

100 Reasons Why

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“To those who think they don’t belong. ”

Ps: you do, just not where you’re trying to.

Book playlist



Tarini

“9, 491 hours. That’s how long you were mine.

288 of those hours were the only time I got to love you without hiding, even though my world began and ended with you.

70, 128 hours. That’s how long I spent knowing our story wasn’t over. Hoping you’d come back. Hoping we’d pick up where we left off.

Four hours. That’s how long it took to pack up and let you go.

And infinite? That’s the amount of time I know I’ll wait, because infinite, again, is the number of chapters still unwritten between us.”

Cringe.

God, how heartbreak-stricken was I when my almost-sixteen-year-old boyfriend dumped me? (Spoiler: very.)

I was in my room that evening, flipping open a small metal box I hadn’t touched in years. Inside were folded journal entries, train tickets, half-dried flowers, and this, my very first poem about him. Buried beneath it all was the photo album.

The first picture: two-month-old me in a pastel onesie, curled in my mother’s arms. She looked so young. So tired. So radiant.

No sign of a father in the frame.

I don’t have a father.

Okay wait. That sounds way too dramatic.

He’s not dead. He’s not missing. He just wasn’t... there. Not at first.

When I was born, the family I came from knew they couldn't keep me. So, they left me in a Catholic orphanage the same day I opened my eyes.

That's where my mother found me.

She was twenty five, newly disillusioned by the idea of marriage (thanks to my ever quarrelling Nana and Nani) and completely babycrazy. So she made a choice that would change both our lives, she adopted a fragile, unnamed infant with chubby cheeks and loud lungs: me.

That day, I became hers.

Tarini Veronica Bose.

Veronica. My middle name. My older sister.

Yes, you read that right. Plot twist.

Before adopting me, Mumma had planned to bring home another little girl from the same orphanage, a two-year-old named Veronica. But just days before the adoption was finalized, the sisters noticed something wrong. Blood cancer.

Veronica was diagnosed with leukemia at two. Mumma fought, every court, every possible way, trying to get legal custody so she could get Veronica the best treatment. But no court was willing to place a sick child with a single, unmarried woman.

So my mother did the next best thing: she stayed.

She visited the orphanage nearly every day. Sat with Veronica for hours. Prayed with her. Fed her. Laughed with her. Cried when she was too weak to talk.

Veronica means "*she who brings victory.* "

And from everything I've been told, she lived up to it. She fought hard. She smiled through the worst. She was only four when she was called back to Mother Mary.

And just a few days later, I was placed, legally into my mother's arms.

That's how I got my name.

That's how I got my mother.

And maybe, that's how I got my first guardian angel too.

Sometimes, I think Mumma still sees her in me.
Sometimes, I wonder if Didi ever really left us.
And sometimes I just wish I could have met her.

Because that little girl made my mother a warrior.
As for me? The “Veronica” in my name feels less like victory and more like irony. Because honestly? I’m more of a worrier than a warrior.

When I turned two, Mumma rewrote her story again. This time, she opened her heart to a man named Hriday Banerjee, the first love of my life. He worked with Mumma, but somehow started showing up almost every day. Sometimes with books, sometimes with ladoos, always with that gentle smile.

And one thing led to another, they got married. Suddenly, we were a family. But not even for a second did Hriday Uncle make me feel like an outsider. He felt like home.

So no, I didn’t have a father at first. But eventually, I did.

A sudden noise pulled me back to the present i heard footsteps. I shoved the photographs into the tin box, slid it under the bed, and sat up just as the door opened.

Esha walked in, the kind of girl who could light up a room just by stepping into it. She dropped a huge bag on the floor.

“What? Moving here permanently?” I teased, tugging it off her shoulder.

“No,” she grinned, collapsing onto my bed. “Pack these with you.”

I unzipped the bag. On top was a bright orange album with *BFF* written in glittery blue. The one we made back in seventh grade in Bangalore, a scrapbook of inside jokes, confessions, and our pact: we’d only open it when one of us was leaving. And here I was the one leaving.

Beneath it lay a book of Emily Dickinson’s poetry and a small brown envelope. Inside was a crocheted bookmark, a sunflower stitched at the top, the letter *T* in the middle. The envelope read: *for the writer in you*.

I groaned. “Esha...”

I had sworn off writing. My manuscripts had been rejected one after another until I gave up on the dream of becoming a bestselling author. If there’s anything I wanted more than life itself, it was recognition. And it wasn’t

coming. I feel like abhimanyu from meri pyari bindu. (the publishers beings bindu)

Esha sat cross-legged on the floor, holding my hands. "Tarini, writing makes you happy. You can't just quit. You've already authored four books. Do you think I'll stop bragging about you now?"

That's Esha. My loudest cheerleader since we were sixteen. While I faded into the background, she was everything I wasn't, beautiful, brilliant, graceful, magnetic. I was awkward, forgettable, always trying too hard. Broken, until the day I discovered words. Writing was the one place I felt whole. And yet, one publisher's rejection had undone me.

Because everything I write is steeped in truth.

The raw kind. The ugly kind. The kind that stings.

And apparently, nobody wants the truth. They want sugarcoated forever-love. They want happily-ever-afters. They want sunshine. But real love? Real love is messy. Real love is just a story. Sometimes it's just a chapter. And sometimes it ends. (it always ends, I just am optimistic)

A love story is two people falling for each other.

A fairy tale is two people choosing to stay.

Over and over and over again. Even when it hurts. Even when it's hard.

Even when the world gives them every excuse to give up.

That's the story I want to write.

And maybe, the one I still want to live.

"Fine," Esha said finally, getting up. "I'll come tomorrow for the final packing. I've got to fill out my admission forms. Can you believe it? Me, in fashion school!"

I smiled, half-heartedly. She was living her dream. And me? I was supposed to be excited about IILE. People said it was a big deal to get into the Indian institution of literature and english, but deep down I wasn't sure I belonged. Maybe luck had struck. Maybe I'd fooled the system.

When I stepped out of my room, Mumma was sprawled on the couch, watching her favorite movie for the 28th time, shouting lazy advice between lines. Other moms fussed over suitcases and home-cooked snacks. Mine? She was my best friend.

Though, in her heart of hearts, she still believed the boy I dated at fifteen was the love of my life.

Sure, Mom.

I flopped beside her, staring at the crocheted bookmark still in my hand.

Anirudh

College starts tomorrow. Finally.

Who would have thought I'd be studying English? Back in school, I was the math guy, good with numbers, plans, and practical things. But poetry changed my life. Or maybe, she did. The girl with passion boiling in her blood.

I'm flying to Delhi tomorrow. My mother, in peak traditional fashion, has packed bottles of aachaar as if I'm migrating to another continent. And Didi flew in from Bombay just to say goodbye. It was terrifying to leave, not because I feared never finding home again, but because I didn't want to.

Bangalore was home, Ma, Ishita, and the city that raised me.

Our fathers had studied in the same college, and somewhere along the way, Ishita became my best friend. She just... gets me, you know? Before I left, she dragged me out for shopping. I knew her agenda, she wanted me to have a "glow-up," finally move on, and maybe even get a girlfriend. She doesn't get the difference between bollywood cinema and reality. It's funny. Almost five years since that ridiculous breakup at fifteen, and I'm still *single*. Who would've guessed? Anirudh Sisodia, perpetually unattached.

*I'm living your dream,
I wish I could tell you.
I'm living your dream
Your dream of flying,
Your dream of winning,
Your dream of standing tall, winning.*

*But maybe, I'm just walking your path.
Maybe, I'm doing this for you.
Maybe, I'm chasing a dream that isn't mine,
Because mine slipped away before I could call it my own.*

*My dream was never success.
My dream was a six-letter name I never got to hold.
My dream was a person.
My dream was a girl.
My dream was you.*

There's this thing, okay? Every time I feel sad or overwhelmed and can't figure out why, I start writing. And somehow, I always end up writing about her. Maybe it's because she was the reason I started in the first place. Every page I've ever written, she's been there.

Back when we were just friends, I'd always find her with a pen in hand and a diary filled with scribbled. She was always writing. Pouring herself into words. I used to laugh at her, tease her for writing just to let go of emotions.

When we made the mistake of letting each other go, I tried holding onto our past through photo albums, frozen moments, desperate attempts to preserve what we had. But Ishita always kept me away from her memories. She wanted me to move on. What she didn't realize was that setting those pictures ablaze wouldn't help me forget. If anything, it forced me to carry her with me in a different way.

She had poetry in her heart, and I wanted her heart to be mine. So, I did the only thing that made sense. I picked up a pen.

I wrote once.

I wrote twice.

And then, I couldn't stop. I was like Saba from *ae dil hai mushkil* at one point.

With every line, I felt her presence. It was as if she lived within my words, breathing through every verse. If I ever see her again, the one thing I'd tell her more than anything else is thank you.

Not for teaching me how to write, but for becoming the ink that stains every page. For appearing in my diary every time I tried to express something beyond myself.

Because in the end, she was my poem.

And now, here I am, offered a chance to write for publishers, to see my words in print. But there's a catch. The editor is just like my old school principal: never, ever satisfied. He wants me to write what she once called *a masterpiece*.

But how do I explain to him that poetry is the masterpiece?

That *she* was the masterpiece?

And that I have been writing about her all along?

At seven, I thought my life would be about numbers. I was good at math. But the moment I discovered my potential in poetry, I knew that had to be my future. At first, Ma found it odd that I wanted to be a professional writer, but with Didi's help, I finally convinced her. And now, four years later, here I am, packing my suitcase to step into one of the biggest literature colleges in India. Delhi's Indian Institute of Literature and English, or IILE, as Delhiites call it.

I've always had a paralyzing fear of being alone, but I think I'll be fine.

Tarini

It had been a week since I moved to Delhi. Our hostel rooms were assigned, and I was paired with a girl named Erica. She was barely ever in the room, most of her time was spent partying or with her twin brother, Daniel, in the boys' hostel.

I'll be honest, I spend most of my time rethinking if my decision of moving was correct or not. I got lucky with my roommate. Erica is fun and out there but this is so out of my comfort zone.

Today, Erica invited me for lunch in Daniel's room. His roommate worked part-time at Starbucks. I think, so I had never seen him. Not that it mattered. Handling just the two of them was overwhelming enough for my socially awkward self. Erica and I had bonded over Bollywood and our shared playlists. Daniel, on the other hand, had promised to introduce me to "the real Delhi experience." True to his word, he ordered a feast of the city's famous momos, both steamed and fried. But how would I ever tell these momo-obsessed siblings from Noida that I liked soupy ones? My anxious heart didn't have the courage to request a change in the order, so I quietly ate my plate of steamed dumplings.

Just as I was settling into the meal, a loud Brazilian phonk blasted from Daniel's phone. It was his ringtone. I internally freaked out. *Aise ringtones kon lagata hai?*

"Hi, bro! God, you're so late we just finished the last plate," he laughed into the phone. "We? Oh well, me, E, and her roommate. Come back soon," I assumed he was talking to his roommate. My stomach tightened. A new person? Another conversation to navigate? My anxiety swelled, and as if on

cue, I clumsily knocked over a small bedside table. A diary tumbled to the floor, its pages fanning out.

The cover was a cherry-red leather, worn and faded. A name was engraved on it, but the letters were barely visible. Something about it felt eerily familiar. I picked it up, flipping through the pages. Inside, nestled between the sheets, was a dusty envelope.

I hesitated. Erica and daniel exchanged a glance, then gave me an encouraging nod.

“That’s his,” daniel mentioned. “He’s been writing a book. ” Curiosity sparked in me. I wasn’t one to make friends easily, but something about this mystery pulled me in. I opened the envelope and unfolded the fragile paper inside. The handwriting looked oddly familiar, too familiar.

Like mine.

My breath hitched.

I had written a million poems, but this one, the one on this page, was special. It was my favorite. And no one had ever seen it. Yet here it was, tucked inside a stranger’s diary.

Or not a stranger’s.

The paper was torn, leaving only the last stanza:

*I have to know,
What’s your meeting point spot now?
Your everyday talking time?
Or do you do none of the things we once did?
Do you talk to her about me?
Do you still think about me,
Even for a fleeting moment?
Or do you see me in her
The way I see you in everyone I meet?*

My hands started to shake.

I flipped to the first page, desperate to find a name.

And there it was.

Sisodia. A heart drawn next to it, glitter pen smudged with time.

My chest tightened.

This was **his** diary.

The one I had gifted **Anirudh** on his 15th birthday, urging him to write, to create something of his own.

I could barely get the words out. “daniel... what’s your roommate’s name?”
He frowned at my shaken voice. “Anirudh Sisodia. Why?”

I barely heard the rest.

The moment his name left daniel’s lips, I wanted to pack my bags and disappear. No.

I spent the last couple years running from my past. i ‘d unfollow everyone from school although I am sure a few of my schoolmates knew what I was upto, thanks to PR teams that glorified my books and my instagram page that many found. I’d stalk a few of them when I got a notification of them following me. I knew about almost everyone, but anirudh.

I didn’t want to know about him. I just wanted to leave every table where his name was brought up. I didn’t hate him, his name- just did something to me.

And then,

“Guess who got soupy momos from the stall? ME!”

That voice.

Deep, familiar, and entirely too goofy.

I knew it. all too well.

Panic surged through me. I covered my face with my hands and ran. Out of daniel’s room. Away from my past. Away from Anirudh. I ran, like always.

I couldn’t tell if it was the shock of seeing him all over again or if it was my body’s way of protecting itself.

Good lord I can’t believe my body now has to stay away from him to feel safe

Anirudh

Was it her?

Could it really be **Tarini Bose**? My Tarini Bose?

Okay, maybe that was a little dramatic. But still, was it her?

"What a crazy roommate," Daniel muttered, watching his sister devour a plate of dry momos while I grabbed my soupy ones on the way home.

Holy. Shit.

Remember the time Tarini and I ate these together?

I turned to Erica and Daniel, waiting for some kind of explanation, because who was that girl? The one who looked like a grown-up version of Tarini, whose face I knew better than the back of my hand and why did she cover her face the second she saw me?

"Hey, Ani," Erica said casually, like she wasn't about to turn my entire world upside down.

"That's Bose. Tarini Bose. My roomie. No clue why she ran off like that bet she's embarrassed as hell. I'll give her a missed call, hold on. "

she left, leaving me, Daniel, and my soupy momos in the room. I could hear her talking on the phone outside.

But wait. **Hold up.**

TARINI WAS HERE?

I wanted to **jump, scream, twirl like a ballerina**, do literally anything to release the storm brewing inside me. It had been *years* since I last saw her, yet it never really felt that long, because she never left my mind. Not in a *creepy*

way, but she somehow always made her way into my books. And now, she was the **protagonist** of the one I was writing.

“Tarini has an allergy to the laal chutney, she realised and left, I’ll go check up on her” erica announced as she turned her back to us and left. I froze. *What do you mean, she’s allergic?*

Back in Bangalore, we used to sit at the Chinese dhaba near my bungalow, and she *loved* the laal chutney. She used to drown her momos in it, swearing it made everything taste better. And now? *She’s allergic ?*

Tarini, there was something about her.

She wasn’t just another face in the crowd; she was the brightest star in a sky full of darkness, the perfect guitar strum in a soft Bollywood melody, the much-needed zing in a laal chutney.

At first glance, she seemed quiet, just another shy girl in a million. But if you really *saw* her, *really* saw her, you’d know she was so much more. She wasn’t a math whiz or a science geek, but her mind was razor-sharp, like a cheetah’s ears picking up the faintest sound. And her heart? Soft as lily petals yet as unshakable as the tree they bloomed from.

Tarini was the kind of girl who dipped her toes into everything debate, basketball, dance, music. Never the first choice, but never left out either. She wasn’t the star player or the lead dancer, but the fire in her eyes every time she tried? That alone could light up the whole room. Heck, she was the silent fuel behind our boys’ basketball team, something I doubt she even realized.

If you asked me about Tarini, I wouldn’t give you the same answer as anyone else. She wasn’t someone you could define with a single word. To me, she was a fun-loving enigma, a girl who knew every Bollywood song by heart the way people know their own names. She wasn’t the best dancer in the room, but the way her face lit up when a song played? *That* made her stand out.

Her heart was too pure. Almost terrifyingly so. No space for hate, no grudges, just kindness. And while that might seem risky in a world like ours, somehow, no one ever dared to break her trust. She had *earned* respect, not by being loud or flashy, not by befriending the popular seniors or racking up Instagram followers, but by staying true to what she loved. Poetry and storytelling were her devotion, her art. While others blasted loud phonk music, she hummed old Hindi classics, how a pure Bong girl knew so much about retro Bollywood was beyond me. But if cinema, music, and poetry could be in someone’s blood, they were in hers.

God, I could write a book about her.

I could never hate her. You could tell me she stabbed me, and I'd be glad she came over. She could burn down my house, and I would be glad that even for a millisecond, we were under the same roof, breathing the same air.

Despite everything between us our not-so-great history, I have nothing but respect for Tarini. Because *some* people demand admiration without asking for it. And she?

She was like the last antra of bade ache lagte hai.

Suddenly Daniel turned to me and snapped his fingers, waking me out of my thoughts. "You knew her, didn't you?"

I frowned. "Erica? Of course, I know her. "

"Not Erica, you idiot. Tarini. "

I sighed. "Yeah, I knew her. "

"And?" daniel smirked, clearly fishing for details.

"And what? We went to the same school, same friend group. "

"Something definitely happened between you two. Either you hated each other, or... woof. "

I rolled my eyes. "Mind your own business, Dan. "

But I knew he wouldn't drop it. "Fine. We dated. Kind of. It was casual, just two kids with tiny crushes, meeting up in parks on Sundays. "

"Mhm. " daniel raised an eyebrow. "That's it?"

I cleared my throat. "That's it. "

Tarini

I let out a sharp cry in my room, unsure why. Maybe it was his name, Anirudh Sisodia. Maybe it was the way it still crashed into me like a cyclone, unsettling everything in its wake.

Why was he in a college of literature? And why did hearing about it make me feel like I was drowning in unanswered questions?

Anirudh and I weren't just high school sweethearts, we were best friends before anything else. But life had a way of pulling us apart. After we broke up, we spent a year in silence, a cold, hollow absence neither of us dared to break. Then, somehow, we found our way back to friendship. It was fragile, tentative, but it was something. And then, life happened. I moved out of Bangalore. Our mutual friends kept us loosely connected, but staying in touch was never easy. And everytime we spoke it felt as if all the healing I went through, crushed. Eventually, he got busy. I got busy. The last time we spoke was on his 18th birthday. I still remember his voice that night, filled with quiet excitement as he told me he had taken up writing and how numbers bored him. He wanted to change fields, to do something different.

Even though I visited Bangalore every year after mummy, pa and I left, I never wanted to meet him. Not because I hated him, but because I was scared I didn't.

I was eight when I first heard the word "crush," and I instantly knew whatever I felt for that curly-haired boy in my class was more than just friendship. At twelve, we ended up in the same friend group, getting to know each other in ways I hadn't expected. And at fourteen, I finally told him, I liked him. It was cute, we were kids.

What followed was nothing short of beautiful. The way he held my hand under the school bench, the way he scolded me for not finishing my food, the way he always asked my best friend about me whenever I fell sick, it was the kind of love that felt easy, effortless, immature. But love, I learned, never stays that way for long.

A year in, everything changed. The fights became constant, his efforts faded. And then, what once felt like home became unfamiliar, something I couldn't hold onto no matter how hard I tried. The night it all ended, I not only lost the first boy i loved but also a part of myself, which now that i think off, i should've taken back from him.

I was so not ready for a Monday morning, for two reasons.

One, I was already behind on academics because I'd been too caught up with my book.

Two, **Anirudh Sisodia was on campus.**

What were the chances he wouldn't be in my class? Pretty much zero. It had barely been a week since college started, and if there's one thing I knew about college students, it was that the whole class *never* showed up at once, especially not in the first week.

I knew I shouldn't waste my time thinking about some childhood lover who supposedly didn't matter anymore (but the twist? He did).

Today was one of those rare days when I actually put effort into my hair, washed, blow-dried, rollers, the whole deal. There was some campus event where the seniors were announcing the freshers' party, which, logically, should have happened before we joined, but our college had its own weird way of doing things. Not that I was complaining. A week into college, I had at least two solid friends, Erica, my roommate, and her twin Daniel. I kept my outfit **simple yet elegant**, a **lilac sleeveless A-line chikankari kurti** paired with **white flared cotton pants**. A **silver watch**, **delicate chandbalis**. I loved Mondays.

- I was a crazy workaholic.
- My hair was freshly washed and styled to perfection (at least for the next 48 hours).

By 7:45 AM, I was already in class, an **absolute early bird**.

I sat down, opened my iPad, and started working on my novel.

Then, I heard it

the unmistakable sound of boys laughing. I looked up and saw a **group of hoodie-clad guys swagger into the classroom.**

"Look at that nerd sitting right there," one of them snickered. "Must be some boring chick," another added.

I rolled my eyes. **Classic Delhi boys.**

Did I expect anything different? Nope.

Did I care? Also nope.

"It's okay, Tarini," I told myself. Just focus on writing.

Then.

"Am I late?"

A deep voice. I glanced up and saw a **tall guy in a hoodie** standing at the door.

Now *he* looked like someone who actually **belonged in a literature college.** He strolled over to the group, took a seat, and within minutes, I felt **someone tap my shoulder.**

I turned around, and there he was.

Dark brown eyes locked onto mine. Intense. Not the romantic, smoldering hero kind of intense. More like the 'I-could-shove-a-cigarette-in-your-mouth-and-force-you-to-chug-it-down-with-chai' kind.

"Do you have an Apple charger?" he asked.

I blinked. Of all the things he could've said.

"Uh, yeah," I muttered, handing it to him. "These boys, man. They carry ***nothing at all,***" he sighed dramatically. "I somehow forgot to charge my iPad, and I don't even have a book to jot down notes. Anyway, thanks a lot."
"

Our professor walked in and, after the usual introductions, asked everyone their **favorite author and book**. One of the **hipster boys** piped up, "Children's Stories by **Ruskin Bond**. "

The class burst out laughing, but I honestly did not find that funny. You need to be serious sometimes man.

A girl in a **black salwar suit** declared, "Two States by **Chetan Bhagat**. " I smirked. **She had zero interest in books, but a LOT of interest in Bollywood movies.**

I could tell how a person was based on what their favourite book was.

Then,

"**Princess by Jean Sasson**. " I snapped my head up. **Charger Guy** said that.

OH. MY. GOD.

I had **never, NEVER**, heard a guy mention *Princess*. It wasn't just a book. It was a **raw, feminist, eye-opening memoir about Princess Sultana of Arabia**. The kind of book that could **crush a fragile male ego in one chapter**.

Who was this guy?

Then came a voice I **knew all too well**.

"**Kafka on the Shore by Murakami**. "

Anirudh.

Annoying.

Sisodia.

I glanced at him. **Since when did he read Murakami?** My turn.

"**Palace of Illusions – Chitra Banerjee**. "

I felt **Charger Guy's gaze snap to me**.

His expression was a clear "**OMG-I-like-it-too-we-should-totally-decode-it-later**" kind of smile. I returned him a smile.

Half an hour before the next class, I was **back on my iPad**, writing.

Then,

"Hey, do you have a charging point near your seat?" **Charger Boy was back.**

"Yep, I do. "

Does this guy talk about *anything* except charging? "Okay, great. The plug near my seat isn't working, so I was wondering if I could charge my iPad here."

Shoot.

Why does he have to be here again?

I don't **admire distractions**, but I also **don't know how to say no**. "Of course," I said, gesturing to the **empty seat beside me**.

"I heard the room has only two plug points, and the one near mine wasn't working," he said. I flashed an **awkward, tight-lipped smile**. The kind that said, "**I-do-not-care-man-just-do-your-stuff-and-GO**."

I didn't **admire male attention**. And I knew **he was definitely giving me A LOT of it**.

"I'm Samar, by the way. **Samar Sinha from Delhi**."

I blinked. **Who introduces themselves like that?**

"Wow. Do people actually say that? Like, '*Hi, I'm Tarini Bose from Kolkata*'?"

"Hey, hi, I'm Tarini Bose from Kolkata," I said, mimicking his tone.

He smirked. "You don't look Bengali," he said as he settled into the seat beside me.

Oh, here we go. "How **stereotypical** of you, Samar," I said, rolling my eyes. "Just because I don't wear **dark kajal** on my waterline or stuff **roshogollas** in my mouth during recess, I don't *look* Bengali to you?"

He grinned. "**No, not because of your kajal or roshogollas**. But because you let the **poor fish swim in the college aquarium instead of chewing it alive**."

I burst into laughter.

Okay, maybe he wasn't **that bad**.

Anirudh

I was in the **canteen**, lazily poking at my **chole bhature**, my mind far from the plate in front of me.

I wanted to **hang out with Tarini**. Now that I knew she was here too, at least as an **ex-close friend**. Should I just walk up to her? Maybe ask how she's been?

Or... should I just **stalk her Instagram and follow her**? Without thinking twice, I opened Instagram. Typed her name.

Nothing.

Her full name.

Still nothing. No way. Did she just **vanish** from Instagram? **Not possible.**

And then, something **clicked**.

I searched her **surname with her birthdate**.

Bingo.

An account popped up, "**bose02**." I clicked on it, pretending like I wasn't **fully invested** in this deep dive. (Even though I could've just **hit follow** since her account was **public**, but okay whatever.)

Her **profile picture** loaded. And there she was.

Sitting on the **ghat stairs** in front of the **Ganga**, wrapped in a **traditional red-and-white Bengali saree**, red **gulal** smudged across her cheeks. Durga Pujo. Visarjan day, maybe?

DON'T ACT CREEPY, SISODIA.

I mentally shook myself, gulping down a bite of **chole bhature** like it could somehow reset my brain.

