me to stay away from him. You and Meghna have been acting weird since I met you in the morning. Can you just tell me what happened?' Disha said.

'Now you know why I didn't come along with you to meet him,' Kajal said. 'He doesn't want to be around any of us.' They went to Gul-

'Time will heal everything,' Dhruv said, looking into her eyes.

Time will heal everything, he repeated in his mind. I feel it's more relevant to my situation than hers. There was an awkward silence between them; both had different thoughts running through their minds. *I have to put my feelings aside and have a straightforward conversation with her for the sake of my family. Dhruv, even if you have to be hard on yourself, don't delay—just be frank.*

'Disha, I want to talk with you. Rather, I want to clear a few things with you right now,' Dhruv said with an aching heart.

She was prepared for it by then, to hear what her friends had been hinting about since the morning. Come what may, she would not be shocked by Dhruv's words, she resolved. Disha looked straight into his eyes and could see that a plethora of emotions were hidden in them. She waited for him to speak with her fingers crossed in the hope that it wouldn't shatter her; she still felt so fragile after her daadi's death. However, what followed was something she had not expected at all.

Dhruv broke the long silence. 'This may sound harsh to you, but I don't want you to talk to me ever. I want you to stay away from me.'

'But why? I'm really sorry if I did something wrong or hurt you.' Disha was completely baffled. It was difficult for her to make friends but she had believed Dhruv to be one.

But clearly he thought otherwise. 'Look, I have my own reasons to come to this decision. Just think that I never existed in your life. We barely know each other and have not been friends for that long. And anyway, Raghav will be there with you. Wasn't that the reason you approached me to begin with?'

'Yes, but I felt that we all—Raghav, you, me and Kajal—would stay good friends even after school.'

'I am not friends with Raghav anymore either. And honestly, I don't want to be in touch with any of his friends.'

Dhruv turned and walked away from Disha. He knew Kajal would reveal everything to her anyway. He had pretended to be stone-hearted, but he could see that his words had hurt Disha, and

It hardly mattered to Disha who else was coming along and who wasn't, as the person who mattered the most hardly cared about her. The thing about heartbreak that's so strange is that the world around you keeps spinning, although you feel frozen. That's exactly what Disha was going through; the pain inside her felt so big that she wondered how it hadn't spilled on anyone else. It was like she was drowning in a sea of darkness.

When Dhruv and Kajal had dropped her home and left, Disha went straight to her room without talking to anyone in the house and locked the door. Sobbing, she looked at the calendar, at the date she thought would be special—24 June—and scratched it out with a pen. When she was finished, there was a gaping hole in her calendar. How she wished she could erase that particular day from her memory!

Ψ

Disha's grandmother came to the door and asked to be let in, but Disha refused. She wasn't in a mood to talk to anyone, even her beloved daadi. One minute she felt she was overreacting, that she should be happy she was now friends with Raghav at least and should give some time for him to get to know her better. But the next second, pain overpowered her and she felt she was unlucky in love. She went to sleep without eating anything.

The next morning, she woke up with a start to loud voices. At first she thought she was dreaming, but the voices continued. As she walked towards the bedroom door, half-asleep, she thought she could hear her mother crying. Alarmed, Disha unlocked her door, and seeing her mother's face, she knew something was terribly wrong. It wasn't an everyday fight. She could hear her dad's voice from her grandmother's room. Her mother was pleading with someone on the phone.

'Please come soon. It's urgent. She isn't responding.'

mohar Café along with Meghna, where Kajal narrated everything to Disha without further ado.

'I remember, it was on the seventh day after your daadi's cremation ... I met Dhruv and we had coffee together. He seemed his usual self. We had a good time that day, but the next morning, when he came to school for some work, he looked extremely disturbed. After classes, I went up to him and he said he was waiting for Raghav. The moment Raghav turned up, Dhruv went berserk and they had an ugly fight. I couldn't understand why he was so angry with Raghav and neither of them revealed the reason then. But Dhruv told me in confidence later, and I went numb when I heard what had happened.

'He said that, after we'd had coffee, he had been on his way home when he saw Raghav's car parked not far from his lane. It was around eight o'clock and the streets were quite dark. When he saw the parking indicator blinking, he walked towards the car, and what he saw inside shocked him. Raghav was there with his younger sister Priya, and the driver was nowhere to be seen. Dhruv lost his temper. He got hold of his sister and, without saying a word to Raghav, took her home. The next day, when Raghav met him, he tried to make Dhruv understand that it was his sister who had pursued him. He even clarified that, though Dhruv saw them together inside the car, nothing had really happened between them and he was only trying to make Priya understand that she should let go of her feelings for him as it wasn't right. Dhruv had already confronted Priya by then; she had admitted that she liked Raghav and even apologised for her behaviour. Knowing Raghav's attitude towards relationships, Dhruv firmly told his sister to stay away from him. Seeing her brother upset, Priya promised him that she wouldn't interact with Raghav anymore. Not wanting his sister to get hurt and for her sake, Dhruv cut ties with Raghav. They haven't been on talking terms since then. Dhruv has also made it very clear to me that he wants to keep a distance from anyone connected to Raghav.'

'I was shocked to find out what had happened. It was hard to believe Raghav could be so insensitive. I mean, we had heard stories

Damn, I shouldn't have said that. Why is it so difficult for me to talk to boys?

'So ... someone stalks.' Raghav turned and smiled at Disha.

Disha blushed and Raghav added, 'I'll send you a friend request once we are back.'

'Sure.' Disha's happiness knew no bounds.

'Where's Dhruv? Wasn't he supposed to come with us?' Kajal asked.

'He'll join us there.'

The drive to the mall wasn't that long, but Disha wished she had superpowers so she could pause time. The soothing music in the car along with Raghav's presence was making her happier than she had ever been. There are some moments in our lives which we want to hold on to forever, and this was certainly one for Disha. Despite Mumbai traffic, she felt that they had reached their destination in a matter of seconds. Dhruv was waiting for them and had booked an alley on Raghav's request. While Raghav and the others changed into their bowling shoes, Dhruv went up to Disha and said, 'You're looking really ... nice today.'

Disha thanked him, and remembered that Raghav had not complimented her on how she looked. She glanced at him and saw that he was engrossed in talking to Meghna and helping her put on her bowling shoes. Maybe he was just trying to be helpful, Disha thought, and decided not to take it seriously. Just as she turned to join them, Dhruv stopped her and said, 'I have a request—please don't talk about the letter that you wrote to Raghav.'

'Why not? Isn't he here because of that letter?' Disha raised her eyebrows.

'It's just that ... I don't want you to look desperate. That's all,' Dhruv explained.

Disha felt his suggestion was sensible. 'Yes, you're right. Don't worry, I won't. By the way, do you know how to play this game?'

'Kind of. Raghav loves it, and I've come here with him and played it a couple of times.'

Kajal felt terrible for her friend. ‘Such an asshole he is. It’s better to stay away from such morons, Disha.’

Over the next few months, Disha avoided Raghav. He did try to interact with her a few times, but with no reciprocation from her or her friends, he soon gave up. Dhruv rarely crossed paths with Disha or Kajal. Occasionally they would pass each other in the school corridors when he came to pick his sister up, but Disha avoided him. Dhruv never approached her either, as he thought she was with Raghav. He had not spoken to Raghav since their fight, and was oblivious of what had happened in his life since then. However, his feelings for Disha had not died. He still loved her, but had no desire to express his feelings. His priorities were set—he wanted to concentrate on his studies and support his family rather than get involved in someone else’s life.

Disha had never imagined that the person she would fall in love with could bring her so much pain. It was an ordeal that lasted several months: she would be up till the wee hours of the morning, asking herself questions that she would never have answers to. After school, when Raghav got admission in a different college, she was able to move on. But for the next couple of years, after the heart-breaking experience of her first love, Disha could not love anyone nor did she let anyone love her. She was afraid to let them in.

Disha and Raghav had both played the game of love. In the end, they both lost. He lost the girl who would have done anything to make him happy, and she lost all the pieces of her heart trying to create a love story that didn’t exist.

Those words impacted Disha strongly and, through all the lectures, various probabilities ran through her mind. She felt like sand was slipping through her hand and there was nothing she could do about it. Disha's memory of her outing with Raghav had faded over the past weeks, but she was certain that she loved him and didn't want any more hiccups to come in the way of them forming a relationship. In the break, when she voiced her concern to Kajal, she received a similar response which added to her anxiety.

'Let the school hours get over,' Kajal said, 'We will talk. I didn't want other things to bother you for the last couple of weeks ... that's why I kept it from you.'

Disha's mind was consumed by the numerous possibilities.

Does Raghav love someone else? But if that were the case, would he have come over to talk to me as soon as he saw me? There is certainly something worse than I am thinking, but what can it be?

Disha kept glancing at her watch, waiting for school hours to end. Finally, classes got over, and as she was walking out of her classroom, she spotted Dhruv near the school office. She instantly asked Kajal to come with her to say hi. But Kajal immediately asked Disha not to approach Dhruv, and she was taken aback. She couldn't figure out why Kajal would say that. When Disha insisted that she would like to meet Dhruv, Kajal gave up.

'You go. I'll meet you outside the stationery shop along with Meghna.'

'You guys are behaving really strangely. Anyway, I won't force you ... I'll meet you outside.'

Disha walked up to Dhruv. 'Hi, good to see you here. I just resumed school today.'

Dhruv nodded. 'I've come here to submit an application to appear for the practical exam before the first semester. I heard about your daadi. I'm sorry for your loss. I remember you telling me that she was really close to your heart.'

'Yeah. She is ... I mean she was ...' Disha's voice was low. She still wasn't comfortable talking about her daadi in the past tense.

The game started and it didn't take long for Disha to sense that Meghna was as good at it as Raghav was. They got along so well together that Disha started to feel left out. It wasn't that Raghav totally ignored the others; he engaged with everyone, but the way he spoke with Meghna, it felt like they'd known each other for a long time. Kajal realised Disha was unhappy with the situation, but she could hardly help. While time flew for Meghna and Raghav, Disha kept counting the minutes, and though Dhruv was by her side all the time, she soon started to feel that she shouldn't have been there in the first place. She was disheartened by Raghav's attitude but kept quiet as she didn't want to spoil her first outing with him. She tried different ways to catch his attention but failed. Eventually, she couldn't suppress her emotions anymore, and Dhruv noticed the tears in her eyes. Kajal saw, and she spoke up.

'I think we should leave now, or else we'll get late and that will mean trouble at home,' Kajal said. 'We told our parents that we are going to a group study session at our friend's place.'

Despite her disappointment, Disha wanted to stay for some more time, but she realised that she would only end up being more hurt. So, she backed Kajal's suggestion. However, she was heartbroken by the way Raghav reacted.

'We're playing a few more games. If you guys are getting late, then I can ask the driver to drop you.'

'It's fun. Stay a little while longer,' Meghna said to Disha and Kajal.

What hurt Disha even more than Raghav not coming along was the fact that he didn't ask her to stay back even once.

Don't allow anyone to hurt you emotionally. Disha remembered her grandmother's words. Finally, she understood what Daadi had wanted to convey.

'No, thanks. You guys stay. We will manage. See you in school,' Disha said in a heavy voice.

'I'll come along,' Dhruv said instantly.

Disha felt goose bumps break out on her skin. 'What's happening? Is Daadi all right? Please tell me,' she said, running to her mother's side.

Her mother sobbed as she put the phone down and hugged Disha. Fearing the worst, Disha repeated her question.

Her mother replied, 'Today, when Daadi got up, she was feeling breathless. After having breakfast and taking her medicines, she lay down on her bed. A few minutes back, suddenly, she stopped responding. The ambulance is on its way. We are taking her to the hospital.'

Disha's heartbeat grew abnormally fast as she followed her mother into Daadi's room. Terrified, she stayed behind her mother, but couldn't take her eyes off the scene in front of her. Daadi was lying on her bed, lifeless to all appearances. Disha almost blacked out.

In the hospital, as she watched her grandmother being taken into the ICU, she couldn't feel anything anymore and just wanted to shut down. She stared at the wall in silence. All the memories she shared with her grandmother flashed in front of her eyes. If only Disha had known what was going to happen, she would have talked to her grandmother last night for at least a few minutes.

Please don't go. I need you, Daadi, you just can't leave me alone in this cruel world. Who will be by my side if not you? Please fight, Daadi. We all need you.

Disha bowed her head and cried. The door of the ICU opened, and a doctor walked out. Disha's parents rushed up to him.

'I'm sorry,' the doctor said. 'She's no more.'

CHAPTER 5

Losing a loved one to death can drain you emotionally. It's incredibly challenging to get your head around the idea that you'll never see that person again. Disha was still in denial; she couldn't believe that her daadi was no more. She had never imagined that anything could ever affect her so deeply, that her whole world could collapse overnight. She had been crying, shivering, waking up in the middle of night with panic attacks—it was like seeing an entirely new spectrum of colours. Out of habit, she would head to her grandmother's room, only to remember her loss all over again. Her daadi had been her one true source of emotional support, someone who understood her and made sure she felt loved. That support had now been wrenched away from her, and the thought of having to go on without her was unbearable. For the next thirteen days, till all the rites were completed, she simply wanted to retreat into a shell and hide, refusing to accept the truth, but she knew that eventually she would have to resume school and face the everyday reality of her life. She needed to accept that life moves on and find comfort in the realisation that death couldn't erase the time they had spent together.

A fortnight later, Disha was ready to start school again. As she got ready, she didn't feel the same eagerness she used to. Then she remembered Kajal's words, which had made her feel better whenever she sobbed like a child over the past few days.

'I can understand how you feel, but there's no escape from such situations. I dealt with the same loss a few years back, when my grandmother died. But then I realised that the only way out is to keep alive the memories of the person who has gone, and live for the peo-

about him, but I always felt he was a good person inside. After this incident, I have lost all respect for him. All I know is that he isn't the right person for you. A person who cannot be loyal to his best friend can never be trusted,' Kajal said.

Disha's heart sank deep into her chest like an anchor that sinks into the sand. She looked up, tears in her eyes, searching for a reason to hold on to hope. She had never been so heartbroken before, her heart felt eroded, bereft of hope. This was the first time she had cherished dreams of love, and they were crushed before they could even take wing. Who's at fault, she wondered. He who never loved her or she who expected him to love her? She had always felt she wasn't lucky in love and her assumption was turning out to be true.

She was about to leave when Meghna stopped her and said, 'That's not all, Disha. You asked me this morning why I was disturbed when Raghav's name came up in our conversation. Actually, I wanted to keep it to myself. I felt I shouldn't hurt you while you were mourning your daadi's death, but now I think I shouldn't hide it any longer.'

'Before all this happened with Dhruv and his sister, Raghav did something that shocked me, which even Kajal isn't aware of. The day we went bowling, after you guys had left, we spent some time together. I thought he was a nice, fun-loving guy who would make a good friend. The next couple of days, we hung out together all the time. Kajal, you might have observed this. But then he made a confession that I really wasn't expecting. He said he has feelings for me, and that was the reason he had befriended you, because he noticed us getting along well in school. I rejected his proposal straight away and started maintaining a distance from him as I had sensed that you love him. I didn't want you to get hurt, Disha.'

Disha was shaken. 'Was he really using me to be with you?' She paused, and added in a heartbroken tone, 'I feel I should at least confront him about why he played with my feelings. If he felt nothing for me, he shouldn't have asked me to go out.'

ple who are still around and love us. I am not saying it's going to be easy, but I'll be there for you whenever you need me.'

As she walked into school, she began hoping that Raghav could bring back her lost smile and that his presence would soothe her. Before classes began, she was chatting with Meghna and asked where Raghav was. Meghna's reaction immediately told her that something was wrong.

'What happened? Is everything all right?'

'Yes, of course. It's just that I'm not feeling so well today.'

'You're hiding something. You were talking casually till Raghav's topic came up. And suddenly your expression changed. Something's wrong.'

'Trust me. Everything is all right.'

Disha held her hand and assured her that she could speak without any hesitation; after all, they were friends. But Meghna stood by her statement. Just then, Raghav entered the classroom and Disha saw him coming towards her. She had thought that, after everything that had happened, her feelings may have changed. But one look from him and her heartbeat increased, the butterflies starting again in her stomach.

Raghav stopped near Disha's desk and said, 'Sorry to hear about your grandmother. I was thinking of giving you a call, but thought you might need some alone time. Hope you're okay now.'

'Thanks. I am fine.' Disha smiled. Glancing towards Meghna and Kajal, she added, 'So what did you guys do while I wasn't around? I'm sure I must have missed some fun.' She was trying very hard to act normal.

'Not much,' Raghav said and quickly moved to his bench. His reaction made Disha feel certain that something had happened with him and Meghna.

Meghna too sensed that Disha suspected this, and knew she couldn't pretend anymore. Before Disha could probe further, she said, 'I'll tell you everything, but not now. After school. Give me some time.'

CHAPTER 6

June 2009

The calendar in Disha's room displayed the date: it was 25 June. Her daadi's third death anniversary. Disha stood in front of a photo of her grandmother, silently paying her respects. Memories of Daadi were still fresh in Disha's heart. Over three years, Disha's life had changed completely, and she was no longer the girl she was in school, who had struggled to hold a normal conversation. Back then, she was painfully shy, an introvert, but with time, she had grown into a lively, cheerful girl, someone with magnetic charisma who always strove to make others feel better.

Much had changed for Disha, but a few things remained the same—she was still single and continued to believe she wasn't lucky in love. Though she had completely moved on from Raghav, the experience had burnt her, and she never reciprocated any of the romantic proposals she received in high school. Her parents still argued with each other every day, making her wonder why they were still together. Every now and then, they tried to keep an eye on her and lay down rules, which frustrated her as she wanted total control over her own life, like every other teenager. She had turned rebellious because of her parents' strict attitude, and their relationship was increasingly filled with tension and conflict.

As the years rolled by and friends moved on, one person had stuck with her—Kajal. She was still Disha's best friend, a sister from another mother. Disha had absolutely no clue where the others were and what they were doing with their lives after school. However, her

fronting him at least once. Isn't this some kind of sign, that we are back again on one campus?"

'Whatever. I would suggest that you not take one step closer to him,' Kajal said firmly.

On the one hand, Disha wanted to ignore the person who had hurt her so badly; on the other, she still wanted to know why he had tried to take advantage of her feelings. The thought consumed her mind till the end of the day, and she could barely concentrate on classes. As she was about to leave, she crossed paths with Raghav again near the gate. Kajal had gone to fetch her Activa from the parking lot while she waited outside.

'Disha, wait,' Raghav called out as he walked up to her.

Disha didn't say anything.

'What's wrong? Why are you avoiding me?' he asked curiously.

Disha couldn't hold the words back anymore. 'Raghav ... we never talked after that one outing in school. So why do you want to ... all of a sudden?' Disha paused.

'We never fought or argued, though. We were in the same school, and being in same college now, I thought we could be friends again,' Raghav explained.

Disha was about to react to this statement, but Kajal came up on her Activa just then. Disha got on the bike and left without another word.

'What was he saying?' Kajal asked as they rode home.

'Nothing much,' Disha said, trying to sound casual.

She couldn't comprehend what life was throwing at her. Out of the blue, her past had crept in, turning her present upside down, and that irked her. All this time, she believed that she had moved on; certainly, she wasn't the same person anymore. Still, she wasn't able to ignore him completely and couldn't understand the reason for it.

Do I still have feelings for him? She pondered over this question all weekend. She shouldn't have been so intensely affected by his reappearance, but she was, and that infuriated her. Sitting alone in her room, she felt weak, as if she had no control over her emotions.

'You should be happy—you have possessive parents if not a possessive boyfriend,' Kajal mocked, and got a punch from Disha in return.

Their college was just a couple of kilometres away and it didn't take them much time to reach despite traffic. Kajal parked her Activa and they were walking down the corridor when a guy called out to them.

'Excuse me, can you tell me where Lecture Hall Five is?'

It seemed like it was his first day; he looked worried as he glanced nervously at the unfamiliar faces around him.

'First year?' Disha asked.

'Yes,' the guy replied hesitantly.

'Which field?' she asked.

'Commerce.'

Disha looked at Kajal, and knew instantly that they were about to play a prank on him.

'Come along. We're from Commerce too.'

They continued to walk, and the guy accompanied them without a word, too shy to introduce himself. The classroom was already full of students, and Disha and Kajal took the seats at the back. The newcomer sat beside them. The professor entered and began the lecture without wasting a single minute.

'Who teaches on the first day of college?' the guy asked.

Kajal shrugged, and he could see that she wasn't interested in listening to the lecture. The guy gave her a strange look, and from his expression, Kajal guessed that he was the nerdy type. Disha saw it too and said, 'It's the second day of college.'

'Second? Wasn't college supposed to start today?' The guy was baffled.

