**Chapter 1**

'Where did the milk go?’ I said, empty Amul carton in one hand and fridge door in the other.

'Back in the cow,’ Saurabh said. He sat on the sofa, tying the laces of his new, sparkling white sports sneakers. His fiancee Prerna had given them to him four months ago. Of course, Saurabh is more likely to enter a ladies’ toilet by mistake than a gym.

'It’s not a joke, Saurabh. It was a full carton. Now I can’t even make a cup of tea.’

'I had biscuits in the afternoon,’ Saurabh said, attention still on his shoelaces.

'And?’

'I don’t like my biscuits dry.’

'You dipped them in a litre of milk?’ 'I used what was there.’

I shut the fridge in disgust, threw the empty carton in the dustbin and sat on one of the dining table chairs, staring at him.

'I’ll get another packet later. And as we discussed, let’s avoid talking. Message me if there's something important,’ Saurabh said.

Like a twelve-year-old, Saurabh had stopped talking to me. Even though we lived together, we communicated mostly through messages.

I WhatsApped Saurabh even though he sat seven feet away from me.

'I want milk now. To make tea.’

Saurabh looked up from his shoes to check his phone screen. He saw my message but ignored it. He pulled up his socks, stood up, picked up his wallet from the dining table and put it in his kurta pocket. The olive green Fabindia kurta made him look like a baby elephant, especially with his thick black woollen sweater over it.

I typed another message on my phone. 'Please respond.’

He typed a response.

Tn a rush. Will sort this out later.'

He opened the Uber app on the phone.

'Damn, no cabs. Uber or Ola' he said out loud, after swiping away on his phone for five minutes.

'What happened?' I said, looking up from the dining table.

'I didn’t speak to you' he said.

'Nobody else in this room. Did you speak to the wall?’ 'Let me be' Saurabh said, fumbling with his phone again.

'Do you want me to book a cab for you?’ I said. 'No. And please don’t talk to me.’

'Saurabh, time you stopped sulking.’

He ignored me and kept staring at the phone screen. 'I can book—’ I said, but he interrupted me.

'Keshav, we have two months before the lease ends here.

Until then, can you please stay out of my way?’ 'I said sorry enough times.’

Saurabh shook his head, eyes still on the phone. 'I will take an auto. Damn it, I will freeze in this cold'

Saurabh mumbled to himself and stormed out of the house.

I continued to sit in my house, staring into space, aware of the silence left behind by Saurabh.

Hi, I am Keshav Rajpurohit and I'm not a particularly nice guy. Not emotional either. I don’t believe in love. I use Tinder to meet girls for the sole reason of having sex with them. Oh, and I am quite good at it. I slept with ten girls last year.

As you just witnessed, even my flatmate doesn’t want to talk to me. Saurabh and I used to be best friends. Now he hates my guts and is waiting for our flat’s lease to end. It is harder to break up with a best friend than with a girlfriend.

Why did it become this way? Well, I’m a dick. I don’t blame him for wanting to move out.

Saurabh and I both work at CyberSafe, a cybersecurity company. Working together complicates things further when you’ve had a fight. Anyway, like any other corporate job,

CyberSafe sucks. My real passion is the little detective agency Saurabh and I own as a side gig, Z Detectives. We started it after we solved a murder case last year.

Z Detectives is located in the Malviya Nagar market, next to kirana shops. We don’t get exciting cases. We aren’t James Bond. RAW and IB don’t approach us for help with international terrorists. We don’t even get any hardcore criminal cases. Most of our inquiries are from aunties in the area, suspecting their maids of stealing their gold necklace or their husbands of having an affair. Apart from the occasional robbery, where someone’s laptop or cell phone is stolen, Z Detectives is a tame affair. Hell, the one thing I want is for us to get a real juicy murder case. Turns out Delhi isn’t quite the crime capital it is made out to be.

My phone pinged. Message from an unknown number. 'Need urgent help on a case?

'Who’s this? What is this about?' I replied.

'Myself Pramod Gupta. I suspect my driver has not been filling petrol for the money he takes from me?

I threw my phone down in disgust. I would deal with this nonsense later. I thought about Saurabh. Why was this fatso so oversensitive? Prerna had made him that way. But no, nobody can say a word against his fat bride-to-be. Yeah, I called her fat. Fat just like Saurabh. Am I body-shaming? I told you, I'm not so likeable. Anyway, what’s wrong in calling a fat person fat? And why the hell do I still care so much about fatso? And why can’t I make a decent cup of tea? And can someone please kill someone in this city? I really need a good case.

Okay, so let me tell you what happened between us. Of course, this is my take.

Six months ago, Saurabh went into an overdrive to get married. Now, I have nothing against arranged marriages. It was I who took Saurabh’s profile picture from his thinnest angle, or his least fat angle, for the matrimonial websites. I wrote his bio as well.

7am Saurabh. I am a well-placed IITian with an easygoing, fun-loving personality. I work in a multinational software company and live in south Delhi. I like food and lots of food and even more food. I also enjoy alcohol and my idea of a good weekend is sleeping for two days straight!

Of course, Saurabh had kicked my butt and deleted the last two lines. He replaced it with 'decent family from Nagpur, no dowry, prefer a well-educated and ambitious career woman’.

I ran my hand over the dining table. Saurabh had first video-called Prerna from here. After several failed attempts, Saurabh had finally met someone he felt excited about. He had planned to give her a quick two-minute call but they ended up speaking for two hours.