15K followers. Her feed was exactly what I expected, **poetry, literature, books.**

And her idol. **Tagore, of course.** (Because let's be real you won't find a Bengali writer who doesn't idolize **Tagore and Gulzar.**)

I hit the **follow** button just as someone **hugged me from behind.**

"Daniel, hi. "

"Sisodia, yo. "

He plopped down across from me. "How's the **chole bhature?**" "Blah," I replied, pushing my plate away.

Daniel smirked. "**So, who were you stalking, lovely? The Bose girly?**"

"It's not called *stalking*," I muttered.

"Oh, so you *were* stalking her. **Creepy Sisodia confirmed.** "

"Shut up, D'Souza," I groaned, standing up to **march back to class.**

Daniel followed, grinning.

"What do you want, Dan?" I asked, throwing my hands in the air.

"**YOU, SISODIA, YOU.** "

"NOOOOOOO," I groaned dramatically.

"Okay, okay, listen. " He finally got serious. "**Me, Erica, Samar, and Tisha are planning to go to the Adya Malhotra concert in South Delhi. You in? It's on Sunday, so you'll have an off.** "

My **first instinct** was a big, fat **NO.**

But somehow... I agreed.

"Is it expensive?" I asked.

"800 bucks for the basic seats. " I raised an eyebrow. "**Wait. Delhi has concerts under 3K? That's a miracle.** "

"Right? I thought the same. "

We half-ran to class, only to find it empty.

Except,

I saw her. And some guy sitting next to her. Tarini looked completely unbothered by his existence, typing away on her iPad while the dude sat there, casually reading a book, legs crossed.

Then, I saw it. His foot accidentally brushed against hers.

She made a face.

And I could read that face like an open book. It screamed:

“Move your dirty feet away, you Delhite. ” I smirked. Still the same Tarini. Before I could overthink it, Daniel grabbed my hand and dragged me over.

“Samar,” he said, nodding toward the guy, “this is Anirudh my roommate. ”

Samar looked up and grinned. “Hi, Anirudh. I’m Samar Sinha. ” He extended his hand for a handshake.

Before I could respond, “Samar Sinha from Delhi,” Tarini murmured, smiling at her iPad, not even looking up. Damn.

”

Tarini

Act calm. Act calm.

You do not give a damn about his existence. I repeated this mantra in my head as I watched Anirudh march straight toward me like some Bollywood hero in slow motion. “So, Samar,” Daniel said casually, “Anirudh wants to join us for the concert. Take the payment from him. ”

“Can I pay in cash?” Anirudh asked.

For a second, I braced myself, fully expecting Samar to scoff, roll his eyes, and say something like, *“Who even pays in cash these days? What an uncle. ”*

But nope. Instead, he flashed the warmest smile and said, “Of course you can, Anirudh. Cash, UPI, card, doesn’t matter at all. In fact, I’m surprised you still carry cash. Hardly anyone does these days. Haina, tarini?”

He turned to me. His voice was smooth. His eyes? Slightly amused. Stay cool, Tarini. Stay. Cool. “Yeah, true,” I said, casually tucking my hair behind my ear, trying way too hard to act unfazed. “I live on UPI. ”

“Waise, Tarini,” Daniel cut in, “you should join us too. It’s on Sunday, off day. ”

I LOVED CONCERTS.

“What? Where?” I asked, pretending like I had no idea what they were talking about, even though Erica had already begged me to come. “Aadya malhotra. On sunday, 7pm to 11pm” daniel said, pulling out his phone to show me the tickets. “I’ll book tickets for you too then. Are you in?” he added.

“Fine,” I said, crossing my arms. If i showed up somewhere that Anirudh was going too, maybe then it would give him an impression about how I absolutely do not care about him at all, and that I have completely moved on from us.

“I’m in.”

Anirudh raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching as if he wanted to smirk.

“It’s an Adya Malhotra concert, babe, keep it caz,” Erica said, running a straightener through her hair, still wrapped in her bathrobe.

“Come on, Erica,” I giggled, “you know I wouldn’t dress like a raccoon.”

I already knew what to wear. I decided to step out of my comfort zone tonight.

A black tank top, short black skirt, and a black denim jacket for an extra touch of edge. Definitely not my usual style, but growth, right? I paired it with silver hoops, beachy waves, a black Adidas crossbody, and sleek black loafers.

“How do I look?” I asked Erica. I looked at her and my jaw fell to the floor.

She looked stunning.

A cherry-red corset top, black leather pants, killer black boots, straight hair, smoky eyes, and a bold red lip. She looked like she was about to walk the MET Gala while I looked like her moody indie band backup singer.

Just then, Tisha walked in.

And let me tell you, she was an angel sent by Jesus himself.

She and Erica had met on day one... in the washroom.

Tisha had walked in to find Erica in a full-blown anxiety attack, and instead of awkwardly leaving, she helped her calm down.

That was all it took. Instant soul sisters. Erica was practically the only person i was the most comfortable to in campus, so it was my agenda to befriend everyone who she was friends with.

“Hi, Tisha!” Erica said, pulling her into a hug.

“Where are the boys?” she asked.

“Oh, I called Daniel. He and Anirudh are ready, but Samar just got back from his aunt’s place, so he’ll take another 15 minutes,” Erica replied.

And then, as if like a truck, reality hit me. Six days.

That’s how long I’d known Anirudh was on the same campus. Six days of successfully ignoring him.

I had seen him follow me on Instagram. *Did I follow back?* Nope.

The beauty of a public account is that I don’t have to follow people back without looking rude.

But today, well I knew I had to talk to him.

I couldn’t act like a child forever.

Twenty minutes later, we all stood near the hostel grounds.

Thankfully, our hostel wasn’t government-owned.

No warden hovering over us.

No stupid curfews.

Basically, a lawless paradise in the world of college hostels.

“Alright, Samar has a car, and I have a car,” Daniel announced. “Three go with him, three with me. ”

“I’ll go with Samar,” Tisha said, trying to act cool.

“I’ll go with you, Anirudh,” someone else added.

Then Erica turned to me. “Tarini, you go with Samar. I’ll go with Dan. ”

I knew why she said that.

She knew I wasn’t super comfortable with random people, and since I knew Tisha, it would’ve made sense.

But here’s the thing.

I couldn’t tolerate Samar’s attention.

Not that he was flirty or creepy,, he was nice. Too nice. It made me uncomfortable. He was the type to glue his attention to one person and not care about everyone else around. “Actually, I’ll go with Daniel,” I said.

“Oh, okay, cool,” Erica shrugged.

I exhaled.

“Can I sit in the passenger seat?” I asked Daniel. “I have motion sickness. ”
“Ask Ani,” he said, smirking. “He’s driving. Had a little beer an hour ago. ”

Oh.

“Can I?” I asked Anirudh, suddenly very aware of my own heartbeat.

He glanced at me

“Of course, tarini” he replied.

I stiffened.

It’s been so long since i heard my name in his voice. I liked the way he called me by my name everytime we talked. And I hated the way my name still sounds the best in his voice.

I had to keep my guards up, Anirudh Sisodia had the powers to pull them down. But this time, I wouldn't let him.

Anirudh

It was my first concert in Delhi.

But that wasn't what excited me.

What excited me was the fact that I finally had friends, and I was finally living the college life I had dreamt of ever since I was ten and first watched *Student of the Year*. Though, if I'm being honest, the car ride felt... weird.

Sitting beside Tarini after all these years should have been normal. But we hadn't spoken. Not once. Even though we had known of each other's presence for at least a week.

So, I decided to break the silence.

"So, how's Auntie?" I asked, fully aware she loved that question. This girl adored her mother.

"Oh, she's fine," she replied, perking up. "She's flying to Texas tonight. How's everyone at home?"

"Excited," I scoffed.

"Excited?"

"Yeah, they've been restless ever since I landed in Delhi. They can't wait to come meet me. "

"That's cute," she said, forcing a smile. From the rearview mirror, Dan smirked. "Why are you two soooo awkward??" he asked in a sing-song tone.

"Shut up, Dan. " Tarini rolled her eyes but smiled.

Then came a question I hadn't expected. "So, Sisodia, how's Ishita?"

I paused.

Old Tarini would *never* have asked that. She *hated* Ishita. Found her clingy. Annoying. And, honestly, I'm pretty sure the entire school still believes I cheated on Tarini with her.

But no one really knew the truth.

No one knew how dependent Ishita became on me after her father left. No one knew how, within months, her mother left her all alone. No one knew that, at sixteen, I was the only person she had left.

Maybe if Tarini knew all of this, she would have understood. Maybe she would've even tried to befriend Ishita back instead of resenting her. Maybe I should have told her back then. And maybe, she didn't hate Ishita, maybe she knew it all.

I kept my answer short.

"She's good," I said. Tarini raised an eyebrow. "*She's studying in Bangalore only, plans to stay there.*"

"Oh? *I thought she lived with her nani in Mangalore. Didn't she leave Bangalore on her sixteenth birthday?*" tarini said, facing towards me. I'd be lying if I said i felt no tension.

I exhaled. "*That was the plan. But her mom... wasn't in the right mindset. She needed someone else to look after Ishita. But Ishita wasn't ready to leave Bangalore, not with everything she was going through. So, she stayed. She'd spend most days in our home, with me, mumma and didi. But her nani moved to bangalore a few months later but she preferred staying with us. Her mother sent in money every month for school and stuff but didn't visit for over a year.*"

Dan choked on air. "*Wait, Ishita lived with you?!*"

I nodded. "Yep. "

Dan blinked. "*And your mother was okay with it?*"

Before I could answer, Tarini spoke. "*They've been friends since they were two. Anirudh's dad and Ishita's dad were childhood besties. So practically they knew each other since the BCE*"

Dan let out a low whistle. "*Damn. That's next-level history.*"

Tarini didn't say anything after that. But for the first time in years, I could see the gears turning in her mind. Like she was piecing together a puzzle she never had all the pieces to.

And maybe, she finally understood.

“WHAT CRAZY VIBE!” a stranger behind us screamed, their voice half-drowned in the roar of the crowd. Her style was odd. A puzzle. Her lyrics bled poetry, soft, aching but she wrapped them in the chaos of rock music. She didn't try to fit in. That's why she stood out.

I stood next to Dan, half swaying, half trying to locate Erica. She was probably near the front, typical. Erica never knew how to stay still when guitars screamed. For her to be anywhere but right under the speakers felt... unnatural.

Somewhere to the left, Samar and Tisha were vibing way *too* well. Elbows brushing, shared grins, they thought they were being subtle. They weren't. I smirked. Something was definitely cooking.

And then there was **Tarini**. Standing alone. Laughing at the chaos, maybe even enjoying it, but alone.

That felt off. Tarini Bose, the girl who used to orbit her friends like planets around the sun. Always touching someone's arm, whispering some secret, clutching onto shoulders during laughter. She was never alone. Not back in school.

So what was this? A phase? Or was she just... left out? Maybe she didn't want to be alone. I know how it feels to be alone, how it feels to be lonely in a crowd full of people, and I didn't want anyone to feel that way.

I didn't think too hard. I just walked toward her.

Adya's voice rang out over the frenzy, The crowd erupted. I saw everyone dancing under the blue lights. I saw Tarini under the yellow.

I didn't wait. I ran to her. Grabbed her hand. Rested it on my shoulder. Put mine on her back. We started doing that weird, chaotic breakdance move that had gone viral on Reels last month. She blinked, lips parted like she couldn't decide if she should laugh or pull away.

Was she thrown off because of the steps?

Or because... *we were close again?*

I didn't ask.

But when the chorus came back, Tarini *moved*.

Really moved.

She grinned that wide, unapologetic grin and twirled into the rhythm like it had been waiting for her.

And we danced.

Like idiots.

Like ex-lovers.

Like people trying to forget who they used to be. We danced until sweat dripped down our backs and our voices cracked from singing too loud. By the end, we were two half-broken zombies in the middle of a pulsing crowd.

I pulled her in for a selfie. She didn't pull away.

Instead, she lowered her sparkly sunglasses, and held up a goofy V-sign above my head, fingers tilted just enough to look cartoonish.

It was silly. Loud. Super platonic.

Finally, the concert ended. The lights dimmed. The crowd slowly began to spill out like a wave retreating from shore, dizzy, high on adrenaline, hoarse from screaming.

"Same cars then?" Daniel asked, brushing his damp fringe back, still buzzing from the last song. "Oh yes, sure," Tarini replied, slipping her phone into her sling bag like it had just witnessed too much.

"Wait, where's Erica?" Tisha asked, panic flashing in her eyes.

Right then, we saw her.

Erica.

Walking toward us like the storm she probably *was* inside. Her mascara was smudged at the corners, eyeliner like war paint, and her perfectly styled hair now looked like she'd been in a wind tunnel or a wrestling match. Daniel's face changed instantly.

Protective older brother mode: *activated*.

He was always chill until it came to Erica. I knew what was running through his mind even before he said anything, because it was the same thing running through mine. Erica might be two years older than me, but I'd always been the one looking out for her. And considering how outspoken, okay, overspoken, Erica could be, it wasn't hard to imagine the kind of scene she could've created in a crowd like this.

"ERICA, WHAT THE HELL?" Dan burst out, stepping forward, voice sharp enough to slice through the noise.

She blinked at us. Then grinned.

"Dan, *chill*. I just sweat a *tad bit*, okay? The hair, blame the setting spray. I'm *fine*. Not drunk. Not dead. Just... concerted. "

I exhaled. But Dan gave her a look. I knew what those eyes said. Didi got them all the time from me.

God I wish no one to be an only child. Imagine being all alone even at your home.

sucks.

Tarini

We were in the car when Anirudh passed me his phone to unlock.

I hesitated.

Not because of the passcode, I knew that.

But because the lock screen was a picture of him and Ishita.

But whatever.

I unlocked it anyway.

“Open the gallery,” he said. “See the picture we took inside.”

So I did.

There we were, sweaty, sparkly, flushed from dancing. My fingers forming a V above his head like we were just... friends.

“Does this not remind you of anything?” he asked. “No,” I said.

Lie.

It reminded me *exactly* of that school cultural fest.

We were barely fifteen, pretending to be grown-ups in a sea of glowsticks and flashing lights. The first time he grabbed my wrist to drag me to the front row. The first time we danced without caring. The first time someone looked at me like I was electric.

We’d taken a photo then, too. Almost identical.

“Post it now,” he said, casually “Okay,” I murmured, and hit the post button.

And then, *ding*. A notification.

Not that I was trying to be nosy, but it was right there.

Ishita.

SISODIA. GOT. THE. GIRL. BACK.

I almost laughed. Who even texts like that?

But then another one popped up.

And another.

And another.

Ani, you were supposed to move on, man. Why are you with her?

Wait, are you two, like, besties now?

Ani, I know you're active. TEXT.

Ani, what the hell.

Calling in 5. Amit is at the door.

Each message was like a pin, slowly popping the bubble we were in.

He hadn't turned off notifications. He hadn't hidden anything.

Which meant, what? That he told her I was here?

That she didn't hate me anymore?

That they weren't... dating? Or they were, and I was just a placeholder?

God, my head spun.

But instead of spiraling out loud, I just said,

"Can I play *Wildest Dreams*?"

Daniel was snoring peacefully in the backseat.

Anirudh just nodded, leaned back, and smiled faintly.

And that was one of the hundred reasons I had fallen for him

He loved *Mother Swift*. (Taylor Swift, duh.)

Then, as the beat dropped and the chorus hit, we screamed at the top of our lungs:

**"SAY YOU'LL REMEMBER ME STANDING IN A NICE DRESS,
STARING AT THE SUNSET, BABE."**

For the rest of the ride, the car became our own little concert. Which was weird because all these years my whole personality was the fact that I hated the first boy I loved. but now that he was with me, i couldn't get myself to act like i did. And maybe I never will. Because Anirudh was important. To me.

Classes ended at 5, but Erica and I left college at 3. The fresher's party was tomorrow, and we needed to go shopping. Tisha would join us at 4.

"The boys will join us in 20 minutes. We'll drive to McD for now. I'm starving," Erica said, booking an Uber. The boys? I thought, a little shocked.

"Yeah, Samar, Anirudh, and daniel," she said casually.

Wow. I had a whole group now?

For someone who never really had friends, this felt like a different world to me. No, don't get me wrong. I did have people to chill with; I was part of friend groups. But like an extension. I was liked, but never chosen. I didn't know the inside jokes, in fact, sometimes I didn't even know there *was* a hangout plan.

I was the friend who'd wait for you when you had to stop to tie your shoelaces, but once you were done, you wouldn't notice I'd been standing there waiting. Esha was the popular kid in school; everybody seemed to like her. She was like fluid, she'd take the shape of any container she was poured into. I couldn't. And that caused me a lot of heartbreak and poetry. This might seem funny, but if there's one thing I always craved, it was to be *chosen*, not just *liked*. Because one likes a lot of things, but chooses only one. To feel like you belong is rare, and for almost two decades of my life, I never felt so homely outside home.

Because again, when a fourteen-year-old is made to sit in the back row even when she's the first to arrive, or is made to walk behind the other two, or constantly gets the answer "nothing" when she asks what the conversation was about, it moulds her brain into thinking she isn't good enough to be liked. Her brain's wiring forever sends vibrations through her body that whisper she is incapable of being loved.

I felt like the cool kid for the first time in my life. Is this what every child in my school felt like?

Less than 20 minutes later, Anirudh and daniel walked into McDonald's. Anirudh wore a loose green T-shirt with blue cargos. What the hell? **Since when does he dress so Gen Z?** He used to live in cotton shirts and chill pants.

"Anirudh, why is your fit so out of character?" I asked, sipping on my Coke float as he pulled out a chair and sat next to Erica. "Arey, Ishita. " He sighed.

"She took me shopping in Bangalore and **forced** me to buy clothes like these. I wouldn't choose them myself, but I can't just waste money, right?"

Of course. **An Ishita tale.**

"Where's Samar?" Erica asked.

"He went to pick up Tisha from her nail appointment," daniel said. "Are they a thing now?" I asked.

"Soon," Anirudh smirked.

"Of course not. He's **100%** in love with Tarini," daniel added.

What?

"The hell?" I nearly choked on my drink. "No way. Samar and Tisha are always together. No chance he likes me!" daniel just raised an eyebrow.

"Have you seen how he looks at you?"

Hold on.

What the hell? Is it a delhi thing to be so casual about love and dating?

Just then the pair of samar and tisha walked in and we changed the topic. But the whole time i felt someone's eyes on me.

Anirudh.

In a way that I was an experiment and he was the scientist.

Anirudh

As soon as we entered the mall, we all split up. Tisha disappeared into **Lifestyle**, Samar wandered into **Levi's**, and Erica and daniel, suddenly remembering they were siblings started picking outfits for each other. And me? I ended up with **Tarini**.

Not that I minded. Obviously.

"I'll check out the women's section, find something to wear," Tarini said, already eyeing the racks.

"I need help. I usually shop with Didi or Ishita. How about this, I hold your bags, and in return, you style an outfit for me?" I offered, putting on my best puppy eyes.

She started browsing through dresses, while I followed, watching her, catching glimpses when she wasn't looking. Her gaze has changed, a lot. She still had that gaze which could make anyone believe that she was in love with them, but now it had become different. The love looked hidden, like it was forced to be hidden and the anger was overpowered. It's like the honey in her eyes peeped in through the fire.

I obviously didn't like her. Did I?

We used to talk about this, shopping together once we were older. Was she thinking about that too?

"White or red?" she asked, holding up two dresses.

"You're neither a bride nor a crazy ex seeking revenge. So, neither. "

"Sisodia," she said, grabbing my wrist. Her tone was serious. "I have to tell you something. "

She gulped, her expression unreadable.

Then

"I HATE YOU. WHY DID YOU HAVE TO RUIN THESE DRESSES FOR ME? I HOPE COFFEE SPILLS ON YOUR T-SHIRT!"

There she was, the **Tarini I missed**.

She finally picked a dress and told me to wait outside the trial room. A few minutes later, when she stepped out, I almost forgot to blink.

She looked breathtaking.

"Nice, na?" she asked, hesitating.

"Yeah, yeah. Looks nice. Can we go now?" I said quickly, avoiding how I actually felt.

"Are you sure?"

"You look like an angel sent from hell. Now please, style my outfit. "

"Sisodia. Rot. In. Hell," she muttered. "Wait here. "

She handed me a **dark blue, loose half-sleeve shirt** and **beige linen pants**.

When I changed and stepped out, she gasped.

"Oh my God. You don't look like a frog, Sisodia. "

"Shut up. Just admit I look charming," I laughed.

"Pair this with your black glasses and scrunch your curls. Perfect. "

"You know I can't. "

"I'll send you a video tutorial," she said, signing for me to change so we could leave.

I tried scrunching my hair, but it looked ridiculous. So, I gave up, washed it again, and blow-dried it.

No one knew how to style my curls, not even Didi. Honestly, I wasn't even sure if I *had* curls. Tarini had convinced me I did, and for some reason, I still believed her.

The **freshers' party** was at the most *amazing* location, our very own **campus**.

I arrived with **daniel**, while **Samar stuck with his old gang**, four guys who had been together since school. They were good guys, okay? Just a little too... **Delhi**. Loud. Chaotic. A bit much for me.

As we grabbed popcorn, daniel turned to me.

"Anirudh, do you like Tarini?"

"What? No, of course not. I mean, yes, I like her as a person, she's great but not like that. Why do you ask?" I stammered, caught off guard.

"Okay so you hate her. " he said and left.

I didn't hate her.

But I didn't *like* like her.

She wasn't just a friend.

And she wasn't just an ex.

She was the girl who once made me the happiest boy alive.

And also the girl who turned me into the most lovesick man. Honestly, if someone asked me what she was to me I couldn't answer. Because I didn't know what to say. It was hard for me to fall for her again, but it was *harder* to force myself to never fall for her again.

Ishita always says my fear of commitment started after Tarini and I broke up.

Maybe she's right.

But I don't think I love her anymore.

She's an amazing human, and I love that we can *be* around each other now, but that's it.

There's no way we start over.

Some stars are written in different skies. And no matter how much you wish, **you can't rewrite fate**.

Tarini



It was too much. Too much of Anirudh.

I didn't hate him, of course not. But having him around felt overwhelming. It made me angry sometimes. But mostly, it scared me.

Scared that I'd drown in his eyes again.

Scared that he would become my poetry again.

Scared that he'd make me forget *me* again.

But the strangest thing? I liked spending time with him. What if he became my best friend again? *My God*. That would be disastrous.

One thing Anirudh Sisodia had taken away from me was my soft heart, my ability to believe. What twenty-year-old *doesn't* get butterflies over a good-looking guy? He made me feel abnormal.

"Tarini, chale?" Erica's voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

"Chalo," I said, retouching my lip gloss before stepping out of the dorm.

The night that followed was a blur. There were flashing lights, loud music, and way too much tequila. Someone had arranged a party game, something ridiculous, something right out of a bad rom-com.

A box.

The rules were simple: pick a chit, and whoever's name you got, you had to dance with them.

Cheesy.

Fate *hated* me.

I unfolded my chit. My stomach twisted.

Anirudh Sisodia.

I groaned internally. Could the universe be more cliché?

As if reading my mind, the DJ suddenly switched from fast, upbeat music to something painfully intimate. The opening chords of *ek din aap* filled the room.

My breath hitched.

No. Not this song.

It was my song. Our song. The one we had claimed as ours when we were fifteen, the one that made us believe in forever.

I looked up, and there he was, tall, composed, eyes unreadable.

He held out his hand. "Shall we?" I hesitated for a split second before placing my hand in his.

I tried saying no. Because come on. NO. But being a sport I am, i got up and swiftly waved my body and clicked my fingers without looking at him. I only looked at him when the song stopped after somebody screamed out "*kya ek din aap ek din aap laga rakha hai, kuch loud lagao*"

He didn't say anything. He just looked at me, *really* looked at me. And suddenly, I felt lightheaded.

He chuckled looking at me, and i smiled as a response. "I still like the song by the way" he said as we headed back to our seats. "Me too" I said as my eyes aggressively searched for erica.

"This is so cliché." i blurted out as i saw another pair being pulled up to the stage to dance.

"You love cliché's" he said taking a sip of his coke zero.

"I don't." I said. "Also coke zero tastes bad. Why would you drink it". I added to clear the awkwardness.

"It's not *just* coke zero" he winked.

I took the next day off. Not because of the hangover, well, maybe a little but mostly because I wanted to work on my book.

This time, I wasn't writing a romcom. No romantic poetry, no hopelessly-in-love characters. This time, it was about cancer.

Not the science of it.

Not the treatments, the survival rates, or the clinical terms.

But cancer- **the way Veronica would feel it.**

Pa had sent me a few poems he found, ones Mumma wrote after Didi died. I read them over and over, feeling the weight of each word. I decided to weave them into the book. I didn't need to edit them. They were already raw, already *real*.

I hope Didi would be proud of me.

I think of cancer a lot. Every day.

Because if it wasn't for cancer, things would be different.

I would have gotten to know Didi.

She would have had a family.

Mumma would have been different.

Maybe I wouldn't even live the way I do now.

I wouldn't have to write about loss, I would just have love.

My phone rang.

Pa.

"Hi, Ini. Kaisi hai?" His voice was warm, familiar.

"Hi, Pa. I'm fine, aap batao. "

"You don't have classes today? I found you active on Insta. "

I smirked. "Acha, Pa, so now you stalk me too?"

He laughed. "Bas, idhar udhar dekh liya"

I sighed. "Yeah... didn't feel like going today. "

He chuckled. "Acha sun, when do you have your holidays? Mumma and I are planning a trip to Australia. "

I hesitated. “Pa... I think you both should go. Just the two of you. ”

“Are you crazy, Ini? Of course, you’re coming with us. ”

“No, really. You and Mumma never took a vacation together. Ever. I’m grown up now, I won’t feel bad. You should go. ”

“Beta, what are you saying?”