Disha ignored him, took her mobile out, and started playing a game on it. Throughout the lecture, the newcomer kept staring at the blackboard and wondering what was happening. He guessed something was up, but only realised what it was when, towards the end of the lecture, the professor asked everyone to introduce themselves

CHAPTER 7

Whether it's a romantic relationship or a friendship, all bonds are built on trust. Without it, the bond is bound to crumble, and Disha was not ready to trust Raghav completely. However, the clarifications Raghav had given her the previous night definitely compelled her to think about the situation differently. After their phone call, she wasn't able to sleep, endlessly thinking about why and how things had happened the way they did back in school.

At breakfast the next morning, her mother looked like she was in a bad mood. The moment Disha sat at the table, her mom said, 'Seems like you are still sleepy. These phone calls are keeping you busy all night. I could hear you talking to someone at midnight.'

Disha was taken aback. 'I was talking to Kajal, Mom. We had to discuss a college assignment that has to be submitted today.'

Damn, I should have stayed quiet rather than give this lame excuse.

'Yeah, right. On the second day of your college, assignments are keeping you awake all night. As if we never attended college,' her mother said sarcastically.

Okay, before making such lame excuses, you should not forget that your parents once attended college too and must have defended themselves in the same manner.

Before she could say anything else, her mother added, 'By the way, you seem to have forgotten that Kajal comes over in the morning, every day. Today was no different, just that she has gone down to make a phone call as there are network issues here.'

friendship with Kajal had only grown stronger with time, and no matter what the situation, they shared every moment of their lives with each other. They were inseparable and had just got admission in the same college for a Bachelors in Arts.

It had been just one day since college had started, and a few students were yet to join, but Disha and Kajal were already getting into the groove of college life. Their excitement knew no bounds, having heard so many college stories from their seniors at school. As always, Kajal was waiting downstairs for Disha to get ready. The only thing that had changed was that her bicycle had been replaced by an Activa.

'It may rain soon,' Disha said to Kajal the moment they stepped outside. 'We have to rush to college.'

Kajal was annoyed at Disha for being late as usual and was about to say something, but she calmed down when she saw that her friend looked stunning in an orange ruffled top, blue jeans and black wedges. The mascara and lip gloss flattered her face and her wavy hair was let down.

'You look amazing today,' Kajal said as she started her Activa. Disha thanked her and sat down comfortably behind her.

'You're in a good mood today. Anything special?' Disha asked, peering at her in the side mirror.

'My dad promised to buy me a new mobile phone next month on my birthday. I was so pissed off with this one.'

'Lucky you. A couple of days back, I told my parents that my mobile is in bad shape and I want to change it. *Concentrate on your studies, not cell phones*, was their reply. They think I use it to chat with boys. As if I have dozens of boyfriends.'

'You do have a screen lock on your phone, right? Then why do you worry about them all the time,' Kajal said.

'Yeah, right... as if I can keep anything secret from them. They keep peeping into my phone whenever I'm texting someone.'

for attendance. Disha was one of the last to give her name and she added, 'First year, Bachelor of Arts.'

Kajal did the same and the professor looked a bit confused. He had asked everyone to call out their names and not the stream. Concluding that these girls were over-smart, he turned a blind eye to them. However, the new guy understood that they had played a prank on him. He thought, *Fuck, man, I'll look like an idiot. I wondered why they were being so nice to me. These days girls are way too much. Earlier, seniors ragged and mocked juniors, but look how times have changed. I am getting mocked by my first-year batchmates. How stupid can I get? This is embarrassing.*

He was shaken from his thoughts by the chalk that the professor had thrown at his face.

'Are you day-dreaming or are you stoned? Didn't you hear me?'

'Sorry, sir.' He stood up awkwardly and apologised.

'Introduce yourself,' the professor said in a stern voice.

'Sir, sorry, I made a mistake. I am not in Arts. I am in Commerce,' he confessed. Disha and Kajal couldn't stop chuckling, and the entire class burst into laughter.

After class, the newcomer was relieved to see the professor leave. He was walking away, head down, when Disha stopped him and said, 'We're sorry. We were just trying to have some fun.'

Kajal too apologised. 'Don't take it to heart. You looked so innocent and your shyness was so cute that we just had to play a prank. Sorry again.'

He was annoyed, but he hadn't expected the girls to apologise. He could see that, though embarrassing for him, the situation they put him in was actually hilarious. It brought a smile to his face.

'It's fine,' he said in a friendly tone, and continued, 'You girls are really candid and crafty. I wish I had the same attitude. Anyway, my name is Kedar. It was a pleasure to meet you.' After a round of casual introductions, the guy left for his class.

When they had re-entered the classroom, Kajal said with a smile, 'Time has really changed you for the better, Disha. I remember

'You can't share one omelette with your best friend?' Kajal pleaded.

'I would do anything for you but not this. I'm way too hungry and not in a mood to eat the poha that mom has packed for me.'

Kajal was about to snatch the plate from her, but froze on seeing a guy standing right behind them.

'Hi, how are you guys? It's so fucking awesome to see you here! It's been too long. I saw Disha from outside and came in to say hi.'

Disha turned around, a numbness suffusing her body. Her whole world seemed to freeze; she felt suffocated, and incapable of speech. It was Raghav.

She got up, signalling to Kajal that they should leave. As they started walking out of the canteen, Raghav stopped them and said, 'I haven't changed so much that you can't recognise me. It's Raghav, from your school. Remember?'

'I do remember, but we are getting late for class,' Disha said in a tone that she would never have used in her school days.

Raghav stood there, looking confused. *We hardly interacted during the latter part of our tenth standard and went to different junior colleges for our eleventh and twelfth, but we never had a fight for them to act this way with me. Quite strange.*

Kajal was uncomfortable about the fact that Raghav was on the same campus. All the memories of how her friend had suffered flashed in front of her eyes. She noticed that Disha was lost in thought.

When we didn't even bother to talk to each other in the last year of school, why does he come and initiate a conversation now? Is this what destiny wants? Disha was wondering. Her thoughts were all too plain to Kajal, who said, 'I know what you might be thinking. But remember, I told you before and I will still say the same. Simply avoid him.'

'I understand that you don't want me to get hurt again,' Disha whispered as they took their seats in the classroom, making sure the professor couldn't see them. 'But I don't know why I feel like con-

On hearing his voice, she got goose bumps.

'I'm sorry I insisted on calling,' he said.

'No, it's okay.' She couldn't bring herself to speak harshly to him.
'So ... can you clarify now?'

'I don't know what Dhruv told you, but I wasn't lying then, nor am I lying now.' Raghav paused for a moment and continued, 'Yes, she liked me, and that day, I was waiting outside Dhruv's lane for him when she passed by. Seeing my car, she stopped and said that she wanted to discuss a personal matter with me. She got into the car, but when she started expressing her feelings for me, I immediately told her that it was wrong. I never saw her that way. Just then, Dhruv spotted us inside the car. But we weren't getting intimate. Even Priya tried to tell him this. And I apologised to Dhruv anyway, but he was on a different trip altogether.' Raghav sighed and added in a gloomy voice, 'That's all. I lost a good friend because of it.'

Disha took a deep breath, trying to figure out if he was telling the truth. Anyway, she had more questions for him. 'Okay ... but why did you play with my feelings? Why didn't you directly ask Meghna out instead of using me to do it and then making me feel unwanted? You hurt me and that really wasn't nice.'

'Wow. Now I know the real reason behind you not talking to me for the rest of the year and even now.' Raghav sighed.

'Please answer my question.'

'Look, I'll be very honest. I did find Meghna attractive. I don't think there's any harm in thinking someone is gorgeous. But I wasn't sure how to go and talk to her directly. At the same time, I had observed you glancing at me occasionally and felt that you were a friendly person. Moreover, you were her bench-mate. It wasn't that I was using you; we could have stayed friends. Was I wrong in befriending you?'

'Even after reading the letter I had given Dhruv, in which I expressed my feelings for you? Didn't you take advantage of the way I felt to get close to Meghna?'

a girl who was a female Kedar during school days, and now, look at yourself! This is undoubtedly a better version of yourself.'

Disha remembered her school days and thought, *I have dealt with my insecurities and immaturities. There was a time when I was at my lowest. It took every ounce of energy I had even to get out of bed in the morning and function normally for the rest of the day. But you are allowed to break down, as long as you pick yourself back up and keep moving forward. And all these years, I have kept improving as a person. Yes, I had to make an effort to come out of my shell, but it was worth it. I still have my moments of fear and anxiety, but I choose not to live in a constant state of negativity. I have started to appreciate the small moments and stopped rushing through my life. I choose to believe that life is beautiful, and that I am surrounded by people I love and who love me back. What more can I ask for than that? I hope that in the future, too, my decisions will make for a better story.*



At break, Kajal suggested that they try out the college canteen. It was very crowded there, but after waiting for a couple of minutes, they found seats.

'I'll have the veg cutlet,' Kajal said, and Disha got up to place the order for both of them.

Collecting the food from the counter, she went back to their table. Disha had got an omelette for herself. Kajal saw it and exclaimed, 'I read outside that they don't make non-veg on Fridays! How come you got yourself an egg?'

Disha said, 'And I thought you could read. It only says that they don't serve meat.'

'Damn, my bad. I don't have enough money to order again. But I have to fill my fuel tank. Let me take a bite from you.' Kajal reached for Disha's plate.

Disha however lifted it out of Kajal's reach. 'Eat your cutlet and don't eye my omelette!'

Finally, on Sunday evening, she lost the battle and her heart won over her mind. She didn't know whether she was taking the right step, but when you have feelings for someone, you don't balance rights and wrongs. You just go by your gut feelings, and all her instincts were now telling her to give Raghav a chance. Disha opened his Facebook profile and sent him a friend request. For the next few hours, she kept refreshing her Facebook page to see if he had accepted the request. When he finally did, they immediately exchanged phone numbers. After doing so, she was in a dilemma again.

What should I do now? What if I fall into the trap once again? I don't know what's on the other side of the door, but after seeing him today, I experienced a sensation that I never expected to feel again. It was weird and shocking, but I did. Maybe it was just an illusion that I had moved on as he was nowhere near me. That chapter had ended, but I didn't realise that the story hadn't ended. I have no idea why he is back in my life; to make me believe in love or to destroy me completely. I have no idea why my heart wants to give him a chance to express his side of things. Am I making a mistake by doing so?

As she was examining her feelings and her thoughts, her phone beeped. It was Raghav.

'Is this a good time to talk?'

All of a sudden, she felt an urge to talk to him. She texted him back with trembling hands. 'Yes. But I want to ask you a few things first. Can I?'

'Sure,' came his reply.

Disha texted him, 'I'll be direct. Don't be offended. If you had feelings for Meghna, why did you get close to Dhruv's sister, and that too within a week of proposing to her?'

'Can we talk? I cannot clarify everything over text messages.'

'No,' Disha replied. She felt his voice still had the power to mesmerise her and she didn't want to get manipulated.

'Please. My monthly pack doesn't include free messaging either.' Raghav replied. He insisted a couple of more times and eventually Disha gave in.

'Letter, what letter are you talking about?' Raghav sounded confused.

'The letter Dhruv gave you before you asked me out,' Disha clarified.

'I have no idea what you're talking about. Dhruv didn't give me any letter that you had written.'

Disha was astounded to hear this; she hardly knew whether to believe him. Had she really misunderstood Raghav all these years, or was she falling into a trap again?

As they left the café, she saw Raghav stop and talk to a beggar child who appeared to be around eight years old. He had a box of Domino's Pizza in his hand and a few packets of biscuits.

The owners of the outlets must have given it to him, she thought. Just then, she saw a waiter from the café coming out with a glass of buttermilk.

'Where are you from? Do you stay with your parents here?' Raghav asked.

'Yes, we stay in Dadar, but we are from Gondal in Gujarat,' the child answered, drinking his buttermilk.

'Your parents work somewhere?' Raghav asked.

'My father does nothing, and my mother works at a construction site.'

'Why doesn't he work?' Raghav persisted.

'He took a big loan from some people and couldn't repay it. After we shifted here, he just spends all his time complaining about things. He doesn't do anything else.'

'Do you have sisters and brothers?'

'I have two younger sisters and two elder brothers who are married.'

'Do you want to study?'

'Yes, but we don't have money for me to study. My mother makes me read and write a little when I go home in the evening.'

Raghav felt bad for the boy and handed him a five-hundred-rupee note. He also gave him his phone number and assured the boy that he would give his dad a job in one of his father's companies. The child left with a happy smile on his face.

Disha and Kajal glanced at each other. They both felt they had misunderstood Raghav. Seeing this side of him was heartening, and made Disha fall for him all over again.

When she was back home, Disha texted Raghav.

'Hi, thank you for coming to our rescue today and also for the coffee. I also wanted to say that I believe you when you say that situations have changed you for the better. Yesterday, after our con-

Kajal thought he was kidding and tried to tease him. 'Even the girls?'

Raghav gave her a lukewarm smile and said, taking a sip of his coffee, 'Yes. It's all about timing, isn't it? I erased everyone from my life. But I think the last two years gave me some me-time ... and an opportunity to analyse myself.'

'Why? What happened?' Disha asked curiously.

Raghav took a deep breath and said, 'My parents got divorced.'

Everyone looked at him with sympathy, and he said, 'There were a lot of issues in their marriage and they had intense quarrels during our board exams. Once I was done with my exams, they filed for divorce. I was depressed, but unfortunately too young to be able to articulate my feelings. When they fought or put me in the middle of a quarrel, I had a feeling that winning the argument was more important to them, than me. After a year or so, the shock wore off, but the impact of how they chose to parent me through the crisis will never wear off. My dad suffered losses in his business, and was broke for a while. But the situation got better last year, and now we are staying together. My mother didn't want custody of me, and that was heart-breaking. What can be worse than your mom disowning you?'

Raghav's eyes were moist, but he didn't let the tears flow. 'The last two years taught me many things in life. No one should have to face what I did.'

His heart was heavy, but he didn't let his emotions break him. He was a changed person who now understood what one goes through when one feels abandoned.

'We're sorry,' Disha said gently.

I feel for him. I go through it every day when my parents chip away at my belief that love is unconditional and replace it with a resolution to harden my heart to love, convincing me that I will be hurt beyond recovery if I don't. I want my parents to stop fighting with each other. I don't want to be forced to take sides and choose one parent over the other, like he had to.

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The café was mostly filled with couples who had bunked classes and professors who didn't have any lectures.

Raghav ordered coffee for everyone. 'School days were fun. So, are you in touch with anyone else from our school?' he asked Disha, checking the notifications on his mobile phone.

Whenever she had interacted with Raghav in the past, she had been timid, but not this time. Disha replied confidently, 'No one, really. For a while, I was in touch with Meghna, but then she got busy. Her parents shifted to Pune; we had no mobiles back then, and we lost touch. I've tried to search for her on Facebook, but she isn't there.'

'Oh, I see,' Raghav said.

Disha tried to gauge his expression and asked hesitantly, 'Do you still like her?'

'No, no. It was just a crush.' He smiled, and added, 'There's no one really in my thoughts these days.'

Disha didn't say anything. Deep in her heart, she felt good that he didn't have feelings for anyone—and the fact that she felt good made her more sure that she still loved him.

That's the strangest thing about love; when the person you love isn't in front of your eyes constantly, you feel that you have moved on. But when they are back, your feelings for them return, stronger than ever. Disha was going through just this situation. The only thing that had changed was that she was much more confident and sure of herself than she had been in her school days. The confidence showed in the way she dressed and groomed herself, and the beauty she had always had was now allowed to blossom.

Raghav continued the conversation after the waiter served coffee. 'I am not in touch with any of our schoolmates either. I went through a lot the last couple of years, and I preferred to stay away from everyone who knew me.'

Fuck ... Kajal has already been interrogated. Why the hell does she have to come so early every damn day? Time to make a move.

Disha ate the rest of her breakfast quickly and went downstairs to see Kajal standing next to her Activa. The moment Disha appeared, she yelled, 'You didn't tell me you are active on some cheap dating website!'

'What? Have you gone nuts?'

'Then who were you talking to at midnight?'

'Raghav,' Disha confessed, and Kajal went berserk.

'What the fuck, are you out of your mind?' Kajal took a deep breath. 'Tell me you are joking.'

'No, I'm not,' Disha said, and as they set off, began recounting their conversation to Kajal.

All the way till college and even afterwards, Kajal kept arguing with Disha.

'How can I accuse him of taking advantage of my feelings when Dhruv never gave him the letter?' Disha said impatiently, adjusting her bag on her shoulders as they walked towards their classroom.

'He must be lying to you, knowing that you aren't in touch with Dhruv. All I can say is, think twice before taking another step.'

Disha didn't know how to respond. A brief silence followed as they approached their class.

'Do you still have feelings for him?' Kajal asked, stopping at the door and looking straight into her eyes.

Disha still had no answer. Her heart was filled with conflicting emotions.

For three long years, I convinced myself that I have moved on, and now here I am, not able to understand whether this feeling is killing me or saving my life. I don't know what I feel anymore.



Raghav looked for Disha in college. When he didn't see her, he tried her phone, but it was not reachable. The conversation he'd had last

relationship with Disha one step further. He decided to tell her how he felt, and ask if she would be his girlfriend.

That morning, countless thoughts ran through his head as he changed into his jeans and red shirt.

I haven't slept the whole night wondering what Disha's reaction will be. It's not that I haven't asked girls out before, but this feels different. I am nervous for the first time. I don't think she will reject me, but knowing how she feels about love, I wonder—what if she isn't ready yet? Even the thought of it makes me go crazy.

With his stubble and well-groomed hair, Raghav was looking smart. He checked himself in the mirror one last time and walked out of his house.

The drive to college usually passed quickly, but that day he counted every second it took to reach the campus. He had asked Disha to wait for him near the parking lot, and the moment Raghav drove through the college gate, he saw her standing there with Kajal. He was dumbstruck at the mere sight of her. Dressed in a long black skirt and a white top, with the little bit of make-up she usually wore, she looked lovely. It wasn't that she had dressed up for the occasion, as she couldn't possibly know what was going to happen, but Raghav felt she had never looked so beautiful as on that special day.

'Wow, you are looking amazing,' Raghav complimented Disha as he stopped his car next to her.

'Isn't that too much flattery first thing in the morning?' she said with a smile. 'Aren't you late for your classes?'

'Stop asking questions and get in. We are not attending classes today,' Raghav said and opened the door for her.

'Wait ... wait ... we aren't going anywhere. My attendance is low and I don't want the counsellor to call my parents again, this time for bunking.'

'Don't be a coward. Act like a warrior. Get in.' Despite Disha's hesitation, he persuaded her to get into the car and told Kajal that they would be back soon. Kajal bid them goodbye as they sped off.

questioned, and after scolding them for being so naïve, the counsellor bowled a googly.

'Call your parents right now,' she said. 'Tell them that you were willingly going with a senior to get ragged and humiliated.'

Disha pleaded and tried every trick in the book to persuade the counsellor not to go through with the punishment, but she was a lady with a strong will. Finally, Disha called her father. 'Hello, Papa. I was going with seniors to get ragged, and the counsellor stopped me.'

'Say what you were asked to say. Repeat it word for word,' the counsellor said sternly.

'Papa, I was going to get ragged and humiliated willingly, and the counsellor caught me,' Disha rephrased the sentence.

I am sure my dad will think I am high!

The counsellor reprimanded all the other freshers and made them call their parents too. When it was all over, only the four of them remained. As they walked towards the main gate, no one uttered a word, but everyone had something or the other going on in their minds.

Kajal had begun to think that maybe Disha was right about Raghav, considering how he had saved them from the seniors. She asked Kedar, 'Were you guys ragged too?'

Before Kedar could say a word, Raghav said, 'No, we were spared, luckily. They were about to get hold of us, but we ran away.'

Kedar nodded instantly. 'Yes, that's what happened. Phew, thank God we managed to escape.'

'Where are we going?' Disha inquired.

'I thought we could all have coffee at Gulmohar Café. It's right outside our college,' Raghav said, looking at everyone. 'Is that fine?'

Disha smiled and he took it as a yes. She glanced at Raghav and thought, *I should thank him ... he saved us from a horrible experience. I think I was right to give him a chance. But the more I see him, the more I feel that old sensation again. Do I really still have feelings for him? I am not sure about that, but I am sure now that he isn't stone-hearted.*

night with Disha made him feel remorseful about what had happened, and he wanted to eradicate the misconceptions she had about him.

I'm not that bad a person; at least not the way she thinks. Yes, I was impulsive during school days, but I have evolved and she isn't aware of that. I can't let her go on thinking that I'm a villain. Moreover, I was never aware that she had feelings for me. How would I know? I have no idea why Dhruv didn't give me the letter like she had asked him to. I don't know if she will believe me.

He walked towards a lecture hall on the edge of the campus. A hand touched his shoulder and he turned to see who it was.

'First year?' the guy asked.

Raghav nodded. He seemed to be a senior. Before Raghav could say anything, he took him to one of the lecture rooms nearby. A few first-year students were there, including Kedar, who stood apprehensively beside Raghav. They were welcomed by a drunk senior who had a coke bottle half-filled with rum in his hand. When everyone was asked to introduce themselves, Raghav understood that he was going to get ragged. He wanted to escape, but the room had already been locked from the inside. Nervously, the juniors gave their names and one of the seniors said to the drunk guy, 'Baba, give them a feel of college life.' Baba was the term used for seniors who hadn't completed their graduation in three years.

