

Chapter 1

The aroma of chai and fried pakoras hung heavy in the air, a familiar scent that announced the arrival of evening in the bustling Calcutta neighborhood. Vaibhav, a lean young man with a mop of unruly hair, sat cross-legged on the worn rug in his family's living room, a worn copy of "The Alchemist" in his hands. But his eyes were not on the page. They were fixed on the doorway, waiting.

A minute later, Avik burst in, a whirlwind of energy and laughter. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was the antithesis of Vaibhav's quiet, introspective nature.

"Bhai, you won't believe what happened today!" he exclaimed, his voice booming, punctuated by the clatter of his backpack hitting the floor.

Vaibhav smiled, the familiar warmth blooming in his chest. "You got into another fight with the neighbour's son again?" he teased, knowing Avik's fiery temper.

Avik's eyes lit up. "No, this is even better!" He recounted the story of their cricket match, a nail-biting encounter where he, with a last-minute boundary, had single-handedly won the game for their team. Vaibhav listened, his own heart pounding with vicarious excitement.

As the evening deepened, their conversation flowed seamlessly, encompassing everything

Vaibhav and Avik

from the latest Bollywood release to the impending board exams, punctuated by teasing banter and heartfelt laughter. Vaibhav, the quiet observer, found solace in Avik's boisterous energy, while Avik, the gregarious one, felt understood by Vaibhav's silent companionship.

Their friendship had begun in the dusty playground behind their school, their shared love for cricket forging a bond that transcended their contrasting personalities. Over the years, their bond had grown stronger, weathering the storms of teenage angst and the anxieties of impending adulthood.

One day, Avik, ever the impulsive one, announced that he had secured a scholarship to study abroad. Vaibhav, his heart sinking, realised that their friendship was about to face its biggest challenge yet.

"It's just for a year," Avik said, sensing Vaibhav's apprehension, "and you know I'll be back. We'll still be best friends, right?"

Vaibhav nodded, forcing a smile. It wasn't the same. He knew that a year apart, in a world of time zones and cultural differences, would change things.

The months that followed were filled with a bittersweet mix of anticipation and longing. Vaibhav, now alone in his familiar world, found himself missing Avik's infectious laughter and his unwavering support. He missed their late-night talks, the shared dreams and

ambitions.

Avik's letters arrived like bursts of sunlight, filled with tales of a new world, yet each one echoing with the unspoken ache of their separation.

The year flew by, a whirlwind of adjustment and growth. Both Vaibhav and Avik had changed, matured, their individual experiences shaping their perspective.

When Avik finally returned, their reunion was a joyous explosion of familiar comfort. They picked up where they left off, their bond stronger for the distance they had endured. They realised that the years apart had only deepened their understanding, their respect for each other's individual journeys.

Their friendship, forged in the dusty playground, had become a testament to the enduring power of human connection. It had withstood the test of distance and time, emerging stronger, more resilient, and forever bound by the shared memories of their journey together.