“Pa, please. I don’t need a vacation. I made good friends here, I’m happy. I’m not a loner anymore. ”

He sighed dramatically. “Itna gussa. Baapre. My big girl. If you change your mind, tell me, okay?. I’ll hang up now. Bye, Ini. *Pa loves you more than Mumma.* ”

They never took a vacation together. **Like, ever.**

I know why.

They never wanted me to feel like an adopted child. And honestly? I never did. But if I think about it, truly think about it they never really got to be *just* husband and wife.

When I was five, I kept getting sick. Constant fevers, weakness, until one day, we found out it wasn’t just regular childhood sickness. It was **Supraventricular Tachycardia (SVT).**

My heart beat *twice* as fast as a normal person’s. Not deadly, but serious enough to change everything.

Mumma and Pa rearranged their entire lives.

Mumma worked day shifts.

Pa worked nights.

They made sure *someone* was always there.

They never took a break. Never went out for dinner, never left me alone.

Even at school, my headmistress, Meena Ma’am, knew about my condition. She kept an eye on me, made sure I was okay. By the time I was ten, things got better. The palpitations didn’t come as often. I could handle them on my own.

But for Mumma and Pa? The worry never left.

And then there was Sisodia.

He took care of me whenever needed in high school. He never made a big deal out of it, never treated me like I was fragile, but he was always *there*.

Anirudh

What the hell was going on?

I had to call Ishita after class, but my mind was stuck somewhere else.

Why did Tarini feel like a part of me again? Like she was some cell in my body, or the calcium in my bones, something I had learned to live without but somehow still needed? I was fine without her. **I was fine.** But every time I spent time with her, it made me want to have her again.

She understood me. Maybe not always, but most of the time.

With her, I felt *safe*.

She was the first person, and the only person, who had ever known me so well.

I wasn't like Ranbir Kapoor in Channa Mereya after our breakup. I didn't walk around drowning in heartbreak

Maybe that was the problem.

Even with Tarini, I had been scared to see *forever*. But I also knew this, if I ever wanted to have a happy future, **I needed Tarini Veronica Bose in it.**

Just thinking about it made me anxious.

I don't miss her.

I miss *who I was with her*.

I don't know much about what she did to me, but I do know that my heart has never felt safe with anyone but her.

I wish I had tried to save us.

But why dwell on the past?

After class, I called Ishita.

“Ani finally has time for Ishita. Wow. ”

I smiled. “Ishhhiiii hiiiiiiiiii howwww areeeee youuuuuuu?”

Hearing her voice made me happy.

Her tone immediately changed. **“Why are you with Tarini?”**

I rolled my eyes. “You sound like you’re my girlfriend. Okay, shut up. It’s casual. We’re friends. We shop together, maybe even dance together, but that’s it. ”

“Anirudh, what the hell? She goddamn ruined you. She’s the reason relationships aren’t serious for you anymore. You have to stay away from her. Forget her. ”

My jaw tightened.

“Ishita, don’t ever say that again, okay?”

Silence.

I sighed. “I’m not going to date her or anything. Our history is the past now. Think of her as someone new. A new friend, maybe. ”

“New friend? That’s worse. I’m your only friend. ”

I chuckled. “Haan baba, you’re my bestest friend. She is just a casual caterpillar in my college, okay?”

“Caterpillar? What the hell does that even mean?”

I laughed. “You’re overthinking, Ish. Just trust me. ”

She sighed. “Fine. But don’t come crying to me when she breaks your heart again. ”

I didn’t tell her the truth.

Tarini had already broken my heart once.

Hearts do not break twice.

Do they?

Im not some cardiologist. I wouldn't know okay.

Starbucks was hosting some *Founder's Day* event, not sure what exactly, but it meant I had to work a full shift today. No after-lunch classes for me. I needed the money, okay?

The rest of the afternoon was spent making endless cups of coffee and baking what felt like *millions* of brownies.

"Anirudh, make a cold brew for table number 7. Fast." Manish, my shift lead, called out.

I hurried, brewing some strong caffeine, pouring it into a cup, and grabbing a tray. As I made my way to the table, I glanced at the order slip.

Table 7.

Tarini.

What.

Wow.

Why was she everywhere?

"Tarini, what a surprise." I tried to sound casual.

She looked up, eyes slightly widening in recognition. **"Anirudh, you work in this branch? Oh my god, hi!"**

I noticed her eye bags immediately. She looked tired. More than tired, exhausted. The laptop and headphones in front of her told me she was either studying or writing.

"Studying?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

"Writing." She replied.

Of course.

"I hope you enjoy the coffee." I gave her a small nod and turned away, not wanting to stretch the conversation.

Moments turned into hours.

By the time my shift ended at 7 PM, my body felt drained. The kind of exhaustion that made you want to drop onto the nearest couch and never move again.

As I stepped out of the store, I noticed her. *Still there.*

Tarini sat with her head resting on her hand, staring at the laptop screen like it was her worst enemy.

I sighed.

“Tarini? It’s been four hours. How come you’re still here? Chalo, I’ll drop you.”

There was no way I was leaving her alone in the streets of Delhi after sunset.

She looked up, shaking her head. **“No, no, Anirudh. Carry on, I’m just working on my book. This place feels comfy.”**

Typical.

“Tarini, Starbucks closes in two hours. You’ll find no Uber at 9 PM in Delhi. Let’s go back to the hostel. Come, we’ll take the metro.”

She hesitated. I could see it in her face, she didn’t want to leave, didn’t want to be told what to do. But she also knew I was right.

With a resigned sigh, she shut her laptop, placed it inside her tote bag, and packed her headphones. She fixed her kurti, tying her hair into a bun before standing up.

“Chalo ab.” She said, finally giving in.

Delhi metros are weird.

Not in a bad way, just *weird*, the kind of chaos you learn to live with. The crowd, the rush, the mix of conversations blending into a background hum.

Our stop was an hour away.

Tarini pulled out her headphones but groaned almost immediately.

“Charge. Should’ve charged it.” She muttered under her breath.

Without thinking, I handed her one side of my earphones and played my playlist. In that moment, the metro wasn’t crowded. Delhi wasn’t loud.

It was just *us*. And my fire playlist

“You still use wired earphones?” she asked taking the side of the wire.

“Aren’t these so much more better than the bluetooth ones? These don’t get out of charge, are cheaper and come in 50 different colours.” I said.

“They also tangle” she said frowning.

“Therefore teaching you patience”

“Patience?” she asked laughing as she saw me struggle to untangle the earphones.

“It takes patience to untangle these wires carefully to be able to listen to your favourite song. It makes the song even more magical” I said, and played perfect from one direction.

Tarini

I was sitting in the classroom next to Tisha when Professor Patel walked in. The moment he entered, the entire room fell silent. He was an older man, but his presence was commanding, and his voice carried an undeniable authority. He taught us World Literature, and despite his strict demeanor, his lessons were always engaging.

Clearing his throat, he addressed the class. "As you all know, your exams are in two months. However, this time, the exam will be for only fifty marks. "

A wave of excitement spread through the room as students whispered and exchanged relieved smiles. But before the celebrations could fully begin, he raised his hand.

"But, but, but-" he continued, his tone making it clear that there was a catch. "This time, your assessment will be different. The class will be divided into pairs, but you won't know who your partner is. Together, you will co-write a book. "

A murmur of curiosity replaced the earlier excitement.

"You are free to choose your own genre," he explained. "The writing process will follow a specific pattern, one of you will write the first chapter, and then your partner will continue the story by writing the next. After each chapter, you will submit it to me, and I will pass it on to your partner. This process will continue until your book is complete. The final submission is due in two months. "

The classroom buzzed with anticipation. Writing an entire book with a mystery partner? This was going to be interesting.

Three days passed before I suddenly received an email from Professor Patel, instructing me to collect my journal from him.

I knew Erica had already begun writing hers, but since she started in a blank journal, it was obvious, I was getting the passed-on journal. That meant my mystery partner had already written the first chapter.

Now, here's where things got weird. I was used to typing on my laptop, and we even had the option to exchange iPads. But clearly, my partner had chosen the old-school method. When I reached Patel sir's desk, he handed me a simple matcha-green journal with the number **307** written on the cover. Probably a code to help him identify which journal belonged to whom.

Our entire class had collectively decided to keep the suspense alive no one was supposed to discuss their story or writing partner with anyone else. The mystery had to unfold on its own.

I sat down, flipping the journal open. The handwriting was neat, almost too perfect. With a deep breath, I began reading, secretly hoping for a romcom or some beautifully written poetry.

Aisha,

Maybe this letter will never reach you. Maybe because I don't want it to.

It has been seven years since we parted ways, yet there hasn't been a single day I haven't thought about you. That might sound bizarre to you. I know the way you remember me isn't kind. Maybe you'll never forgive me. Maybe I'll never forget you. Maybe our paths will cross again, or maybe no road I ever take will lead me back to you.

Maybe us meeting was just a coincidence to you, but for me, choosing you every time feels like fate. Is this what you called love? Is this what I failed to give you when you were still mine?

I still remember that night at the airport as if it happened just yesterday. I asked you for a charger, and your hands trembled when you passed it to me. I didn't even know your name, but something inside me whispered that I already knew you. What were the odds? Maybe I was Adam, and you were my Eve in another life.

We were both on the same flight, London to Bombay. We had four hours to kill before boarding, so I asked you why you had been in London. You smiled. God, that smile, and told me you had won a scholarship to study there but had to return to Bombay for your sister's wedding. Then, you asked me why I was flying back. I told you I lived in London but had to go to Bombay for a month to help my uncle with his business.

I knew you felt the connection too.

It was as if our hearts recognized each other, like they had known one another for lifetimes. Like they felt safe together.

The next two years were the happiest of my life. Who would have thought that the girl I met at an airport would become the most important person in my world?

Sometimes, I wonder if you were an angel, sent into my life just to fix it. And when you saw that I was finally in the right place, God called you back.

Or maybe, I was the one who sent you away.

, Rohan

I stared at the page, gripping the journal tighter.

Who was my co-author? Whoever they were, they had a way with words. This wasn't just good, it was *beautiful*. This opening felt like something straight out of a classic. It was warm, aching, and so full of raw emotion that I could practically feel the longing woven into every word.

And now, it was my turn.

What was I supposed to do with this? Was this going to be a novel written in letters, or was this just the beginning of something else?

One thing was certain, I couldn't ruin this.

Whoever my mystery partner was, they had their heart in the right place. Because there was no way an ordinary person could write something like this.

And honestly? I wasn't even sure *I* could have written something this breathtaking.

As I began to write, Erica plopped down beside me.

"So, Samar likes you, but Tisha likes Samar, and Tisha thinks you might like Samar, but I know you actually like Anirudh. Except, Anirudh might like daniel," she blurted out so fast it took me a solid minute to process.

I blinked. "Wait, Anirudh likes guys now?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, that's not true, it just slipped out. He still likes girls. But seriously? That's the only thing you got from everything I just said?"

I shrugged. "Why does everyone think Samar likes me? He's done nothing to make it seem that way. Honestly, I think he likes Tisha too. "

"Samar is unpredictable," she said, tilting her head. "Honestly, I thought you were into him too. "

"Is this like a delhi thing? Every other girl shares a lore with a guy?" I blurted out. "Crazy woman. No. If this is some messy boy drama, count me out. " You know when Lara Jean said love is fun to read and write about but terrifying in real life? Yeah, my brain and heart were both screaming that at me. The heart's job is to pump blood, and sometimes, it gets a little too ambitious and starts falling for people.

Hormones i tell you.

But my heart? Oh, it's strictly business. Pumping blood efficiently, no distractions. We cannot afford a cardiac mishap. Can we?

Anirudh

AISHA

***“9, 491 hours.** That’s how long you were mine.*

***288 of those hours** were the only time I got to love you without hiding, even though my world began and ended with you.*

***70, 128 hours.** That’s how long I spent knowing our story wasn’t over. Hoping you’d come back. Hoping we’d pick up where we left off.*

***Four hours.** That’s how long it took to pack up and let you go.*

And infinite? That’s the amount of time I know I’ll wait, because infinite, again, is the number of chapters still unwritten between us. ”

That sounds familiar.

Anyway, hi. I’m Aisha. Aisha Sood, from Bombay.

It was a cold Thursday night when I first met Rohan at the airport. I’ve never been the kind of person to romanticize life, let alone expect to meet the love of my life in an airport. So I dressed for comfort, not for fate. A black top, black track pants, a brown coat. My hair was twisted into a messy bun, my black glasses slipping down my nose. I was sipping on hot coffee when he called out to me, asking for a charger. And that was it, the moment that changed everything.

I couldn’t stop looking at him. He was gorgeous. He wore a blue hoodie, black pants, and a fanny pack slung across his chest. God, I should’ve put more effort into my outfit.

We got to know each other over several more cups of coffee. He was a year older than me. We talked about the city, our lives, our plans. And when we landed in Mumbai, we exchanged numbers.

I thought he’d lose touch. People always do. But he didn’t.

We met often in London. Over coffee, over drinks, over chai. Somewhere between those meetings, I fell for him, hard, fast, completely. I was sure he felt something too. Maybe not as much as I did, but enough.

I was 22 back then. Immature. Confused. Insecure. But that's not the case anymore.

I'm 29 now. I have a two-year-old son. I am a mother, I co-parent my son with my then husband and now, um i don't know? We meet, for our son. But that's it. This love shit i tell you, is not for me.

Okay. Is Tarini my co-author?

The first stanza, those words

I've read them before. She wrote them in her first novel. I always go back to that book, rereading the lines, wondering. *Was that about me?*

If my co-author isn't Tarini, then it has to be someone who read her book. But that book is old. She published it when she was sixteen. *Who even remembers things from when they were sixteen?*

Anyway, I'm writing this book.

We were sitting in class when Tarini walked up to me, looking like she'd just seen a ghost, or worse, made a life-altering decision without consulting the group chat first.

"Anirudh, where's Tisha?" she asked.

"She didn't come today," I said, because I was observant like an owl.

Tarini hesitated. "Something happened?" I asked.

She let out a deep breath, like she was about to confess to a crime. "Samar has to like Tisha, right?"

"...What?"

"Erica says he likes *me*, but I *know* Tisha is head over heels for him, and if he likes *me*, then, it's just

not okay." I blinked. "Woah. Tarini *chill*. Has Samar asked you out?"

"No. "

“Then what exactly is freaking you out?”

She huffed and flopped into the seat beside me. “It doesn’t feel right. Samar’s a nice guy. *Tisha* deserves him. Not me.”

And that’s when it happened. The absolute betrayal. I got butterflies. I, Anirudh, logical and emotionally stable, felt *actual* butterflies because Tarini looked sad over some random dude liking her. This was a problem.

“Tarini, I have no clue what’s going on in that brain of yours,” I said, which was true most days. “But you don’t need to freak out. I’ll handle it, okay? I promise. Now *chill*.”

She still looked troubled, but at least she wasn’t pacing like a detective in a murder case anymore.

Although, now that I think about it... *This* Tarini was acting nothing like *old* Tarini.

Old Tarini would have romanticized every accidental eye contact, every brush of fingertips, every coincidental ‘oh my God, we both ordered iced coffee!’ moment.

Old Tarini would have turned this entire situation into a tragic love triangle. *This* Tarini, though? She looked like she was about to rewrite my entire romance novel into a psychological thriller where the lead couple never gets together and someone dies in chapter twenty.

So yeah. Maybe my co-author isn’t Tarini.

“Oh shit. Samar. Bye, Anirudh,” Tarini blurted out before speed-walking away like she was avoiding an ex she owed money to.

Samar walked in just as she disappeared. “Why’s she running?” he asked, pointing at her retreating figure.

“Maybe she got a flirty text from a boyfriend,” I said casually.

“She’s seeing no one” he replied instantly.

Oh. *Oh no*. He liked her. This was bad. But I promised Tarini I’d *do something*.

I shrugged. “She’s probably lying. She used to do that in school too.” Samar narrowed his eyes. “anirudh, *you* were her boyfriend. You told me the

whole school knew about you two, and that she never wanted to hide your relationship. I don't think she's the 'secret boyfriend' type. "

Damn it. Good memory. Bad for me.

Okay, Plan B. *Misdirection*.

"Do you like Tisha?" I asked, throwing the question like a frisbee.

He snorted. "Are you crazy?"

My stomach sank. That was not the response I needed.

.

Tarini

I wore a white sundress with lilies on it to church that Sunday. I don't know why, maybe because it reminded me of Didi. Maybe because when I was here, sitting on this wooden bench, staring up at the cross, I felt like she could still hear me. That if I whispered my fears into the silence, she'd somehow answer.

So, I prayed.

"Jesus, please make sure Samar doesn't like me. Didi, what do I do?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, gripping my fingers so tightly they ached. I was scared. More scared than I wanted to admit.

Younger me *thrived* on attention. The me from back then would've laughed, flipped her hair, and made a joke about how *of course* Samar liked her, who wouldn't?

But *this* me? This me *knew* what it was like to lose people to love. I didn't want to lose another friend. Not again. Not like last time.

Anirudh had said he'd take care of it.

I wanted to believe him. I *needed* to believe him.

But Anirudh had also once told me he'd love me forever.

And look how that turned out.

I let out a slow breath, forcing the lump in my throat to disappear.

Maybe I should trust him this time.

Maybe. Just maybe.

I mean, how bad can it be? (Okay brain, don't answer that.)

I don't think he'll mess up *real* bad... this time.

So I walk out of the church, all calm and collected (minus the one auntie who almost knocked me over), and guess who I see?

Anirudh.

In the market. Just chilling near the bananas like life's a breezy fruit bowl.

I walk up to him. I had to buy fruits anyway. "Tarini, hi," he says, with that stupidly cute smile.

And I just... paused.

Because this Anirudh? This version?

He's different.

He's happy. He's showing up.

Sure, life's probably still throwing lemons at him, but he's not ducking anymore.

And honestly?

He's kinda more attractive now than when I fell for him at sixteen.

Back then, he was sweet, mature, very "boy next door"... until he turned into a full-on emotional hurricane.

I remember telling Esha, "I think we're ending. He's around, but not for *me*."

Home was chaos too. Mumma and Pa were always fighting.

Mostly about me.

Pa wanted me to live like a "normal kid" (lol, what even is that?), while Mumma had panic attacks if I even touched the scooter keys.

And all I wanted was for Anirudh to just *be there*.

But poof- he disappeared.

Rumours popped up about him and Ishita. People said he cheated.

But nah. Not him. He might've been distant, confused, even done with us, but cheating? Not his thing.

He stopped showing up. Stopped texting. And when he did, it felt like... nothing changed.

Like we were still "us," but also not really.

But one day, when I finally felt... put together,

I realised what I was doing.

For *minutes* of happy moments with Anirudh, I spent *weeks* crying. And he? He was out there vibing with his friends on weekends like nothing

happened.

It felt like I was the one holding the whole thing together, while he was just... showing up when it suited him.

So one day, I gave up. On "us". Because just love, is never enough.

And yet, every time I remember how he shattered my heart into a million little bits, my *stupid* heart still managed to make sure those million pieces fell for him again.

Every. Single. Time.

I still get mad at him. Super mad. But this Anirudh, standing in front of me, picking out fruits like an adult with a grocery list? He wasn't that same boy. I could tell.

Maybe I could move past our history. Maybe we could actually be friends.

This Anirudh was... nice.

Not perfect. But nice.

"I'm so excited for Navratri. Finally get to go home," he said.

"How's Esha?" he asked. "I heard she moved to Kolkata too, right after you?" he added as we began walking across the streets of delhi.

"Yeah, her brother got transferred so she moved with him. She's doing design now," I said,

"How are uncle and aunty?" he asked.

"They're in Australia. First couple vacation," I smiled.

"That's amazing," he said.

"How's didi? I mean... your didi?" I asked, trying to keep the convo rolling.

"She's good. Lives with nani in Bombay now. "

Silence.

"You visiting school?" I asked.

"Oh yeah. First thing I'm doing after reaching Bangalore. Amit, Ishita and I go together. "

"Amit and Ishita *hate* each other," I said, confused.

"Hated," he corrected.

“Really?”

Because last I checked, those two couldn’t sit next to each other without throwing mental knives.

“They’re dating now. Two years. ”

“OH MY GOD. WHAT?”

Real life enemies to lovers?? I’m obsessed.

“I know what you’ll say next,” Anirudh said, already grinning.

“What?” I asked.

“Enemies to lovers,” he said, laughing. Caught. Red-handed.

I laughed too. Because, yeah. He knew me well

I got the journal today. We've been exchanging chapters for a month now, and I *still* don't know who my co-author is. The story's shaping up into a tragic love tale, and in my head, there's no way the characters end up together. It's too complicated. Too broken. But if this anonymous writer somehow pulls off a happy ending, great. Otherwise, we let it be heartbreakingly beautiful.

For a while, I thought it was Anirudh. Mostly because the characters, Rohan and Aisha, felt a lot like *us*. Even the promise tattoo popped up a few times. But when I slipped in a quote from my book the one I *know* he read, he didn't react. That, and the tone felt more like Rohan still loves Aisha... but Ani and Tarini? No spark.

The book's due soon. So is the Durga Pujo break. I'll finally get to go home. Finally see Esha.

I miss her. A lot.

She has a boyfriend now Vikas shaw from colony. And he's great. Treats her right, makes her happy. I'm glad. Really.

But a part of me misses when I had more of her. I feel guilty even texting sometimes. What if I'm interrupting? What if she doesn't need me like before?

There's no drama. No ignoring. Just... change. And I realise how much I leaned on her emotionally. Maybe too much.

I do have other friends. But they aren't the "talk about feelings" kind.
Well maybe Anirudh is.
He listens. Doesn't judge. Somehow always knows what to say.

It was a Sunday. So why was Mumma calling me at 7 AM?

"Han, Mumma?" I croaked, half-asleep.

"Tarini? Papa transferred some money to your account. Go out today, hun. Happy 21st birthday, baby. "

Right.

My birthday.

I blinked at the ceiling. 21.

After I turned 18, birthdays stopped meaning anything. They became a date people remembered because Instagram reminded them. And more often than not, they came with creeps in my DMs sending wink emojis.
Gross.

"I'll buy a dress with the money. I've been partying almost every day, Mumma... And thank you. " I ended the call.

The room was quiet. Erica was still fast asleep.

I decided to wash my hair, dry it, and Dyson the ends into some volume. It gave me something to do, something to focus on.
By the time I stepped out of the bathroom, smelling like lavender shampoo and comfort, Erica stirred.

Still in her pajamas, she walked over and hugged me.

"Happy birthday, T. Get ready jaldi, the crew's going out. "

"The crew?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, duh. Our gang. "

"Erica, you know I don't like making a big deal out of my birthday. Can we just do dinner or something?"

She rolled her eyes. "Tarini Bose. Stop being such a bore. I swear, I'll keep it lowkey. Just trust me, okay?"

I wore a **lilac dress**, the soft kind that hugs your skin like a whisper. A pearl necklace around my neck added just enough to feel dressed up but not dramatic.

Then came a knock on the door.

I wasn't expecting anyone.

But it was *him*.

Anirudh.

Holding lilies in one hand... and a **DVD** in the other?

"Happy 21, Tarini," he said, pulling me into a light, familiar hug. "Thank you..." I said, my voice trailing off as I took the flowers. "I got you something," he said, handing over the DVD. Then, from a gym bag slung across his shoulder, he pulled out a portable DVD player, of all things and popped the disc in.

The screen flickered.

It was *our playlist*, the one we made when we were fifteen. Track after track of inside jokes, indie songs, poetry, and late-night thoughts in the form of MP3s. Then, suddenly, an audio clip.

"Anirudh... what is this?" I asked, confused.

"Just listen. "

His voice echoed through the room. Not his voice *now*, but his **younger self**.

And then, his voice began to read:

For you, maybe I would bring down the moon...

But you, you are the moon.

For you, maybe I'd become a warrior...

But you, you are the war.

For you, maybe I'd write a book...

But you, you are the entire library.

For you, maybe I'd become a poet...

But you, you are the poem every poet dreams of.

For you, maybe I'd dive into oceans...

But your eyes, they're oceans enough to drown in.

For you, maybe I'd chase the stars...

But you, you've always been the sky.

For you, maybe i would agree to bleed,

*But my body has no blood belonging to me, for they all have your name
written.*

For you, maybe I would bring down the moon...

But you, you are the moon.

Then came a playful voice layered on top:

“GUYSSS TARINI WROTE THIS FOR MEEE. I love my girlfriendddd. Now you might wonder where this silly lover is and where I am? We're in Esha's home library and my wonderful little girlfriend is studying. What a bore. ”

The audio glitched, static crackling into silence. I looked at Anirudh. “What... what is this?”

He smiled, soft, a little nostalgic. “You never knew, but I always vlogged. I saved every poem you wrote for me. Just in case... we ever wanted to remember *us*. ”

I stared at him. At the lilies. At the screen.

If he loved me this deeply... why did he leave?

Why did he break my heart so recklessly?

I didn't feel safe. I felt exposed. Confused.

Overwhelmed.

“I think you should go,” I said softly. He didn't move. He just looked at me, eyes full of something unreadable.

“You've changed a lot, Tarini,” he said.

“But one thing is still the same. ”

He stepped closer. “This Tarini too, she puts her nose in a book the second things go downhill. Face your problems, Tarini. ”

And then, something happened. Something like a bomb blast happened.

He sat down on the bed, calm like he hadn't just lit a matchstick in a room filled with gas.

I stood up. Walked till I was right in front of him, his knees brushed my

legs.

And then I stepped back.

Because the last thing I wanted was *Anirudh Sisodia's DNA on my body.*

"Face your problems? Says you?"

I laughed

"Says *Anirudh Sisodia* the same guy who disappeared when I needed him the most? You have the audacity to sit there and preach to me? What do you do when things go downhill, Lord Sisodia? Face them like a saint? Do you honestly think you're the bigger person here? Sitting like some moral compass, handing me lessons on how to live?"

I could feel the fire rising.