Baba said, 'Gone are your high school days. In college life, you need to leave behind your bookish education and get used to applying your brains.'

He threw a pen on the floor and said to Kedar, 'Pick this pen up with the ass.'

Kedar was clearly scared, and even Raghav was sweating as he knew he would be next.

Kedar stammered, trying to look at his own backside, 'How can I?'

versation, I kept thinking how you could have evolved from the self-centred person that you were in our school days. Today, I knew how. I feel that more people should strive to have the strength and passion that you display in everyday life. It made me happy, the way you talked to that little child. I could see the urge in your eyes to help him and to know more about him. It melted my heart. I know now that you have a pure soul and a heart of gold.'

Raghav replied within minutes.

'During one of my numerous coffee runs with dad in the last couple of years, I asked him why he spends time making small talk with the waiters and he replied: "This is their whole day, standing there taking orders. We might as well make it a good day." After that, I made an effort to be kind to everyone, no matter how small a role they played in my life, because you never know what someone is going through. It has taught me so much. And, you know, the things you said about me—I could say I feel exactly the same about you. I really feel you have a pure soul and a heart of gold—and you even have looks to die for! You are so gorgeous, but trust me, I didn't approach you because of your beauty. I just wanted to clear the misconceptions you had about me. I am sorry if I have ever hurt you unintentionally.'

Disha was overcome with joy when she read the message. The way Raghav made her feel was amazing. She loved that feeling, but couldn't put it into words—it was a feeling authors write novels about.

Kedar nodded. As they walked past another classroom, they saw from the corner of their eyes that some fresher girls were going in, followed by seniors.

'So, it's not only the boys ... even the girls are having fun. But what are they telling the girls to do?' Raghav was curious to see, but didn't want to get caught again so he kept walking.

'This is wrong,' Kedar said. He was looking normal again.

When they got to the first floor, they saw Disha and Kajal walking along with a senior.

Shit, they are taking Disha to the girls' room for ragging. I cannot let this happen. Just then, Raghav spotted a lady counsellor, who was an advisor and guide for girls. He rushed towards her and told her what was happening. Before that, he had asked Kedar to follow the girls. Just when Disha and Kajal were about to enter the room where the freshers were being ragged, the counsellor called out authoritatively, 'Stop.'

The girls turned around and saw the counsellor. Disha and Kajal saw that Raghav and Kedar were with her and breathed a sigh of relief. Kedar gave them a broad smile. He had been ragged for two days straight, and recalling the incident with the girls on his first day, he couldn't suppress the smile.

Looking into the senior's eyes, the counsellor asked, 'Which year are you from?'

'Second year, Bachelor of Arts,' the senior replied.

The same question was fired at Disha and Kajal. Nervous, they didn't utter a word and instead glanced towards Raghav, who signalled to them to relax.

'First year, Bachelor of Arts. Class B,' the girls replied in one voice.

The other fresher girls who were with them also revealed that they were first-year students.

The counsellor immediately informed her colleagues and the anti-ragging cell. The seniors were instructed to report back after a week's suspension. A few minutes later, the fresher girls were being

'May I know what's cooking in your mind?' Disha asked. She had some inkling of what it was, but wanted to hear it from him.

'You will get to know soon. Till then, just enjoy the Mumbai traffic. I'll put on some nice songs.'

'Is it something special?' Disha probed further.

'It is.' Raghav had a smile on his face like never before, which made Disha blush.

It took them an hour to reach their destination, and throughout the journey, Disha kept wondering whether what she was expecting would really happen. Or was she just fantasising? As for Raghav, he was feeling panicky till he parked the car near Juhu beach.

'Why are we at Juhu beach?' Disha acted innocent. With every passing minute, her hopes were becoming more concrete, and her expectations were increasing.

'Come along,' he said, and they crossed the road and headed to the beach. Raghav wiped his hands nervously against his jeans and pulled his phone out of his back pocket. He dialled a number and informed someone that they had arrived.

Since it was quite early on a weekday morning, the beach wasn't too crowded. With every step, Disha's heart pounded. Raghav, too, was excited, and just when they were about to reach the spot, he closed Disha's eyes with his palms. They walked a few steps, Disha laughing excitedly as she was unable to see anything. Then they stopped and Raghav spoke.

'Here's the moment we were both waiting for.'

He uncovered her eyes and made her turn.

In front of her was a sand sculpture of a heart amidst lots of roses and rose petals. Raghav had asked a sand artist to prepare it and was delighted to see the pure joy on Disha's face. A question was engraved on the sculpture:

Will you be mine forever?

Disha was awestruck. She felt like she was in a dream and someone would pinch her any moment, bringing her back to reality. But it really was happening!

CHAPTER 8

Relationships with people change over the years, and that is okay. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. As the weeks passed, Disha and Raghav became good friends. Their relationship had changed for the better. In each other's company they laughed a little harder, cried a little less and smiled a lot more. It was like having their own little corner of the world to escape to. With every passing day, their bond strengthened and they grew to rely on each other. Kajal too had thrown away all the negative thoughts she'd had about Raghav, and they enjoyed each other's company. Friendship is a wonderful thing, and although sometimes things don't turn out the way you plan, there's a reason why certain people are meant to be in each other's lives.

Disha's feelings for Raghav had escalated, and Raghav too started to nurture a soft corner for her. It had become apparent to everyone else, from the way they spent time together and interacted with intimacy, that they were more than just friends, but neither of them was ready to accept it. While Disha stopped herself because she felt she wasn't lucky in love, an assumption that she had carried for years, Raghav was reluctant about getting into a relationship after having witnessed his parents' divorce. Moreover, he knew that Disha wasn't like the other girls he had dated, and he wanted to be really sure before expressing his feelings. Though he felt that he had fallen in love with her soon after they had become friends, Raghav decided to take some time to stabilise his emotions. After more than a month, the day came when he finally decided that he would take his

Raghav couldn't help chuckling at his expression, and after much verbal abuse from the seniors, Kedar actually tried to pick the pen by sitting on it.

Damn. I'm not doing this.

Everyone laughed and called out obscenities. Noticing that Raghav was trying to control his laughter, they pounced on him next.

'You think you're really smart? Now you give it a try. Pick the pen up with the ass.'

Raghav's grin had disappeared by then. 'Come on,' said Baba. Raghav took a step forward and picked the pen up with his right hand, murmuring, 'How should I ...'

Before he could finish, Baba got up from his seat and his expression had changed—he was smiling now. Raghav was confused, wondering what had happened to change his mood, when Baba said, 'You are indeed smart and know how to apply your brains. You can leave.'

Without a second thought, Raghav rushed out of the room, unable to comprehend why he had been spared. After a few minutes, Kedar came outside, crying.

Seeing Raghav, he said, 'You're a genius. How did you know the trick?'

'What trick? I am still trying to figure out what just happened. By the way, what's your name?'

'I'm Kedar.'

He still had tears in his eyes as he explained that Baba had asked them to pick the pen up with the ass, with the pen's ass and not theirs. And Raghav realised that, luckily, he had lifted the pen by its bottom end.

Holy crap, that was a close shave, Raghav thought, but at the same time, he couldn't help chortling at the trick.

'Don't tell anyone what just happened with us, or else I will tell all the girls that you were crying inside.'

She had kept the dress hidden inside her wardrobe, and in the afternoon, she quickly put it in her bag before she left the house. She wanted to be in the dress when she met Raghav though, so she went to a nearby mall to change. It was a Saturday, and she had told her parents that she was going to Kajal's place for an overnight group study session. While she was in the mall and even inside the washroom, she was extra vigilant to ensure that no one she knew spotted her. She changed quickly, put on a little make-up, and looked in the mirror. It wasn't every day that she wore such a seductive dress, and she oozed with confidence. The red made her skin glow and the new lenses she put on gave a mysterious expressiveness to her strikingly beautiful eyes.

Raghav was standing by his car near Shivaji Park when he saw Disha walking towards him. She seemed so beautiful, so different, that he could not understand why everyone on the street was not affected as he was by her. He was holding a bouquet of roses and her favourite Hershey's chocolates, which made Disha go pink with delight.

'Wow, you look gorgeous. I think I can never have enough of you. I love you,' he said as he helped her into the car. She sat down, feeling like she was in a dream come true, as if a scene from a romantic novel was unfolding in her own life.

The moment they entered their room at the hotel, a waiter came in to present them with a bottle of wine and a cake with 'Happy Anniversary' written on it.

'Happy anniversary, Sir and Madam. Do you need anything else?' he asked.

'No, thank you,' Raghav said, giving him a tip as he left.

He turned towards Disha, who stood there shyly as he poured some wine in their glasses.

'Cheers,' he said, raising his glass.

Disha's nervousness showed in all her movements. It was the first time she had ever been in a closed room with a man, having a glass of wine. After a couple of drinks, she felt a little tipsy. She was

Raghav was prompt in replying, 'Then I'll make your experience memorable.'

Every time he said something like that, she had a spark in her eyes. It made her feel loved. Just being in his presence was intoxicating for her. For Raghav, too, Disha's gentle voice and sweet perfume made even the simple act of chatting with her a sensual experience.

At Five Gardens, they sat on one of the corner benches, their bags to the side. Raghav certainly knew how to make a girl comfortable, and Disha's early butterflies vanished in no time as they talked about anything and everything—their lives, past experiences, dreams and families. They sat for hours, even taking a walk in between when Disha saw an ice cream vendor and got tempted to eat one. Raghav got her a chocolate-flavoured ice cream and Disha pounced on it like a child. He moved closer to her then and said, 'You look really cute, and your expressions make me go crazy for you.'

Disha's heartbeat rose. She had never been so close to a guy and the proximity sent chills down her spine.

Raghav added, 'Forgive me, but I really want to do something.'

He was so close that she could feel his breath, and she didn't know how to react. She simply nodded, thinking he would kiss her, but he reached out and wiped some ice cream off her chin with his fingers.

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Disha had never imagined that anyone could make her feel this way. Her whole body was electric with excitement and she loved the sensation. Suddenly, it started raining and they took shelter under a tree. They were standing so close that, despite the raindrops falling on Disha's face, she could feel the heat from his body. There was complete silence between them and everything else seemed to fade. He moved a few inches closer to her and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, which had been falling over the most beautiful face he had ever seen. He slowly leaned in, and Disha realised what he wanted

She thought for a minute about sending it... and in the next minute, she deleted it. She didn't want to share what she was feeling; it was hers and only hers!

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There's nothing in the world that can make you feel as content as being loved by the person you love. Very soon after getting into a relationship, Disha and Raghav became the most talked-about couple in college; such was their chemistry. People search their whole lives to find what Disha had found in Raghav. When they had started college, they were both emerging from their own complexes and issues, but they confided in and comforted one another. The months passed swiftly, and with each day they fell deeper in love. Raghav made Disha feel secure and protected, and for the first time in her life, she felt whole. She forgot all the worries in her life, and seeing her happy and doing well in her academics, even her parents quarrelled less often.

At midnight on their first anniversary, she wished him, 'Happy anniversary, my love. You don't realise how much you mean to me. Although we've been together for only a year, I feel as though I've known you my entire life. My connection to you is already so deep, and my love for you is already so strong, that I can't imagine what my life would be without you. You are my everything.'

Raghav immediately responded. 'Happy anniversary to you too, baby. Tomorrow is going to be a special day, and I want to see you in the dress I gave you.'

Disha couldn't sleep the whole night thinking about the next day. It wasn't a surprise—she knew what was in store for her. He had booked a suite in a five-star hotel to celebrate their togetherness. Just thinking about the time she would get to spend with him gave her goose bumps. The burning desire inside her made her heart beat like a drum.

'Shut up and guess.'

'What? Don't tell me you lost your virginity on your first date!'

'Such an ass you are.' Disha paused, recalling her experience, and said, 'We had our first kiss. That too, in a park.'

'What? Seriously?' Kajal jumped off her bed, eager to hear the full story.

'Yeah.' Disha was still blushing.

'Didn't some old man interrupt you guys saying, "Beta, this is not the right place and age to do such stuff"?' Kajal laughed.

'Luckily we weren't interrupted. I didn't even think once about someone seeing us ... it was so special. I did feel awkward before the kiss; there were mixed thoughts and emotions in my mind. What to do and what not to ... but when it happened, I wanted it to last longer. Now I know what it must feel like to be in paradise.'

'Wow ... hearing this, I wonder when I will get lucky. Damn, I think even my graduation will get over without a single kiss,' Kajal grumbled, 'So when are you taking it a step further?'

'What does that mean?' Disha asked.

'Sex, of course. I am fed up of watching it in movies. I want to hear about a real-life experience.'

'I'll kill you. Fuck off. Bye.' Disha was slightly embarrassed and disconnected the call as she heard Kajal laughing on the other side.

She lay back on her bed and closed her eyes. She could still feel his lips over hers. Her pulse was racing, her breath shortened and her senses were on fire. It was like being able to feel everything at once while being numb to everything that wasn't about them. She started typing a message on her phone.

I felt like I was being drawn to a magnet—as if being with you was completely out of my control. How clichéd can this feeling possibly be? I couldn't control it, I didn't even want to. How ridiculous am I? I have always felt I wasn't lucky in love but the instant you kissed me, I knew I belonged to you. I just wish the love we have for each other will never fade and continue beyond eternity.

checking her phone when Raghav picked up a feather-tip pen from the table and traced the outline of her ear with it. The feather glided on her earlobe, and she jumped involuntarily.

'Are you feeling ticklish?' he whispered in her ear, coming up behind her and holding her by her waist.

'No,' she lied, despite feeling goose bumps all over her body.

'I don't believe you,' he said.

She knew she couldn't hide how she was feeling when he stroked her neck.

'You liar,' he teased. She tried to scramble away but fell on the bed instead. She tried to relax and summon a smile to her face, while her heart beat like a drum in a Republic Day parade. Raghav bent over her, and in his eyes she saw love and delight. The feelings he evoked in her just through an intense look were indescribable. Disha was overwhelmed, but tried to downplay her reactions. She turned slightly to the side and he gently kissed her cheek, and then, just below her ear. She could barely resist the urge to kiss him back, but she held back, ever so slightly, just to prolong and live in the moment.

'Be gentle,' Disha murmured so softly that he could hardly hear it.

'What?' he asked, moving a little away from her.

'I said ... it's my first time. Be gentle.' She hid her face in the pillow.

It had been a year since they began dating each other, and Raghav had never forced her to do anything she wasn't comfortable with. It was only now, when he felt that she was ready, that he had decided to take this step. He pulled her closer and looked into her eyes, saying, 'Don't worry. You are my first time too.'

Disha reddened as he gently turned her face and placed his soft lips on hers. She felt she was losing the inner resolve to hold steady, shivering inside this frenzy of sensations, love and unremitting passion.

'Damn,' Raghav said after a few minutes, as they lay naked on the bed.

Raghav got down on his knees and said, 'I don't have a lot to say to you right now, but these few words mean a great deal. I know your shy nature makes you reluctant to open up to me, but your eyes convey the love you have for me. You are the part of my life that I have been searching for all these years. Finally, I've found you. I have never felt this way in my entire life. I want to be with you always and I'll make sure that all the happiness in the world comes to you. I love you so much, Disha. Will you be mine forever?'

Tears rolled down Disha's face. No one had ever done anything like this for her.

She made him stand and said, 'I love you. After everything that I've been through, I never believed I would find someone like you. It's like finding a needle in a field full of grass. Ever since we met again, you've made me believe that I am worth loving, despite my imperfections. I love you so much.'

They hugged and promised to stay together till the end of time. Disha's assumption that she wasn't lucky in love was finally dissolved. She had finally found her soulmate, the one person she had loved since she had understood the meaning of love.



There's always that person you have feelings for from the moment you see them, and for Disha that person was Raghav. Years before, she had given up on him and on the emotion of love, but unknowingly she had been chased by the same love. It is said that when the time is right, everything falls into place. Nothing could be truer in Disha's case; it was as if the saying was meant only for her. For the first time, someone had held her hand and the warmth of that touch, the sensation of it, had given her goose bumps. She no longer cared about the people around them—the world had shrunk to just him and her. Even after spending the whole day together, she wanted more of him.

'What, don't stop now. I need you.' Disha sighed, pulling him closer.

'I forgot the rubber.'

'Now what the fuck is a rubber?' Disha asked in confusion, her body fully aroused.

'A condom.'

'Shit... you are such a fool.'

But neither of them were in a state to draw away from each other.

'I'll take a pill later,' she said and pulled him to her. They held on to each other, absorbed in their deep, intense feelings, fulfilling years of desire. They had a thin quilt over themselves, but that wasn't even required, not at that moment at least. Raghav took her in a firestorm of heat and flame that didn't just unwrap their bodies but their very souls. He was all over her and, after a while, her body shook as she climaxed for the first time in her life.

'That was incredible. You know exactly how to turn me on.' Disha struggled to breathe; she could still feel a heat inside her.

'One more round?' Raghav said, grinning.

'I loved the thing you did with your tongue,' Disha said, hiding her face shyly under his broad shoulders.

Disha had thought that it would be painful, but it wasn't.

He's the best. I was so nervous before actually doing it, having read so many stories about painful intercourse last night. But nothing of that sort happened. He was passionate and gentle.

Hours of lovemaking later, during which time they were lost in an ecstasy of pleasure, Raghav said, 'That was amazing. I hope you liked it as much as I did.'

Disha smiled and said, 'That was even better than I thought it would be. And now I don't know why we waited so long.'

They hugged each other passionately before slipping into a deeply relaxing sleep.

Disha woke up early the next morning. She had to return home before noon so that the beautiful time they had spent together would

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to do. Her body shivered in that split second, as she thought, *Should I tell him that it's my first kiss? Can he tell from my reluctance? I have only seen it in movies and read about it in books. What would he feel, sensing my inexperience?*

Disha however didn't say anything and let the moment unfold. She could feel his breath on her, no room left for any air between them. He held her gently, cupping her face with one hand, and their lips finally met. And it felt as if she had been struck by lightning. He saw her eyes flutter as she closed them and wrapped her arms around him. He drew her closer. It felt so intensely natural and novel at the same time that she was at a loss about what to do. It took her a moment to open her eyes and then she hugged him again, relishing the familiar feeling of his touch intermingled with the foreignness of a new and wonderful sensation.

She pulled back and said, 'It was my first ...'

Raghav looked straight into her eyes and said, 'But certainly not the last. And brown is my favourite colour.' He smiled, 'Anyway, I wouldn't have minded even if your teeth were rainbow-coloured.'

'I'll never forget this,' Disha said, smiling. Her body trembled and she still had goose bumps.

She had imagined her first kiss thousands of times, but never had she anticipated that it would be so magical. It was unplanned but it was pure bliss.

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'Guess what happened today?' Disha said eagerly when she called Kajal late in the evening after reaching home.

'Don't tell me you smashed my Activa somewhere?' Kajal replied.

'Bitch, how unromantic you are. It was my first date. Now guess?' Disha could barely hold back her excitement. She wanted to tell Kajal all about how she felt.

'Oh ... so Miss Disha is talking about romance,' Kajal teased.

When she disclosed what had happened to Kajal, her friend's happiness knew no bounds. Disha was finally content and ready to swim in the world of love, which had remained an unmapped province for her all these years. What more could Kajal ask for?

The next day, she managed to convince her parents that she would be late to return home as she had extra classes. It was the first time her parents didn't cross-question or doubt her, and that made her feel Raghav was her lucky charm. For a change, she didn't even wake up to the sound of them fighting. Lost in thoughts of Raghav, she welcomed the sun with a new zeal. When she arrived at college with Kajal, Raghav was already waiting for her in the parking lot. Every time he saw her, he couldn't stop staring at her sparkling beauty. He looked at her from top to toe, taking a minute to admire her exquisiteness before locking his car.

'Why are you leaving your car? Aren't we supposed to go out?' Disha asked curiously.

'Of course, we are. But not by car. We are going on Kajal's Activa today. I already had a word with her and had told her to not tell you.' Raghav turned to Kajal and said, 'Thank you Kajal! You are a darling.'

'Don't get too touchy or do rumpy-pumpy on my Activa; else I'll have to give it for deep cleaning tomorrow,' Kajal teased them as she handed over the keys and rushed off for her first lecture.

'Why on the Activa all of a sudden? What if it rains?' Disha asked, raising her eyebrows. 'It is a bit cloudy.'

Raghav turned on the ignition and Disha sat behind him. As he was about to start riding, he looked at her in the side mirror and said, 'So that I can see you uninterruptedly and feel your touch while you hold me. And it will be even more romantic if we get drenched.'

Disha blushed and shyly held him by his waist, her nervousness apparent on her face. Raghav soothed her by brushing his hand against hers for a few seconds. The gesture comforted her and she relaxed as they rode towards Five Gardens in Matunga.

'It's my first time sitting behind a guy,' Disha confessed shyly.

