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# Contents

1 .

5



# Chapter 1

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It was the first day after summer vacation, and May still clung to the air like a heavy blanket. The fans on the classroom ceiling dragged themselves in slow circles, pushing warm air from one corner to another. Shirts stuck to backs, ties tightened for morning assembly still refused to loosen their grip on sweaty necks.

Seventh graders filled the room with chatter. A month apart felt like a year at their age. Everyone had stories to tell and voices seemed to rise from every bench—except the last one, where Shiva sat with his usual companions, Vijay and Rajveer. The three of them—self-declared Tridev—leaned close, talking as if the rest of the class didn’t exist.

“So, where did you go this time?” Shiva asked, pulling at his tie until the knot finally gave up.

Vijay grinned. “To my mama’s place. He has a big fishpond now. I even went with him for a fish catch. They use those huge nets, you know? One pull and you get hundreds. He’s doing well—government job, side business... everything.”

Rajveer nodded. “Fisheries is good money. My uncle also has ponds. People earn a lot.”

Vijay puffed up a little. “And my elder uncle might become village head this time. He even lets villagers fish for free sometimes. Gains goodwill that way.”

Shiva listened, nodding, though something tight curled in his chest. He had nothing grand like this to share—no ponds, no wealthy relatives, no election-bound uncles. That small pinch of insignificance, the kind he never admitted to anyone, settled quietly inside him. So he reached for the one thing he did have—knowledge.

“I read that the economy’s improving,” he said. “Lot of privatization now. The government is pushing business growth.”

Vijay snapped his fingers. “Oh! I also read about INS Vikramaditya. India got it from Russia. It’s massive! Like a whole city floating.”

“What does it do?” Rajveer asked.

“It carries fighter jets,” Vijay said dramatically. “Just imagine—planes taking off from the sea!”

Before anyone could reply, the classroom door swung open. Like a wave, every student scrambled back to their seats. Books snapped shut, whispers died mid-sentence.

“Good morning, Ma’am!” the class chorused.

Ms. Sneha entered with her attendance register tucked under her arm. Her smile was warm—the kind that made even the boring subjects feel interesting. Shiva liked her

classes. She explained Social Science like it was some story unfolding around them, not just printed text to memorize.

She began calling out names. One by one, students stood and answered. “Present, Ma’am.” “Present, Ma’am.” The rhythm was familiar, almost comforting, even with fifty-plus students in the room.

Shiva wasn’t paying much attention—until a soft voice interrupted the routine.

“My name is Gauri Mishra. I studied previously in the city.”

Shiva’s head lifted before he even realized it. She stood in the second row, first bench, her chin slightly raised as if she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to be here. Pink frameless spectacles rested neatly on her nose. Two ponytails fell over her shoulders, tied tight and perfectly even. Something about her speech—clear, calm, practiced—made the whole room seem quieter to Shiva. The heat, the fans, even Vijay’s previous excitement... everything faded a little.

He kept watching. Not staring, exactly—just drawn in, as if she were a new word in a book he wanted to understand.

The rest of the class buzzed on, but Shiva barely heard any of it. The period ended quicker than he wanted. When the bell rang, he almost jolted upright.

“I’ll be back,” he muttered to his friends and immediately walked toward the front benches.

He didn’t dare speak to Gauri. Even looking at her too long felt like breaking some rule. Instead, he stopped beside Divya, who sat next to her.

“Hi, Divya. How are you?”

Divya raised an eyebrow. “So you remembered I exist?”

Shiva laughed awkwardly. “Hey—those two kept talking. I meant to come earlier.”

Her teasing softened into a smile. She clearly understood why he had suddenly found the front benches so interesting.

On the second bench, Mohit sat hunched over his notebook. Shiva tapped the desk. “Mohit, can you move a bit? I need to sit here.”

Mohit brightened instantly. “Sure!”

Shiva sat down behind Gauri. Not close enough to draw attention—just close enough to see the tiny strands of hair escaping her ponytail, the slight tilt of her head when she read something, the city-girl confidence in the way she straightened her posture.

For the first time that day, the heat didn’t bother him anymore.