"Yes, I *do* put my nose in my books when everything else falls apart. You know why?"

Because it's the *only* thing that's ever been *mine*. Not dependent, not conditional, just mine. And you know what terrifies me to my bones? That even *that* could be taken from me someday. "

I paused, my voice suddenly quieter.

"You don't know what it's like to be *average*, Anirudh.

To give your heart and soul and sweat and tears into something, only to come out just *enough*. Never great. Never exceptional. Just *okay*"

I could feel my hands trembling.

"You remember school? Remember that one thing you always said you were proud of?"

'Tarini's in every damn event. '

You thought I was this all-rounder, this hyper-enthusiastic girl who wanted it all.

It wasn't passion. It was panic.

Because if I wasn't seen everywhere, I'd be seen *nowhere*.

If I didn't do *everything*, I'd be *nothing*.

So yes, I buried myself in books. Not to *escape* my problems, but to *cling*, to the last sliver of something that belonged to *me*. "

My voice cracked. Damn it.

I had this thing where I cried when I got angry, and I hated it.

But I swallowed the tears. I kept going.

“Even my heart doesn’t support me, Anirudh.
It races when I’m still. It skips when I try to stay steady.
I’m always one second away from a goddamn palpitation.
I take anti-anxiety meds like breath mints. ”

He blinked. I didn’t stop.

“But that’s not even the worst part.

The worst part is, I’ve been popping those pills since I was *fifteen*. And my parents, my own parents don’t even know. Because how do I tell them that their daughter isn’t just average, isn’t just sick, but is also CRAZY, Needs a goddamn *psychiatrist*?”

Shit. i could feel my eyes get watery.

Anirudh

That's when I saw her.

Erica.

Standing at the door. One hand clutching her phone, the other pressed over her mouth like she'd just witnessed a car crash. And maybe she had.

Tarini Bose- raw and real

I think I understood her expression, because I felt it too. I was just as shaken. Hell, I had tears in my eyes.

What *was* that? Who *was* that?

Tarini Bose?

The girl who was always calm, always quiet in the face of chaos. The one who smiled through nerves and blamed panic attacks on bad dreams. The girl I used to know. Or thought I knew. Now I wasn't sure I knew her at all. Not even a little bit.

How could someone feel *that* much?

How could she call herself *average* when everything about her screamed *extraordinary*?

It hit me like a gut-punch how much she had been hiding behind that sweet, gentle face in school.

And her nightmares weren't in her sleep at all?

What if her nightmares were real, and they were *living right in front of her*?

Erica ran forward without saying a word, arms wide and sure. She wrapped Tarini up like she'd done it a hundred times. And maybe she had.

Tarini didn't cry.

She just... collapsed.

Not physically but in that terrifying kind of silence She buried her face in Erica's shoulder and didn't move.

"Anirudh," Erica's voice was gentle but strong. "Anirudh, leave" she ordered.

She didn't even look at me when she said it. Her full attention was on the girl in her arms.

And I stood there useless, stuck between guilt and helplessness.

"But Tarini," I whispered, voice barely making it out of my throat.

"*Anirudh*, please leave." Erica said, firmer now. Her eyes flashed, and for the first time, I realized how intimidating this girl could be.

I nodded, slowly. Like a child. And I stepped out.

The door closed behind me with a soft click

I leaned against the wall outside.

God.

Who was this? All my life i spent believing no one knew tarini as much as I do, and today it felt like i stood in front of a stranger, whose story somehow i knew but didn't know at the same time.

And if I could go back in time, I would. God, I *would*. And I'd go back just to show Tarini...

That *this* Anirudh Sisodia
was there.

And would *always* be there.

I genuinely wanted to give tarini a memorable gift, now that we both had moved on from our past (as I would like to believe) I thought this would be a sweet memory of us.

God I hate my brain sometimes.

Tarini

For a moment, everything was a blur.

I couldn't feel my limbs, couldn't hear anything. All I knew was that Erica held me.

Tightly.

Safely.

And I was bawling. In my head, my whole life played out like a 50 second reel.

Snap.

Sixteen-year-old Anirudh saying, "*I think we need to break up.*"

Snap.

Me staring at my marks mocking me with a very average score despite all the nights I spent working like an ox

Snap.

Hospitals.

Heartbeat monitors.

"Breathe, Tarini. One, two, three... now breathe out," Erica's voice came through. I nodded. I think. Then I walked over to the bed and curled up, knees tucked into my chest.

"You're safe. You're fine. These are just your thoughts," she whispered, kneeling next to me.

The air was still heavy, but it was *warm*.

Safe.

"I think I'm okay," I whispered.

"Can we stay like this for a while?"

"Of course, Tarini," she said, with that smile. She moved over to the mirror and started blow-drying her hair, giving me space while still keeping her presence close. The soft hum of the dryer was oddly calming. "I don't want to go out," I told Erica quietly.

"Not with people. "

She nodded gently.

"No pressure. "

" i think i'll go out for a bit to get some air. I feel suffocated in here with the smell of flowers"

I did a quick outfit change. A pink sleeveless kurti paired with crisp white linen pants, and a pair of silver chandbalis that brushed just above my shoulders.

I packed my iPad and Bluetooth keyboard into my big tote bag, just in case I felt like writing in a café. walked to my college's library.

Thankfully, it was open on Sundays. I needed to calm myself down. I cannot be vulnerable.

I found myself a solo desk right under the AC, Perfect.

I opened my iPad, connected the Bluetooth keyboard, and began typing.

This book was different.

So, so different from all the stories I'd written before. Every time I researched, I needed at least thirty minutes just to recover.

To breathe again.

When I was a child, and Mumma spoke of Vero, her eyes would glisten with a kind of grief. "She's with Mother Mary now," she'd whisper.

"She's being taken care of just like I would've. "

That memory alone made my chest hurt.

I blinked back a tear, wiped the one that escaped from my left eye and felt someone tap my shoulder.

"Tar Tar? You here?"

I turned.

Anirudh.

Black glasses. Black t-shirt. Same annoying smirk.

“Why would you call me that?” I said, laughing.

He shrugged.

“I was writing,” I said, motioning to my screen.

“Mind if I pull up a chair?” he asked.

I looked around. There were many empty chairs, but i eventually nodded, hoping he’d apologize for what happened in the morning.

And he did.

There was a short pause. Then he spoke.

“Tarini, I know ‘sorry’ doesn’t quite cut it... but I am. Genuinely. ”

“You don’t have to, Anirudh. I overreacted. ”

He shook his head. “No, Tarini. Maybe I just... underreacted. Those years ago. I never knew you were carrying so much in your head, and I’m sorry I never gave you the space to talk about it. I might have been a pretty crap boyfriend, but I swear I’m trying to be a better person now. A better *friend*. I don’t know if we’ll ever be what we were... but I’d really like to stay in your life. Just... as someone who sticks around this time. ”

I smiled. Goofy. Genuine.

“We can’t be friends, Anirudh. ”

His face fell. “Why not?”

“Because I *love* hating on my ex-boyfriends with my friends,” I said, straight-faced.

He looked at me for a second

And then we both cracked up.

“You can hate on your ex-boyfriend *with* me,” he said.

“Anirudh Sisodia is disgusting,” i said

“Oh very disgusting” he mimicked my tone, as he put his hand on mine.

"Let's go," he said, holding his hand out.

"Where?" I asked. "*Follow me*" he smiled, and pulled my chair back with a quick little flourish.

By the time we reached the hostel, he had already pulled out a blindfold.

"Anirudh, what"

"No questions. "

And when the blindfold came off, I almost forgot how to breathe.

We were on the terrace.

But not the regular, dusty one where we hung our laundry.

This one looked like a Pinterest board came to life.

A little white canopy stood on the far end, wrapped with fairy lights and surrounded by potted plants that looked too pretty to be real.

There was a huge grassy rug spread like a green island, decorated with lanterns and soft cushions.

In the corner stood Erica, daniel, Tisha, and Samar, smiling like they'd been waiting all day.

I was still processing everything when someone covered my eyes from behind.

"Guess who?"

That voice.

That voice.

"ESHA???"

I whipped around so fast I almost hit her with my hair.

But it didn't matter. I was already tearing up.

"Oh my god, Esha!" I choked out, wrapping her in a hug.

But wait.

"Hold on, *why* are you in Delhi? Didn't you have that college fest this week?"

"I did," she said, grinning,"but remember the fashion show I told you about? The one I submitted my designs for? Well, I won. And now I'm here for the

Delhi showcase. If things go well, I'll be on the *front page* of Delhi Times. They're even doing a shoot with my designs for the cover!"

She said it with that half-proud, half-shy tone she always used when something really mattered.

"Hi, Esha," Anirudh chimed in, offering her a side hug. "Long time, man. I follow your fest page you're *killing* it. "

"Thanks!" she beamed. "But right now, I think *Tarini* should be cutting that cake instead of looking like she's about to cry. "

We all laughed.

Of *course* Esha would know exactly what to say.

She's been my best friend since 6th grade. I had other friends too, but esha was the sun.

She had straight A's, never scored below a 95.

She danced well, sang beautifully, knew *all* the cool bands.

Every group she entered, she rose to the top. But here's the thing, none of that made me jealous.

Because she was also *mine*.

My best friend.

She cheered the loudest when I won. She noticed when I cracked. When she got her award for her academic excellence in high school, I was right there next to her, clapping the loudest, despite the fact that I was holding a report card that shattered me from the inside.

Because she understood.

She always has.

She knew.

She knew the heartbreak.

The breakup.

The result.

The way those two things weren't just *things* they were my everything.

And when they both broke at once, she did everything to hold me together.

“So... you and Sisodia are good now?” Esha asked, sprawled on my dorm bed like it was her own.

We had successfully smuggled her into my room, mine and Erica’s though calling it a ‘mission’ was a stretch. Our warden was so chill, she’d probably offer Esha a welcome drink.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to sound casual. “Not awkward anymore. ”

Esha raised an eyebrow. “Not awkward? Babe, just four years ago y’all were avoiding eye contact like you were in the same WhatsApp group after a breakup. Now you two talk like you’re co-hosts on a podcast. What’s the tea, Miss Tarini? Got butterflies doing salsa in your stomach?”

She flopped her head onto my lap. I rolled my eyes. “Esha, is your brain on airplane mode or what? Of course not. ”

That comment coming from her was weirdly out of character, she’d always been the hyper-protective, give-him-the-stare-of-death type when it came to boys in my life.

Then she casually dropped, “Anyway. What’s the thing with Anirudh’s dad?”

I blinked. “What thing?”

“Anirudh must’ve told you. I need the full lowdown,” she said, tossing her phone aside like we were about to discuss plot twists in a K-drama.

“I seriously have no idea what you’re talking about. ”

Esha sat up, all dramatic. “Tarini. His parents don’t live together. You’re his friend now, I figured you knew. ”

My brain short-circuited for a sec. “Wait, WHAT?”

“Yeah. Remember the trophy ceremony in high school? Amit showed up solo? We thought Anirudh ghosted amit that day for no reason? Turns out, his home was crumbling while we were busy judging him. ”

I stared at her like she just told me she was actually a lizard in disguise. “Esha. You knew this. For FOUR. WHOLE. YEARS. And didn’t tell me?!”

She shrugged, totally unfazed. “I didn’t think it mattered. The last thing I wanted was you sending him tulips and handwritten sympathy notes after he dumped you. And I *know* you, Tarini. You would’ve. ”

She wasn't wrong. But still. Why didn't Anirudh ever mention it? I *asked* him how his parents were doing. He literally said *everything was fine*.

Anirudh

Although it was a Monday, a day usually reserved for existential dread and rethinking life choices. Me, Tarini, Esha, and Esha's disturbingly sweet boyfriend decided to go on a full-blown Delhi tour.

Esha was only here for three days, and I knew she wanted some solid girl time with Tarini before she zipped off to North Delhi to drown in competitions and the chaos of her designer life. Now, Esha is what I call "aesthetic to an irritating degree." Her life is curated like her Pinterest boards came alive. So obviously, she insisted we all wear white today.

Yes. White. On a Monday. Like it was someone's minimalist funeral.

I wore my white crochet shirt with bottle green shorts, an outfit Ishita had very strongly suggested over a chaotic phone call this morning. ("Trust me, it's giving cool-meets-casual," she'd said. I wasn't convinced, but I listened.)

First stop: Faqir Chand Bookstore.

Esha and her boyfriend were practically bouncing off the pavement. Goofy-level excited. I didn't know grown-ups could get this hyped about bookshelves, but here we were.

Apparently, Vikas was a fellow bookworm. I, on the other hand, just hovered around. The bookstore smelled like nostalgia and overpriced hardcover spines. But I didn't buy anything. I had a freshly guilt-tripped stack of unread books waiting back in my room, silently judging me.

So, while the three of them got lost in the magic of paperbacks and pretty covers, I slipped out to the café next door.

and pulled out the journal I'd been writing in, the one for the book me and my co-author were working on.

The plot had taken a very "oops-we-accidentally-made-this-depressing" turn. The love story had spiraled into a slow, aching tragedy where the woman ends up married, with a child.

I flipped through a few pages and stopped at a paragraph I didn't remember writing.

*"I stood there, knowing it was the last time I'd ever see you.
We made promises to each other
You said I'd be a part of all your achievements,
I swore I'd make you a memory in all my moments.
You promised to forgive me,
I promised to forget you.
You finally let go of me,
And yet, I stood there once more, waiting for you. "*

I froze.

This, this was familiar. Too familiar.

I'd read these exact words before. On *Tarini's* post. During a late-night Instagram stalking spiral, obviously. Wait. Does tarini know I was her co author? Should I keep it a surprise? Or should I subtly drop a hint. Just as my brain was loading all the possible chaos this could unleash, I heard a voice behind me.

"Anirudh? You bunked college to write your little novel?"

I turned. "Samar! Hey, man!" I got up and gave him a side hug,.

"I came to visit Masi, she lives around here. She's been unwell," he said,"I figured I'd grab some sandwiches for me and Meher before heading up. "

Just then, I heard the distinct sound of tiny, hungry drama.

"Samar bhaiyaaa, I want chocolate caaaaaake!" a little girl's voice called out from the café entrance.

I crouched down to her eye level, grinning. "And who's this cutie?"

"She's Meher," Samar smiled. "My tiny, chaotic little cousin. "

Meher gave me the most suspicious side-eye ever, like I might be there to steal her dessert.

“Samar?? Hi!”

I heard Tarini’s voice float in like background music that suddenly got way too personal. She was balancing a stack of books in one hand and her sipper bottle in the other, “How come you’re here?” she asked, flashing that warm smile. She leaned in for a polite side hug, and I swear I was chill, until Samar handed me his phone like I was his unpaid assistant and went in for a proper hug.

Like a *real* hug.

Okay... what was happening?

Why was I standing here, holding accessories, while my ex-girlfriend-turned-friend and this new guy were having a *moment*? And why was I feeling things? Daniel *did* say Samar had a thing for Tarini. I never believed it because Samar was always glued to Tisha, and Tisha was, like, aggressively into him.

Now I wasn’t so sure.

Tarini ordered, “One lemon iced tea, please,” and we all settled at a table. Esha had disappeared on a university call, and Vikas, ever the supportive boyfriend, followed her to help coordinate some design display. That left the four of us: me, Tarini, Samar, and Meher. I pulled my seat beside Meher, hoping for some sanity. Samar casually slid into the seat next to Tarini like it was scripted.

“Tarini? Momos?” Samar asked with a smile.

Then he added, “Anirudh will obviously not say no to momos. ”

I was about to nod, because well, momos are sacred.

“No, thank you,” she said, sipping her iced tea like it was suddenly made of secrets.

And I blinked.

No to momos? Tarini saying no to steamed bundles of joy?. Something was definitely off. Or maybe... she was pretending?

My overthinking was interrupted when Esha and Vikas finally returned, looking like they’d just wrapped a mini board meeting.

I checked my watch. Time to leave.

“I’ve got work,” I said, standing up and brushing the imaginary awkwardness off my jeans. Afternoon shifts. Morning classes. And apparently, lunchtime drama.

I gave a half-smile and a nod. “See you guys later. ”

Tarini looked up and said “dinner at 9 at the mess then?” “yes maam, i said and left”. Dinner at 9 didn’t mean a date, you silly readers. It was a daily thing me, her, erica, dan, samar and tisha did.

Tarini

Exams were always terrifying.

Not because I wasn't prepared, I always *was*. Notes? Highlighted. Mind maps? Done. Revision? On point. And yet, somehow, I almost always walked out with a result that didn't live up to the story I told myself while writing.

But literature... literature was *my thing*.

I didn't top the class, but I never flunked it either. It was my comfort subject. I was seated next to Tisha during the paper. And my god, this girl was a machine. Sheet after sheet, filled like she was writing a novel mid-exam. Her leg kept bouncing under the desk.

I think I did decently well.

Not great. Not terrible. Just... okay. Which never felt like enough. Because in my head, I always believed I wrote well. But the marks never seemed to agree.

After the paper, I didn't feel like heading back to the hostel. I decided to camp out in the college library and work on the co-authored book instead.

The library was unusually full, seniors lounging with airpods, and a few familiar faces from my batch.

And then in the far corner, I spotted *him*

Samar, earbuds in, hunched over his iPad.

"Samar, can I sit here?" I asked, pointing to the seat beside him.

He looked up, smiled, and nodded. "Yes, yes. Come. "

I dumped my bag, sat down, and glanced at his screen.

“Wait... seriously? *Harry Potter*?”

He paused. “What? You don’t like it?”

I smirked. “Of course I love it. But it’s just weird to see someone watching *Harry Potter* now. I don’t know it’s like running into your childhood best friend in a grocery store. ”

I pulled out my phone to play some music.

Connected my Bluetooth. Or at least, I *tried to*.

Samar chuckled and slid one of his AirPods toward me. “No big deal. Here,” he said. And handed me one of his airpodes.

He popped the other one into his ear, then opened Spotify and hit play on a playlist Old Hindi classics started drifting through the earbud.

“You like?” he asked,

“I love,” I said.

After almost two hours, we decided to grab some chai nearby to shake off the sleepiness. The university air had this strange way of leaving students tired and oily within, what, six hours?

“So, you have no siblings? What does that even feel like? I bet you grew up with all sorts of privileges,” Samar said as we waited by the chai counter, easing into small talk.

“That’s a very accurate prediction, Samar,” I said, looking at him. “I did own a mini Mercedes at the age of two and grew up in an Apple ecosystem,” I added, laughing. Then I said more sincerely, “But really privileges, yes. I had my own set. I got super close to both my parents. It’s honestly scary how much I share with them. I had my own room, never had to split toffees with any creature, and I saw my parents grow up alongside me. ”

“That’s... really different, Tarini,” Samar said after a pause. “Seeing people close with their parents feels like a foreign concept to me. My parents mostly just know me as the middle son. But yeah I’m close to Bhaiya and my little sister. ”

“I bet your sister is the most loved one in the family. ” I said, smiling.

“That’s actually not wrong,” Samar admitted with a dramatic sigh. “Aashi is seven years younger than me, which makes her the baby of the house. So yes, she gets all the attention in the world. ”

“What about your brother?” I asked, genuinely curious now.

“Ishaan Bhaiya? He’s two years older than me. Doing medicine in Chandigarh,” Samar said, his tone shifting slightly. “And no, he gets zero attention at home. He’s the son who taught himself everything. Switched from engineering to medicine, moved out at 17, told Baba about his girlfriend at 13. He’s the rebel. But a good one. He does all the stereotypical ‘bad’ things and somehow ends up opening doors for me and Aashi. ”

“So you’re the perfect son of the house?” I asked, laughing.

“Yes, angel,” he said with a playful grin.

Samar really did have that golden retriever energy loyal, kind, and the kind of warmth that makes you forget the cold outside.

Anirudh

“Anirudh?” I heard a voice. “Seen Samar anywhere?” It was Tisha.

It was past lunch, and I was looking for Samar too. I’d noticed Tarini was missing as well. I tried fooling myself they were *definitely* not together, right?

“I don’t know, Tisha. I can help you find him though,” I offered.

“Han, chalo,” Tisha said, grabbing my hand and practically dragging me out of the mess.

And then we saw them.

What were these two creatures doing near a chai point? Drinking chai, obviously but still, this was weird. Samar and Tarini never hung out just the two of them. Not like this.

I glanced at Tisha. I could hear her voice drop low.

“Um,” she mumbled, her eyes teary. “Guess Samar’s... busy. ”

I knew she liked him. Everyone knew except him, apparently. And now, seeing them together like that? I could hear her heart breaking right beside me.

But what hit me harder was this sudden tide in my own chest. Why did it feel like I was falling into it too? Probably the exam nerves. Yeah, that had to be it.

“Tisha, wait here I’ll call them. Don’t read too much into this. It’s probably just a coincidence,” I said, trying to comfort her while lowkey talking to myself.

“Anirudh... he’s *totally* into her,” Tisha whispered, clutching my arm for support. “He doesn’t even drink chai. But look at them for Tarini, he’s here, sipping away. ”

I knew what to do.

I grew up with Didi and Ishita, and between the two of them, I’ve seen heartbreak in every possible shade.

“Tisha, you got this. You’re stronger than this,” I said, and in a moment of misplaced macho energy, I hit the pillar next to us.

And *damn*, it hurt more than expected. I shook my hand, wincing, and let out a laugh.

Tisha laugh-cried too. “Chalo,” she said. “Let’s go call them. Erica and Dan are waiting upstairs. ”

I usually didn’t take calls during dinner. I genuinely enjoyed the company of my new friends. But today, I saw Ishita’s name flashing on my screen *7 missed calls*. That was strange. She *never* called.

I freaked out and immediately FaceTimed her.

“Anirudh,” she said, her voice low, almost breaking.

I needed headphones. I whispered for AirPods, and Tarini, seated right next to me, silently handed me hers. She glanced at the screen and looked kind of... disappointed? Maybe she was one of those people who hated calls at the dinner table.

“Han, Ishita? What happened?” I asked, concern growing. Her eyes were red. She’d been crying.

“Can you come home?” she said, her voice trembling. “I feel... lonely. ”

“Amit left for Bombay last week, Vihaan’s busy with boards, and Nani.. ” she choked on the words.

“Nani?” I asked sharply.

“She had a heart attack. ”

“What? Is she okay?”

“She’s still in the hospital,” she said quietly.

After her parents' separation, she'd grown closest to my Didi, her brother Vihaan, and her Nani. Those three were her whole world.

"Please, Ani... I feel so, so lonely," she whispered, then broke down completely.

"Ishita, go home. I'll see what I can do," I said.

"Home?" she asked.

"I can't go back to Mom. Vihaan's with her. " she said, bitterly. "My home, Ish. My home," I said gently. "Mumma's always waiting for your visits. "

"Are you sure, Anirudh? Will Sushmita aunty be okay with it?" she asked through sniffles.

"Do as I say. I'll check flights, I'm coming, okay? I'm there. "

I hung up.

And that's when I noticed the whole table had gone silent. Everyone was looking at me.

Everyone, but Tarini.

She didn't even glance up. Just focused on her food like nothing happened. Then finally, she spoke.

"So... should I look for flights?"

Whoa. That was... cold? Weird?

"Sorry, what?" I asked, confused.

She finally looked up. Her expression unreadable.

"You're going to visit Ishita, haina? I'll help you find the flights while you pack. You can pay me later. Let me help you with this. "

She said it with a strange calm. But okay... maybe I could use the help.

Post-dinner, Tarini and I were in my room. I was packing, and she was looking for flights.

"Should I book the return tickets?" she asked, not even looking up.

"I'll do it. Not sure how long I'll stay," I said, brushing it off.

"Of course," she replied, coldly.

Okay, what was with her? Since when did Tarini turn so... cold?

"How many shirts should I pack?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"I don't know, man. Why're you asking me?" she snapped.

I exchanged a look with Daniel. That tone was *something else*.

"I was just asking for help, yaar. Ishita usually helps me pack whenever I travel," I said, trying to defend myself.

"But hey, plot twist I'm *Tarini*, not *Ishita*," she said, more irritated than ever.

That one hit. And yeah, it made me lose my cool a little.

"Tarini, I *am* grateful you're helping me, okay? But can we please keep this polite? I hope you know these aren't vacation tickets you're booking," I said, still calm. I didn't raise my voice, normally I might have, but younger Tarini used to get panic attacks when voices got loud. I wasn't sure if *this* Tarini still did. But with her... you never really knew.

"ARGH, ANIRUDH," she groaned.

Then, in a calmer tone, still visibly annoyed she said, "Okay fine, I'll help. Take three shirts, two pants. Use your cabin bag, not that huge damn suitcase. Put your iPad in your handbag. Don't forget chargers. I'll grab you a plastic bottle from my room, pack that too. "

There it was, *Tarini, back in action*.

"Finally. You came back to normal," I said with a smirk.

"Welcome back," Daniel chimed in, giving me a high five.

"Shut up, boys," she said, but this time she smiled. An infectious smile she had.

"You have an infectious smile. You know that?" i told her.

"I know" she said.

Tarini

I got lucky last night with Anirudh's flight. The closest one was at 11:15 PM, so I booked it. Around 1:30 AM, I got a notification, money transferred to my account from Anirudh. I figured it was for the flight.

The next day was some admin holiday, so I let myself sleep in. I woke up around 10:30 AM to find Erica still drooling on her bed. I got up, walked to the bathroom to brush my teeth, and casually turned on my phone screen.

27 missed calls. From an unknown number.

My chest tightened immediately. I called back. no answer. Called again. nothing. The third time, someone finally picked up.

"Tarini? Tarini? It's Ishita. "

Pause.

What?

Just her tone made it obvious something was wrong.

"Yes, Ishita?" I asked, trying to keep calm.

"Anirudh... Ani met with an accident. He was in an Uber on his way home when it happened. The people nearby used his phone to call the last dialed number, mine. He's in the hospital. "

She said it all in one breath.