Nothing is worse than getting hurt by the one person you thought would never harm you. Kajal tried hard to make Raghav change his decision, but she knew in her heart that the end of Disha and Raghav's relationship was inevitable. Every relationship is not meant to last forever.



The pain of separation stalked Disha during the days that followed. She had so many unanswered questions and unspoken emotions. She realised that she had given her heart away to him because she wanted to feel needed, supported and loved. Hence, his flaws were not flaws to her—she loved everything about him. She only wished he could have believed in her, in their relationship.

On a particularly miserable day she sent him another message with the vague hope of getting a reply.

'A week has gone by without you, and it feels like there's nothing left in this world. I've been thinking a lot about how things ended between us. I am so sorry. But not everything is lost yet. Please come back to me. I can't live without you. You said we would be together forever. Then why are you giving up without even trying? Please reply.'

Disha waited for a reply from Raghav, but he didn't respond. She was getting used to this. Not a day went by when she didn't think about their relationship. They had had wonderful moments together and, in those moments, the world outside the intimate space of their togetherness had seemed not to exist. Every time she saw him in college, those memories rushed back, and whenever she passed places where they had spent time together, she was reminded of Raghav. It was the memory of those moments that made Disha refuse to give up and, despite knowing that Raghav would ignore her, she kept texting him.

'Didn't you realise that I would support you in everything, even at the risk of my own values? Instead of being patient, you made

CHAPTER 9

'Dad ... what are you doing here?' she stammered.

'Shouldn't I be the one asking that?' he said fiercely, his face like thunder. 'It was lucky that I was here to meet clients.'

He had seen Disha exit the elevators with a boy who had then headed to the reception, clearly to check out. Disha was terrified. How was she going to handle this? What would she tell her parents? In utter dismay, she realised that the most memorable experience of her life was about to turn into a nightmare.

Disha's father had told Raghav to come home in the evening and left the hotel with her. She had planned to deny being in a relationship, but when they reached home, she realised her mother had already checked her laptop and found hundreds of photos of them together. Disha was questioned for hours, and on finding out that her mother had seen their photos, she freaked out. She finally revealed everything to them. Her good grades over the past year was the only redeeming factor in her parents' eyes, and Disha guessed that was why they were willing to meet Raghav at the very least, but she had absolutely no clue what the discussion was going to be about. She was so mortified that she didn't even call Raghav later and just texted him about the situation at home.

Raghav was nervous about the visit and meeting her parents, but he had no choice.

'Raghav, right? Disha's dad said when he let him in.'

'Yes,' Raghav stammered as he sat down on a sofa.

be an independent woman. Where did this marriage spiel come from? They should at least ask me before deciding what course my life should take.

Disha looked at Raghav. She knew that he would say yes, but she was disheartened by her parents' attitude. Raghav looked at her, and she gave him a slight smile, expecting a positive response to her father's question. That was when the switch flipped. Raghav thought for a while and said in loud and clear voice, 'No, I am not ready for it. It's too early.'

Disha's father had probably anticipated what Raghav would say, and wanted Disha to hear it. As for Disha, she almost had a panic attack. Then she went completely numb, as if she was dead inside.

Too early? We've been in a relationship for a whole year. We experienced such intimacy last night ... and it is still too early?

Disha's father wanted to clarify things once and for all, and asked, 'Too early for marriage, or too early to commit to marriage?'

Raghav had no answer. With nothing more to say, he stood up and walked out of her house after saying goodbye to her parents. Not even all the good that existed in the world could have numbed the pain that his silence had caused Disha to feel. Everything faded in front of her eyes and she felt her heart break into a thousand shards and pieces. She ran after him as he walked towards the building's elevator, not caring that her parents or the neighbours might be watching.

'Raghav, what's wrong? Don't we love each other?' She was almost in tears.

'Yes, we do. But marriage is something I'm not prepared for. We are only in our second year at college.' Raghav stressed every word he spoke.

'I understand that the timing wasn't right but you could have given some assurance to my parents at least. The rest, I would have handled.' Disha was desperate to convince him; she hadn't expected that she would have to try so hard.

'Many times since morning, I have asked my daughter what the two of you were doing at that hotel, but she has no answer. Will you answer the question?' he asked sternly.

God, Dad, seriously? Disha shot her dad a glare, but he ignored her. *I can't believe him. He doesn't usually act this way with people, even if he doesn't like them. I expected this from Mom, who has always hated the thought of me being with boys, but not Dad. He told me in the morning that he would be soft with him. If Raghav wasn't nervous already, he must be now.*

Disha's dad was deliberately intimidating Raghav, and he had the right to do so, being a girl's father.

'Sorry, Uncle. I can understand that it wasn't the right thing to do, but to tell you the truth ... we are dating each other.' Raghav paused, glanced at Disha, and then turned to Disha's dad again. 'I am sure she has told you this.'

'This is the reason we never wanted to give her a cell phone,' Disha's mom said in a stern voice. 'Do you kids think this is the age to do all this? You have your entire lives ahead of you; you should be concentrating on your studies.'

Disha hated it when her mother started spouting her advice and philosophy. Increasingly, it was evident to Disha that this meet-up was a big mistake. Not like she'd had a choice, though.

'So how did you guys meet?' Disha's father asked.

Raghav had gained a bit of confidence after acknowledging their relationship to Disha's parents, and this was apparent in his reply. 'Actually, we've known each other since our school days, but we became good friends last year in college and started liking each other.'

Disha didn't say much but was quietly observing the reactions of everyone. *Was this really such a big deal? Maybe, maybe not. But this has made me realise how traditional my parents are, and how intolerant they are of the possibility I may not feel the same way as they do.*

Disha's father had got up and was now pacing the room, talking about how humiliating it had been to see his daughter with a boy at a hotel in front of his clients, and how he still couldn't believe Disha

not be ruined by probing questions from her parents. Before Raghav could get up, she had changed into the clothes she had worn before leaving her house. Within no time, Raghav too was all set. They went downstairs to the reception to check out. While Raghav was completing the formalities, Disha sat on a couch in the lobby and checked the time on her watch.

It's just ten-thirty. We're on time. It's Sunday and there won't be any traffic on the way home, she said to herself, relieved.

Minutes later, there was a tap on her shoulder. She got up and turned, thinking it was Raghav, but froze when she saw who it was. She was completely clueless about how to react. It was her father.

a decision on your own. It is okay to be selfish to protect yourself, to do what is best for you, but did you think about me even once? I promised you I would never break your heart, but I remember now that you never made the same promise. And you wound up breaking mine. You once told me, "I didn't think this is what love would feel like", yet you ran away. Is hurting me worth it? Is losing me worth it?"

She knew in the core of her heart that she would never be able to mend things with Raghav, but she couldn't stop trying. It had all ended so abruptly. One day she had opened her eyes and everything around her sparkled, but that sparkle had turned into a fire and burnt her completely. As she struggled with the break-up, it seemed to Disha that Raghav's life was unaltered. Their separation after a year-long relationship seemed hardly to have disturbed him. She saw him laugh and talk with friends in college, and it made her wonder if he had really loved her. It made her doubt her decision to be with him. *How could he be so emotionless? How can it be so easy for him to move on, she thought.*

Every morning she woke up with an overwhelming sense of emptiness and purposelessness. She could hear the birds chirping and her alarm clock ringing, but she didn't feel like getting out of bed. She simply wanted to burrow into the darkness of sleep and inhale its silence, because the voices in her head didn't give her a second's peace during the day. The wee hours of the morning that had once haunted her gave her comfort, and the daylight that had made her laugh, choked her now. Every positive emotion that she had once felt crumpled up like pieces of paper till she didn't feel the pain anymore; she was now used to it. Every night the silence triggered a tornado of thoughts which raged inside her until she fell into a restless sleep.

'Look at you, what have you done to yourself?' Kajal asked her one day, looking at Disha's dull face.

'Nothing.' They were at the college canteen together, but Disha was lost in her thoughts.

'Will you just stop acting like there's nothing left in your life? Raghav is going around living a normal life and, by behaving like

'No... I saw the look in their eyes. They were serious. They want you to get married as soon as you get a job. I am not up for such a strong commitment right now.'

'I would have handled it, baby. Haven't we committed to each other, haven't we said we will stay together forever?'

Disha tried to get close to him, but he held her by her shoulders at a distance and said, 'I am not denying that, Disha. But I can't commit to marriage when I haven't even found my feet. Commitment is a bloody serious word. I know the consequences. I have gone through it—I've seen what happened with my parents. I think we need to take a break. I can't handle this pressure.'

The baggage of his parents' divorce made Raghav fear commitment. His parents had set an example that he didn't want to replicate. On the other side, Disha's parents were hell-bent on their decision. The one who was suffering the most in this situation was Disha, who had expected her love to support her. She knew she had time to make her parents change their decision. But Raghav, without bearing in mind their year-long relationship, had easily stated that he needed a break. If he was so scared of commitment, why was he in a relationship in the first place?

Disha was left alone with her tears, shattered at the very core from watching the person she loved the most grow more distant with every passing second. Raghav had failed the test, and when Disha went back inside, her father asked whether she wanted to be with someone who wasn't even ready for a commitment. From the point of view of a girl's father, he was spot on.

But what about his daughter's dreams? Is marriage the culmination of a girl's life? She had fought with them for Raghav's sake, but now she had nothing left to fight for and she was back in her shell. Would the shards of her life come together and mend themselves into some form of normalcy? Disha had no idea. All she wanted now was isolation from a world she felt had no place for her.

Love is strange. The people who get it don't value it, and those who don't get it, crave for it. For the next few days, Raghav avoided

was involved with someone. After a lot of ranting, he finally got to the subject of why he had asked Raghav to come over in the first place.

'I'm not saying you don't have the right to love. But Disha's mom is right. You're at an age where you can either build or destroy your career. What do you want to do in the future?'

Disha was surprised with the flip, but she felt a little better now. Raghav answered, 'My dad is a businessman, and he wants me to run his companies after I graduate. He is into real estate and also has textile firms.'

My father hasn't even asked me what I want to do, Disha thought. He doesn't even know that I want to appear for the UPSC exams after my graduation.

'That means you're under no pressure to find a job or anything. So what are your intentions regarding my daughter?'

Disha was taken aback. She hadn't expected that question to come up in the first meeting itself.

'What?' Raghav too was baffled.

'You heard right.' Disha's dad looked straight into Raghav's eyes, expecting an answer.

Raghav couldn't make eye contact and was silent for a while. Disha's mom said, 'What happened? You have no answer? We want our daughter to marry immediately after completing her graduation and getting a job.'

Hearing that, Disha's eyes nearly popped out. *What the fuck? Did they decide this together in the afternoon and lead the conversation here? What's wrong with them?*

'Mom, what is—'

Before she could finish what she was saying, Disha's dad stopped her. 'Raghav, you heard what Disha's mother said. Are you okay with it? You said you love her.'

Damn. Is this the only aim in a girl's life? To complete her graduation, get a job and then marry? If that is so, what's the need to spend so much on her education? Even I have dreams. I want to study further and

Disha, who tried all means possible to make him understand the situation, but he seemed traumatised.

I hope we can remain friends, and I hope you will come to see that this is the best decision for both of us.

She read his message for the umpteenth time. Every time she read it, she felt her heart was breaking again, and tears rolled down her cheeks. Their relationship was collapsing like a pack of cards, and with each passing day, her hope that she could mend it crumbled too. One moment she blamed her parents for being too harsh, and in the next, she blamed herself for allowing Raghav to break her emotionally.

Unable to get through to Raghav, she turned to Kajal, who was furious with Raghav and wanted to beat the shit out of him for not thinking about Disha even once. Kajal wasn't in favour of talking to Raghav, but for her best friend's sake, she did.

'Don't you think you should at least give your relationship a chance? There's a long way to go before you graduate. And I know Disha very well. She'll be on your side no matter what. But if you just walk away like this, I'm afraid she won't be able to recover. She really loves you,' Kajal said.

She and Raghav were at Gulmohar Café, where they had all had coffee the first time.

Disha was in college, anxiously texting Kajal nonstop, telling her to convey the things she wanted to say to Raghav. She knew this was her last chance to get through to him, as they had no other common friends. She didn't want anything to be left unsaid, and Kajal was leaving no stone unturned to advocate her side of things.

But Raghav had made up his mind.

'There's no other way. If we continue and it doesn't work out in future, she'll be damaged permanently. I can't even think of marriage before I take over my dad's business and get some experience ... and also, I'm not very desperate to get married. I want to take my own time even if it's a love marriage. I have my reasons for that. It's better for both of us if we part ways now.'

CHAPTER 10

November 2013

Good evening everyone! You are listening to RJ Pritam. Today is Valentine's Day, and while some people might have got hitched, some people might have broken up. Break ups are painful, but remember, pain doesn't show up in our lives for no reason. It's a sign that something in our life needs a change. There comes a time when you have to let go even of your most precious possession. The only one keeping you hostage in your current situation is you. Don't be afraid to set yourself free. Don't spend the rest of your life mourning someone you have lost.

Disha's cab driver had tuned into FM radio on her way to Kajal's place. She wasn't really listening—she was busy cursing the Mumbai traffic that worsened year after year. Kajal and her fiancé Pranav were throwing a cocktail party the night before their wedding, and Disha wanted to reach on time. However, she had got late choosing the perfect accessories to go with her rose-pink lehenga. And then, before leaving the house, her parents had tried to convince her to meet a boy suggested by relatives. She had rejected more than half a dozen candidates, and her parents were worried as all the men had been very eligible and well settled.

The radio jockey continued to speak. *This Valentine's Day, let's spread happiness either by promising to stay together or by promising to move on. On that note, let's connect with the first caller of the day.*

Disha called Kajal. 'Hey, I'll be there in ten minutes. Do you want me to pick anything up from your home on the way?'

Kajal continued, but Disha was lost in her thoughts—not about her past but the sense that their lives were changing. They had heard about it from others but had always waved off the possibility that it would happen to them. Together, they had seen different shades of life, and Kajal had always stood by her when she needed her the most. When Disha had struggled with moving on from Raghav, Kajal had kept everything else aside and made Disha her priority. Together, they had overcome that too. Every end is a beginning which starts with a decision. Once you realise you deserve better, letting go is the best decision ever. And Disha certainly deserved the best.

Ψ

The next day, in the midst of the wedding rituals, when Disha was totally involved in making sure Kajal had every little thing she needed, she started to feel that, sooner or later, it would be her time. Every morning, it had become a regular routine of her parents to scroll through matrimonial websites in which they'd forced her to fill all her details. A few proposals had come through relatives, and her parents kept pushing her to meet the boys and their families.

With all these thoughts running through her mind, and no time to even sit for a minute, before she realised it, the ceremony was over and it was time for Kajal's viddai. Strange though it may sound, when a girl takes that leap of faith and begins her new life after marriage, the contradictory emotions that she goes through can be quite overwhelming. Even though Kajal's marriage had not happened overnight, till this day and moment, she had never got to the point when she could say without hesitation, 'Yes, I am ready to take the plunge.'

Disha saw tears in Kajal's eyes as she hugged her father tight, reluctant to leave him.

'You've been a wonderful daughter, and I am sure you will be an equally wonderful wife and daughter-in-law.' Her father blessed her with swollen eyes.

break your spirit ... I'm RJ Pritam, and you're listening to the Valentine's Day special.

The night she had tried to end her life was the last time Disha had tried to talk to Raghav. She was admitted to a hospital and it took days for her to recover, but in that time she had comprehended that the most courageous decision one can make is to finally let go of what is hurting your heart and soul. Her grandmother's words had had a strong impact on her. Moving on, she never looked back, choosing instead to focus on the people who loved her and valued her presence in their lives.

The cab reached the venue and, paying the driver, she rushed to the room where the cocktail party was being held. After she had greeted Kajal, they watched a dance performed by Pranav's friends. Once the performance was over, Disha got on the stage. Holding a mike in her hand, she turned towards Kajal and her husband-to-be who stood right in front of the stage. Kajal looked gorgeous in her beautiful green lehenga and elegant make-up. Her fiancé looked smart in his black suit. Disha smiled at both of them, and then spoke. 'I know what's going on in Kajal's mind right now. She's already giving me a look, daring me to reveal all the dirty little secrets we share. I'll beat the shit out of you if you tell people the truth, is what she's thinking. Pardon my language, but you all know—that's exactly how Kajal talks, right? Just making sure you're aware of the real face behind that gorgeous-looking girl, Pranav! Thank god, from now on, I won't be the only one at the receiving end of her abuses.'

Kajal laughed as she hid her face in Pranav's suit. All the guests laughed too, and Disha continued, 'I would need a few days to tell you all the crazy stories Kajal and I have lived through for around fifteen years. Unfortunately, the funniest stories cannot be shared in public ... but I am ready to narrate them to you later, in private. All those who wish to know. You too, Pranav. After all, you said yes to her. I'm afraid it's too late to change your mind.' Disha smiled and added, 'It took me fifteen years of our friendship to understand that this girl discovered a very important secret, at a very young age: life should

Kajal had no words, and the moment was so moving that even Disha couldn't help getting emotional. Disha had always assumed that she herself would not feel this way when leaving her parents' home, but that moment was enough to break all her assumptions. She suddenly missed her parents and was on the verge of tears, forgetting all the arguments they'd had over the years. But she didn't want to see her best friend off with tears in her eyes, and managed to hide her feelings.

'You are just going from Dadar to Ghatkopar. That's like three local stations away. So chill and stop crying. Or I'll knock on your door and screw up your first night,' Disha joked and wiped Kajal's tears off. No words could console Kajal at this moment, however, and she hugged Disha tightly as every memory they had ever shared flashed through her mind.

Taking a deep breath, Kajal said, 'Your parents met me the other day and told me to convince you about the IIT fellow working in Google ...'

'Now stop it. I know ... and yes, I have promised them that I'll meet him on Sunday,' Disha said.

'Superb. So, by the time I'm back from my honeymoon, I want good news,' Kajal whispered in her ears.

'I can say the same to you too. By the time you are back, you should give me good news,' Disha smiled.

'Bitch ...' Kajal laughed. Then, giving her best friend a final tight hug, she turned to her parents, embraced them and then got into the car to start her new journey with Pranav.

As Disha watched the cars of the groom's family zooming away, she read the quote written behind one of the hired cabs: 'Love can be blind ... but marriages are eye-openers.' It brought a smile to her face and, on her way home, she thought, *It's so strange that we promise someone we don't even know that we will stay with them forever. Will my life be the same after marriage? Will my husband love me and care for my needs as much as I care about his? What about his family—will they treat me like their daughter? Will they give me the love I have*

not be taken too seriously. But I do hope she takes you seriously. I know you can handle her tantrums, and I wish you both a great future together. I also hope that you come back from your honeymoon with some good news and make me a maasi. And now, before she actually beats the shit out of me, cheers to the most beautiful couple I have ever seen. Kajal and Pranav!'

They danced, laughed and enjoyed themselves thoroughly, and when everyone started to leave, Disha, Kajal and Pranav had their last drink before dinner.

'So, when are you planning to get married?' Pranav asked, removing his jacket as he relaxed on a chair.

'I knew that by the end of the function there wouldn't be anyone left who hadn't asked me this question. These days, attending social gatherings means answering this golden question.'

Pranav laughed and said, 'You are now working as head professor in a reputed coaching class and your best friend is getting married. So, it might be a good idea to have a husband around. What say?'

'Oh please ...' Disha rolled her eyes.

Just then, a relative came up to talk to Pranav, and he stepped away.

Disha looked at Kajal and said, 'You're starting a new phase of your life and I feel sure that Pranav is the right choice. I am so happy for you.'

Kajal was high on alcohol and happiness, and she swayed as she hugged Disha. 'You know what ... I'll be the happiest person when your D-day arrives. I have seen you through such times ... we all felt that you wouldn't recover. But you did! It's been four years, but it feels like yesterday.'

'Forget about me, and think about your first night. So how are you going to make it special for Pranav?' Disha changed the topic swiftly.

'I'll just throw him on the bed with wild intentions ...'

She dialled Raghav's number, but the next moment cancelled the call and kept her phone aside.

There's no point in calling him. Like always, he will just ignore it. He doesn't care about what I am going through. I don't know how I will face everyone if this test comes out positive. But there's no point in blaming him for this. I am at fault. I have made a complete mess of my life, and I'm hurting everyone around me. I know my parents and Kajal love me and care for me, but my depression is worrying them, and I don't want that. I had told myself for years that I am not lucky in love. Yet, I fell for him, and here I am inside a washroom, not knowing what my fate will be. Go for it, Disha; there's no escape from the truth.

Disha proceeded with the test, and she felt her head spin when she saw the indicator.

Two bold lines. Positive.

I don't want to live anymore. How do I overcome this?

She stared at the wall blankly. She heard the beep of a text message on her phone, and she automatically picked it up to check. It was from Kajal.

'Is everything okay? I tried calling you but your phone is not reachable. Please call when you see this message. Really worried about you.'

With blurry vision, she replied.

I'm not going to make you worry anymore. Everything will be okay now, when I'm gone.