'I’m so sorry I delayed lunch. This went on longer than expected' Saurabh had said when he finally ended the call.

'She’s the one' I said. 'Really? How do you know?’

'You gave up food for her. For two hours. If that’s not true love, what is?’

Turns out I was right. Saurabh fell head over heels for Prerna Malhotra, the only daughter of Ramesh and Neelam Malhotra. She lived in a Punjabi joint family in New Friends Colony. She was what Saurabh wanted: ambitious and career-minded. She had her own internet startup, and it was doing really well.

'It’s called Eato. Curated food delivery' Saurabh told me. 'Like a hand-picked Zomato. They test the dishes and tell you the tastiest ones to order.’

'I can see why you like her' I said. It had to be about food. 'Yeah, told you I like career women' Saurabh

said.

'Of course' I said.

Over the next few months, Saurabh and Prerna dated, if you can call it that in an arranged marriage situation. Maybe arranged dating or arranged courtship, if there is such a

term. Soon the two were more in love than any love- marriage couple I knew.

It’s like meeting Prerna rewired Saurabh’s entire DNA. One night I heard him talk in a singsong voice mothers use for six-month-old infants.

'Ole my Prernu bebu. You became tai-ll-ed. Why you wol-k so hard my sona bebu' he said.

I almost puked. You also had to see the transformation in the way he dressed. Gone were the T-shirt and pyjamas, Saurabh’s official costume. In came fullsleeved, collared shirts. He even wore Calvin Klein nightsuits to bed.

The entire room smelled of aftershave as we sat down for dinner one evening.

'Is that cologne?’ I said. 'Yes' Saurabh said.

'Were they distributing it for free?’ 'It’s always nice to smell good.’

'And you realised it just now? After twenty-eight years of living your life cologne-free?’

'Prema suggested it' Saurabh said in a voice as soft as the phulka in his hand.

This domestication didn’t bother me. I felt happy for my friend. Prema was not just his bride-to-be. She was his only crush, love, girlfriend and, in fact, his only female acquaintance.

Okay, let me come to the point, however shallow it might be. Prerna is actually a nice person—affectionate, smart and loving. But... she is—how do I put it? —big, large, overweight. I won’t beat around the bush —I’ve already said it before, haven’t I? She is fat. Yes, I called a perfect girl in a perfect relationship with my best friend fat. So judge me. But then, let me judge people’s weight too.

Food connected them. Almost all their dates were at popular eateries. Even their terms of endearment for each other were related to food.

'You are my laddoo,’ she would message him.

'My jalebi' Saurabh would answer.

'I find you as sweet as rasgulla syrup.’

'I love you my little gujia,’ Saurabh would reply.

Seriously, they were as into each other as they were into food. Soon they ran out of sweets to describe each other. When you are down to gujia, you know you have exhausted the mithai list. I shuddered to think what their future kitchen would look like. It would be a mithai bunker large enough to sustain humans forced to hide underground in the event of a nuclear holocaust.

Of course, every now and then one of them would see a post on Instagram about fitness and they would make plans to exercise.

'My little boondi, we are going to get fit together, no?’ Saurabh told her on a call. Firstly, if you are planning a fitness routine, stop referring to each other as desserts. So they made plans to get fit post-marriage. Right now, they decided, they would have fun as 'this time wasn’t going to come back’. Well, this time may not come back, a heart attack might.

I must add, I might be the fitter one, but she has the fitter career. She, along with her business partner, had managed three rounds of funding for Eato. A private equity firm had just invested thirteen million dollars, or ninety crore rupees, into her company for a thirty-five per cent stake.

'You’re so lucky for me, my kaju katli,’ Prema had told Saurabh after the funding round closed. 'This is huge forme.’ Honestly, I didn’t resent her for this. I was happy for Saurabh. Fat and rich is good with me, and so long as she

keeps my best friend happy, I’m happy.

Well, Saurabh was insanely happy. The only problem—he just wasn’t my best friend anymore. Something changed. He never had time in the evening. I understood that, newly in love and all. However, he started neglecting work at CyberSafe.

'I’m going to Amritsar for a few days. Can you make the pitch presentation Jacob’s asked for?’ Saurabh said.

'Why are you going to Amritsar?’

'Prema really wants me to try the Amritsari kulchas there.’

'What?’

'It’s her hometown. Her father has his factory there too.’ 'The project deadline is next Friday.’

'Handle it, no,’ Saurabh said and mock-punched me in the chest.

'Only this time,’ I said.

Except it wasn’t only that one time. Saurabh was ready to drop everything for her. He was so in love that he was once debugging the Eato app for Prerna for like two weeks. It was around the time we had to finish a crucial piece of code for a CyberSafe client. I couldn’t complete it on time alone. Our client at CyberSafe complained to Jacob, who then vented on me.

'Sorry, bhai, I didn’t realise the Eato debugging would take so long,’ Saurabh said.

'Jacob gave me a warning,’ I said.

'Wait, Prerna’s calling me. I’ll talk to you later,’ Saurabh said and disconnected my call.

I put up with everything. I even went to meet Prema’s entire family—her parents, brother, maasi, chacha and daadi. All of them stay in the same three-storey house. I helped plan the engagement, picked out Saurabh’s clothes and danced more than any other guest at the party. Of course, he forgets all that. All he remembers is the one time I lashed out. I’d had a bad day. Fine, I could have chosen my words better.

But now the dude doesn’t want to talk to me. He wants to move out of the house, change departments within CyberSafe and close Z Detectives. And I am the bad guy? Seriously?