"Ishita... Is he okay?" I asked, heart pounding, trying not to spiral.

"I don't know, Tarini. I was with Nani at another hospital when I got the call. I thought maybe you could come. I really need help. "

"I'll look for flights right away," I said, already pulling open my bag.

"There's one at 12 PM. Should I book it for you?"

I checked the time. 10:35.

"Yes," I said, running to wake Erica, narrating the whole thing while blindly tossing clothes into my bag.

I had exactly an hour and a half. Thank god the airport was just 15 minutes from the hostel.

Samar didn't even hesitate, he grabbed his car keys and drove me. I prayed the entire ride not to break down. But inside, I felt like I was choking.

I kept calling Ishita for updates.

The last one before I boarded: she had reached the hospital, and they said Anirudh needed blood. She was now on her way to the blood bank, and her mom was rushing to the hospital.

I stopped going to hospitals a long time ago. They always brought back the same haunting memories, me, lying helplessly on a hospital bed, fighting battles my body barely understood.

I saw Ishita sitting in the waiting area. She looked... different. Her hair was no longer a bob it was long now, tied back loosely. She wore a simple cotton kurti, her eyes heavy with worry and exhaustion.

"Hi, Ishita," I said, quietly, and sat down beside her.

"He's stable now," she replied, not looking at me. "Still hasn't regained consciousness."

A wave of relief hit me, but I didn't say anything. I just nodded, clutching the strap of my bag tighter.

"Nani?" I asked gently.

"She'll be discharged tomorrow."

Another quiet sigh of relief.

Just then, a doctor approached and informed us we could go in to see Anirudh. Ishita stood up quickly and followed him inside. I stayed back.

I decided to walk over to the reception and finally call Mumma and Pa to tell them everything.

I dialed Pa's number.

"Han Tarini, bolo," came his calm voice.

"Pa..." I hesitated. "I'm in Bangalore," I said, pausing for his reaction. I braced myself for a shout, complaints to Mumma, her turning it into a scene. But instead, I heard:

"Okay. Is everything fine?"

Odd.

"Anirudh left for Bangalore last night. I got a call this morning saying he met with an accident. I know I should've asked you before coming, but I did what I thought was right. Sorry. I panicked. "

"Is Anirudh okay now?" he asked.

"He just regained consciousness," I said, just as Ishita walked over to me.

"Tarini, go in now?" she said gently.

"Okay," I replied and quickly told Pa I'd call him later.

I was freakishly scared to enter the room.

I knew he'd been given blood. I knew the machines would be there. And those machines. God. never fail to drag me back to childhood, when everything was wild and uncontrollable.

As I stepped inside, my eyes welled up a little. My stomach twisted in anxiety.

"I did what no one else could," Anirudh said.

"Huh?" I asked, sitting down on the stool next to him.

"Brought Tarini Bose back to Bangalore," he said with a chuckle.

"Oh, shut up," I muttered, deliberately not looking at the machines.

Anirudh looked surprisingly okay. One hand was in a plaster, the other had channels taped in. The bandaging told me it was bad, probably a clean fracture.

"These hurt, han," he said, meeting my gaze.

"Must," I replied, gently running my fingers along the edge of the cast.

"You freaked out," he smirked.

"Of course not. You're Anirudh. No way anything would ever happen to you," I said, trying hard to hide the fact that I could literally break down at any second.

"Anirudh?" I began.

No, Tarini. Don't do this. Not right now.

"Tarini?"

"Where's Uncle?" I asked instead.

"Not with us," he said, eyes shutting slowly.

"Oh. "

"It's been six years since I last heard his voice," he continued, opening his eyes again. "Doesn't visit me or Ma. He meets Didi occasionally. "

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "Not a divorce," he added, looking straight at me. What was I hearing?

"Ma still makes extra dinner. Just in case he drops by. "

Where was this going? "As much as I love being Indian, I hate how stereotypically unwise some rules are. What do you mean my parents *can't* split just because there hasn't been a divorce in the family before? Isn't that just stupid?" he said, and I saw his eyes moisten.

"I'm still listening," I said.

"When have you not?" he replied with a soft chuckle.

"When I was twelve, Baba started a business. Turns out, the very next year they suffered losses. Thankfully, Ma had her stable job as a professor, so we were okay financially. But Baba? His mental health took a toll. His anger was never in control. "

He paused. I didn't interrupt. "Remember Akhil chacha? Baba's younger brother who stayed with us? One day, he asked Baba to leave. Said he was scared Baba would do something dangerous. Ma knew it. Didi too. "

"Then, right after my tenth, Baba packed everything and left. And although Ma knew it was for the best, she still hoped for a legal divorce. Not because she stopped loving him, but because love alone doesn't make a marriage work. You know that, right?"

I nodded, even though he wasn't really looking at me.

"Didi was always closer to Baba than I ever was. So, she still meets him. Forcefully, sometimes. Things at home got bad, Tarini. Ishita moved in with us. Baba left. Ma tried to stay strong. Didi slipped into chronic depression. A month later, Chacha got married and moved out too. "

I felt like a stranger here.

I didn't know any of this.

Was *this* why Anirudh had changed so much?

I always knew something was wrong, but I didn't know that the *something* was this big.

There was this strange hollowness inside me, and the room suddenly felt colder.

I reached out to hold his hand, instinctively.

But he immediately flinched.

"I have a *fractured* hand, Tarini! I gave you five months of college to hold it and now you're trying to break my bones? How mean," he said, and I burst into laughter.

"You know... Ishita's presence healed me back then. It still does, obviously," he said, his voice quieter now. "But a part of me always wished it was you who found me when I was a mess. I wish *you* were the one who was actually there, Tarini. "

Those words did something to me. They cracked something open.

But why did I feel like such a horrible person for walking away when *he* was the one who told me to?

He was the one who stopped showing up for me.

I still remember... the unofficial senior dance at Esha's farmhouse. He

didn't ask me to be his date.

I figured maybe dancing wasn't his thing.

But then I saw him dancing with Ishita.

She was sitting alone in the dance room, and he walked right in, took her hand, and danced. Although not a very couply dance, a very fun and goofy one, but it still felt off.

Yes, I felt off.

Because, damn, I was his girlfriend.

Now that I know what Ishita was going through... I get it. She deserved that moment, more than I ever did.

But still,

I *didn't* deserve what he put me through.

Not like that.

Anirudh

I was still in slight shock, Tarini had flown to Bangalore without a second thought.

And I could practically feel my brain muscles tearing as I told her the truth. The truth she deserved to know years ago.

The reason I never told her anything was simple, I *knew* she was already going through too much.

Her SVT wasn't under control. I remember how her parents would rush her to the hospital every other day, and I'd be at home, praying for my little, beloved girlfriend.

Her grades dropped.

She lost friends.

Her confidence was shattered.

She needed someone strong to lean on.

And I wanted to be that person. I wanted to be her rock.

But when I realized I could no longer *be* that rock, when I knew I was crumbling, I also knew I had to go. Because i knew, i had hurt her.

If I had told her everything, she would've tried to help me. Because that's who she is, an angel sent straight from heaven.

But I did her wrong in too many ways.

I didn't even realize how deeply I was hurting her while trying to protect her from the mess that I was becoming.

But when Amit finally pointed it out to me, it was like the last thread snapped.

I knew then.

I had to leave her.

I loved her. God, I *loved* her. I loved her, enough to bring Jupiter down for her if she asked.

But not enough to let her stay.

Not enough to let her love me while I was this broken.

Even if that was the only thing *she* ever wanted.

Back then...

I couldn't.

I don't know if it's my age or my experiences, but over time if there's something that I've realised it is that we were so wrong. When you love someone, you don't have to be their rock, you do not have to be perfect just to make them love you, and deep down I know if I opened up to Tarini all those years ago, she would've stayed. And sometimes, all you need is someone to stay.

In the evening, Tarini, Ishita, Ishita's mom, and Ma came to visit me.

Ma was worried, hovering around, repeatedly checking with the doctors if I was truly okay.

The head doctor finally announced that I could be discharged the day after tomorrow.

Thank *God*.

I swear I would've died if I had to eat that bland khichdi again. Specially if Ishita fed it to me again, she'd probably shove the spoon down my throat out of frustration. Aggressive human.

I had my eyes shut, so everyone assumed I was asleep. But I was awake, and I heard the softest conversation warm the entire room.

It was between Ma and Tarini.

"Tarini, I can't believe you came," Ma said gently.

"Aunty, how could I not? Ishita was helpless. She knew I booked Anirudh's tickets, so she called me. "

There was a pause, then Ma's voice again, quieter this time.

“Tarini, I don’t know how to say this, but it feels really nice to see you two together again. I never told Anirudh this, but I always liked you. And when you left Bangalore, things just... changed. He changed. ”

“That’s really sweet, aunty,” Tarini replied softly. “It was actually a total coincidence that I met Anirudh again, almost six years later, in an English university. I was surprised too. ”

There was another brief silence, and then Tarini asked, “How come Anirudh changed his mind? Didn’t he plan on doing accounts?”

“Yes, finance,” Ma corrected her. “He was set on studying finance. But after tenth, something shifted. He grew this scary passion for poetry and books. And I could see, *really* see how much writing healed him. He once said that some special friend taught him the magic of poetry. Crazy son of mine. ”

Tarini

We were still in the hospital when I realized Ishita wasn't around.

After the conversation I overheard between her and Anirudh yesterday, I'd been a little worried.

She had been crying hysterically on the phone last night. Something wasn't right.

I stepped out to look for her. She was nowhere.

Finally, I went into the ladies' toilet to wash my face, and that's when I saw her.

She was sitting on a small stool, facing the wall.

Her hair fell over her face, her body trembling.

"Ishita?" I said softly.

She looked up, pushed her hair behind her ears, and before I could say another word, she hugged me tight.

"This is too much, Tarini. I feel very overwhelmed. I can't do this," she said, gasping for breath.

As someone who, at this point, is practically a master at handling panic attacks, I knew exactly what to do.

"Ishita, listen. Breathe, okay?

5 things you can see,

4 things you can touch,

3 things you can hear,

2 things you can smell,

1 thing you can taste," I guided her, my voice gentle and steady.

She paused, her breathing slowing slightly.

“Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out.

Everything is under control. Nani is fine. Anirudh is fine. He’s finally here, in Bangalore. You have your best friend with you now

And I’m right here... if you need me. ”

And in that moment, I realized, this was *Ishita*.

The girl I had once felt so distant from. And that deep down, we are all one person if seen from a birds view, we all have emotions, and emotions get a little too much sometimes.

Anirudh wouldn’t believe his eyes if he saw us like this, holding each other together in the middle of a hospital bathroom.

I decided to live in Anirudh’s house for a few days, with Ishita’s mom, Ishita, Anirudh’s mom, and Anirudh himself.

After he returned from the hospital this morning, things got busy. I had my book to work on. And, of course, the journal.

In the afternoon, when Anirudh’s mom cooked us a full on feast, we all gathered around the big dining table.

It was huge. Just like I remembered.

And I remembered *everything* about this house, vividly.

When his parents would be out for work, He’d sneak me, ishita and esha in and we’d spend hours together just hanging out, worrying about the future, planning how one day we’d all get an apartment and stay together like the tv show, friends.

Anirudh’s right hand was still in a cast, so his mom fed him, spoon by spoon. Ishita and I fake-mocked him for being a baby. He pouted dramatically, as usual.

And honestly?

I felt... different.

This wasn’t the old Tarini. Something had shifted.

"I'll look for flights after lunch," I announced casually, setting my plate aside.

"Mad or what?" Anirudh's mom exclaimed. "You're not going anywhere!"

"Aunty, I *truly* am enjoying this palace," I smiled, "but I have to get back to college. "

"Tarini," Anirudh jumped in, "you do know we have the option of online classes this sem, right? I'll give you my laptop. Stay a couple more days. We can go together.

Anyway, I cannot go like this I need a bodyguard," he said, nudging his casted hand at me.

"ARGH, ANIRUDH. FINE," I said, unable to hide my smile.

"We'll leave in five days," he declared and cheekily tapped my leg with his under the table.

Later in the evening, I was sitting on their beautiful balcony, sipping chai, the sky melting into orange and gold.

Ishita came and sat beside me.

"So?" she asked, a little awkwardly. "How have you been, Tarini?"

"Great," I replied, even more awkwardly.

"I've got something to show you," Ishita said, handing me a mini polaroid.

It was a picture of us on my ninth birthday. Me and Ishita, best friends, laughing and inseparable. To think how close we were now seemed almost unbelievable.

"I still think you copied my blue gown, by the way," I teased, pointing to the photo.

"And I still *disagree* with that," she shot back, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

"What were those times, man," I sighed, taking a sip of my masala chai. "I genuinely wish we could go back. "

"I'm sorry, Tarini," Ishita said, her voice softening as she looked at me. "I really am. "

“You were my best friend. How did I ever do that to you? I don’t even know how to apologize, it was rude, inhumane. ” She looked down, guilt flashing across her face.

And then, the memories came flooding back.

Back in eighth grade, we had a science project. Ishita and I were a team, and I couldn’t have been happier, she was my best friend, and working together felt like a win before we’d even started. Of course, she didn’t actually help. Not once. And honestly? I didn’t mind. I’ve always worked better alone.

The real blow came on the day of the display. I fell sick, and she... well, she removed my name from the project and claimed all the credit. She was featured in Bangalore’s children’s magazine that year, showered with awards and praise. Later, she apologized, told me she needed this, that after all the scandals she’d gotten herself into at school, she had to prove she could achieve something.

But like this? By cheating her best friend? No. That was the day our so-called golden trio me, her, and Anirudh fell apart. It might seem small now, almost trivial. But back then, it shattered me.

“I don’t think I can ever forgive you,” I said, my voice steady. “But I don’t hate you either. I’ve grown out of it. We’re good. ”

I wanted to sound mature. I was mature now, wasn’t I?

“You know I didn’t mean it, right?” she asked quietly.

“I do,” I replied, though a part of me still questioned whether she truly understood the weight of what she’d done back then. That project had been more than grades it had been trust. And Ishita had a habit of this: lashing out or acting selfish in the moment, then later coming back with an apology, always heartfelt, always convincing. But I couldn’t let myself get caught in that cycle again.

Ishita and Anirudh had been childhood friends, and he never tried to push me into rekindling our own friendship after the fallout. That wasn’t me being cold. It was me being protective of my heart, my peace, and the version of myself I’d fought to rebuild after she broke it. “So, you seeing anyone?” Ishita asked, one eyebrow arched in amusement.

"No," I said easily. "That's an intentional choice. "

"Oh? Waiting for *the one*?" she teased.

"Not exactly... maybe. I just don't date for the sake of dating," I replied with a small shrug.

She smirked. "Please, your eyes are telling a whole different story. "

I laughed. "Nice try, Sherlock. But no right now, I'm just not chasing butterflies. If they show up, great. If not, I'm fine with that too. "

The morning was quiet, save for the sound of the clock ticking and the soft hum of the fan. I sat at the breakfast table, waiting for Anirudh to finally join me. He promised I could attend my classes from his laptop.

Five minutes before the class was about to start, Anirudh stumbled out of his room. His hair was a mess, eyes half-closed, and his shirt wrinkled as if he had just woken up from an intense sleep.

"Shit!" he cursed under his breath, glancing at the clock. "Tarini, sorry, sorry! Let's go!" he said, scrambling back into his room with an urgency that made me laugh.

I shook my head. Of course, this was exactly how I imagined our mornings would be: chaotic, but with a hint of charm.

The house was eerily quiet, everyone was gone. Ishita and her mom had left, and Anirudh's mom had informed me that our food was in the fridge and that she'd be back soon. I waited, watching Anirudh hustle to get everything set up.

He came back a minute later, carrying his laptop and two chairs. He placed one of them in front of the desk and set a pillow on the other. "You sit here," he said, pointing at the pillow. "Get comfortable. Class is about to start. " I didn't even have a chance to respond when I suddenly heard his voice loud, panicked, coming from his mom's room.

"Anirudh?" I called out, my chest tightening.

No answer. Just a muffled groan.

Without thinking, I sprinted towards the room in worry. When I reached

the doorway, I froze for a split second. He was sitting on the floor, his back against the bed, cradling his fractured hand like it might shatter further if he breathed too hard. His jaw was clenched, pain flickering across his face.

"Anirudh, what the hell?! What are you doing? Are you okay?" I dropped to my knees beside him, panic flooding in before logic could catch up.

"I'm fine now," he muttered, forcing a lopsided smile and nodding toward a hairbrush that had rolled a few feet away. "I was just trying to brush my hair..."

I stared at him. "Are you *kidding* me?" The exasperation came out sharp, but the worry beneath it was impossible to hide. I slid an arm under his good shoulder, helping him up, feeling the warmth of his skin even through his T-shirt.

"Just sit," I ordered, guiding him to the bed like I'd done it a thousand times before. "And please, don't do anything heroic for the next ten minutes."

He sat, obedient in a way that almost made me laugh. There was something oddly boyish about it, like we were sixteen again and I'd caught him doing something stupid before a big exam.

I bent to pick up the hairbrush, turning it over in my hand, unsure why I was even holding it. But then without thinking, I stepped closer and started running it gently through his messy curls.

The moment my fingers brushed his temple, something shifted. The quiet hum of the room, the faint scent of his shampoo, the way he closed his eyes for a second like he trusted me completely, it was all too much.

For the first time in almost six years, real butterflies took flight in my stomach. The kind that didn't just flutter, they swarmed. My heart was doing reckless backflips, and I couldn't hide from it.

It wasn't just the touch, or the moment. It was *him*.

The way he looked sitting there, a little vulnerable, a little embarrassed, but somehow at ease with me like nothing had changed and yet everything had. "Thank you," Anirudh said softly, looking up at me with a smile that felt unguarded.

I smiled back, hoping it hid the sudden rush in my chest. "Anytime,"

I settled into the chair with my laptop, but my focus kept drifting. Maybe it wasn't just about helping him out. Maybe something had shifted, and I wasn't ready to admit it yet.

"Tarini, feed me," Anirudh said, nodding toward the bowl of poha on the table.

I glanced at his fractured hand and then back at him, half amused, half concerned. "You're impossible. "

He grinned faintly. "Come on help the needy, you wouldn't leave me hanging hungry here would you?"

I shook my head, but I still picked up the spoon. "Only this once. "

"Sure," he said, with a tone that made me suspect he didn't believe a word of it.

Seventy-two hours ago, I was giving this boy the coldest treatment known to humankind, and now... here I was, feeding him breakfast? Voluntarily?

What was I, his personal nurse?

No, Tarini. This is called *basic human decency*. That's all. Nothing more.

I hadn't had a serious crush in years, so I wouldn't exactly recognise the signs even if they were skywriting above my head. And honestly? I wasn't looking for them. Not here. Not with him.

Anirudh Sisodia was... fine. A good friend. Maybe even the kind of guy who'd make a great boyfriend.

Just strictly speaking, not mine.

I kept feeding him, and he kept eating, casually recording the lecture for us to make notes later, like this was the most ordinary thing in the world.

"Anirudh, can I ask you something?" I said lightly.

"I mean, I doubt the gareeb would keep getting fed if he said no," he teased, giving me a sideways smile.

I smirked back, but didn't waste time.

"Why did Ishita call me?"

Of all people, she could have called Vivek, Rishabh Bhaiya, Daniel, Samar... anyone. I was sure she had all their numbers.

But she called me.

“I don’t know,” Anirudh shrugged. “Maybe she thought you needed a break? I don’t know what goes on in that crazy brain of hers, Tarini. ”

Anirudh

I knew exactly why Ishita had called Tarini out of all the people she could. Last night, when I saw them talking out on the balcony, it took me back to the three of us in kindergarten, building crooked little sandcastles in the backyard of Ishita's nani's house all summer. Back when nothing could break us.

Later that night, I asked her straight. "Why Tarini?" Her answer... it felt like she was holding up a mirror. Showing me a version of myself I hadn't looked at in years.

"Be honest, Anirudh. Every time you've felt weak, every time something's broken you, you've wanted Tarini. You've always wanted her to be the one who got to you first. We've been friends for as long as I can remember, Ani, but the version you are with her... it's the rawest you ever get. And I've missed that version of you. I never told you this, but when she's around, you just *are*. No guard, no act.

I wanted her there for you. I wanted you to get better. And I know you are, but I also know only she can bring that version of you back. I know you, and I know her. And I genuinely hope you find your way back to each other. Because that's where you both belong. To each other. "

There are a hundred reasons why I could avoid Tarini. A hundred reasons why I should. And maybe it's not that I can't stay away... it's that I don't see the point in trying to stay away.

"TARINI YAAR, JALDI!" I yelled, first thing in the morning.

Today, Tarini, Ishita, and I were heading to our school. The place where it all began.

"WAIT, ANIRUDH! STOP BEING SUCH A DAD, I CAN'T FIND MY JHUMKA!" she yelled back.

I walked over to the guest room where she was staying and found her standing there in a red kurti and white pants.

The second I saw her, I paused. She didn't line her eyes with kohl anymore, her hair was usually tied back, her nails no longer freshly manicured, but there was still something in the way she stood, searching, focused, that made me forget why I'd come into the room in the first place.

"Can't find my jhumka," she muttered under her breath.

"Check your suitcase, I'll look through your handbag," I offered. (Seriously, why do girls stash random jewellery in every bag? And wasn't she here in Bangalore to visit a friend who'd had an accident?)

"There," I said, holding up a pair of earrings. "I'm looking for *jhumkas*, Anirudh. These are *chandbaalis*," she said, giving me a murderous look.

"What the hell, man. Chalo, niklo!" I said, grabbing her wrist and pulling her out of the room. Normally, I wouldn't mind waiting for her all morning. But not today, we were already running late.

We had to be there by the first recess bell. 10 AM sharp.

We were waiting for our auto when I spotted a familiar figure standing across the street, just outside my building.

Samar. Samar?

What on earth was he doing here?

"Tarini!" His voice cut through the air as he jogged across, pulling her into a tight embrace before I could even process the moment.

"You look incredible, Tarini! Where are you headed?" he asked, holding her just a fraction longer than necessary. "SAMAR! Oh my God, what a surprise!" Tarini's voice was bright, almost too bright, ringing against my eardrums.

I kept my expression neutral, though my jaw tensed.

"Anirudh, my man, how are you now? Hope you're doing well," Samar said, finally glancing at me. His eyes flickered for a second, assessing, as if weighing unspoken things. I gave a curt nod, my voice staying lodged somewhere between my chest and throat.

"And you pretty woman must be Ishita," he said, offering his hand with the easy charm of someone who knew exactly how to be liked. Ishita returned it with a warm, polite smile.

But my mind wasn't on introductions. It was on the fact that Samar was here, and the thousand questions that raised.

"I saw you guys attending online classes and thought I needed a break too," he continued, flashing a grin that seemed almost rehearsed. "So I tracked Tarini's location and came over. We can all fly back together whenever you want. "

Wait.

Tracked her location?

Why was she even sharing it with him? But the bigger question was did he think we were vacationing here?

Tarini glanced away for a beat, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Samar didn't notice, or maybe he did and didn't care.

"We're actually headed to our school St. Pauls" Ishita said, breaking the moment.

"Perfect. I'll join you," Samar replied, handing his luggage to the security guard without hesitation, as though this had been his plan all along. "Let's take two autos," Tarini suggested, her voice light but her eyes darting briefly toward me.

"Yeah," Samar said casually, his tone deliberately unbothered. "Me and Tarini can go in one, and you two can take the other. "

Right then, Ishita spoke up.

"I was thinking... maybe Tarini and I can go together. It's been a while since we chatted properly. You and Anirudh can take the other one. School's not far bas pandrah minute from here, without traffic. "

Odd thing to say.

Before I could process it, she added,

"Anirudh, you forgot your dawai. Let's quickly go and have it. You guys wait here. " I hadn't forgotten any medicine.

But Ishita didn't wait for me to protest she grabbed my hand and steered me toward the lift.

"Anirudh," she said once the doors slid shut, her eyes sharp and unblinking, "what am I missing here?"

"What?" I blinked at her. "Is Samar her boyfriend?"

"No! What the hell, no way. Tarini doesn't like him like that. "

Her arms crossed. "You are clearly, totally, fully in love with Tarini. "

"Why would you say something so random, Ish?"

"Because you sound, look, and feel extremely jealous of Samar. Be honest, Sisodia do you still like her?"

"Of course not, Ish. " I said quickly. "I'm just... thrown off by Samar showing up out of nowhere. "

"I don't think so. " Her voice softened, almost gentle.

"Anirudh, I know you. I know the Anirudh who's in love. And right now, you look exactly like that Anirudh. "

"Cut the crap, Ishita," I muttered, brushing her off. "I'm just overwhelmed by Samar's *achanak* appearance. Let's go back. And stop overanalyzing this. "

"Ani," she said quietly, the edge gone from her tone, "Tarini's a good human. You two just... didn't have the right timing, maybe. You know you can be honest with me, about anything, right?"

"Yes, Ishita," I sighed. "Also stop with your 'right timing' theories. These are just marketing propagandas that matrimonial websites make to get you hitched, chalo abhi. "

Tarini

These familiar roads oddly made me feel out of place.
But also... so in place.

Like Bangalore was my home, and I had run away from this city just to avoid a handful of people, choosing some other city as my refugee shelter, even when home was right here, waiting.

It felt like the plants along the sidewalk had bloomed just this morning just to remind me how beautiful this city still was.

And I can't believe I'm saying this, but...
I missed Bangalore.
A lot.

I think Ishita understood what I was feeling, so she stayed silent throughout the ride, until finally, she spoke:

"Bangalore missed you too, Tarini. "

That made me smile. From somewhere deep within.
In almost ten minutes, we reached the place that had both shattered me and put me back together in the most extreme ways.

St. Pauls.

The school had always been led by strong women:
The principal, Ms. Esther, and the headmistress, Ms. Susan.
And I had loved them both, since I was a kid.