A second later, she had her father's shaving blade in her hand. She was shaking violently and tears rolled down her cheeks. She looked at herself in the mirror.

Don't do this, a voice in her head shrieked, but her image in the mirror told her what she had become. She was not the person everyone knew since the depression had taken over her life. With that final thought, she made a deep cut in her wrist and sank down on to the floor. Blood pooled around her as she stared at the ceiling till everything went black. Did I deserve this? That was her last thought. No one would have said she did, knowing her and knowing what

this, you are just showing that he has complete control over you. A year back, your life without him was a smooth and happy one, and a year from now, it will be the same. Just get over him; he has no significance in your life anymore.' Kajal tried to make her see reason.

It was then that Disha revealed to Kajal the shocking fact that had swept the ground from beneath her feet, the thought that had consumed her mind all day and night.

'What if he still has significance in my life?' she asked, her head bowed.

'What do you mean?' Kajal raised her eyebrows, trying to interpret Disha's words.

Disha looked up, and with a heavy heart, said, 'I have missed my period. On our anniversary, we got... intimate. And he didn't use protection. I was also so into the moment that I let him go ahead.'

'Fuck! You should have at least taken a pill,' Kajal said, shocked.

Disha was feeling dreadful. The possibilities had consumed her mind round the clock for the last few days. It felt like a paralysing pain was crawling inside her. She looked at Kajal with tears in her eyes. 'I was supposed to... I meant to... but it completely skipped my mind when all the drama happened. Then I forgot all about it as Raghav's decision had totally shattered me. What if...'

'That's scary. How could you be so careless, Disha?'

Disha had no answer. She was silent for some time and then said, 'What should I do? I am so scared. I just want to run away from the world and hide.'

'Don't act like a fool. That's not going to solve the problem. Rather, it will land you in bigger trouble. Do a pregnancy test immediately and just pray that all is well.'

Disha had been in denial over the past few days, terrified of facing the outcome. However, when Kajal forced her, she bought a test and went home. Avoiding her parents, she locked herself inside her washroom and read the directions on how to use the kit. Her entire body was shaking in fear, and for a moment she picked up her phone.

Kajal said she didn't need anything and told her to come to the venue as soon as she could. Disha hung up and, as the taxi passed Shivaji Park, memories of all the time she had spent there with Kajal came to mind, bringing a smile to her face. She realised they had grown up really quickly, and in the midst of the changing face of the city and the people around them, the one thing that had not changed was their friendship.

Hi, this is RJ Pritam, what's your name and what do you do?

Hi Pritam, I'm in my first year of B.Com. My name is Raghav.

Raghav, so what feelings do you want to convey on Valentine's Day?

The name brought her back from memories of Kajal and her school and college days. It didn't affect her anymore, but it certainly caught her attention. You may move on and start accepting that things are the way they are, but the past never really gets erased from your heart. Disha continued to listen.

'There's a girl I love. Her name is Shruti. We've been friends for three years. She is a big fan of your show and never misses it, and so I wanted to convey my feelings in this special way.'

'Wow, Raghav ... go ahead, and we hope that Shruti is listening to the show right now.'

'Shruti, I love you. And I'll love you till my last breath. I know you've been hurt in the past and I want you to know that I love you for who you are. I know you are listening to me right now. If you love me, then call me. I'll be waiting.'

Disha was silently listening ... four years had passed since Raghav had walked out of her life, and she had absolutely no contact with him. She didn't even know whether he still lived in the city.

'That's really sweet, Raghav, and we hope you receive her call. Shruti, Raghav loves you. Just because you've been hurt in the past doesn't mean you shouldn't have a future with someone else. Never let people underestimate your ability to subtract them from your universe when they're no longer adding to it. The person you love may break your heart and damage your pride, but never give them the power to

she had gone through the past few weeks; this wasn't the fate she deserved. What was her mistake? She had loved unconditionally and expected the same in return. But all she had received were fake promises and loneliness. Was she really so unlucky in love? Didn't she deserve a second chance? It didn't matter now as she lay there unconscious, the life draining out of her.

the possibility of getting married? I mean, I never would have thought about it if we had met otherwise.'

'I totally understand, but eventually, we both have to get married to someone. And I think it's better to get married to someone you know is a good soul. A familiar stranger is better than a complete one.'

'Yeah, it's always better to see the cards rather than play blind,' Disha said with a laugh.

Again, she wondered how to bring up her past with Raghav. She was apprehensive about what Dhruv would think. Suddenly, she remembered the love letter she had given him to hand over to Raghav.

Does he even remember the letter? Raghav had denied receiving it. But that's not the point. Dhruv knows about it, and that's what matters right now.

Disha was still reluctant to broach the topic directly and thought of approaching it in another way.

'So ... have you ever had a girlfriend or been in love with anyone?'

He didn't want to sound clichéd and say he had never liked anyone except her. So he said, 'No ... because I never found anyone to love. There were some girls that I would have liked to date, but I felt they just wanted to kill time. And I decided I would rather focus on my career. I have always wanted only one woman in my life, someone whom I could love.'

Then, as Disha had expected, he asked her the same question, but in a different manner.

'I remember you liked Raghav during our school days and had started interacting with him before I fell out with him. Did you guys ever date?'

Before fear or anxiety could stop her, she said, 'I don't want to lie to you, now that we are about to take a decision that affects both of us.'

Disha told him everything, from how it all started to how it had ended. But the one thing she didn't reveal was the reason she had

through it? She still had no answer to that. There's no reason why some things happen in life. And even if there is, one shouldn't try too hard to rationalise it. She had loved Raghav wholeheartedly, but he had stepped back, like a coward. She had stopped trusting him then. When she found out she was pregnant, she hadn't even thought about telling him. She had never told him that she tried to kill herself either.

She feared he might damage her image permanently in college. It would have been too much for her to handle and she wasn't up for the shame that could have followed. Neither her parents nor Kajal had spoken to him about it, as they feared the same. They knew if something of that sort had happened, Disha wouldn't have managed to live, and for them, her well-being was more important than retaliation.

She had lived through it alone and had bounced back in her life like a champion. Raghav had just moved on with his life as if nothing had happened. It was Disha who had to drop a year and face the setbacks and insults of that failure every single day. But she had lived through it all alone and bounced back. She had managed to survive the deepest of sorrows, and now, when fate had brought her and Dhruv together, she didn't want to look back with regret. After a long time, she felt positive about a guy and wanted things to work out. But she couldn't do it without disclosing those chapters of her life with Raghav. She picked up her mobile phone and texted Dhruv.

'If you have some free time while you are in Mumbai, can we meet? I have to tell you something.'

He talked about his job, his family and their lifestyle. Disha listened patiently to every detail. Once he was done, he asked her the same question.

'What about you?'

Should I tell him right away or would that look odd? I don't want to hurt him, nor do I want to portray myself in such a way that he would have the wrong perception about me. It's not the right time to reveal everything, Disha, she convinced herself. Then she said to Dhruv, 'Nothing except... if I love you and your family like my own, then you too have to love me and my family like yours.'

Dhruv smiled and said, 'Definitely. If you try to hold the pillar from one side, then I'll make sure that the other side of the pillar is held by me.'

Disha was impressed. She knew now—he was the one.

After they had left, she pounced on her parents for lying so barefacedly.

'We didn't lie. We just hid a chapter of your life that hardly matters. There's a difference! And we did it for your benefit. It would create unnecessary problems later, if you get married to him.'

'No relationship can survive if there is dishonesty.' Disha wasn't ready to back off this time.

'Okay, fine, what do you want us to tell his family?' her mom shouted. She sat down to try and calm herself. Her blood pressure had shot up just thinking of the outcome. She continued in the same pitch, despite feeling breathless, 'Should we tell them that our daughter had an affair in college? To which she was so committed that she even got pregnant? You want us to tell them that you have gone all the way, and even had an abortion? And then expect them to say yes to the marriage?'

'Please calm down,' Disha's father said as he patted her back.

Without saying a word, Disha walked back into her room. Every time they mentioned that phase, she felt she was dying a thousand deaths. She wished she could erase those memories once and for all. But they resurfaced every now and then. Why did she have to go

hand, she feared that every time she saw him, she would recollect her memories with Raghav. The dilemma kept her silent and she responded only when she was asked something. She needed time for her turbulent emotions to settle down.

After the typical round of questions from Dhruv's parents, his mother asked, 'So are you ready for this marriage? I mean no offence, but kids these days face social pressure ... and then some of them have their love affairs. So, it's better to ask directly, isn't it?'

She is so right. I just wish I could run away from these social pressures. But then ... could it be one of those trick questions to find out if I am in a relationship with someone? She isn't wrong to ask; after all, her son's happiness is at stake. But will Dhruv realise who I had dated if I say, yes, I have a past? I have to tell him though; I can't hide this.

Before she could say anything, Disha's father said, 'Of course, she is ready. And believe us ... she isn't involved in any love affair.'

Disha looked at her parents and then turned towards Dhruv, but her mother sensed what was coming and immediately said, 'And neither did she have any in the past. Our daughter was very studious when she was in college, and our values have made her the person she is.'

'I think we should give them some time alone.' Dhruv's dad switched the topic, sensing Disha's discomfort.

The next moment, Disha was alone in her bedroom with Dhruv. She was at a loss for words.

How am I supposed to tell him the truth? My parents have lied shamelessly. What would he think if I just contradict their statements?

It had been a decade since they had interacted or even seen each other's faces, and all of a sudden they were alone in a room, discussing marriage. It wasn't something she was prepared for. Dhruv, on the other hand, had known whom they were coming to meet, and he was calmer.

He asked, 'So, how's life treating you?'

CHAPTER 11

'Fate is not quite as strange as it appears.'

Dhruv updated his Facebook status before he got ready for his rendezvous with Disha. The day they had met again at her home, he had accepted her friend request. He wanted her to notice and consider the status update as an expression of his belief in their relationship. He had liked her since their school days and had never been in any relationship since then—not because he was madly in love with Disha, but because he had stayed focused on his career. He was aware that he had to look after his family, and wanted to behave responsibly. Never in his dreams had he thought he would meet Disha again, leave alone the possibility of marrying her. But they had met, and how! The moment he found out about the proposal, he had made up his mind that he wouldn't marry anyone else. He just hoped that Disha felt the same, unaware of the turbulence in her mind. He was completely ignorant of all that had happened in her life since they had parted ways.

There is something about two people who bump into each other repeatedly in different phases of their lives. It's like the world is saying, '*Stop separating, you are meant to be together.*'

They met at Barista in Dadar, and though it was only their second outing after school, Dhruv felt like he was meeting his long-lost friend. He could still picture her in her school uniform, and he thought, *She looked beautiful back then, and even now she is someone who can make your heart skip a beat. Yes, she's grown a few inches taller and has matured as a person, but her presence has the same vibe. Who wouldn't fall for such a pure soul? At least, I would. Once again!*

'All good. Life goes on. Rather, I should be the one to ask you what's been going on ... you just disappeared so suddenly after the boards.'

'I know. I am sure there's a lot you might want to ask me. I don't know if your parents told you that we don't live in Mumbai anymore.'

Dhruv paused, and seeing Disha shake her head, he said, 'I work in Pune with Google. After our boards, I got admission for a diploma course in Pune and stayed in a hostel for some time. Eventually, after my sister's boards, my dad got a better job there and the entire family shifted. We never returned to the chawl. I prepared for the IIT entrance, and the efforts paid off. I got admission at IIT Kanpur, and eventually got placed in Google. As you know, I come from a low-income background. After I found a job, however, our family's financial status improved gradually and life got better. I had to strive every step of the way, but my parents were a rock-solid support.'

'You were always intelligent and hardworking; success was just waiting to knock on your door,' Disha said with sincerity.

He smiled and said, 'We were in Mumbai to attend a family function, and a relative showed your photo to my parents and suggested the match. They instantly liked you, and when they told me all the details, I knew it was you.'

Disha said, 'I'm so sorry—I had no idea it was you. To be honest, my parents have made this a regular weekly affair, so I didn't even ask for any details. And when they were about to tell me last night, I just avoided the topic.'

'So, you aren't ready for marriage yet? If you're not up for it, then you can tell me frankly.'

'No ... nothing like that.' Disha's hesitation was visible. She didn't want to reject him outright. She needed time to sort through her feelings and choose her words carefully. 'If there's anything you would want to tell me beforehand?' she asked.

'Actually, a lot.'

Disha's mother turned to her father and said, 'Tell your daughter to keep her mouth shut. Otherwise everyone will mock us for raising a child like her.'

Isn't it strange that, even today, a girl is judged by her past relationships and not by her educational qualification or the position she holds? Disha kept quiet. She didn't want to start an argument, as the guests would arrive any moment. She didn't show it, but their words affected her deeply. It was ironic that no one apart from her own parents made her remember the painful memories that she had tried so hard to put to rest.

Sitting in her room, she heard the doorbell ring. Then there was some conversation in the living room. Soon, Disha was asked to come out.

Okay, it's time to fake some elegance and modesty. Come on, Disha ... show that you're sanskaari.

She came out of her bedroom and immediately her eyes locked with the guy's. He looked familiar, but Disha couldn't recognise him at first. It took her a few seconds to realise who he was. A whirlwind of emotions raged in her heart and a strange, eerie silence took over in her head. She could not believe how fate had knocked on her door.

'Small world, isn't it?' the guy said with a smile. It was Dhruv.

After exchanging some awkward smiles, Disha took a seat in front of him.

'Do you know each other?' Dhruv's mother asked.

'Yes. We were in the same school, but after I left, we never interacted with each other,' Dhruv replied.

'That's great! Panditji has already given his nod to this,' Disha's mother said eagerly.

That looked really desperate to Disha, but she didn't let her smile fade. She felt flustered as she sat there in front of Dhruv; she couldn't help thinking that she had once dated his best friend. She was confused—should she tell him about the relationship? In a corner of her heart, Disha felt she shouldn't reject Dhruv without giving his proposal fair consideration, knowing he was a good guy. On the other

'I never thought we would be sitting here like this one day, discussing our lives together,' Dhruv said, picking up the menu card.

Disha couldn't agree more and smiled in the way Dhruv remembered so well. They hadn't known about each other's life after school, which made them practically strangers.

'I have so many things to ask and to tell you, but I don't know where I should begin.'

'Maybe a coffee will help. Hot or cold?' Dhruv asked, as the waiter approached their table. After ordering coffees for both of them, Dhruv broke the ice.

'So, after a decade, we meet again. Are you in touch with anyone from school?'

'I'm only in touch with Kajal—do you remember her?'

'Of course. Your best friend.'

'Yeah, she still is, and just got married.'

'That's great...'

There was a pause in the conversation. Dhruv wondered what she wanted to talk about and whether he should ask her directly.

I wish there was a set of FAQs for such meetings. I am so clueless, Dhruv thought, and a smile passed between them when their eyes met. Disha was in a similar fix, wondering how to bring up the topic she had organised the meeting for. It was Dhruv who eventually had to move the conversation forward.

'Are you okay with shifting cities? I don't want your work to suffer after marriage.'

Disha was about to ask if his parents would allow her to work after they got married, but his question settled it and made her feel better. She replied, 'If things work out, I could apply for a transfer to the Pune branch of the coaching centre. I'm sure they won't have a problem with it.'

'Should I take that as a yes?' Dhruv winked. He had his fingers crossed beneath the table. He wanted to hear a yes from her.

Disha, however, was struggling with her own dilemmas. Out of the blue, she asked, 'Do you find it a little odd that we are discussing

always craved for? She didn't have to wait long for all her questions to be answered.



Disha's parents were making sure their house was clean and organised, because yet another boy and his family were scheduled to visit. They had pleaded with Disha to take this particular meeting seriously, not only because the guy was an IIT graduate and well-placed in Google, but because their kundli score was apparently thirty-one out of thirty-six. Initially, when Disha's parents had started to look for a groom for her, she would stalk the person on Facebook out of curiosity, but it had now become so routine that she didn't bother anymore to even ask any details of the guy or his family. Every time a proposal was being considered, she would point out some flaw or the other in the guy or his family, just to avoid getting married. However, the pressure from her parents had doubled after Kajal's marriage was fixed. After all, that's the virus which comes along with your best friend's wedding!

Okay, I can do this. Yes, I can. Just breathe, Disha said to herself while putting on a salwar kameez and combing her hair. Mentally, she tried to prepare herself, but the feeling that she was about to jump off a cliff just wouldn't vanish.

'Don't give away any extra information, for god's sake. Even if you don't like the guy, don't try to get out of it by talking about your past like you did the last time. I don't want everyone in our community to know about it,' Disha's mom warned her minutes before the boy's family was scheduled to arrive.

For the last four years, Disha had been at the receiving end of these jibes from her parents. She had no expectations of emotional support from them, but she wished they would just stop talking about it.

'I don't want a fake relationship,' she said tersely.

Disha changed into her night clothes but had a smile on her face now, thinking about what had just happened.

'You can come out now. Don't die in embarrassment,' she called out, sitting on the bed, that innocent smile still on her face.

Dhruv came and sat next to her.

'Why don't you take off all that jewellery and be comfortable? I know you must be feeling a little awkward, but it'll get better, I promise.'

Disha sensed his concern, but the stories she had been fed all these years about the first night still set her nerves on edge. However, as they sat together and talked, her fears and worries slowly faded away, disappearing almost completely when he asked, 'Don't you think arranged marriages are kind of funny?'

Disha chuckled with a sigh of relief. 'They are. Especially for girls. Like an electric switch, she is made to switch roles.'

'Ask me. It's equally stressful for boys. At least half of them go through a lot of anxiety and the other half are simply lying.'

Dhruv knew exactly how to make her relax. Soon, they were engrossed in a conversation that was full of fun and laughter. After some time, Dhruv told her that she could sleep if she wanted to, as he was a night owl and rather used to sleeping late. But she said she was enjoying their discussion. He came a little closer to her then and put his hand on her shoulder as they lay together on the bed. She shivered at his touch, and when he tilted his head towards her, she could feel his breath. It was then that she felt uneasy and stammered, 'I was really worried about our first night. There is too much pressure and, to be honest, I need some time. Mentally, I don't feel prepared yet...'

However, Dhruv calmed her instantly by saying, 'First nights don't really have to be like they are portrayed in movies. We should definitely take our time, so don't worry.'

It was as if he could read her mind. He continued, 'It is not only about "me" now, it is "us". There might be things you are not comfortable doing, and similarly there are things that I wouldn't like. We

Now D-Day had finally dawned and she was going through a roller-coaster ride of feelings, imagining herself as a married woman. It made her cling to every memory of her home and her childhood. In a few hours, she would be an integral part of a different household, a family that she didn't even know. The fear of change was taking a toll on her. Just thinking about it made her feel like hugging her parents and never letting go of them. She had never had a warm relationship with her parents, but all of a sudden, she could only think about all that they had done for her. All of a sudden, she realised that she would never have the luxury of just lying in bed, doing nothing all day. She wouldn't be able to order her mother to make her favourite dish while she watched her favourite TV show.

At the same time, she was excited to start her new journey in life. Since they had agreed to the marriage, she and Dhruv had spoken for hours on the phone, chatting about their lives together after marriage. Disha had shared her insecurities and Dhruv calmed her by assuring her that he would stand with her through all the ups and downs of life.

Kajal walked into her room just then and stood there, looking stunned. Never before had Disha looked so mesmerising. She had decided to go for an elegant and classic bridal look, and the blush-pink lehenga with embroidered floral motifs was the perfect colour and cut for her. Her flawless skin glowed, and she looked beautiful.

'I am so nervous right now!' Disha said, examining herself in the mirror, making sure she looked perfect from all angles.

'Don't worry. I have gone through this, and trust me, everything will settle down. But remember what I have told you. Don't let your past intervene in your present and your future. Just leave those episodes behind and start afresh.'

The previous day, Disha had thought about disclosing the truth about the extent of her involvement with Raghav to Dhruv, but Kajal had told her to just move on. They had discussed it for hours, and came to the conclusion that she should not talk about it to anyone

requested this meeting in the first place. Her heart held her back, and something deep inside stopped her from telling him.

Why am I scared? Why am I not able to reveal what happened? I shouldn't keep it from him; it looks like we are both serious about moving forward with this marriage. Disha, don't let guilt and shame crawl in and consume your inner self totally. Tell him ... he's a nice guy and it's clear from the look in his eyes that he likes you. But ... what if my mother is right? What if he backs out on hearing that I crossed certain boundaries with Raghav? I want to marry him, and I can't risk losing him over this.

Dhruv's words broke through her thoughts. 'To be honest, I had sensed his selfishness when he got intimate with a teacher in school despite being in a relationship. But I overlooked it because of our friendship. When I found out that Priya likes him, I told her to stay away, knowing how he treats girls. She was the reason I decided to keep a distance from Raghav and everyone associated with him. If I had stayed friends, she would have had to meet him on and off, and would never have overcome the feelings she had for him. Thank God, I found out about it at the right time. Anyway, let's end his chapter right here. I have no issues with your past; I'm sure every girl has one, and that doesn't offend me in any way. Rather, I'm really glad that you opened up and told me everything. I always wanted a relationship that's transparent.'

Disha stayed silent. It wasn't that she didn't want to reveal everything, but her words seemed to freeze in her throat. Her mind was in a whirl until Dhruv abruptly said, 'I want to confess something.' He made eye contact with Disha in an attempt to gauge her reaction.

Disha's heart skipped a beat as she thought, *Does he already know about it? No ... how could he?*

After a brief pause, Dhruv said, 'Knowing Raghav's character, I never handed your letter to him. I didn't want you to be with the wrong person.' He didn't say a word about his liking for her, but Disha was still astounded to hear this.

'Sorry to say this, but you are too good to be with a guy like him.'

henceforth. Remembering the promise she had made to her best friend, Disha nodded and said, 'It's just that I feel burdened by it.'

Disha's father walked in just then, and said, 'Burdened by what?'

Disha turned towards him. He had come to check if she was ready, as everyone was waiting to leave for the venue. Seeing her in her bridal dress, he got emotional.

He said, 'Everything will be fine. This isn't the time to let negativity and second-guessing ruin your happiness.' He made her sit, and then sat down beside her. 'I am not sure if I've ever told you this, but the progress you've made in life ... you make me proud. I feel that I've often failed at being a good father, but it was not because I didn't care—it was because I cared too much. Raising you, working through issues in our marriage ... it wasn't easy. I may not have expressed my love for you often, but I am going to miss you.'

Disha felt overwhelmed. She hugged her father and said, 'I love you, Dad.' She added jokingly, 'Now there will be no one to trouble you both.'

'You can always come to me—no matter what, I will help you figure things out. Always be happy and make others happy.' He kissed her forehead and Disha hugged him one last time before they got up to leave.

Disha settled down in the car that would take them all to the venue. As it moved through traffic, she looked out of the window and thought, *I hope I am lucky in love ... at least this time.*

As soon as Disha and her family reached the hall where the wedding would take place, they were surprised to see Dhruv and his friends waiting outside for them. The moment they got out of the car, Dhruv was on his feet, grooving to a song he loved.

Tu hi to jannat meri

Tu hi merajunoon

Tu hi to mannat meri

Tu hi rooh ka sukun

Tu hi ankhiyon ki thandak

Tu hi dil ki hai dastak

Wow, he cared for me back then, when we were just friends. Am I falling for him already?

Dhruv paid the bill, and before putting her in an auto, asked her one more time, 'Should I consider it a yes from your side?' He still had his fingers crossed.

Disha had no doubts by then. She didn't say a word, but her silence and the glow on her face was enough for Dhruv to comprehend that it was a big 'yes'.

And in no time, their wedding cards were printed.



D-day

No matter how many times everyone around her told her to get that beauty sleep, Disha had stayed awake the previous night because of pre-wedding jitters. It was like one of those moments right before we crest a peak, and suddenly a rush of emotions are felt before we take the final plunge. Though she had known Dhruv in school, he was still a familiar stranger and it was still an arranged marriage. She barely knew his parents, his lifestyle or his true nature. Sitting alone in her bedroom, just to get rid of her nervousness, she had written a letter expressing her emotions.

In a few hours, I'm going to be married. Only I know what my heart is going through. Seeing the moon, full and bright amidst the dark skies, gives me hope. It feels like a sign that everything will be fine. And that gives me strength. Yet ... I can feel the turbulence in my mind and in every ounce of my body. Does every girl have these feelings or is it just me? I am not sure. But I am sure that not every girl has second thoughts on the night before her marriage.

It's not that I am being forced to get married. I do want this—but I am scared.

She had continued writing till she fell asleep.

night. Dhruv guided Disha to their bedroom and went outside to bid goodbye to all the relatives. She looked around the room which was now supposed to be hers. It was decorated with flowers and candles, and the dim light gave it a romantic look. She had seen bridal chambers in movies and had found the idea of it enthralling, but here she was—scared and nervous when she had finally entered her own.

Will he force himself on me? Or will he give me time to prepare myself? Will he be desperate, or will he make me feel comfortable and loved? What will my first night be like?

She sat on the bed, burdened by the weight of the gold she wore and the lehenga. It was very heavy and she didn't want to keep it on even a second longer, but she didn't want to rush. It had hardly been a few minutes since she had entered the room, and she wasn't really comfortable yet with the idea of changing in it.

A few minutes later, Dhruv came inside and locked the door behind him. With every step he took towards her, her heart clenched in fear. She could not bring herself to look up, assuming that he was scanning every curve of her body and fantasising about every inch.

'Disha,' he said, and there was a note of nervousness in his voice too.

Disha looked up and saw a warmth in his face, not the beastly lust that she had seen in movies or read about.

Dhruv asked her to change and went into the attached washroom. Disha wondered if this experience would be different from her first one. She was nervous and felt an awkwardness that she had never experienced before. In a while, Dhruv came out of the washroom, so exhausted that it totally slipped his mind that Disha was in the room. Standing in front of the AC, he started removing his clothes. Embarrassed, Disha stood in a corner of the room, holding the lehenga that she had just taken off. She quickly reached out and got hold of her pyjamas, but before she could wear it, Dhruv turned and his heart was in his mouth. He hastily apologised.

'Damn, I totally forgot, and out of routine and habit just ... you know,' he tried to explain and rushed inside the washroom again.

A crowd of Dhruv's relatives who couldn't attend the wedding were already waiting to welcome them in Pune along with the photographers. Everyone wanted a glimpse of Disha, but she had mixed feelings. She was not used to getting so much attention. Both Dhruv and Disha were emotionally and physically exhausted after the day-long ceremonies followed by the drive to Pune from Mumbai. However, seeing everyone including her in-laws dancing all the way to the entrance of the house gave Disha a fresh burst of energy.

Holding her hand, Dhruv got out of the car, and the moment Disha stepped out, they were showered with rose petals and sparkles. It was a fairy-tale moment, leaving her speechless. She couldn't stop blushing, and she held on tight to Dhruv's hand in the midst of so many people she hardly knew.

When they reached the doorstep, Dhruv's mother instructed Disha on how to enter by kicking the rice pot with her foot. But his sister teased her saying, 'Bhabhi, you have to take Bhai's name before entering; else we are not going to allow you in. It's a ritual.'

Disha was nervous as there were more than a dozen relatives eyeing her now and cheering her on.

'I seriously don't know how to ...'

'We are not going to listen to any excuses. After you, even Bhai has to do it. So be prepared,' she said to Dhruv, who made a face at her. However, to make Disha comfortable, he took the lead instantly.

'So, it goes something like this ...' he said, and turning towards Disha, continued, 'Office home office was my life, office home office was my life, now I just want to say, Disha is my lovely wife.'

Disha couldn't hold back her laughter and everyone echoed her. But it didn't last long as it was now her turn. She wasn't less of a player, though, and blushing, she said softly, 'Four plus five is equal to nine, four plus five is equal to nine, I'm only Dhruv's and Dhruv is only mine!'

Everyone cheered.

After all the rituals that needed to be performed at home were done, Dhruv's parents told the newly married couple to retire for the

*Aur kuch najanu mein
Bas itna hijaanu
Tujhme mein rab dikhta hai
Yaara mein kya karu*

He even made her dance with him, and Disha was almost in tears, realising that her fiancé was madly in love with her. She could see it clearly in his eyes, and it made her wish they had got together earlier in life.

But that was not all. After the dance, they were welcomed inside, and before the rituals began, Dhruv looked at Disha, who was also gazing at him from the corner of her eyes. The next second, he went down on his knees in front of Disha and her parents, who stood on the stage next to each other. He pulled two gold rings out of his pocket and presented them to Disha's mom and dad. Then he took the mike from the pandit's hand and spoke.

'Dad, before I make my vows to my wife-to-be, I want to promise you something. These days, people dance, drink and do all kinds of things to look cool on their wedding day. But I want to do this the old-school way by assuring you that I'll take care of your daughter. I have seen you look at me with eyes that are both sceptical and loving. I felt the way you hugged me a little too hard, to let me know that you could both protect and kill me. I saw the way you kept glancing at my wife-to-be, wondering if she was still too young to get married. Very shortly, you will become my father-in-law, and I promise you that I will do everything possible to be the son you never had. I can't promise that there will be no hard times ahead; you've seen a lot more life than me and we both know how unpredictable it can be. However, I do promise that I will not leave her, no matter how hard things get. I promise that I will give your daughter the kind of life that will make you hug me and say, "Son, you make me proud".'

Disha was overwhelmed to see this side of Dhruv, and so were her parents. The guests were cheering for Dhruv, who continued, 'Today, as you hand her over to me, I promise you that she will always be yours, first and foremost. I promise you that by choosing

to marry her to me, you are not going to lose a daughter. Rather, you are gaining a son who will be by your side through thick and thin. Do you know why I am promising all this? The reason is that, thirty years down the line, when I give my daughter's hand in marriage, I want her to see me the way your daughter sees you right now.'

Disha's father hugged him with tear-filled eyes. Who wouldn't want a son-in-law like him? The anxiety that Disha's parents felt disappeared when they heard his words, and the smile on their faces expressed the secure feeling as they had made the right choice for their daughter.

He made them wear the rings and concluded, 'Before I say my vows to your daughter, I promise that I will stick by these words and that I'll love her forever and ever.'

First comes love, then comes marriage, but in between, there's a whole lot of traditions and rituals. Dhruv had organised everything perfectly and made the ceremony very easy for both the groom's side and the bride's. The wedding went as smoothly as a romantic love song, and soon the marriage rituals were completed. Disha was now officially hitched to Dhruv. Her new journey had commenced. Before getting into the car that was decorated with her favourite jasmine and orchid flowers, she hugged everyone, including Kajal, who wished her a blissful married life.

They had decided to return to Pune the same day. As the car left the city, Disha had tears in her eyes. Seeing this, Dhruv held her hand and pulled her close. Keeping her head on his shoulders, Disha said, 'I never thought I would cry at my vidaai. Thanks for everything. Especially the promises you made and the way you complimented my parents. You made this special day incredibly memorable for me.'

'I love you.' Dhruv kissed her forehead.

'I love you too,' she replied and thought, *Saying yes to this relationship was the best decision of mine.*



Disha was uncertain about what to do now. She wanted to open the door and go out, but was reluctant and scared at the same time. She didn't know what the situation in the living room would be like. Going through this confusion, she missed mornings at her own home, which she had always disliked despite the liberty she had.

She quickly got dressed, and after summoning up some courage, was about to open the door, when Dhruv's sister knocked on it. Disha heaved a sigh of relief when she heard the knock and opened the door immediately.

'Good morning, Bhabhi. Come outside if you are ready? Breakfast is prepared and we are waiting for you.'

Disha followed her to the living room, her eyes searching for Dhruv. He wasn't there though. Priya realised this and teased her. 'Searching for Bhai? He's in the kitchen, making his own breakfast. He's very particular about it.'

That scared her.

Me waking up late and not entering the kitchen is fine, but Dhruv inside the kitchen on the first day after marriage is not! Happy marriage, Disha!

'I am coming in a minute,' Disha said to Priya, forcing a smile.

She checked herself in a mirror to make sure she was looking decent.

Oh God, please come to my rescue, she prayed, and went into the kitchen. Her mother-in-law was there, and seeing her, Disha bent to touch her feet.

'Good morning ... Mom.' Calling her 'mom' was a bit awkward as it was such a new relationship.

Dhruv greeted her with a smile and said, 'Today, I am making breakfast for you. You can eat parathas, which Mom is making, or my special egg bhurji.'

'Bhai is a very good cook. Especially non-veg,' Priya commented, leaning on Disha in a friendly manner.

CHAPTER 12

'Hello Mrs Dhruv ... how have your last few hours been? New relations, new environment, new bedroom and a new husband!'

Disha was still in bed when Kajal called. She checked the time. It was ten o'clock. Dhruv was nowhere around and that made her all the more apprehensive. She cursed herself for sleeping so late—it was her first day at her in-laws' place!

I have fucked up on the very first day. Shit ... shit, why didn't I hear my alarm? What's my mother-in-law going to think of me? I should have been in the kitchen helping her or at least asking her if she needs help. But here I am, sleeping like a dumb idiot.

'Hello ... are you there?' Kajal asked, hearing no response from Disha's side.

'Yeah ... yes ... I'm sorry. Actually, your call just woke me up.' Disha was out of the bed before she could complete the sentence.

'My, my ... looks like someone had a really long and hard first night. You must be feeling tired?'

Disha wasn't paying attention. She checked the washroom and saw that Dhruv was not there either, sending her into panic mode.

'What the fuck are you doing? You are mute ... as if you're making out while I'm on the line,' Kajal shouted.

'No, no ... we just slept; we were too tired to do anything. Anyways, I'll call you later.'

'Yeah, of course I'm no longer your first priority. *Kitna badal gaya insaan*,' Kajal mocked her.

'Fuck off. Bye. Speak soon,' Disha said and hung up on her.

'It might seem strange, but this is our regular holiday routine. Dad doesn't like the breakfast Mom and Bhai make, and so on holidays he brings his favourite dishes from nearby stalls,' Priya laughingly explained. 'Mom hates outside food, and being a vegetarian, she won't have the eggs prepared by bhai, who won't eat anything except that. Funny family, right?'

Disha smiled. Priya continued, 'But today is special. And the dish you choose to eat will decide who you will be most pampered by. It's your choice. Parathas, eggs or dosa?'

'Don't forget, I am your husband.' Dhruv winked.

Dhruv's dad gave him a mock-bitter look and turned towards Disha to say, 'That's blackmail. It's against the rules. You should know, I was the first one to say yes to this marriage proposal.'

'Don't get tricked by the father-son duo. After all, you have heard so many saans-bahu stories. You know better,' Dhruv's mother put in her bit.

I feel so blessed right now. I have always felt that life is too hard on me, but I was wrong. This feels like a dream. Maybe I was even wrong in thinking that I wasn't lucky in love, Disha said to herself. Indeed, the best relationships begin unexpectedly. Out of nowhere, Dhruv had re-entered her life and added the colours that were missing.

She leaned forward and started taking a bite of each dish. 'Okay, okay ... I'd rather gain some weight than choose one of the dishes. Not because I love them all, but because, today, I got a new family. And I want your love and this feeling of togetherness forever.'

Dhruv's parents felt blessed to have her in their family. They loved their son and had seen him struggle all his life, but not once had he disrespected or ignored them. So, they were very cautious while choosing a partner for him, as all the more because they had seen families get shattered when the spouse did not fit in. They had always wished for a daughter-in-law who would not only be strong and independent, but would love their son and his family like her own. They had seen all those qualities in Disha's eyes.

Dhruv's mother didn't say anything, and her silence made Disha feel that she was angry. To salvage the situation, she said, 'Mom, let me help you.'

Dhruv's mother instantly took her outside the kitchen. Disha could barely breathe; she didn't understand what was happening because the expressions on Dhruv's mother's face weren't those of someone who was angry. She made Disha sit at the dining table and said, 'In our family, a newly married daughter-in-law is not supposed to enter the kitchen. You can relax here, be comfortable, and just tell me whatever you want. Don't be shy or get embarrassed. This is your home, and you are no less of a daughter to me than Priya.'

Disha was amazed. Her mother-in-law kissed her forehead and returned to the kitchen. Surrounded by such positive vibes, she felt that her marriage had given her more than a husband; it had given her a second mom and a friend in Priya. She had hardly spent any time with them, but their warmth had already put Disha at ease. She had always craved for such affection, and though she knew it was just the first day, she felt she couldn't have asked for anything more. She took a deep breath of happiness and had just picked her phone up to call her parents when the doorbell rang.

'Disha, please open the door?' Dhruv requested from the kitchen.

Disha got up and unlatched the door to see her father-in-law standing there with some bags. Without a second thought she took them from him and greeted him. He stepped inside and said, 'Dhruv mentioned that you like South Indian dishes. So, I brought you medhu vada and dosa. We get amazing ones just outside our building every morning.'

'Papa ... already Dhruv is making some ...'

Dhruv was right next to her before she could finish, and so was her mother-in-law. The way she was being pampered, her jitters completely vanished and she felt at home. She was awestruck by all the love she was being showered with, but rather puzzled as she watched three different breakfasts being served.

will explore it all together and set our own guidelines. I would never be happy making you do something that I know you're not ready for.'

He was already living up to the vows he had taken, and that made Disha feel special. They cuddled and slept peacefully after that. Those words were enough to make Disha fall in love, because the man in front of her, her husband Dhruv, had made all her fears disappear on their very first night. All except one. Her new life had started, but could she bear the burden of the past that she was carrying in her mind?

The rest of the family started eating, and Dhruv's mother said, 'We always wondered what kind of girl will enter our close-knit family—whether she will easily meld with us, or if she will need some time to understand us before settling down with us. But I want to tell you that you are not just a part of this family; rather, you have completed our family. You know that stereotype of the overbearing, insufferable mother-in-law? I absolutely refuse to let myself become that person. Please feel at home and feel free to talk to me about anything.'

'We have a lifetime to sit and talk with each other. For now, they have to pack their bags and get ready for the flight tonight,' Dhruv's father reminded his wife.

Later, when they were in their room packing their suitcases, Dhruv came up behind Disha and held her. It caused electric vibrations in her body. He asked her, 'Are you happy?'

'Happiest,' Disha replied.

It is rightly said: you don't need to be perfect for each other—you just need to be happy together.

Ψ

Sometimes one simply has to believe in what's coming one's way and break out of preconceived barriers. When Disha had said yes to Dhruv's proposal of marriage, she went with her gut feeling, not thinking about whether the time or situation was right, but knowing that the person was right. And she was happy to find that she felt such a strong connection with Dhruv and his family.

Later that day, Dhruv and Disha, along with his family, met a few relatives to complete the post-marriage rituals before leaving for their honeymoon. Disha's parents were in Pune for this too. Dhruv's relatives immediately took to Disha, and Dhruv knew he had made the right choice.

That night, they left for their honeymoon destination—Gangtok. Their parents came to the airport to see them off.

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I can't enjoy life today like my friends; one day I will face the world with pride and give back to my parents all the happiness they have sacrificed for me.' And he had actually done it, more than repaying the debt for all those years of sacrifice.

'I am proud that you have lived up to their expectations and given them a life they deserve. After we return, we should book a holiday package to their favourite destination for them. They too deserve a break after all the hectic preparations for our wedding.'

'That's a great idea,' Dhruv said happily.

On reaching Gangtok, they checked into the hotel they had booked. After resting a bit, they set out to explore the city, and when they returned to their suite in the evening, a surprise was waiting for Disha. Their room had direct access to the swimming pool, and as soon as they entered the room, Dhruv took Disha towards the door and opened the curtains. Disha was flabbergasted to see that the entire pool area was lit up with candles and the pool was full of roses. In the room, there was a note on a table, next to a bottle of champagne.

I still remember the first time we met; you were so beautiful that my heart melted. Your eyes sparkled like stars; your hair fell perfectly around your face. And now we are bonded in this holy relationship. It is said that marriage is one of the purest bonds, and I hope that our love for each other will live up to that ideal. I want to be your best friend, not just a husband. I love you and I want to tell you how happy you made me when you agreed to be mine. And my choice? It's you. Every. Single. Time.

Disha hugged him and they celebrated their togetherness with an incredibly romantic evening under the starry sky.

'You know, I hated the idea of being tied to someone I didn't even know. But now that it has happened, it isn't so bad. Actually, I am on cloud nine right now. Feels like a Disney movie,' she said, stepping closer to him.

'You deserve every bit of it,' Dhruv said.

The night was serene; the heat from the day still warmed the ground, but a slight breeze played with Disha's hair. Dhruv was

'Come back soon and give us good news,' Disha's mother teased.

'Stop it, Mom. There's a lot of time for that,' Disha brushed it off casually, and Dhruv just smiled.

Soon after, Disha's mother-in-law said, 'They are still too young for that. Let them enjoy their life together first, and when they feel like it, they can make the decision to start a family. But not before four or five years, I feel. Ask me, I had two children in quick succession and my entire life changed after that.'

Disha's father-in-law backed her, saying, 'Yeah, a lot of people will be after you about having children. Even today, during the rituals, you got a taste of it from the relatives. But don't let anyone put pressure on you. Take your own time and enjoy yourselves above all.'

Disha's mother quietly nodded, agreeing to what was being said. Disha was overwhelmed and so incredibly happy that she wanted to hug her in-laws right there, but she felt that her parents might be offended, and thus restrained herself. But Dhruv understood what she was feeling from the way she tightened her grip on his arm and caressed it.

Not all in-laws are cruel and dominating, like in movies and TV shows, Disha thought. After they had boarded the plane, she said to Dhruv, 'Now I know why you are so rooted and have the values that make you the person you are. It's because of the way your parents brought you up.'

Dhruv beamed. He glanced at Disha and said, 'They have always loved and supported me, even when they had to struggle to make ends meet. They cut down on their expenses and sacrificed their dreams to give us a good education and a better future.'