We entered the school gates. I felt a clutch in my stomach, nervousness.
That strange feeling of returning to a place that had once been your whole

world.

I glanced around and caught Samar smiling at me. "So?" he asked, resting a hand lightly on my shoulder,

"This school saw little Tarini too?"

"It did," I said, feeling a little more at ease.

The four of us walked into the principal's office.

Ms. Esther was sitting at her desk, but the moment she saw us, she jumped up.

"Anirudh? Ishita? Tarini?" she exclaimed, beaming.

"It's been so many years! How are you?" She pulled me into a tight hug. It felt warm. Familiar. She turned towards samar, then towards me again and gave a crooked smirk.

"You don't know this, but I've read all of your books. They are fantastic, Tarini. So, so proud of you. "

I blinked.

I had no idea she even knew about my books.

I never even followed her on Instagram.

How... ?

"Anirudh bought me copies of your books," she said. I turned, stunned.

"Oh, I didn't know this," I whispered.

Wait really?

I had no clue that Anirudh had actually *read* my books.

I mean, sure, he must have known I'd written them thanks to my occasional Instagram posts.

But I never, ever thought he actually *read* them. Except maybe the first one. Rumours had it- I had written the book for him.

"Go meet Susan ma'am," Ms. Esther said, smiling warmly.

And so we did.

Ms. Susan was happier than ever to see us. She chatted with us for a while, asking about college, life, our silly adventures, and then suddenly turned to me and said,

"Let me take you somewhere. Kids, follow me. "

Just like that, we were back in primary school again, lining up behind her, just like we used to when she led us to PT classes, little hands swinging at our sides.

Except now, we were all grown up.

Today, she didn't take us to the PT ground.

She took us to the library. The high school section.

And there, right in front of me, lined up neatly on a wooden shelf, I saw four of my books.

"For You, I Would" my very first book.

"To the Stars, and the Moon" my second.

"Aurat" my third.

And *"If You Find Me"* my fourth.

My favorite.

I stood frozen for a second, just taking it all in.

"If You Find Me" was a love story.

A story about second chances.

I had written it a year after the breakup, back when I still thought that maybe, just maybe, Anirudh and I had a second chance waiting for us somewhere down the road. How silly of me. How achingly hopeful.

But somehow, that book born from a heart full of old dreams and stubborn hope, had turned out to be my bestseller.

I would be lying if I said I didn't have tears in my eyes, because I did.

"The school is so proud of you," Ms. Susan said, giving me a gentle tap on the shoulder.

"So are we," Ishita added, pulling me into a hug which suddenly turned into a full-on group hug as Anirudh and Samar joined in.

Aw, how cute, you'll say.

But honestly? I was lowkey suffocated.

But this kind of suffocation?

I like.

After a little school tour, we left.

“Should we go to Commercial Street and have some dosa and filter coffee?” Ishita asked.

“Anirudh, you’re okay na? Or do you need rest?” Samar asked him.

“If the question is about Commercial Street, I’m always ready to go. Let’s get a cab,” Anirudh said and booked an Uber.

Anirudh sat beside the driver to avoid any hand accidents and I got sandwiched between Samar and Ishita in the back. Samar was weirdly sitting super close. I could feel the warmth of his body and very clearly smell his perfume.

It didn’t make me uncomfortable, because come on, it’s Samar. A golden retriever could not make anyone uncomfortable. Except Anirudh, I think. He looks like he’s always super annoyed with Samar.

We reached Commercial Street, and I headed straight to *Delux Cafe*, surprised it still existed.

I used to come here with Mumma and Pa all the time. This was the place where I tried filter capi for the first time, along with their bestselling orange cupcake. So I ordered the same for myself.

I realized Anirudh was missing.

“Where’s Anirudh?” I asked Ishita.

“He said he’s buying some home decor for his hostel room,” Ishita said, casually ordering herself some food.

I was worried.

What would a man with a broken hand, who met with an accident just four days ago, do in Commercial Street?

Break his other hand?

So I decided to go out and look for him. *Why am I so concerned about him? Because I’m a good person. Obviously.*

I spotted him standing near a jewellery mandi.

Jewellery mandi? Whatever.

I tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and, for a second, looked at me as if he’d seen a ghost.

Rude.

"WHAT?" I said.

"Nothing," he muttered, quickly hiding his hand behind his back, very obviously trying to conceal something.

Just then, the shopkeeper called out, "Bhaiya, 250 rupay!"

Anirudh glanced at him, fished out some cash, and handed it over without a word.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

He didn't answer. Instead, he thrust a tiny newspaper-wrapped envelope into my hands.

"Take," he said.

I peeled open the makeshift packet and there they were.

A pair of jhumkas.

"Anirudh?" I looked up at him, stunned. I hadn't seen this coming.

It felt... odd. Straight-up odd.

"I actually..." he began, scratching the back of his neck. "Trust me, it was a mistake. I broke your jhumkas last night. "

I frowned. "What were you doing in the room last night?"

"I left my medical gel on your dressing table after class," he explained hurriedly. "I just came in to grab it but galati se, I knocked your jhumkas over. One of them broke. And... I know you love them. I didn't want to make you sad. I thought maybe this could be a cover-up. "

I wasn't mad at Anirudh.

I was just, shocked.

Shocked at how simple his thought process really was.

How innocent it really was.

In all the books I'd read, a guy giving a girl jhumkas usually meant something bigger, a grand declaration of love or something cheesy like that.

I have never been this confused about something. Ever.

Am I reading too much into this? Why do we have so much of anirudh in here?

Tarini

"TARINIIIIIIII!" Erica screamed the moment she spotted me at the arrivals gate of the airport. She and Tisha had come to pick us up.

I ran and pulled them both into a hug.

"Daniel nahi aaya?" Samar asked casually, putting on his sunglasses, while Tisha nudged Anirudh to give Samar a hug.

"Dan's not in town," Erica said.

"Not in town matlab?" Anirudh asked, confused.

"Aye, nothing major bas passport stuff. He's in Noida. Aa jaayega raat tak," Erica replied.

"Toh, let's take two autos?" I suggested.

"Nope. I got a Sudan," Erica said.

"What?" Anirudh asked, looking shocked.

"i mean, an Uber Sudan," Erica clarified.

We let Anirudh, with his broken hand, sit in the front. Samar took the back seat, and Tisha joined him. Erica and I sat in the middle.

Throughout the car ride, Tisha kept trying to talk to Samar, but he just seemed... uninterested. Maybe he was just tired?

"Acha guys, by the way," Erica began. "Midterms are in fifteen days. Then we have our mid october break starting very VERY soon.

"What the hell? Midterms are in fifteen days? Dude, I know *nothing*," Anirudh blurted out.

"So do I. Tarini will give us coaching. Won't you, Tar?" Erica turned to me with a smirk.

"Sure," I replied.

"There's also a ball dance," Tisha said suddenly.

"Oh right! On the 25th, there's a prom party too," Erica added.

Prom? Oh my god. I *always* wanted to attend prom. I love being in an internationally based college.

But wait. Who would I go with? I was *sure* none of the boys from our class would ask me out. Maybe I'll just not go with a date.

"So should the six of us just go together?" I asked, considering all of us were hopeless romantics currently experiencing just the *hopeless* part.

"YOU DON'T KNOW?" Anirudh suddenly shouted, making me jump.

"Dan and Aahana. "

"Daniel and Aahana are official?" I asked, genuinely surprised, and maybe a little excited. Daniel had liked Aahana since day one of college. I knew they hung out, but... woah.

"Yes. Last night," Erica confirmed.

"So Daniel's out of the group," I said.

"I'll be going to Bombay on the 24th night Dada is getting engaged," Tisha chimed in.

"What? Really? Congratulations to your Dada," Anirudh said warmly.

So now it was just me, Erica, Samar, and Anirudh left.

Unless, of course, that Tushar guy asked Erica out. Erica apparently *really* likes him. But Tushar... I don't know.

Two days had zoomed by, and I hadn't had a moment to breathe, let alone function like a human. I was drowning in notes I'd missed, and thanks to my ever-terrifying English History professor, I had to stay back in college till 7 for

extra classes. This morning, while I was brushing my hair and pretending to be organized, Erica looked at me like a lost kitten and begged me to teach her *The Alchemist*. Considering that it's practically the Mount Everest of our literature syllabus, I didn't say no plus, a little revision never hurt anyone. Bonus detail: she casually mentioned that Anirudh would be joining us. And to be honest, I didn't mind. Not one bit.

So post-college, around 4 PM, we dragged ourselves to the reading room. And I swear, the moment I stepped in, I was hit with the warm fuzzies of déjà vu. Back in our grade ten midterms, Anirudh, Esha, and I used to form this chaotic little study squad. Esha wasn't the "study months in advance" kind of person, more like "I'll study two days before the exam and still destroy the curve." she had a brain that was as sharp as a kitchen knife. Meanwhile, I'd spend weeks buried in books only to get marks good enough to be a little better than just average. Anirudh? He was the wildcard. If he actually cared, he could easily have given Esha a tough competition. But he didn't. And we usually ended up scoring almost the same, comfortably average, chaotically neutral.

I missed group studying more than I thought I did. After tenth, I moved to Kolkata for junior college and, well, didn't really find anyone who liked decoding Shakespeare over chai and snacks. Then came the whole Delhi University entrance exam drama, I didn't get in the first time, so Pa dumped me in a random English college while I tried again. One and a half years of academic purgatory later, I finally got into DU. And somewhere in that mess, I completely forgot how fun it is to study with people you actually like.

I was mid-rant about Santiago and alchemy and "listening to your heart" when I noticed Erica looking like she was about to headbutt the desk in her sleep. Anirudh, on the other hand, looked at me like I was revealing the secrets of the universe.

"Should we take a break?" I asked.

"Yes please," Erica mumbled.

I suggested a walk, half for the fresh air, half to prevent us from becoming furniture. But Erica waved us off like a sleepy queen on her throne. "You two go, I'll just... exist here," she said, curling up in her chair.

So Anirudh and I stepped out, and within two minutes of walking, he casually dropped,"Daniel's planning a promposal for Aahana. "

I blinked. "Wait, *our* Daniel? The Daniel who couldn't even spell 'balloon' last year?"

"Yep," he grinned. "He wants to order roses and get letter balloons that say, 'Will you go to prom with me?'"

I almost tripped over my own feet. "Who is this man and what have you done with Daniel? Also, I *need* to help him. There's no way I'm letting him propose with wilting roses and misspelled balloons. "

Anirudh laughed. "I'll let him know. He'll probably cry tears of gratitude. "

"Is this going to be your first prom?" I asked Anirudh as we strolled past the empty corridor.

Back in Bangalore, we went to an international school, which sounds fancier than it actually was but there was no tenth-grade prom. And by the time twelfth rolled around, I'd already moved to Kolkata, where my state-board school barely acknowledged school fests, let alone dances under fairy lights. I wasn't sure if Anirudh had stayed back at St. Pauls or switched schools after I left. I also had no clue if he'd ever worn a suit and asked someone to dance.

"Not an official one," he said. "But remember tenth grade? We had that unofficial dance-prom thing at Esha's farmhouse? Just that. "

"That was not an unofficial prom. That was... a party with snacks and a speaker," I replied, unable to help the small flicker of memory that hit me like a paper cut. Back then, I had quietly hoped he'd ask me to be his date, even if it was unofficial and chaotic. But he didn't. He didn't ask anyone, not even the girl he was *technically* dating(me). He just wandered around aimlessly and barely noticed me. I used to get mad thinking about that day. But now that I knew what he was going through, it made more sense.

"It was a prom," he said out of nowhere, as if defending it from the grave.

"Sure," I replied. Then I nudged his shoulder and asked,"So, who do you plan on asking out this time?"

"I don't know. Maybe someone will ask *me* out. " He raised his eyebrows dramatically.

“Mhm,” I replied, doing my best impression of someone thoroughly unimpressed.

“What about you?” he asked, too casually.

“What about me?” I mirrored back. “I haven’t been on a date since tenth grade. I think I’ve just been accidentally ghosting everyone who’s tried to ask me out since. Like, I’m genuinely bad at this. So if Erica goes with Tusha, which, let’s be honest, is practically written in the stars at this point, I’ll just turn up solo. Like some mysterious literary heroine who doesn’t need a date.”

“Right, the whole ‘I don’t do dates’ vibe,” he said, mock-nodding like I’d just recited a dramatic monologue.

“Exactly,” I said. “It’s my brand now.”

When we returned to the reading room, we found Erica peacefully knocked out on the beanbag, looking like a stressed-out angel finally at peace.

“Should I wake her?” Anirudh whispered.

“Let her nap,” I said. “She spent all of last night talking to Tushar.”

“Tushar Mehta?”

“Yup.”

Anirudh raised his right hand to his mouth, like he was gasping in a soap opera. “God, these D’Souza siblings. How are their lives so freakishly in sync?”

“Maybe it’s the DNA arrangement,” I said, and we both cracked up like.

We gathered our books and iPads like quiet little burglars and tiptoed to another table. I fished out a shawl from my bag and gently placed it over Erica. The new table was right by the window, classic study-with-a-view vibes. Anirudh opened it, and a soft breeze floated in. It smelled like petrichor was just five minutes away.

And then... I don’t even know how the next two hours disappeared. I went full-on tutor mode, no breathers, no nonsense. Anirudh, surprisingly, became the poster boy for academic obedience. He actually *listened*. He made *notes*. He asked *doubts*.

Who *was* he?

The younger versions of us would pretend to study, him distracting me every two minutes with a meme or a stupid joke. But this? This was new. Mature. Suspiciously productive.

Although, I still found it kind of silly to ask doubts in literature. I mean, come on. We're literally just reading stories. But whatever. Let him live his curious life.

When I went to wake Erica, I noticed something was off. Her forehead was burning hot.

"Anirudh, she has a fever," I said, panic setting in. "I'm taking her to our room. Can you grab some Crocin from the pharmacy?"

"I've got some in my room," Erica croaked, voice all shrill and heroic.

"Chill. Go have dinner. I'm going to bed. "

Anirudh nodded. "Tarini, go eat. It's already 8. I'll walk her to the room. "

I was just about to leave the reading room when I spotted Samar walking in, looking like he was searching for a lost treasure.

"Tarini! There you are. I've been looking for you all day," he said, grinning.

"Came here hoping I'd find you. And boom. "

"Oh, I've been tutoring Anirudh and Erica. Heading for dinner now. Why were you looking for me?"

"Nothing really. Just... chai peeyogi?" he asked, with a sheepish smile.

"Chai? At 7:45 p. m. ? Should we maybe do dinner instead? Hostel mess?"

He lit up. "Sure," he said, already walking ahead like he'd planned it all along.

Later, as we strolled through campus post-dinner, I glanced at my watch.

"Today *flew* by," I said. "First tutoring Anirudh, and now... it's almost 10? What time vortex did we fall into?"

Samar chuckled. "Time always runs faster when I'm with you, Tarini. "

That one made me pause. For like a millisecond too long.

"Anyway... I'm gonna head to my room now," I said. "I sleep early. "

"Really? When do you wake up?" he asked.

"6. Sometimes 7. "

"So early? I get up at 9. Which explains why I'm always *this* close to missing the first lecture. What do you even do at that hour?"

"Oh, um I jog. Around campus. It's peaceful. Quiet. No humans. " I waved him a sleepy goodbye and walked off before my cheeks could betray me.

Anirudh

Daniel woke me up at 5:30 in the morning. Unintentionally, or so he claimed. He was fussing over a flower arrangement for Aahana, planning to ask her to prom today. Apparently, the flower market only has the best bunches before 8 a. m.

"You should go for a walk," Daniel said, glancing at me between stems and ribbons. "You've been scrolling for half an hour. Go walk. " Honestly, not a bad idea. I changed into my sportswear, laced up my shoes, and stepped outside.

Where should I go? The thought came as I locked the door. Maybe around the college campus? That actually sounded perfect. Our campus is beautiful on any day and at 6:15 in the morning, it had to be something else entirely.

I slipped through the side gate, the air crisp and quiet except for the occasional rustle of leaves. And that's when I saw her.

Tarini.

Hair pulled up into a high ponytail. There was something about her that always turned my lips into a soft smile.

She was jogging on the far side of the fountain when "Lover" by Shawn Mendes began playing in my earphones. For a second, it felt cinematic. Like someone had queued up a soundtrack for this exact moment.

But my perfect little movie didn't last. The song switched to "jealousy, jealousy" by Olivia Rodrigo.

Wait. Hold on. I sounded like a teenage girl just thinking about it.

Still, the song fit the scene far too well. Because right then, Samar stepped into the perfect scene.

He jogged up to Tarini, looking utterly ridiculous in a red t-shirt and bright yellow shorts, like Shinnchan come to life.

I couldn't hear what they were saying. I was too far away, across the road. And I tried to remind myself that I should just keep walking. Because, why was I even feeling this way?

I didn't *like* Tarini anymore.

So what if she was with another guy? That shouldn't matter.

Maybe it was because she was the first girl I ever loved.

Or maybe because, all this time, she hadn't been seeing anyone... and that gave me this strange, quiet sense of security.

And now? Now that someone else might have a place in her mornings, a place I once held, I suddenly felt... replaceable.

God. That's bad, Anirudh.

I was just about to turn away when Samar called out, "Anirudh? You walk early too?"

I looked back. There they were, standing together.

Tarini's big, wide eyes met mine and I couldn't look away fast enough.

"Um, no. Just today," I replied.

"You both jog every morning?" I asked, keeping my tone light.

"No. Tarini usually jogs alone," Samar said easily. "I only found out yesterday that she wakes up this early. So from today, I'm trying it too. "

"Oh. Well... good morning, then. I'll get going. "

And I walked off.

Because I couldn't deal with the noise in my head, or how heavy my chest suddenly felt.

Another boy waking up early just to spend time with the girl I once loved? It stung.

Because I remembered being that boy.

Back during midterms, we barely got time to talk her schedule was crammed. Then one day, she mentioned she woke up at 5 a. m. for slow, mindful mornings.

Once I knew her mornings were sacred, I began waking up early too, just to catch those quiet minutes with her.

She became my morning ritual.

And I became part of her routine.

And now... watching someone else step into that space?

It felt wrong.

Unsettling.

Like I'd been erased from a photograph I didn't even know we'd taken.

I waited for Daniel to leave for college before moving. I needed the room to myself.

I skipped the first class.

And I called Ishita.

Because when you're in trouble, you call Ishita.

"Hi, Anirudh!" she answered, bright as always.

"Ishita... you were right," I blurted out before I could stop myself. "I never dated after Tarini because I never got over her. She was out of sight for years, but never out of mind. I didn't even know I missed her this much until now. And now that I finally get to see her, talk to her, it feels like she's slipping away. I missed her all of these years, but now that she's actually around, i miss her the most. I got too late, Ishita. " What was I even saying? Do I actually like her?

Like-like her?

"Anirudh... are you sure?" Ishita asked gently.

"I don't know, Ishita. I'm just... happy when she's around, and I want more of that. More of *her*. Seeing her with Samar boils my blood. I don't know, Ish. I absolutely don't know. I can't zen myself down and I'm SO CONFUSED. ?"

By this point, I was done.

Exhausted. Mentally, emotionally, cosmically drained.

Too many thoughts. Too much insecurity. I didn't know how to hold it all anymore.

"Anirudh... find out," she said, her voice suddenly sharper, almost cutting through the fog in my head. "Do you like her? Because I can't answer that for you, haina?"

I sat there, trying to gather whatever was left of me.
Reminding myself, again that it's okay to not be sure.

But the fear of losing her?
That was real. And it was quietly eating me alive.

What if I take too long to figure this out?
What if, by the time I do, she's already with Samar?

There's every chance he might win her over. Okay, maybe *woo* isn't the right word. But then again, nothing about this feels right.

Tarini and I broke up on bad terms.
What if she thinks I only want her back now because she's put herself together?
Like I only want her because she's glowing again?

I don't want to take that light from her eyes again.
God, I'm so scared.
I'd rather break myself over and over than hold her and risk shattering her again.

Because I know she acts like this confident, hyper-independent woman. But I've seen her late nights in the library, breaking down after brutal days. I've read that part of her journal entry more times than I can admit.

She needs someone. We all do.
Someone who'll just *be* there.
Someone who'll hold her if she ever fell.

And I wanted to be that someone.
God, I still want to be that someone. But she seems drawn to Samar.
And Samar? He's Mr. Perfect.

Tarini always said she wanted a Mr. Perfect.
Not some confused, unfiltered Anirudh

I opened the journal to see how much we had written.

We were almost at the end.

I think we both knew the story wasn't good enough to get us a special mention in class. But we could probably still get an A. Maybe not an A+, but an A for sure.

Honestly, I have *no* idea how this turned into a tragedy. We started it like a fairy tale. All golden sparkles and rom-com charm.

Who would've guessed that what begins like a fairy tale ends like a *Jack and Rose* situation?

Or more like, an *Anirudh and Tarini* tragedy?

I won't lie. I didn't even want to write the book anymore.

The co-authoring thing was getting too complicated. Too tangled.

I wanted to quit.

But something inside me said:

Keep going. Maybe it ends well.

So I flipped the page.

"He came back. "

I paused, a little stunned.

"He came back, like he had never left in the first place.

It had been seven years since the incident.

Aakarsh and I got divorced six months ago.

Life has revolved around my son Ishan since then. And as much as I love his company... I crave someone who actually understands me.

Rohan came back. Back to London.

To mine and Aakarsh's home.

The country where Ishan's parents built a home.

And Ishan's mom made a mistake.

That mistake was called Rohan.

After the divorce, I was heartbroken. But then I just... knew.

I had to be rock-solid.

If not for me, then at least for Ishan. I changed my job.

I work at a government-owned finance company now, future job security.

And then Rohan stepped back into my life. Just when I needed someone the most.

Yet, I let go of him. For me.

Seven years ago, when he asked me to marry him, I was hyper-dependent on him. He was everything. My safety net. My comfort. My compass.

I misunderstood what it meant to have someone there for you versus needing someone.

But I said yes.

Because I was scared of never being chosen again.

When he broke the engagement a month before the wedding, I knew,

I could never let myself love someone the way I loved him.

Because love... made me weak.

So, so weak.

Mom and Dad arranged my wedding to businessman Aakarsh Chabra three years later.

I didn't have much choice.

I won't lie. A part of me still believed in love.

Like the kind they show in the movies. I thought maybe Aakarsh and I would fall for each other, eventually.

But my heart,

Well that kept wandering back to Rohan.

And Aakarsh... he didn't even try to make it work.

He was nice. The bare minimum kind of nice.

Birthday gifts. Fancy anniversary dinners. Office parties.

He got me a nanny after Ishan was born. Bought me medicines.

He did love. But it was never enough.

Even when I asked for the divorce, after four long years of trying he just said, "Fine. "

He's a great co-parent. But I'll never stop wondering...
If it were Rohan instead of Aakarsh, would life still be this hard?

Rohan would've made it work.
He always made it work.

And now that he's back...
I don't even know if I want him under the same sky as me. "

Wow.
I was... well. *Shocked*.
This was pure, But not the kind that makes you feel warm and whole.

No.
This made me feel like a criminal who just found his victim's diary.
Too personal. Too unfiltered. Too *real*.

Tarini

"Oh boy," I gasped the moment I opened my eyes.

It was earlier than usual, I'd woken up with a plan to revise for Historic Literature but the second I looked at my phone, I forgot all about chapter summaries and note margins. A message blinked on the lock screen. From Samar.

"Hi Tar, I'm down. Where are you?"

Holy. Shit.

I completely forgot to tell him I wouldn't be jogging today.

Crap crap crap.

"I'm so sorry, I completely forgot, I'm revising for the test today. No jog. Super sorry."

I hit send and shut my phone. I couldn't afford distractions.

But the universe had other plans.

A knock.

I practically tripped over my slippers to reach the door, assuming it was Tisha. She came by yesterday to revise together.

It was not Tisha.

It was Samar.

And before I could say a word, he pulled me into a bear hug.

A full-body, warm, slightly-too-long-for-friendship bear hug. At 6:45 in the morning. Cool.

“What was that for?” I asked, laughing, trying not to sound flustered as I stepped aside to let him in.

“I was worried. Your phone wasn’t reachable,” he said, looking a little too serious for someone in gym shorts.

“Samar... I *texted* you. There was no reason to freak out,” I replied, arms crossed.

He shrugged. “What if I just wanted to see you?”

Um.

Okay.

Samar has been acting weird lately. Suspiciously sweet. Too sweet.

Like that time he brought me coffee to the 24/7 reading room at 2 a. m., despite once saying he hated the library past sunset. Or how he jogs with me *every single morning* now, even though he used to proudly skip morning classes. Then there’s the book, *that one book* which I’d only mentioned once in passing. He showed up with it the next week.

And every time we hang out as a group? He practically shoves Erica off her seat to sit next to me.

I’m not clueless. Something is definitely up.

But here’s the catch: while Samar has been orbiting me like I’m the sun, *Anirudh* has gone radio silent. Like completely MIA. No texts, no calls, no eye contact. I thought we were friends again. Specially after the bangalore trip, i really thought i got one of my best friends back.

But now the situation, is well worse, he’s ignoring the group chat.

Me: hey y’all, wanna grab coffee from Starbucks? **Daniel:** sure thing

Erica: yes ma’am

Tisha: obv

Samar: chalo

Seen by Anirudh - 4 hrs ago

No reply.

Not even a dumb sticker.

“Tarini?” Samar’s voice snapped me out of the spiral. He was still standing there, awkwardly holding his water bottle like he didn’t know what to do with his hands.

“Oh, um... I was revising. I’ll see you in class,” I said quickly, practically pushing him out.

As I shut the door, I heard a voice behind me.

“You should give him a chance, you know. ”

I turned. Erica had appeared from god-knows-where, arms folded, her usual judgmental smirk softened by concern.

“Good morning to you too,” I muttered, brushing past her.

She followed. Of course.

“Everyone has prom plans already. Tushar asked me yesterday. Daniel’s going with Aahana. Most of the class has dates or *some* kind of plan. Samar’s obviously going to ask you. Don’t be so cold about it, Tar. ”

I stopped mid-step and spun on my heel.

“I’m not being cold, I’m being practical. And why does everyone treat prom like it’s the grand finale of our teenage lives? Anirudh’s going solo too. It’s not a crime. I can shop for a dress without syncing color palettes with some guy. Also, why are you suddenly so... boy crazy?”

It came out sharper than I meant it to. But honestly, I was exhausted. Tired of pretending I didn’t feel that constant tug-of-war between what I actually wanted and what everyone expected me to want.

Erica raised a perfectly skeptical eyebrow. “Okay,” she said, and walked off.

I *should’ve* followed her. Should’ve apologized right there because, yeah, I was being a jerk. I knew prom was supposed to be a date-night kind of thing, and maybe I was the odd one out. But going solo didn’t sound so bad. Did it?

Instead of chasing her, I turned around and headed back to my dorm to get ready for the exam. On the way to the exam hall, I spotted Anirudh huddled with Tisha going over last-minute notes. I started walking toward them. Erica glanced at me, then silently slipped away. Anirudh didn’t even look up. Just kept revising with Tisha like I didn’t exist.

Cool. Cool cool cool.

What was even going on? One minute I'm fighting with my best friend, and the next Anirudh's acting like we're strangers. Should I talk to him? Did I do something?

I mean, yeah, Anirudh wasn't technically my best friend (*I guess*), but it still felt... off. It took us five whole years to reconnect. Five. And when we broke up, sure, I expected to lose the first boy I ever loved. But no one warned me I'd lose my best friend too. Losing Ishita had already felt like losing a limb.

And now? After months of slowly scrubbing away 80% of our awkwardness he was back to being distant. As if I hadn't babied him when he broke his hand. As if he hadn't bought me those jhumkas.

So, here's the plan:

After this exam, I'm finding Erica, groveling for forgiveness, and then cornering Anirudh, possibly at metaphorical gunpoint and demanding an explanation.

The exam was Surprisingly good.

Like *really* good.

Like *dance-in-the-dorm-hallway* good.

So: step one, done.

Next up: Erica.

I spotted her deep in conversation with Samar, both animatedly discussing the paper. The second she saw me, she turned her back.

Not this time. I bolted after her.

"Erica! Erica, wait!"

Thank you, Usain Bolt instincts, she finally stopped.

"I'm sorry," I said, catching my breath. "I overreacted. Prom is about coordinating with your date and taking cute couple photos. You're allowed to be excited about that. And I had no right to act like I wasn't being judgy, because I was. "

"That's not what hurt me," she said softly. "It was you calling me 'boy-crazy.' You *know* that's not me, Tarini. It sucked hearing it from you. "

I winced. “I’m really sorry about that too. I didn’t mean it. I was just... a walking emotional hurricane. And the Samar stuffwell that is just a bit much for me right now. Please don’t push it. ”

“Of course,” she said gently. “I’m sorry too. ”

And then, she pulled me into a hug.

“So... now that we’re friends again, want to grab some iced tea?” she offered with a smile.

“Tempting,” I said, stepping back. “But I’ve got more pressing business. ”

Like tracking down a boy who’s ignoring me for absolutely no reason.

Let the treasure hunt begin.

Anirudh

Oh God. She was storming towards me like a bullet, and I just stood there, frozen. If there's one thing I suck at, it's pretending to be cool. After my call with Ishita, I'd rung up Amit her boyfriend and my childhood best friend, for advice. He told me to stay away from Tarini for a while, to see if what I felt for her was real. Sounded dumb at first. But hey, he's my best friend. I had to at least try.

Only, the "stay away from Tarini" plan was crashing and burning. Hard. The less I spoke to her, the more I wanted to. And somewhere in all this, I think I started to feel something for her. Not huge, not overwhelming. But real. Definitely real.

"ANIRUDH GODDAMN SISODIA!" she yelled.

My name in full caps. That was never a good sign.

"What?" I asked, already bracing for impact.

"Why have you been ignoring me?"

"Ignoring?" I let out a laugh so fake I cringed inside.

"Cut the crap. "

"I really don't know what you're talking about. "

"Okay, so listen. You've been avoiding me for days. Everyone's noticed it. What happened? Did I do something? Because *something* definitely happened. You even stopped coming to the library when I teach Erica. And don't tell me you suddenly caught up with academics on your own. "

"I just... had to focus more," I mumbled.

“Oh, and the group chat texts you’ve been ghosting?”

“I’ve been working at Starbucks. If you guys hang out there, I’ll join. You know it, there’s nothing for me to feel I will be there”

“Sisodia, *you’re not getting it*,” she said, her voice cracking. Her hands suddenly flew up to cover her face.

“God, this is embarrassing,” she whispered from behind her palms.

“I really thought we were close again. Like best-friend close. After five years of silence, I thought we found our way back to each other. But clearly, I was wrong. Clearly, I’m just some friendly neighbour to you now. ”

She finally moved her hands away, and I saw her face, tear-streaked and soft and broken. Something in me snapped. I couldn’t pretend anymore. I had made a silent promise to myself: Tarini would never cry because of me again.

But I was confused too. She didn’t feel the same way I felt about her... right? So why did this distance hurt her so much? Why did the idea of not talking again break her down like this?

Was I being delusional?

I pulled her into a hug. Just a simple hug. (Don’t get excited. No confessions yet.)

“I’m sorry, Tarini. Something came up. I’ve been out of touch with everyone, not just you. ”

She looked up, pulling back slightly. “Are you sure it’s not personal? Just because I cried a little doesn’t mean you have to make up stories to spare my feelings.. ”

“You’ll have to make it up to me,” she said.

“Whatever you want. ”

“Soupy momos. With chutney. ” Her eyes lit up.

“You don’t even like soupy momos with chutney. Right, Bose?” I teased with a smile.

“Oh shut up. You *know* I can never unlove soupy momos with chutney. ”

“Then why the drama before? ‘I don’t like soupy momos. ’ ‘I’ll absolutely diesel with the teekhi chutney. ”

“I don’t know, Anirudh. Somehow, soupy momos and chutney... they reminded me of you. It was *our* thing. The momo tapri beside the chai shop? That was our spot. And I thought if I told you I still liked it, you’d think I was being weird. Or clingy. ”

“How could I ever forget that place,” I said, smiling.

And then we were off, catching an auto to my favourite spot in Delhi, Bordoloi’s Kitchen. It was an old place started in the 80s by a woman named Ankita Bordoloi. Her granddaughter ran it now. I’d been there once before.

“Is Kaku’s momo tapri still open?” she asked, blowing on her steaming momo. “We could’ve gone when we were in Bangalore. ”

“It is. ”

“Still the same?”

“I haven’t eaten there in five years. Never felt like going without you. It was... an *us* thing. ” I said, echoing her tone.

“You know, after we broke up, I still thought about us. Talked about you sometimes too. It’s weird, isn’t it? How, when a relationship ends, we forget all the good parts?”

“We don’t forget,” I said quietly. “It’s just... the bad parts weigh so much, they bury the good ones. But eventually, the good memories find a way to come up. Slowly. And when they do, they remind us what it used to feel like. ”

“Like right now,” she said.

“Like right now,” I whispered.

I am sure. Like 100% sure i like her. Really like her. But i know it would be very un cinematic to ask her to be my date at a momo tapri. I would have to go back to dorm asap and tell daniel about it so that he can help me with the promposal. And i knew i had to be fast. This samar dude’s nose was practically everywhere so he might ask her out before. But i know tarini. She would not go with samar. I blushed internally. But because i know her i also know there are 88% chances she’ll not go out with me either. And

because i am the luckiest man in the cosmos i might have to go with samar.
Ew.

Tarini

Today was perfect.

I had my favourite soupy momos, with the perfect person to eat soupy momos with.

It was late at night, and I was just removing my makeup like I always do, when I got a call from Samar.

“Tarini, come down. I have to take you somewhere,” he said.

“Samar, are you crazy? You *know* our hostel warden changed, this one’s cruel. If she finds out I left the room at 10, she’ll sue me. ”

“Oh, shut up. You *know* you can come,” he said sarcastically.

“Okay, coming,” I said, lowkey curious, and left.

The moment I stepped down, he grabbed my hand. “Come,” he said, pulling me to his car. “Sit. I want to take you somewhere. ”

The next 15-minute drive took us to what I can only call *heaven*. It was a lake, a beautiful one. It almost looked like Marine Drive in Delhi. Samar got me a *gola*, and we sat down on the grass.

I hadn’t done this in months. Ever since I moved to Delhi, I barely got the chance to just sit on some soft grass and... exist. Back in Kolkata, Maa and I used to do this often in our backyard.

“This place is beautiful, Samar. I love it. ”

“I knew you would,” he said.

“How were you so sure?”

"Because I know you. "

"You don't. "

"I know you enough to..." he paused.

"Know me enough to?"

"Love you. "

There was a pause. A long one. I just kept looking at him, blinking.

"Yes, Tarini," he said, quietly. "I've been meaning to tell you this for a long time. I truly, fully, completely like you. A lot. And... I was wondering if you'd be my date for prom. "

I was honestly stunned. I did *not* see that coming. At least not right now.

"Look, Tarini, I know you're weird about relationships, and that's completely okay. You don't have to say anything. It's okay if you just want to start slow, like being my date for prom. We can see where things go eventually. "

"I don't know, Samar. I mean... you're nice and all. But a *date*? I never saw you like that. Don't get me wrong, I love you. It's just that I'm not *in love* with you. And honestly, I don't think I ever will be. We're just so, so.. "

"Different," he finished.

"Exactly. "

"I know, Tarini. That's why I thought prom could be a good opportunity to see if this works. I mean, half the people bringing dates to prom don't even end up dating them. It's okay if that happens with us too. "

"Why would you even want to take the risk of losing us?" I asked.

"Tarini, I already took that risk, by telling you all this. "

I thought for a while.

Erica might be right. Maybe I've been out of the dating game for too long. Maybe I *should* give this a chance. After all, he wasn't asking to be my boyfriend. He asked for a date.

And maybe, just maybe, I could let myself go on *one* date. Step out of my shell. This was just a trial, right? He was leaving the decision to me whether we'd go forward or go back to what we were. Haina?

“Will you give me a guarantee that after prom, I take the call? Whether we go back to just friends or move forward?”

“Of course. ”

“Okay then... I’ll be your prom date,” I said.

And that’s when I heard it, a sharp exhale

I turned and saw Anirudh and Daniel standing there.

“Daniel!” Samar shouted, practically bouncing.

“Guess who finally got the guts to spill everything to Tarini!”

So... Daniel knew? Not shocking.

What *was* shocking was his reaction. No squeals, no dramatic hand gestures, just a flat, “Wow. Good for you. ”

This was *Daniel*, the ‘OH MY GOD, I AM SOOOOO HAPPY’ Daniel.

Before I could dwell on it, Anirudh hooked an arm around Samar in a side hug.

“Great for you both. I’m happy Tarini Bose is finally going on a date. ”

He said it lightly, but the words felt... loaded.

Then he left, and Daniel almost jogged after him.

Something in me twisted, that quiet instinct that says *follow them*.

Not in a Sherlock Holmes way, but in a “*Hey, is anything wrong?*” way.

“Samar, give me a second,” I said, already moving.

“Anirudh! Anirudh!” I called.

He stopped under a lone, flickering streetlight the only one lit in the stretch.

When he turned, I saw his face.

His eyes.

They were red.

Five years ago, I’d learned what that meant. Red eyes meant tears.

“Anirudh? All good?” I asked softly.

“You tell me. Why’d you come running after me?” His voice was a mix of sarcasm and something else.

“Anirudh, kya hua? Why are your eyes red? Are you okay?”

“He has a cold,” Daniel cut in quickly. “We come here often for the famous golas, almost every other night. Anyway, we gotta go. ”

He tugged Anirudh away.

Wait. Hold on.

A cold?

And eating *gola* at midnight?

Odd man.

Anirudh

Last night was one of the coldest nights I'd experienced in a while. Not the temperature outside.

Tarini agreed to be Samar's date for prom?

Thank god I was there at the lake when he told her everything, otherwise I would've made a total fool of myself today by telling her how I feel. God, she would've hated me.

I tried to console myself by saying I was just *starting* to like her. Not that I was deeply into her or anything. Not that my world revolved around her. So I guess it's okay.

What's *not* okay, though, is the fact that I'm telling all this to myself just to convince myself.

I mean, this feels so wrong.

We have a history, a very harsh one. Maybe that's the reason we're like this today.

Maybe that's why a 21-year-old girl is scared of commitment. And why a 21-year-old boy is scared of the fact that he likes someone.

"I'm so sorry, Ani. Do you wanna go grab some iced tea today? We've got an exam day after, we can take a break," Daniel said.

I told Daniel everything the second I knew I felt something. Because he's not like the other Delhi boys I know, he actually has a soft heart, and it's in the right place. I knew he would listen, and sometimes that's all you need.

Last night, after hearing Tarini and Samar talk, it almost felt like *he* was the one who heard the girl he likes agree to go on a date with a guy who calls

you his best friend even though you absolutely can't stand him.
Reason? He's perfect.

And what does Tarini want?

A Mister Perfect.

And what am I?

Not even close.

"I'll study in the reading room. I'll join you in the afternoon, I've got a four-hour shift from 3," I said, and left the room, my course material in one hand, my personal diary and the shared journal in the other.

I decided to write in the journal.

The submission's in 20 days, which means we're just 13 days away from *officially* knowing who our co-authors are.

Almost everyone has their guesses.

Stupid Samar still thinks his co-author is Tarini.

Daniel thinks it's Garima.

Tisha thinks it's Erica.

Erica doesn't want to guess.

But the real question is... does Tarini know that *I* am her co-author?
Does she have any guesses at all?

I opened the journal to see how far she had come.

"A few days ago, while picking up Ishan from his school, I saw a face. A very familiar one..."

It was one of Aisha's entries.

And suddenly I couldn't stop reading.

She was writing about a man named Rohan, someone who broke her heart, who left her to fend for herself, who came back years later asking for coffee.

He was her storm.

And now that the storm had returned, she didn't know whether to run from it or stand in the rain again.

There was this one line that hit me right in the gut:

“Rohan came into my life like a storm seven years ago, and now it feels like the storm has returned to destroy whatever was left untouched the last time”

And I don't know why, but I couldn't stop thinking about how much it felt like it was about me.

About us.

But obviously, it would be weird to just ask her: “Hey Tarini, did you write this about me?”

Still, there's this little spot in my heart, a very annoying, hopeful spot, that keeps whispering:

This is about you.

You were the storm.

And maybe... maybe you still are.

“Arey, Anirudh? Yahaan?”

Someone snapped me out of my spiral of thoughts. I slammed the journal shut and dropped it on my lap like it was a crime scene.

“Tarini, hi. ”

“Don't you have a shift today?” she asked.

“Not right now. ”

“So, you're free?”

“Yeah. ”

“Toh chalo, chai pilao,” she grinned, already halfway out the room.

And I, like her loyal little tail, followed.

There was a voice in my head screaming, “*Anirudh, bhaag.* ”

But my heart? My heart was whispering like a Bollywood hero in a rain scene, “*Jaa Anirudh, jee le apni zindagi. Kal ho na ho.* ”

What does a guy even do in moments like these?

“So, what are your plans for prom?” Tarini asked, sipping her tea like it wasn't breaking me into a thousand polite pieces.

“Nothing much,” I lied.

“Kya nothing much? Who do you plan on asking out?” she pushed.

And suddenly, like an echo from another universe, I heard sixteen-year-old me yell, "*Bhai, ye mauka dobara nahi aayega! Tell her! Ask her! Be her date! Kar de yaar! If not for yourself, do it for me, I always wanted to take Tarini to prom.*"

I opened my mouth, ready to do it, ready to bridge the years between who I was and who I had become
But just then, fate strolled in, all smug and shiny.

"Hey, lovely," a voice said.

It was Samar.

"Good morning to you too," Tarini replied with a smile I hadn't seen in a while.

"Hi Ani," Samar nodded at me.

"Hi Samar," I said, stiffly. "How's it been?"

"What?"

"I mean, uh life? Good?"

"Yeah, even better now that *your friend* here agreed to be my prom date," he said, gesturing toward Tarini.

My brain short-circuited.

Prom *date*?

He wasn't done.

"She even let me book after-prom dinner at Olives," he said.

Olives? That place costs more than my entire bank balance and self-worth combined.

"Not just that, we also booked a limo. Tarini loves night drives," he added.

She smiled again. But this version of her? I didn't recognize.

Yes, Tarini loved night drives, but on my old, creaky Acura, hair flying, laughing at bad roads and worse playlists.

And dinner? It was supposed to be at Kaku's Momos, not somewhere with candlelight and quinoa.

Before I could recalibrate the disaster unfolding in front of me, Erica appeared out of thin air like a commercial break.

"I was looking for you guys!" she squealed. Behind her, I saw Tushar, Daniel, Aahana, and Tisha.

“Chalo, let’s go,” Erica said.

“Go where?” Samar asked.

“Prom shopping! We were having breakfast in the cafeteria when Tushar decided we needed a group shopping day. Oh, and Tisha can pick some outfits for her bhai’s wedding. ”

“Sounds good,” Tarini said, finishing her chai in one clean gulp.

Ever since the *Tarini & Samar* chapter began, Tisha had been quieter than usual. I got it. I really did. And I’d been trying my best to be there for her, sitting next to her during group lunches, cracking the lamest dad jokes just to make her laugh.

Once, she even told me I reminded her of her father.

And I swear, my chest hurt in the best way possible.

Because that? That’s foreign territory for me.

A father who tries to make you laugh?

A father who shows up for your big moments?

A father who stays?

Mine didn’t.

Mine left.

So maybe being that for someone else is the only healing I get.

“Anirudh, chalo!” Aahana’s voice snapped me out of my head again. Right. Reality was moving on.

And once again, I followed.

Tarini

Once we reached the mall, Erica's voice practically bounced off the walls. "GUYS, I HAVE AN IDEA!"

"What now?" Daniel asked, already bracing himself.

"Let the boys choose the colour of our prom dresses! And then they can match their outfits with ours!" she said, like she'd just invented fire.

"Sounds terrible," I replied instantly.

Because, one, *'our boys'*? What were we, a 2008 rom-com?

And two I was *not* about to match with someone who wasn't even my... anything.

"No no Erica, that sounds lovely," Aahana cut in.

"Totally," Tushar chimed in, because of course he did.

Majority ruled. Which meant the boys were picking our outfits.

Great.

By the way, that idea? 100% Daniel D'Souza origin story. I adore the D'Souza siblings, don't get me wrong, but sometimes they're just... too much. Like a glitter bomb in a quiet room.

Tisha slipped away toward the Indian section to finalize a few lehengas for her bhai's wedding. Meanwhile, Anirudh stayed glued to us, doing absolutely nothing. Not even pretending to look for a suit. Just existing. Silently. Like an unpaid intern on a chaotic film set.

Suddenly, Daniel popped up with a stunning coral blue dress. "Aahana loves blue. Do you like this?" he asked, almost shy. "I'll try it on," she smiled, and headed toward the trial room.

Tushar, meanwhile, found this *gorgeous* lavender gown for Erica. I swear, the moment she laid eyes on it, her soul left her body in a cloud of glitter. "I already love this," she squealed, hugging him before disappearing into her trial room.

Aahana came out of hers looking like a scene from a soft-focus dream. The dress flowed perfectly, but what really caught me was the way her face lit up seeing Daniel's reaction, he looked like he'd just witnessed a miracle. I couldn't help but smile.

And then I realized... I wasn't the only one smiling.

Across from me stood Anirudh, hands in his pockets, eyes crinkled in soft admiration.

Our eyes locked.

"He's so in love," he mouthed.

And something in me melted.

Yes, Anirudh had changed.

But deep inside, I could see a reflection of old me in him. How I was a silly little girl who loved love more than anything else in the world. The way I saw him smile now, was the way I smiled years back seeing other people in love.

And maybe, I was what Anirudh used to be. A guarded human being, whose deepest fear was to put his guards off, and letting someone enter into his little space. The space, that felt like black hole. Well I know they say, when two people tangle eachother up, it becomes impossible to let go of eachothers traits, and sometimes they even become the reflection of the other person. And if their's one thing that i know, it is that I loved anirudh, more than anything in this world, and anirudh, let his guards down for me.

Then the realization hit me like a sudden gust of wind.

"Wait. Where's Samar?" I asked Daniel.

"No idea," he shrugged.

I turned to Anirudh.

“Where is he?”

“Let’s look,” Anirudh said.

So we set off.

We found him, eventually, laughing in the Indian section with Tisha over a particularly horrifying lehenga.

“I look like a squashed *mehendi ka packet* in this,” Tisha said, doubling over.

Samar burst into loud, carefree laughter. And no, I wasn’t jealous.

I didn’t even *like* Samar.

I wasn’t sure why I agreed to this whole date situation in the first place, maybe to feel something different, to step outside the lines I’d drawn for myself.

But I did feel... a little disrespected.

Not hurt.

Just... small.

“Samar?” Anirudh called out, sharper than usual.

“You were supposed to look for a dress for Tarini. What’re you doing here?”

“Arey sorry, yaar,” Samar said, casually brushing it off. “I was just helping Tisha. ”

And something about that hit an old nerve.

Because once upon a time, *Anirudh* had made me feel like that too.

The difference was, Anirudh was falling apart back then.

Samar wasn’t.

“Acha, chalo,” Samar said, placing his hand on the back of my neck. “Let me find you something. ”

He picked out a deep red corset dress with floral embroidery.

“This’ll look stunning on you,” he smiled.

I wanted to say: *I hate red. With my whole soul. Red reminds me of anger and blood and every Diwali outfit I’ve ever hated.*

Instead, I smiled tightly.

“Okay. I’ll try it on. ”

The second I saw myself in the mirror, I wanted to scream: *I look like a bedsheet stained with period blood.*

But I stepped out anyway.

“It’s lovely, Samar. ”

“I knew you’d love it,” he grinned. “You look gorgeous. ”

And just as I was about to close the trial room door, I heard a familiar voice.

“Tarini, look at this dress. ”

It was Anirudh.

Holding up a pastel yellow satin gown, sleeveless, body-hugging, delicate criss-cross back.

It was *everything*.

Yellow was my favourite colour.

And that dress? That dress looked like the start of something.

But before I could say a word,

“Anirudh, please,” Samar cut in. “Tarini will look like a banana peel in that dress. Rakh de wapas, bhai. ”

I gave a half-hearted smile.

Didn’t say anything.

Just turned around and walked back into the trial room.

After we got back from the mall, I went straight to the reading room to study. The whole *date* thing was a bit too much for my system to process, honestly. Four hours flew by studying before I realized it was already eight.

I trudged down to the mess to see what was on the dinner menu. Dal. Brinjal. Roti. Ugh. My taste buds instantly curled up and died a little inside.

I walked back to my room to find Erica binge-watching *Friends*, again. Probably her 287th rewatch.

“Dinner?” I asked, dropping my bag on the bed.

“Yaar, I’m gonna call for some Subway,” she replied lazily.

“I really don’t want to eat mess food tonight,” I sighed.

“Then order something, na?”

“My digestive system won’t support that decision,” I groaned dramatically.

“Acha, do one thing. Get roti from the mess, then take Daniel’s room keys from my study table and use his induction stove to sauté some veggies. We still have vegetables, right?”

“We do,” I confirmed, grabbing Dan’s keys.

Daniel and Aahana usually pulled late-night study sessions at her place, so Dan’s room stayed vacant. His keys lived permanently with Erica now.

Opening their room felt oddly strange, it was empty, and Anirudh was working late too.

I turned on the lights and headed toward the induction stove. It was placed right in front of Anirudh’s bed. Neat as ever. His study table was aggressively organized, almost like it came straight out of a productivity Pinterest board. I wandered over.

A little wall shelf above the desk held exactly four books. Mine. My heart did a teeny little somersault. There were photo frames too, one with him and Ishita, one of our whole college group, one with his mom and sister, and one old picture of him with his dad. He must’ve been around five.

And suddenly I found myself thinking, *What must’ve gone wrong?*

I remembered being fourteen, when Anirudh had morphed from my best friend to my boyfriend. I remembered him telling me, during one of those late-night calls, about how his dad once took him bowling, how much he loved it.

I was mid-reminisce when the door creaked open behind me. I quickly put down the photo frame and turned.

“Are you trying to burn my house down?” Anirudh asked, raising an eyebrow and pointing at the oil heating on the induction.

“Nope, just making dinner,” I said, walking toward him.

“Your dinner is hot oil?” he teased, placing his bag inside the closet.

“Very funny. I brought veggies. Erica gave me the keys.”

He put his bag down and headed into the shower while I got to slicing mushrooms.

“Did you eat already?” I asked, halfway through the babycorns.

“Nope,” he said.

“You want me to sauté a little extra? Join me?”

“Sure,” he said with a shrug. I didn’t expect him to say yes.

Ten minutes later, we were sitting cross-legged on the floor, plates in hand. The room smelt like garlicky heaven.

“So, how was your day?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“It was great, actually. Got my salary today,” he said, smiling wide.

That smile held something different, maturity. Like he’d seen and survived more than most people our age. He earned, sent money home, handled his expenses... and still showed up for classes.

“Is this your first job?”

He shook his head. “Nah. I started working right after school. First as a transcriber, then a social media manager for a perfume brand, then a scriptwriter. Been hustling since I was, like, sixteen-and-a-half. ”

I stared. How did I not know this?

“But why?” I asked gently. “Your mom works, your sister’s an intern doctor. I saw your house in Bangalore, it looked comfortable. Do you work just to keep busy?”