The childhood he had spent in the chawl, the days he used to work part-time after school, and the initial years of struggle even after shifting to Pune, flashed before his eyes. There were times when his parents couldn't afford the things Dhruv had wished for as a child, the things he saw his friends showing off. All they had was values and ethics; they upheld what they believed was right and set standards for their kids. Dhruv had always said to himself: *So what if*

Dhruv also got busy with work. However, with each passing day, they grew closer to each other. Some weekends later, Disha started feeling uneasy and vomited a couple of times in the morning. Her mother-in-law suspected that she was pregnant and told her son that they should find out. Dhruv discussed it with Disha when they were alone together.

'Should we consult a doctor?' he asked.

'I am just feeling a little fatigued and uneasy ... maybe because of staying awake so late at night to study.'

'You aren't a doctor to diagnose yourself though. I feel we should visit a doctor. Let's not rely on a pregnancy test,' Dhruv said.

Disha had a blank look on her face; it did not express what she was thinking. 'What if Mom's instinct is true? Are you ready? We didn't plan it, having decided to wait for a few years. What if...'

Dhruv, with a clear mind and a firm voice, said, 'To be honest, I wasn't prepared for this. But though unplanned, if it is true, it would be the best day of my life.'

Disha looked into his eyes. He looked so sure and confident that they would be able to handle the situation. Disha needed some time to digest the possibility. She wandered around the room for a while, staring out of the window and at the walls. Deep inside, there was just one thought in her mind.

After a while, she smiled and said that she too was up for it. Overwhelmed, she hugged him tight. The only anxiety she had now was whether they were really mature enough to be parents.

Dhruv and Disha were starting to feel excited about the prospect of having a baby. Dhruv's hopes that his mother's suspicion would turn out to be right increased exponentially. All of a sudden, he started to feel responsible for an unborn child, and even before the test, he had started thinking about where he would throw a party to celebrate. Disha too was thrilled, especially with the love and affection Dhruv was lavishing on her. Everyone in the house was so excited that she too actually hoped the test result would be positive.

CHAPTER 13

Dhruv was like a lonely ship adrift in a dark ocean of sadness. He would never forget how sad and vulnerable he felt when he finally told Disha and his family what the doctor had said. Their reaction was one of shock and disbelief. Over the next few weeks, Disha and Dhruv went to the best experts in the city, but the medical opinion was the same. Disha felt like her soul had been completely crushed. While both Dhruv and Disha's families were shattered and sorrowful, Dhruv's family gave Disha the much-needed strength and support to face this setback. Dhruv was devastated but didn't show it when he was with Disha, as the news had broken her to the core. Her eyes were swollen as she talked with Kajal on the phone.

'I feel broken, incomplete. I feel as if I have been denied the one thing that should be so natural for a couple. My head knows I am not at fault, but my heart feels like I am a burden. I feel defective. I feel so much less than ...'

There were no words to accurately describe her pain.

Kajal consoled her. 'Some things in life aren't in our control. And we have to find a way to face them.'

But Disha was terribly upset and said, 'But why me? Why do I have to be the one to suffer always? And just when I thought I was getting everything I deserve. Am I not allowed to be happy in life?'

'You have a loving husband and in-laws who're supportive. Everything will be fine,' Kajal said, her heart breaking for her friend.

The word devastation did not even come close. Trapped in a cycle of painful thoughts with no escape was not an easy place to be.



An arranged marriage is a strange thing. Sometimes you feel a tinge of disappointment that you never fell in love or got to marry the one you love. You will also be sceptical as to whether you will experience love in an arranged marriage. For Disha and Dhruv, the answer to this was a resounding 'yes'. Two strangers with just a passing acquaintance had a few hours to decide whether to spend their lives together. A few questions asked, infinite unspoken words exchanged, and the decision was made. A month later, they met on their wedding day. Stolen glances, hidden smiles and endless emotion in each other's eyes. A little apprehension in the hearts of both, but their inner voice told them, 'Yes, this is the right match.'

After spending a week together in the hills of the Northeast, they had started to paint the walls of love with the colours of happiness, affection and passion. Disha, who had initially felt a slight discomfort with Dhruv's proximity, now craved for it and felt immense warmth towards him. She was in love, once again!

After returning from their honeymoon, Dhruv resumed work. One Sunday, Disha voiced a wish that was close to her heart. 'I don't know how to tell you ... but I had always wanted to appear for the UPSC exam. My parents wanted me to get a job so they could marry me off after that, but I feel now that I want to fulfil my dream. I don't know how your family would react, though ... and you too. Is it okay with you if I leave my job and concentrate on clearing the UPSC exam?'

'That is it? You were so worried about expressing this small wish?' Dhruv said casually, and turned back to the book he was reading.

'It seems small?' Disha snatched the book from his hand and shifted to his side of the bed to look straight into his eyes.

However, the day after Disha took the test, when Dhruv went to collect the reports, the doctor's words swept the ground from under his feet. His heart felt like it had stopped, and a numbness spread through him.

'There's a complication. It is going to be tough on you both, especially Disha, and you must stay by her side as she could undergo a lot of stress given the situation. We have seen cases where women have attempted to end their lives.'

'What? I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you are trying to say. Is everything fine with her?' Dhruv asked in an anxious voice.

The doctor took a deep breath and said, 'The thing is ... because Disha had told us she was feeling tired and unwell, we ran some other tests and scans. And as per the reports, Disha can never conceive. She can never give birth to a child.'

What the fuck is she talking about? Is she out of her mind? There must be some misunderstanding.

'No ... no ... please check again or take a second opinion. I think you are mistaken.'

'Mr Dhruv, you have to face the truth. For your wife's sake, you cannot break down,' the doctor said.

There were no words for the intense sorrow he felt. His phone rang. Not once, not twice, but umpteen times. But he didn't dare to pick up. He just couldn't. What would he tell Disha, who was waiting to hear the good news from him? He felt lost, almost numb.

Dhruv sat up and intertwined his fingers with hers. 'I mean the request to quit your job certainly is. But your ambition to appear for the UPSC isn't. And I'll be a proud husband if you clear it.'

'Really? Are you serious? You don't mind if I don't earn for a while?' Disha was incredulous.

'Why would I? You are taking a break to study because you want to grow in life. I would have a problem if you say that you don't want to do anything in life.' Dhruv stroked her cheek with his other hand.

'Thank you so much ... but what about your parents?' Disha still looked worried.

Without thinking for even a second, Dhruv called his mom into their room and told her about Disha's wish. Disha had tried to stop him, saying it was too soon for an announcement, but he obviously knew his parents in and out, and proceeded to spill the beans without any fear in his mind.

His mother, after hearing about her daughter-in-law's ambition, said, 'Maybe your parents were worried about your marriage and this was the reason they didn't allow you to go ahead. Preparing for the UPSC does take a toll on a person. But as far as I know you, I think you are smart and focused. It is unlikely that you'll take years to clear the exam. I have always believed that people should keep learning throughout their lives and nothing should stop them from doing so. Only we know what we have gone through when, despite our financial crunch, we told both our kids to go and explore the world of education. And now that we are comfortably off, why would we not allow you to do the same? You are still young and you should explore your dreams. We are all with you.'

Nothing in the world could have taken away the feeling of happiness that Disha experienced at that moment. It was pure bliss, and with happy tears she thanked her in-laws.

Soon afterwards, she submitted her resignation at the coaching centre and filled out her application to appear for the UPSC. She procured the books without further ado and started preparing for the exam.

unsure whether to make the first move or not; he wanted her to be absolutely ready. He moved closer to her, and saw that she didn't object, but he was still confused about whether she was silent because she was scared, or because she wanted to experience the moment in silence. But when she responded by holding him and stepping even closer to him, he didn't have an iota of doubt in his mind.

'Do you want to take it ahead?' he whispered in her ear.

'I want you to be gentle,' Disha answered, unleashing in him sensations that he had never felt before.

Dhruv immediately covered her mouth with his, his lips hovering over hers, caressing her and then withdrawing. She reacted instinctively, with an ease she never knew was in her. She felt their breath merge, the air flowing between them warmed by their bodies. Disha made soft sounds of pleasure, conveying the excitement she was feeling.

When Dhruv pushed her on the bed and came close, she whispered, 'You feel so good. I want you to show me the kingdom of heaven.'

Dhruv couldn't hold back any longer and Disha moaned, her hands locked on his shoulders, her breath against his face. He gasped as she put her lips against his ear, whispering his name over and over, like a chant, or a song, or a prayer. Disha couldn't get enough of him. She wanted to draw him in, deeper and deeper. She wanted to watch him, to feel him even closer, so that she would never forget. Dhruv had sensed and knew exactly how to touch her chords. There was no end to it and the whole room rocked to their rhythm, making them crave for more and more until the last drop of sweat fell on her, leaving him exhausted and her with a sense of satisfaction.

'Was it the way you wanted?' he asked.

'So much more. I love you.' She could have announced it to the whole world.

Disha's body blushed that whole night, and the vibrations were felt till the first rays of the sun fell on them. They hadn't only made love; they had felt love!

everything was fine and she was just feeling unwell. She too was upset, not because Dhruv wasn't responding, but because she had kept the truth hidden. A few hours after lunch, she made tea for her in-laws, and texted Dhruv again.

'Dhruv ... please don't ignore me like this. I was broken and I couldn't allow myself to open up, so I shut off that episode of my past. The love and affection you and your family have showered on me is something I have always craved for. I don't know when I started loving you, but you know how much I do. The burden of hiding this one thing from you made me feel guilty always ... I never thought it would come out like this. Maybe because of me, your family life will always remain incomplete, but I'll try to make you feel whole in spite of that. Believe me, please.'

Eventually, he did reply.

'You have fractured my trust to an extent that I don't know if it will ever heal. Maybe I can never hate you, but I don't know if I can love you the same way I used to. How could you hurt me the way that you did? Never in my life could I have imagined that someone I love so much, shared precious memories with, my wife, would be the person to turn my world upside down. I wish I could say this is something easy to fix, but it isn't. I may not think about it for weeks or months, but if something reminds me of it, it will come back like a hurricane crashing over me. You aren't the only one who has to deal with the aftermath of your selfish decision. Unfortunately, I do too. So please don't try to convince me otherwise. Let's just keep a distance between us from now on.'

For the next two weeks, Dhruv resisted all her attempts to talk to him. The tension between them was obvious to Dhruv's parents. In the beginning they assumed the two were fighting about the usual things newly married couples quarrel over, so they were not too worried. But as the days passed, they grew more concerned.

'Do you also feel that there's something seriously wrong between the two of them? For the past week or so, I've been noticing that Dhruv is avoiding Disha and behaving very strangely. Since

Disha cried a lot. But the pain refused to go. The grief was ripping her apart and that reflected in her words.

'Everything will be fine—I have been hearing that for years. But now I feel hopeless. Every woman wants to experience motherhood once in her life. Don't I even deserve that? I cannot explain what I am going through. I wish I could have died the day I cut my veins.'

'Disha ... stop putting all the blame on yourself. Do you want me to come down to Pune?' Kajal said.

'No ... it's just that the truth is killing me from the inside,' Disha finally revealed. She double-checked to make sure no one was in earshot. Dhruv was away at work, and she was alone in the house with her in-laws who were in their own bedroom.

'What happened? Aren't Dhruv and his family supportive? Are they blaming you for this?' Kajal asked, concerned.

'They are all tremendously supportive, and it only adds to my guilt. It makes me feel like I am cheating on him, on all of them, by hiding the truth.'

The doctor had told her the reason why she couldn't conceive and the knowledge was weighing her down.

'The fact is, I cannot conceive because there were complications during the abortion. And this truth is hurting like hell. None of the doctors mentioned the abortion in front of Dhruv. But now I feel I have to tell him. It doesn't matter how he reacts; I just can't hide it anymore. He's been so good to me, and even if he yells or takes extreme steps, I am ready to face it.'

The truth was giving Disha sleepless nights, as if someone was stabbing her heart with a sharp knife repeatedly. Though Kajal tried to make her understand the probable after-effects of revealing the truth, Disha had made her decision.

That night, when she and Dhruv were alone in their bedroom after dinner, Disha spoke up.

'Dhruv ... I want to disclose something that I should maybe have told you at our first meeting. But I just couldn't. Many times, I even thought about telling you just before our wedding, but still I

couldn't. Nevertheless, I want to now. Or my conscience will not let me go on with the life we have together.'

There are times when my happiness lives in a place of fear. There are times when I am just waiting for disaster to strike. That fear turns to dread. It becomes anxiety. I am suddenly terrorised by the idea of losing you and feeling that I already have. I am afraid to feel like everything is out of my control again. I am afraid to be helpless again. I am afraid of living in limbo again, not knowing what my fate will be. I know I have no right to ask, but please, please be patient with me.

Dhruv sensed Disha's fear and said, 'I know you're stressed and I don't want you to suffer. We can talk later if you want.'

But Disha knew she had to say it right then. 'I have no clue how you will react to what I am saying, but I request you to listen to each and every word carefully before responding.'

'Okay,' Dhruv said, a bit tense now about what he was going to hear.

'Remember, I had told you about my relationship with Raghav ... I didn't tell you one part of the story ...'

'What do you mean?' Dhruv stared at her unblinkingly.

Disha narrated all that she had concealed from him. Listening to every word that Disha uttered, Dhruv was shattered like a glass. In the end, he wished he could just disappear or fade away like dust. It had been totally unexpected, as he had blindly trusted the incomplete story that Disha had told him earlier. It wasn't that he had any issues with her past or that he was not ready to accept the way things were, but Disha had kept the true story hidden from him and he felt betrayed. His trust in her was broken.

After a long and terrifying silence, he took a deep breath and said, 'You lied. You're a liar. I told you that I hate it, and yet you decided to hide this from me. I hate you. Please stop trying to explain yourself, and don't expect any more from me. Though we will stay together, we cannot be together.'

Dhruv's eyes were moist. He felt completely broken. The window never expects the brick to be thrown. The brick shatters the

Dhruv was too drunk to say anything. After a while, Disha returned and saw Dhruv sitting with his parents in a state that she never could have visualised him in. She felt overwhelmed by exhaustion, and emptiness crawled into her heart like a snake. She blamed herself for everything, for pushing Dhruv into an ocean of sadness that had disturbed his mental balance to this extent. She wished she could take Dhruv to their room to avoid creating a scene in front of his parents. With blurry vision, Dhruv saw Disha walking towards him.

'Dhruv ... why are you doing this to yourself?' she asked with tears in her eyes.

Dhruv swayed as he got up, holding on to a chair for support. He looked into her eyes for a few seconds with anger and grief, after which he started shouting like a maniac. Disha and his parents were stunned.

'It's all because of you, bitch. You ruined my life and left me shattered. What did you get by lying to me? After destroying me, you're asking me why I'm doing this to myself, fucking idiot? You should be ashamed.' He flung a glass of water that was on the table in rage. The glass shattered into pieces on the floor, and so did Disha's heart with each abusive word that Dhruv had uttered.

'Just get lost ... get out of my life ... I hate you and I don't want you anymore. It's over.'

That was it. Disha was convicted in Dhruv's court of love.

What is it about me that makes others walk away as if I mean nothing to them? Why can't I make them stay? Maybe my assumptions were true. I am not lucky in love and I don't deserve a second chance.

Was this the end of her love story? Had she failed in love once again? The next morning, before Dhruv woke up, Disha walked away with a heavy heart. From his home and from his life. Forever.

her medical reports came out, things haven't seemed fine between them,' Dhruv's father said to his wife. They had just had dinner and Dhruv and Disha had gone to their bedroom without saying a word to anyone.

'I thought it was only me who felt it so I didn't talk about it, but now I think we should intervene if you feel the same. He should understand that it's not her fault and realise that it's not the end of their lives,' Dhruv's mother said. After a pause, she said, 'Do you think you should talk with Dhruv first?'

Dhruv's dad responded promptly, 'You know Dhruv ... he won't open up. I feel you should talk to Disha first. The way Dhruv is acting, I am sure she is feeling terrible. This is the time when he should be standing by her like a rock. I just don't know what's happening between them. Maybe Disha will tell you the reason behind it.'

Dhruv's mother nodded in agreement. She spoke to Disha later, asking her what was wrong and offering her the support she needed. But Disha pretended that nothing was wrong. Dhruv's mother tried a couple more times, but on each occasion Disha dismissed her suspicion that something was wrong.

Eventually, they decided to have a word with Dhruv. They couldn't bear to see Dhruv and Disha in such a state any longer. That day, when Dhruv returned from work, Disha had gone to the supermarket down the road, and his dad felt it was the right time to initiate the conversation.

However, they quickly realised that Dhruv was very drunk, barely even able to walk properly.

He never used to drink. Whatever the problem is, it definitely seems more serious than what we imagined, Dhruv's dad thought as he managed somehow to make his son sit on the sofa.

'What the hell is wrong with you? Is this the way a sensible man behaves?' Dhruv's father said sternly, still under the assumption that his son was drinking because he wasn't able to face the fact that they could not have a child.

window anyway. There is a brief moment of contact; then nature takes its course. The broken pieces of glass lie on the ground, and the brick is on the other side.

Dhruv was the window and Disha was the brick. He loved her wholeheartedly and had given everything to their relationship. It was obvious that he felt cheated, but Disha wanted him to understand that it hadn't been her intention to hurt him. Everyone has a past, and she was no exception. She had even acknowledged her mistake. But was it too late?

Dhruv didn't say a word after that. She wanted him to speak his heart but he didn't. He wasn't someone who would get abusive or violent, and so he preferred to just keep quiet, but his silence hurt more than words could.

The next morning, before Disha woke up, Dhruv had already left for work. He told his parents that he had to reach the office early. In fact, he just wanted to avoid seeing Disha in the morning. He was badly hurt. When Disha got up and saw that Dhruv had left without letting her know, she sensed that he had not forgiven her. But she wanted him to understand her, and so she sent him a WhatsApp message.

'I know I shouldn't have lied. I should have revealed everything and given you a true picture of my past. Now I am in tears, full of deep regret for what I could have saved. My thoughts are filled with you. You are my one true love. I need another chance to show you I am your soulmate. I know it will be difficult for you to trust me again, but can you try? I will never ever betray you again. This was the only thing that I didn't have the courage to reveal. I am already going through a lot and I need you. Please forgive me. I'm sorry for hiding the truth from you.'

After sending the message, Disha waited for a reply. The hours went by, but he did not respond. Disha tried calling him during his lunch break like she usually did, but he didn't pick up. Seeing Disha's pale face, Dhruv's parents understood that something was terribly wrong. They even asked her what had happened, but she lied, saying

CHAPTER 14

Days became months and months turned into seasons, but Disha's fate didn't change. Neither did Dhruv contact her nor did she try and get in touch. But she couldn't keep Dhruv out of her thoughts. Disha had taken the blame for the failure of the relationship all on herself and was very depressed. She couldn't concentrate on her UPSC preparation, nor could she summon up the energy to look for a job.

When she returned home, her parents had been very angry. They had told her to keep her mouth shut from the beginning, but she hadn't listened, and now it had come to this. Instead of supporting her, they were angry with her for ruining the relationship; and on the other side, even after learning the truth, Dhruv's parents put in their best efforts to bring about a reconciliation, advising their son to let go of the past, but in vain. As time went by, Disha withdrew deeper into her shell, cursing her life.

It was her birthday, but that hardly mattered to Disha as it was just another day in her bleak existence. Kajal and her husband had come over in the morning, hoping to make her feel better, but Disha responded to their birthday wishes without any emotion.

Later, Kajal sat by her side in her bedroom and asked, 'Did Dhruv wish you today?'

Disha shook her head. Her face was expressionless; she looked pale and dull, as if she had lost all her energy and strength. Kajal knew what she was going through and said, 'I think you should try and talk to Dhruv one more time. I am sure that, like you, he is suffering too. It's just ego that's coming in the way of your patching things up.'

CHAPTER 15

Dhruv was getting restless. Every few hours, one family member was allowed to enter the ICU to spend time with his mother. When it was Disha's turn and she had gone inside, Dhruv's father came and sat beside Dhruv. He put his hand on his son's shoulder like a friend and said, 'When will you stop all this? When either Mom or I die of stress and tension because of you? You aren't the same Dhruv that we have known all these years. You used to be sensitive, kind to your loved ones. Understanding. But lately, we have noticed that you have turned egoistical and rude.'

Dhruv turned towards his father, his shoulders drooping with fear. In his grief, he listened to his dad attentively. 'Your mom hasn't been able to sleep peacefully for months, as she thinks about you and Disha all the time. Beta, Disha loves you, and nothing matters in life as much as having a caring person by your side through thick and thin. You should consider yourself extremely lucky to have her in your life.'

'But Dad, what about her lie ...'

'If it was someone else, she would have chosen self-respect over love and moved on. But look at her, she hasn't eaten anything since morning, having travelled from Mumbai on her birthday just because your mother felt like seeing her. She could have opted to return to Mumbai and enjoy her birthday back at home with her parents and friends, but she chose to stay here during our crisis and give us the emotional support we need. Like an elder sister, she just got Priya something to eat for from the hospital canteen; like a daughter, she is giving me strength when my wife is fighting for her life inside. Yet,

Dhruv came out of his room, having changed into a t-shirt and jeans.

'You are looking smart. Anything special?' Dhruv's dad said.

'Why this unnecessary flattery? Can we just leave? It's three o'clock already and I'm hungry.'

Dhruv took the car keys from his father and drove to the restaurant his parents had chosen. Meanwhile, Priya was texting Disha, who had reached Pune and was on her way to the same restaurant. Dhruv noticed everyone giving him furtive glances at regular intervals and that made him suspicious. He even asked if something was wrong, but they avoided his questions. However, after a while, his father tried to steer the conversation to Disha indirectly.

'There's something special about today, I feel. But I am not able to recall what it is. Don't you feel it too?' he asked, looking at Dhruv's mother and Priya.

'Yes, I've been feeling that since morning. What do you think, Priya?' Dhruv's mother said.

'Yes ... you are right. I even dreamed last night that we would be celebrating today. But what is the occasion?'

Dhruv turned to Priya who was seated beside him and snapped, 'I know very well what you are hinting at. I know that today's Disha's birthday—there's no need to act so innocent.' He turned his attention back to the road.

Dhruv's dad leaned forward in excitement and said, 'So you knew it and still came along with us to celebrate. That means you still love her, right?'

'Can we just stop talking about Disha and me?' He wanted to bang his head on the steering wheel.

'But I think we should call her too ... what do you say?' his father said.

'Yes, that's a great idea. She can join us for the dinner if she leaves now,' his mother said.

Dhruv wanted to stop the car and kick himself for agreeing to come along.

'Dad, will you please stop it. She's in Mumbai. And please let's not talk about her. Or maybe, for some time, let's not talk at all. I am irritated right now,' he said.

Everyone kept quiet after that, but they glanced at each other and smiled. Priya signalled to her parents that Disha would reach the restaurant soon.

After being seated at the restaurant, they ordered food. They continued to be silent until Dhruv's dad said, 'I think we should at least call her and wish her. Now that we have remembered it's her birthday ... after all, we are her in-laws.' Saying this, he took his phone out of his shirt pocket and dialled her number.

Dhruv snatched the phone from him and said angrily, 'Dad, Mom—what's wrong with you guys? Are you my parents or hers?'

The next instant he was shocked to see Disha standing by their table.

All of them acted like it was equally surprising for them too, and Dhruv's mother said, 'Oh Disha ... come, join us ... wow ... you will have a long life!'

Dhruv, however, saw through their act and understood quickly that his parents had organised this meeting. He was furious, and getting up from his seat, shouted, 'This is crazy, all of you have lost it. I just don't want to see her face. Why the hell don't you guys understand that it's over?'

The people in the restaurant stared at him as he turned to leave. As he walked towards the door, he heard his dad, Priya and Disha cry out, but decided it was just another trick to make him stay, and continued to head for the exit. However, when he heard a few more shouts and the note of panic in them, he turned around and his heart stopped. He saw that his mother had collapsed on her seat, and that his family was trying to revive her.

He rushed towards the table. 'Mom, are you okay?' he asked, terror-stricken. As he passed the restaurant manager he said urgently, 'Tell the valet to bring our car immediately.'

if Dhruv and Disha were brought together, they would be able to resolve their differences.

A couple of hours later, Priya asked Dhruv, who was in his room working on his laptop, 'What about your lunch?'

'Whatever Mom has made is fine for me,' he replied without looking up. He had locked himself in his room since morning, pretending that he was working from home.

'Mom hasn't made anything. Dad is taking her out for lunch and I have decided to tag along with them. Why don't you join us?' she said casually.

'No, I don't feel like going out. I'll order something to eat. You guys carry on,' Dhruv said.

'Why? Are you planning to go somewhere with Disha?' she teased.

'Yes ... we are going out together on a romantic date. Any problem? Now go.' Dhruv shut down any further conversation.

Priya went to her parents and informed them that Dhruv wasn't coming. But his dad knew him well and was aware that Dhruv was just throwing a tantrum. The moment they were about to leave, Dhruv came out of his room and said, 'Give me five minutes, I am coming. I don't want to sit and eat alone.'

Dhruv's dad smiled and said, 'Sure. Make it fast.'

Yes, the plan is working. Today, nothing can stop Bhai and Bhabhi from meeting, Priya thought happily.

She said, 'I don't think anyone's parents have ever been so excited to take their child out on a date. How does it feel?'

'Mind-boggling.' Dhruv's father laughed. His mother was worried and prayed that everything would fall into place. She desperately wanted them to be together again. What her husband had said to Disha on the phone was true. She was under a lot of stress and at her age it wasn't advisable. Her blood pressure wasn't stable and the doctors had suggested her to take rest and stay calm to avoid further risks. But today she had hope in her heart.

phase has made me love you all the more. It's said that the hurricanes in our lives strengthen the foundations of relationships.'

She was just about to send the message when she got a call from her mother-in-law. She stared at her screen for a few seconds and then took the call hesitantly. She was aware they were calling to wish her, and soon she heard her mother-in-law's voice, 'Happy birthday, Disha—from both of us.' She spoke warmly, trying to hide her pain. Dhruv's father, who was sitting beside his wife, signalled to her to give him the phone but she continued in a low voice, 'How are you doing?'

'I am fine, thanks, Mom ...' Disha lied. 'How are you all?'

'How would we be, without our daughter-in-law?'

Disha remained silent. Then her father-in-law took the phone and said, 'Can I ask you something today?'

'Yes, sure, Dad.'

'We both want to see you, and celebrate your birthday together. Please don't refuse us this. It will take you only a couple of hours to reach Pune. You can go back in the evening,' he said.

'But, Dhruv ... won't he ...'

'Don't worry, we won't tell him that we are meeting you. Please do come. Your mother-in-law is not feeling very well these days. This situation has put her under a lot of stress. She wants to see you, and I request you to come as it would make her happy.'

Disha had tears in her eyes as she listened to his words. She too missed being with them, and recalled how her mother-in-law had always been so supportive of her. She had given her more care and love than her own mother had. When Dhruv had been away at work during the initial months of their marriage, it was his mother who had provided her with the companionship she needed in a new home and a strange city. Thinking about all those moments, Disha felt she couldn't deny their request. She smiled through her tears and agreed.

Dhruv's dad disconnected the call and with a grin on his face winked at Dhruv's mom and his sister. It had been Priya's idea to invite Disha to Pune and get Dhruv to meet her. They believed that

Priya was in tears, seeing her mom in an almost unconscious state, her eyelids fluttering.

'Mom, what happened to you? Please speak ... say something,' she cried.

'Help ... kindly help us,' Dhruv's father stammered, asking the staff to help carry her to the car.

With all of them in the car, Dhruv drove quickly to the nearest hospital. On the way, summoning every ounce of energy she had left, his mother conveyed her wish to Dhruv. 'Please forgive Disha. If something happens to me, promise me that you will be with her always. I want to see you both together. She loves you.'

She was finding it difficult to keep her eyes open, rapidly losing all the strength she had. Disha sobbed like a child. Even in that state, all her mother-in-law hoped and wished for was to see her and Dhruv together again. Disha held her hand and Dhruv's mother immediately tightened her grip, but soon her fingers went limp and she stopped responding. Those had been her last words before she fainted.

When they reached the hospital, a doctor ran some tests. When the results were out, he said, 'It looks like a mild heart attack. We need to put her in intensive care right away.'

'Doctor ... do something, please save my mom. Nothing should happen to her.' Dhruv's emotions were visible in his moist eyes. He was trying hard to stay composed.

The doctor assured him and the rest of the family that she would be fine as she was wheeled into the intensive care unit.

Everything had happened in the blink of an eye and now the entire family stood there, shell-shocked. Dhruv's father, shaken to the core himself, was trying to comfort Disha and Priya, seeing the tears roll down their faces. Dhruv sat beside them, numb, his hands joined in prayer, pleading silently for his mother's life. He felt terribly guilty for reacting the way he had on seeing Disha. His parents knew him well, he realised. They had known that he just needed to kill his ego and express how much he missed Disha. But instead of appreci-

'What should I say to him? There's nothing left. I feel responsible for his sorrow. I should have come clean right at the beginning. I was the one who didn't maintain transparency in our relationship. He told me even the minutest details of his life, but I continued to behave like a coward. I don't expect him to forgive me, but I wish I could make him look deep inside my heart and soul just once, so he could see that I never intended to hurt him.'

'What are his parents saying?' Kajal's husband asked.

'They call me every now and then. I am really blessed to have in-laws like them. Others would simply have cut ties after hearing the truth, like Dhruv did, but they still stand by me and tell me that I did nothing wrong. But my conscience knows I have made a terrible mistake and that is what I tell them. They keep saying all that was in my past and we should both get over it. I could forget what happened between us, but will he? When I ask them the same question, they have no answer. Then how am I supposed to start afresh? A relationship works when two people try to mend ways, not just one. The feelings have to be mutual, and the efforts have to be equal.'

It's so easy to love someone when things are perfect and everything is wonderful. But to love someone when things are messed up, that's the true test. To love someone despite feeling broken, and to be willing to stand by them no matter how challenging the situation is—that's what shows how meaningful your love is. Disha and Dhruv's relationship was sorely tested by this crisis. Disha didn't feel like she could give up on it, but she didn't know what she should do to get back with him. She loved him with the same intensity as before, but was clueless as to what would pacify his anger and make him love her again.

Kajal finally convinced her to message him, and she sent him a text.

'I know I have broken you emotionally and that our problems have made our relationship vulnerable. I don't have a solution yet; things are hard and I can never convincingly explain why I didn't tell you the truth before. But trust me, I will always love you. And this

ating their insight, he had shouted at them and tried to storm out of the restaurant. He felt he would never forgive himself if something happened to his mother.

We seldom have the opportunity to observe our parents in their finest moments, in the prime of their lives. Actually, we do see them at those moments, but we're often much too young to fully realise how amazing they are. Even as mature, functioning adults, we still need their wisdom and love.

Dhruv closed his eyes and prayed, *If I could change all this for you, Mom, I would. I know you got up every day and put on a brave face ... you didn't let anyone know how much you were hurting after our separation. I know I would get mad at you whenever you tried to talk to me about Disha. I didn't realise that when I fed my ego so much it took away my sensitivity. I am sorry that I didn't understand what you were saying and I am sorry for making you feel bad. I love you, Mom. I really do. Please get better. I'll never hurt you again. Punish me like you did when I was a child. You would shout at me, lock me into a room. I used to cry but you made me realise my mistakes. Punish me again, but don't do this to me. Without you, I am nothing. Please get better.*

Isn't life strange? One moment the people you love are with you—smiling, laughing and making memories—and in the next, they are fighting for their life. You feel your loved ones will always be part of your world, and then reality knocks on your door. Dhruv's mother was in the ICU, struggling to stay alive, with one wish: to see her son and daughter-in-law together again.

way back to each other and were now complete in each other's arms. Misunderstandings, ego and secrecy had split their relationship into several pieces, but the jigsaw puzzle had only been waiting for the right fingers to pick up and gently place each piece where it belonged. They had tried on their own, but had put the wrong pieces in the wrong places. Eventually, it was Dhruv's parents who had put the pieces back together again.

Their reunion was followed by more good news after a few hours. The doctor came out of the ICU and told them, 'She is recovering rapidly—there's nothing to worry about. In a couple of days, you can take her back home.'

Dhruv's dad finally breathed a sigh of relief. He had been under immense stress during the last few hours, but being the pillar of the family, he didn't show how he felt. He had stayed calm to give strength to his kids. Even after hearing the news, he didn't shed tears. It was a moment that he wanted to celebrate as not only his wife but even Dhruv and Disha's marriage had been revived that day.

Her only wish was for you two to reunite; here you reunited, and there she recovered. It is a miracle, but she made it happen because she had wished for this with all her heart.

Seeing the doctor still standing there, they looked at him curiously.

He said, 'One more thing, she's now conscious and you can meet her. But remember, she needs rest, so don't let her speak much.'

His words doubled their happiness and Dhruv's dad rushed inside. Dhruv shook hands with the doctor and said, 'Thank you, Doctor. Really, we are grateful to you.'

The doctor smiled and left, patting his back for being strong and cooperative. Dhruv, Disha and Priya then went inside. Dhruv had missed hearing his mother's voice, her advice, her orders, and everything about her, and now that she had opened her eyes, he couldn't wait for her to be back to her lively self again. Disha too wanted to sit and talk with her for hours, something she had missed while staying away from her mother-in-law. Priya's smile was back on her face,

all you see is her past. I know that you haven't been happy all these months. You have suffered as much as she has. Then why keep this up?"

Dhruv started to cry. All the pain that he had suppressed emerged through his tears. He knew that his father wasn't wrong. He loved her; he loved her more than himself. He had loved her ever since he had understood what love was.

'It's not that I don't love her, Dad. I have missed her so much. I care for her. You know it. But something is stopping me.'

'Beta, she never betrayed you after starting a relationship with you. She might have had her own fears to tackle, and thus couldn't express the truth to you. But as a husband, if you won't understand her, then who will? Have you ever thought about what it is like to be in her shoes? She must have gone through the worst phase in her life when she had to have an abortion. Society is not kind or forgiving towards such girls. Look at you; despite knowing her, you couldn't forgive her easily. Then do you think society would? But Dhruv, you have to put a full stop to all this now. End it. She has suffered a lot, and now that she's aware that she can't ever have a child, she must be traumatised. For a girl, it can be nothing less than an emotional breakdown. Shouldn't her loved ones stand by her during this difficult time? Instead, you left her alone and vulnerable. She needs you. She wants you to be by her side; she expects you to be her strength. Don't abandon her.'

Dhruv's father was interrupted by a nurse who asked him to bring some medicines from the chemist.

'Think about it, son,' he said before he got up and left, wanting Dhruv to reflect on what was best not only for him but for the entire family.

Dhruv realised how badly he had behaved with Disha. Somewhere in the corner of his heart, he knew she was an honest person. Her intention had not been to harm him in any sense.

She could easily have continued to hide the truth. I would have never found out. But she spoke up for the sake of keeping our relation-

dictable it can be. However, I do promise that I will not leave her, no matter how hard things get. I promise that I will give your daughter the kind of life that will make you hug me and say, 'Son, you make me proud.'

Dhruv knew what he had to do. He had found a way through the dark tunnel he had been trapped in—by holding on to Disha and her love for him that was divine, unaffected and eternal.

Ψ

A few minutes later, Dhruv's dad returned with the medicines. When he had handed them over to the nurse, Dhruv apologised to him for his behaviour and also requested him to convey to Disha that he was waiting for her outside the ICU. He didn't want to waste a moment in making things right. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her and how sorry he was. He wanted to hug her and feel her warmth. At the same time, he was hesitant because he realised that the way he had behaved was not right. He should have been more supportive and compassionate; he should have been more empathetic towards her trauma. In one of worst phases of her life, he had just left her alone, showing no concern or love.

Couples who go through everything that could tear them apart, and yet hold on to each other, are the ones that are meant to be. Dhruv and Disha, despite their recent separation, were a single soul inhabiting two bodies.

When Disha was informed by her father-in-law that Dhruv was waiting for her, she had goose bumps. Dhruv's dad had hinted about what his son was going to say, and after a long time, she felt like a leaf on which the first rays of the sun had fallen. It felt like she had been yearning for his love and attention forever; these last few months had felt like ages to her.

She stepped outside the ICU, and there was Dhruv, waiting for her. Dhruv immediately showed his repentance. Like a ten-year-old kid, he held both his ears and looked at her with a pleading face, asking for forgiveness. Disha, who had waited so long for him to return

to her, couldn't hold her emotions back. Her happy tears expressed that she had already forgiven him. But he voiced his apology, 'I don't know where to start. I've mistreated you, spoken to you like you were nothing, acted like you were nothing, ignored you, and still you stayed. I'm sorry. The way I spoke to you was hurtful and insensitive, and I'm sure it only added to your distress. I wish I were as gentle and forgiving as you are. When you needed me the most, I acted immaturely, and now when I look back, I feel so ashamed. I should have handled things better. But trust me, each day I suffered too. I love you madly, and when you hurt someone you love, it rips you apart.'

Disha gently placed her fingers on his lips to stop him. If they hadn't been in a hospital, she would have kissed him to stop the words and show her love. 'You weren't the one who hurt me ... it was me who hurt you. I am sorry that I couldn't confess the truth at the right time. I love you and I always will.'

Dhruv smiled, as tears fell from his eyes and touched her fingers. She moved a step closer and wiped them off. Dhruv, taking a deep breath, said, 'I have no excuse for my behaviour, but I promise, I'll never make you feel incomplete again. I know it may be difficult to believe right now, but I love you as I have never loved anyone else. I never told you this, but I have been in love with you since our school days. Disha, I would give anything to pick up where we left off.'

Dhruv was so lost in the moment that, for a second, he forgot that they were in the hospital and brushed her lips slightly with his. Disha had closed her eyes and didn't want him to stop, but Dhruv's dad and Priya were eavesdropping on their conversation, and seeing this display of affection, they clapped in celebration. Disha felt embarrassed and hid her face shyly. Dhruv hugged his dad and Priya hugged her Bhabhi.

'Please come back home now,' Priya said.

'Yes, we all need you and have missed you,' Dhruv's dad said.

Dhruv held her with the love and affection that she had craved for so many months, and all the tiredness and strain on her face vanished with his touch. Disha and Dhruv had finally found their

seeing her mom almost back to normal, and Dhruv's father—who had feared that he would lose her in that fraction of a second when she had collapsed—kissed her forehead and held her hand firmly. She struggled to grip his hand, but managed to smile and give him a glance that was so refreshingly romantic that it could have given any newly married couple a complex. She saw Disha and Dhruv standing together, and her heart was filled with joy. She felt like removing all the tubes so that she could hug them both, but didn't have the strength.

She made them hold each other's hands and spoke in a breathless voice, 'Never let go of each other's hands. Stay together. You are not only each other's strength, but also ours.'

'Don't speak much,' Dhruv's dad said gently. He then turned towards Dhruv and Disha, saying, 'Promise each other now, in front of us.'

Dhruv was slightly embarrassed and so was Disha. 'Dad, what? We are in a hospital.'

Even the nurse who was in the room giggled.

'So what? You aren't a rented husband. She's your wife. There's nothing to be ashamed of.' Dhruv's dad had a wide grin on his face.

Dhruv looked into Disha's eyes, awkward with everyone around, but he had no choice.

His dad mocked him again, 'What kind of husband are you? Too shy to flirt with your wife? You let me down, son.'

'Bhai, you can even kiss her. We won't mind,' Priya too played along.

'You guys are really embarrassing me. Please ... maintain some decorum in public.'

'To hell with your decorum. Have a little drink first if you want and then propose to her,' Dhruv's dad said happily.

Dhruv finally decided to speak from his heart. He took a deep breath and said, 'I have something to say ...' Pausing, he gave her a deep, intense look, as if he could see the world in her eyes.

'I love you.'

Disha blushed. But Priya urged her to voice what she was thinking, and with all her heart, in front of her beloved family, she uttered the words that had stayed with her for a long time.

'I always felt I wasn't lucky in love. But now I know that I am. I love you too.'

And that's what it's about, isn't it? Love! Two people composed of one emotion. Forever and ever!

ship transparent. She put loyalty above everything else, even above her own dignity. Then why does my conscience stop me from making things right with her? Why?

He was sitting there with his thoughts when he saw doctors rushing towards the operation theatre. A woman was being taken inside, and even in her half-conscious state, she was holding the hand of her husband, who was in tears. He overheard their conversation.

'Doctor, I want my wife to be safe; I can't live without her.'

The lady wasn't able to speak but her eyes stayed on her husband, who looked at her and said, 'Don't worry. Nothing will happen to you. I'll do anything to keep you with me.'

Seeing the wealth of love in the husband's eyes, Dhruv thought, *What have I done to myself? I am hurting everyone around me. My mother is in intensive care because of me; my wife isn't by my side because of my ego and my dad is no longer proud of me. This isn't me. And why is 'me' coming before 'us' when I had promised that would never happen? What have I done? There are people around me who are praying to God, begging for some more time with their loved ones, and here I am, still pampering my ego and allowing it to destroy our relationship. She loves me, she loves me so much. And I love her too. Isn't that enough? I know no one else can understand me and my family like her. I know my actions have hurt her deeply, and yet she has stood by my side. Why am I allowing my ego to win over my heart? I was never angry with her because of her past or because we can't have a child. It was only because she lied that I felt betrayed. But Dad is right. She had her own insecurities. And who doesn't? Maybe the timing of her confession was wrong, but her intentions were good. I want her by my side. I don't want to lose her and I'm now ready to fight my ego so that it doesn't happen. I love you, Disha, I really do.*

He remembered not only his wedding vows to Disha but also the promises he had made to her father. He recalled every moment of their wedding day, and was overcome with emotion.

I can't promise that there will be no hard times ahead, because you've seen a lot more life than me and we both know how unpre-