“oh to work just to keep yourself busy” he scoffed, lips quirking. “Maybe some ultra-rich trust-fund babies do. But me? I work to save. I don’t want to end up like Deepak Sisodia. ”

He said it with such casual clarity, but I froze. He never mentioned his dad’s name before.

“He fell into debt when he had two kids. Then ran. Just... ran. Coward,” Anirudh muttered. “If he’d saved earlier, made smarter choices, maybe he wouldn’t have spiraled into depression. Maybe he wouldn’t have disappeared.

Mum earned, sure, but barely enough to cover our school fees. And we had to keep asking Nana Ji for money, even though he lived on pension. ”

He sighed. “I don’t ever want to be like Deepak Sisodia. Prevention is better than cure. ”

The air shifted. My mind reeled with a hundred questions but I only managed a quiet, “Does your mom send you money?”

He shook his head and asked, “Do your parents?”

“They do,” I said. “But I mostly earn through my books. And my Instagram page. I do scripting for ads too. Pays decently. ”

“Does your first book still sell?”

“Yup,” I said, pride blooming in my chest.

The one time I truly felt proud of myself was when that first book became a bestseller five years ago. I still remember walking into bookstores and seeing my name on the display. And my Instagram exploding from 500 to 15, 000 followers in two months. Sounds like a small thing now, but at the age of sixteen, it meant so much more.

“Tarini, can I ask you something?” he said as we cleaned up the floor and packed away the plates.

“Sure. ”

“What’s going on between you and Samar? You two don’t really... you know...”

“Look like a couple?” I finished for him with a crooked smile.

“Yeah,” he said, sheepishly.

Anirudh

“I don’t know, Anirudh,” she said, her voice suddenly quieter. “We’re not really *dating-dating*. The whole prom thing is just... a stunt. A public experiment. Erica said I needed to step out of my comfort zone, and this is me trying. But dates and PDA and all that? Totally not my thing. I’ve been out of the game too long. ”

“You hate the dress, don’t you?” I asked, glancing at her.

“I wouldn’t say I *hate* it. It’s just... not me,” she replied, rolling her eyes.

She plopped down on my chair and I sat on the bed.

“Are you excited?” I asked.

“For what?”

“For the new experience? I mean, Samar’s a nice guy. ”

Why was I being such a saint? Giving advice to the girl I liked about dating someone else? Who even *am* I?

“I don’t know, yaar, if I should be excited or not. Like I said, this is all just a test drive,” she said.

“Maybe spend more time with him? Could help you figure things out,” I offered, very much against my own interests.

She was quiet for a moment, then said, “I really can’t, Anirudh. Spending time with him just feels... wrong. Off. ”

“Why?” I asked.

And then she said it.

"Because he isn't you. "

The words weren't quiet. They weren't whispered. They *exploded*. Like her heart had kicked her mouth into gear without warning.

I forgot how to breathe.

"**What do you mean?**" I finally gathered the courage to ask.

"I mean..." she sighed, fidgeting with her fingers like she always did when she wasn't sure of her words, "you know, Anirudh, you were just... easy. Like, technically, you were the first and the only person I was *with*. And with you, I never had to overthink anything. I could just exist without editing myself. Maybe because we were built on friendship. But with Samar, it's like, imagine never having driven a car and suddenly someone hands you the steering wheel of an ambulance. *In traffic*. You get it?"

Then she cringed and half-shrieked, "Oh god, did that sound super weird?"

"No, no! Don't worry, I get it," I said quickly.

But honestly? I didn't. Not fully. Still, for the first time in months of being back in Tarini's orbit, I saw a glimpse of the old her, the one who opened up like a half-read book. Not because she said I was "easy," but because she was finally letting the armor crack.

People say she calls me her *old friend* to everyone else, but in her heart, I know, I just *know* I'll always be the first boy she loved. At least that's what Aisha wrote in her journal about Rohan.

And I know it's technically wrong for her to compare something new to something we once had. But I also know it's impossible not to, when the heart remembers something that made it feel safe. This time, I understood Tarini. *Fully*.

"I really liked the yellow dress, by the way," she said, changing the subject.

"Dude, that dress *screamed* Tarini Bose. How did Samar *not* like it?"

"Because the Tarini he knows is bold. Confident. Strong. Like red," she said, flopping back onto the chair like a philosophical potato.

"But yellow is soft. Yellow is gentle. It looks like what love would look like," I replied, trying not to sound like I was quoting her book.

“Did you just steal that line from *my* novel?” she asked, raising an eyebrow and pointing to the shelf where all her books lived like royalty.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” I smirked.

“So?” she said, getting up. “See you later?”

She rested her hand on my shoulder as she passed, and, she was gone. Again.

The Bollywood-crazy part of me wanted to scream “*Palat! Palat!*” in full Shah Rukh Khan style. But I couldn’t risk her thinking I was completely insane.

So, I let her go. Again.

The last exam. Two days to prom. And yes, I was going alone. Because, you know, “*I’m single, strong, and independent,*” right?

(Damn it, who was I fooling?)

We’d all planned to go for lunch at Aahana’s after the exam. She’s one of the best cooks I know, like, make-you-cry-with-a-ladle kind of cook.

After the exam, I headed back for a quick shower. But surprise surprise, the door to our room was wide open. Which was odd because Daniel wasn’t even in the hostel.

Could it be... Tarini again?

“Burning my house down again, Tarini?” I called out even before fully opening the door.

But it wasn’t her.

“Ishita?” I blinked. “ISHITA! WHAT?! I CAN’T BELIEVE IT’S YOU!!”

“It is me!” she grinned, arms wide, and pulled me into the kind of hug that makes your ribcage feel like it’s been home all along.

“How? What? When? WHY?”

She sat on my bed, smiling like a secret.

“It’s a long story. ”

“I’ve got ears and time,” I said.

“Well, okay. Not that long. It’s just... Dad. ”

Ah. *That.*

After her parents split, Ishita lived with us. Then her nani moved in. Then, eventually, her mom came back, stable, healing, and trying to build something again. She even got a flat in our building and tried everything to win Ishita back.

It took three years.

And Ishita finally slowly let go. But her dad? He’d never really left. Not emotionally. Not a single day went by without a call from him.

“He left his job,” she finally said.

“What?!” I almost choked. “But that was, like, a mega-prestigious gig in the Netherlands!”

“He said there’s no point in earning lakhs if he can’t hug his daughter every day. ”

I swear my heart melted.

“So... what now?”

“He’s going to Delhi first Dadi’s place. But I came to surprise both of you. ”

“Wow. He left it all... for you. ”

She smiled. “Anirudh, I’ll start earning in two years. ”

“Well... welcome home,” I said. “Oh, and hey, I’m going to Aahana’s for lunch. You *have* to come. ”

“Are you sure?”

“Obviously. ”

When we walked into Aahana’s house, I could feel a dozen eyes swivel toward us curious, warm, watchful.

“Hi, um I’m Ishita,” she said, her voice soft but steady as she gave a polite little wave.

Erica lit up and got up to hug her like they were old sisters finally reunited. Tarini, though, just smiled from across the room, small, restrained, like a ghost of something that once was.

And it hit me.

How inseparable they were as kids.

How time, distance, and unspoken things had turned them from soul-sisters into soft-eyed strangers. Not bitter, not hostile just... unfamiliar.

By lunchtime, prom fever had taken over the house.

Outfits, dates, afterparties, it felt like we were all at some glittery pre-Oscars luncheon, and everyone was secretly hoping they'd win Best Dressed.

Tisha wasn't there, she was packing for her flight tonight. And then there was Samar and Tarini.

Even in a room full of chatter and food and clinking cutlery, their silence stood out.

They weren't sitting together.

Not that they were ever the clingy, all-over-each-other type, but this distance was different. Measured. Deliberate.

Tarini didn't smile. Not once. Not even the pretend kind she usually gives when someone tells a half-funny joke.

And Samar, he kept checking his phone, the screen casting a cold glow on his face, occasionally glancing at Tarini with eyes heavy and hollow, like he was watching a goodbye play out in real time.

Then my phone buzzed sharply against the back pocket of my jeans, Mom. Her name blinking across the screen like an alarm.

I muttered a quick excuse and got up from the table, heading upstairs to Aahana's room balcony to take the call. The breeze outside was soft, the kind that usually calms you down. But something in my chest felt tight.

I ended the call and turned,

And that's when I saw them.

Through the slightly ajar door, Tarini was on the floor, knees pulled close to her chest, eyes red-rimmed and glistening.

Samar sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, head in his hands.

Even without sound, the scene was loud.

I saw him look up and mouth something, "I'm sorry, Tarini. "

And suddenly I wasn't sure where I belonged.

Should I stay on the balcony? Step inside and pretend I saw nothing?
Or walk in and pretend like everything was normal, which it so clearly
wasn't?

But I didn't move. Neither did they.

A moment later, Tarini stood up slowly, like her body was heavier than
usual. Samar reached for her, gently, like he wasn't sure if he was allowed
to, and pulled her into a quiet, aching hug.

And then she laughed.

That kind of laugh you let out through tears, not because it's funny, but
because it hurts and laughter is the only way it won't drown you.

I watched her mouth, "get her. "

And Samar gave her a smile that wasn't a smile at all. Just pain in a different
shape. Then he walked out.

Tarini exited the room not long after, wiping her face as if she could erase the
last five minutes. I waited until she was gone, then stepped out too.

Downstairs, Samar was saying something in a low voice to Dan. Whatever it
was, Dan didn't reply, just reached out and patted Samar's back with the kind
of quiet understanding only close friends can give. Samar left soon after.

Tarini returned to the table like nothing happened. Like her heart hadn't
cracked upstairs just a few minutes ago.

"Can I order ice cream for everyone?" she asked, her voice airy and light. Too
light. Like she needed us to believe she was okay.

"I'll have a vanilla," Ishita said quickly, probably just to fill the silence. Or
maybe to help Tarini hold up the curtain she'd drawn around herself.

And I,

I didn't know what had happened before I got here.

But I knew one thing for sure:

Something had ended.

Tarini

For someone who absolutely hated the idea of prom, it didn't feel fair for me to be this sad about my prom date leaving, especially when I was the one who asked him to. But feelings, I've realised, aren't always fair.

The day we went dress shopping, it was already clear Samar had little to do with my choice of outfit. He was kind, considerate, and yes, he liked me. But sometimes love isn't about kindness, it's about belonging. And somewhere deep down, I knew I didn't belong with Samar. Not after that night in Anirudh's dorm room, eating dinner cross-legged on the floor, laughing over childhood memories.

Something about that night, about the way Anirudh spoke to me, felt like returning home. Like being remembered by someone when I'd forgotten myself.

He reminded me of who I was, not by telling me, but in the way he noticed the small things. The way my eyes lingered on the yellow dress. The way I scrunched my nose at the mention of the overpriced restaurant and limo. That, I believe, is what makes a connection real. It's not just love, it's being known. Seen in your truest form and still admired for it.

Earlier today, on the way to Aahana's place, I told Samar everything. How I felt. How I didn't think we were meant to be. And how, I believed he belonged with Tisha.

I remember his response word for word, like it carved itself into me: "You don't, Tarini. I realised that during dress shopping. I don't even know you, not really. You're different with me. But with Anirudh? You're not just different, you're real. I saw the yellow dress too, but in my mind, it didn't

look like you. In his, it did. Maybe you were never mine. Maybe you've always belonged to him. ”

It didn't break me. It settled me, the way clarity often does. For the first time, I could admit to myself that the universe had been nudging me all along. Soft signs, quiet hints... and I ignored them. I was too scared of change, too scared of hurting someone kind. But what really stung wasn't losing a date, it was how rushed everything felt. No warning, no space to breathe. And I've never liked rushing anything.

I've always loved slow things. Slow mornings. Slow walks. Slow realisations that land gently, not like punches. But this? This unraveling of my prom plans, this emotional curveball? It was all so sudden.

The truth is, though I've acted unbothered, I wanted the magic of prom. Not necessarily the romance, but the feeling. The photo booth giggles, the warm lights, someone standing beside me, mine just for the night. I didn't care about matching colours, but I cared about being cared for. And even though I played it cool, somewhere deep inside, I wanted the silly, cuetsy night everyone else was so excited about.

At 7 PM, I glanced at the clock. The dress store would still be open. I got up, took the red dress I'd bought to match with Samar, and decided to return it. This time, I'd get the pastel yellow one instead, the one that made my eyes light up, the way Anirudh had quietly pointed out. I didn't need to match with anyone anymore. I was going alone. And weirdly, that felt right.

But when I reached the store, the store manager gave me this apologetic look. “Sorry, ma'am,” he said. “The last piece of that dress got sold just a few minutes ago. Some man came and bought it. ”

I just blinked, surprised. I stood there for a second, then quietly handed over the red dress for return. I could wear something I already had. It didn't matter anymore.

Still... it felt like the universe was planning something.
Even if I wasn't.

PROM DAY

Daniel told us this morning that Samar had flown out last night, to Tisha's. And I was happy for them, genuinely. But it didn't stop the hollow from creeping in. I felt...lonely. Like I belonged nowhere. Erica and Aahana did their prom transitions together. They hung out, went on double dates, it made sense why they wouldn't want me tagging along. It wasn't because it was me. It was because I was, well, single. Always have been, for the most part.

It wasn't a new feeling. Back in Kolkata, Esha had her boyfriend and a million other friends, always orbiting around plans I was never truly a part of. But I could never be angry at her. I knew, somewhere deeper than where envy reaches, that she was trying. She was sixteen too, just like me. Figuring out her life one messy choice at a time.

That evening, Aahana invited us over to get ready at her place. Erica was the most excited, typical, but I was okay too. Just wished, silently, that I was a little less... alone.

I wore my beige maxi dress, the one I'd worn a couple of times before. Familiar. Safe. I started curling my hair into soft waves, standing alone in Aahana's room while the others were outside, capturing their 'couple photoshoots' with Dan and Tushar.

Suddenly, i heard music. The music floated in from the balcony, faint at first.

You Belong With Me.

I paused. Taylor Swift.

I rushed to the balcony, heart clenching for no reason I could name. And then I saw him.

Downstairs. Looking up.

Anirudh

He stood there in a bottle green suit, hands in his pockets, wearing that stupid, downward smile that always undid me. In one hand was his phone, the source of the music. In the other, a pastel yellow box.

I leaned over the railing, barely breathing. "Anirudh?" I mouthed.

He turned off the music and raised the box a little. With a slow, deliberate motion, he untied the ribbon. Inside was a folded dress, pastel yellow, the one. *The dress.*

My breath caught. "How did you, ? It was sold out!"

"Too bad, Miss Bose," he called up. "

I laughed, an actual laugh, and shook my head, still not fully believing this was real. He looked so smug. So him.

I gestured for him to come up, but he didn't move yet.

Instead, he tilted his head and smiled, soft, nervous. "So... will you be my prom date officially this time?"

I froze, then felt the answer bloom across my face before it even made it to my lips. A tiny nod. A smile that curved downward like his. The kind we used to give each other when we were fourteen and pretending to hate math class.

He turned the music back on.

Think I know where you belong... think I know it's with me.

He looked up at me like I was still the girl who said yes to him back then, in front of a scratched wooden desk and a notebook full of doodles.

And maybe I was.

Because in that moment, the loneliness didn't just fade.

It turned into something golden.

I never felt this beautiful.

The yellow dress hugged me in all the right places. I curled my hair again, soft waves that bounced at my shoulders, and wore my favourite pink lip gloss. I hadn't known this day would turn around like this. A complete 360. I think I said yes for two reasons: one, because it was Anirudh. And two, for little Tarini, the girl who would've *died* to go to prom with Anirudh Sisodia.

There was a knock. "Is my date ready?" he said from the other side of the door.

Aahana nudged me forward, whispering, "Tarini, go!"

I turned to look at Erica, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"I'm happy for you, Tarini," she said softly.

My usual response would've been something like "*Chill guys, it's just a prom dance, not a shaadi.*" But this time, I only smiled.

I opened the door.

"I don't know how it gets better than this," he said, quoting Taylor.

"Okay, that's enough of Taylor Swift, Sisodia," I replied.

"Tarini Bose saying *enough* to Taylor Swift? That's new. "

"No, I'm kidding. I love it," I said, and laughed, really laughed. For the first time in days. And he smiled. Holy Grail. He. smiled. When. i. Laughed. "Tarini, remember how prom was our bucket list thing?" he asked.

"Will I ever forget?"

We went down to the basement of Aahana's house, and parked there was... a Nano.

Not exactly a head-turner, but somehow it felt like magic.

"Wait... Ani?" I blinked.

"I *died* to hear you call me that again. " He paused, serious now. "We've come too far to go back to 'Anirudh Sisodia' and 'Tarini Bose', haven't we?"

My throat caught, but I nodded. "Yeah... but the Nano?"

"Oh, relax. I didn't buy it. Just rented it for the day. "

"Rented a Nano?"

"Ashish Mama lives in Agra. It's his," he said casually.

"You went all the way to Agra? *When?*"

"The second I found out my competition was out of the way. "

"Cheapo," I said, teasing.

We both laughed as we slid into the car.

Anirudh

Can you believe it? Tarini was actually beside me in the car, *as my date*. Good Lord, I couldn't wrap my head around it. God, I just knew it, she's the most gorgeous human being ever. The way her eyes squeezed shut when she laughed, the way that pastel yellow dress hugged her like it was stitched by sunlight just for her, and that delicate necklace with *11:11* engraved, resting right on her collarbone like a secret wish she wore proudly. Can a woman really look this lovely?

Well, Tarini can. We reached the venue, and before I could get out and open the door for her, she opened it herself. I think she sensed I wanted to do it, because she looked up at me and grinned. "I open my own doors, Sisodia," she said. "Ani, to you, miss," I replied with a smirk, sliding my hand into hers. God, it had been so long since I held her hand. "It's the same," she said softly, her eyes meeting mine. "What is?" I asked, confused for a second.

"The warmth of your hand. It's the same," she said, smiling in that way that made my heart feel like it forgot how to beat. Today, I felt like the luckiest man on the planet. Not just because the girl I liked said yes to prom, but because little Anirudh, the boy with poems in his pockets and dreams in his eyes, finally got to take *his* Tarini to prom. Officially. We stepped inside the venue, it wasn't in our college but in a fancy hotel ballroom. The room was dimly lit, almost like an amphitheater without seats. It looked like something straight out of Netflix, twinkling fairy lights, moody purples and blues painting the walls, music thumping low through the wooden floors. We looked at each other in awe. "Oh my god," she whispered, eyes wide. "Look! There's a mocktail bar!" She grabbed my hand and dragged me to the prettiest little setup I'd ever seen. A faux-marble counter with glass jars of fruit and

mint, all under a chandelier that looked like frozen stars. "I'm surprised they don't serve alcohol," she said. "You drink?" I asked. "No... just, well, yeah," she shrugged. "Wow. That's like, fifty new things I've learnt about you in the last fifty minutes."

We laughed and mingled with our friends for a bit. Then, the announcer declared the dance floor open. As expected, Erica and Tushar were the first to rush in, followed by Aahana and Dan. I looked at Tarini, but she wasn't looking at me. She was watching Erica, a soft smile on her lips.

"She looks so happy," she said, eyes squinting with a little laugh. I was honestly freaking out about asking her to dance. But I knew one thing, I had missed my chance to prom-dance with her in school. I wasn't going to let that happen again.

So I stood up, reached out my hand. "Seriously, Ani?" she said, eyes wide as she got up. "You *know* I can't dance. " "And you *know* who can?" I asked, pointing at myself with both thumbs. "Be a sport!" I grinned, pulling her to the dance floor. The DJ played some kind of EDM track, which, honestly, was a weird choice for prom. But I was grateful. At least it wouldn't make her feel awkward. She laughed, tried to mimic my moves, and I couldn't stop smiling. She was carefree, happy, like a girl who had learned to breathe again. I felt like the luckiest man alive. Could this be the beginning of our forever?

Then suddenly, the music shifted, *Perfect* by Ed Sheeran came on. The room changed instantly. All the couples were slow dancing now. I looked at her. She looked at me. She wasn't smiling. She wasn't angry. She looked like someone had hit pause on her.

Then, slowly, her lips curved into the softest smile, and she gently placed her hands on my shoulders. I slid mine around her waist. "I remember slow-dancing with Esha in school during dance practice," she said. "But doing it with you? I thought I never could. " I laughed. This was her favorite song back then. I remembered little Tarini in music class with her guitar, trying to be Ed Sheeran, singing this exact song.

That's still my favorite version of it. When the song ended, I braced myself for another EDM beat, but instead, the DJ switched to classic Bollywood romance. *Tum Se Hi* started playing. I knew she wasn't ready for a full-blown slow dance with me to something that romantic. I could feel her hesitation

even through her smile. So I leaned closer and asked, "Tarini, should we go out?"

"Where?" "I made reservations too. " "Don't tell me," she said, suspicious. I grinned and pulled her toward the exit. "Race you to the car?" I teased when we reached the hotel driveway.

"I'm wearing heels," she said, exasperated. "Godddd," I groaned with mock drama, and we walked side by side to the car, her hand still in mine, her presence echoing in every beat of my heart.

We drove around the city, it was almost 8pm in the night. The girls had a sleepover planned at aahana's so we could be out late. We went to a lakeside park.

Tarini

“These are your reservations?” I asked, slightly surprised.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a grin.

“Thank god. I was freaking out for a second. ”

“Why? Didn’t *you* plan on some five-course formal meal at Olive’s?” I asked, teasingly raising an eyebrow.

“Even this lake feels like a fancy restaurant with you,” he said, smiling that soft, stupid smile that made it hard to look away.

And then suddenly, he disappeared for a second and came back holding *pink cotton candy*, light as a cloud and exactly the color of childhood.

My heart twitched.

“Pa bought me this all the time,” I said quietly, almost as if the words belonged to my seven-year-old self instead. My inner child giggled, wide-eyed and sticky-fingered, reaching for the sugar swirl.

“I know,” he said gently. “You mentioned that on the school trip in eighth grade. ”

I froze.

He remembered that?

So you’re telling me... Anirudh Sisodia remembered something I casually said back in eighth grade? Something so small, so unimportant in the grand scheme of things?

And yet, he remembered.

God.

What do you do when someone holds on to the little pieces of you, even the ones *you* forgot you gave away?

Anirudh

To call off our casual not-a-date situationship, and to finally, *officially*, ask Tarini to be my girlfriend, I planned something simple. Not a rooftop candlelight dinner. Not a five-star meal. Just... *Bordoloi's Kitchen*. I know. People usually take the girl they like to some fancy, overpriced restaurant for a big "will you be mine?" moment. But not me. Not us. I wanted this to be *ours*. "Chotu, do plate momo," said the guy at the counter, eyeing us with a grin. "With the *teekhi* chutney," I added quickly. "Nothing without the *teekhi* chutney," Tarini said, her voice dancing with that same childlike joy she never really lost. We sat at one of the two-seaters near the edge, facing the water. The place was tiny, almost makeshift, with mismatched chairs and fairy lights wrapped around bamboo pillars. But God, it felt warm. It felt right. I was melting inside. Not because of the spice, but from the nerves. Ishita's voice echoed in my head: "*The worst she can say is no.*" We spent the next twenty minutes taking pictures, mostly her doing all the clicking, posing, tilting her head in that signature way. I didn't even care how I looked, I just kept looking at her.

"I *have* to post this now," she said, holding up her phone. "This one is so cute!"

It was a selfie, our heads touching, her eyes closed, a wide smile on her face, and me with a dumb, dorky expression. But somehow, the photo worked. She looked like the embodiment of sunshine. I looked like someone who had just been hit by it. The waiter brought our plate of momos, steam curling into the soft night air. I decided to wait. *I'll do it after dinner*, I told myself. Because let's be honest, what if she said no? Then dinner would be a disaster. At least let her enjoy the momos and once we were done, we took a slow walk to the park

next door. We sat on the grass, her knees hugged to her chest, her chin resting on them, eyes facing the lake but occasionally flicking toward me. I picked a spot beside her, close but not too close. "Um... Tarini," I said, and immediately my voice cracked. She turned to me, her head tilted slightly, eyes curious but calm. "Go on," she whispered.

I swallowed hard.

"Tarini, I'm sorry. I'm so, *so* sorry," I began, each word heavier than the last. "I'm sorry for not telling you enough that I loved you. I'm sorry for missing four of your birthdays. I'm sorry for letting you go. I'm sorry for being horrible, for becoming someone you didn't deserve. And I'm sorry that it took me this long to realise..." I paused, looked away, then back into her eyes. "...that I can't go a single day without saying it. That I love you. That you mean the whole damn sky to me. "I never stopped choosing you, Tarini. Not even once. The four years I spent without you, do you think they were easy? My laptop password is still your birthday. Amit told me every time you published a new book, and I made sure I read it first. Every single one. I even made sure everyone I knew read them. " I laughed shakily, though my chest ached.

"Every year on your birthday, I fought the urge to text you. Because I knew, if I messaged you *once*, I wouldn't be able to stop. I would never be able to stop. Fifteen-year-old Anirudh was helpless, Tarini. I tried. God, I tried so hard to be there for you. Watching you go through all that... it broke me. And every time you cried because of me, I swear, I wanted to disappear. Just to make your life easier. That's how much I loved you," I whispered. "That's how much I *still* love you. " I paused. Closed my eyes, then opened it again. "I know I was unfair. But Tarini, I was shattered. I had already given up on myself. I tried to stay, but I kept hurting you. Kept breaking your heart, because I wasn't myself anymore. That wasn't your Anirudh. Please... please be mine again. This Anirudh, the one standing in front of you now, he won't break your heart. He'll protect it like it's made of diamond. Because to me, Tarini, that's exactly what it is. " I could feel my eyes welling up, but the tears were too scared to fall. They just lingered, like they were waiting for permission. I looked at her. She had shifted a little away now, her posture no longer relaxed, her arms crossed defensively. Then she turned toward me. Her face was red. Tarini's face always turned red when she was nervous. I knew

that. I *remembered* that. I reached out, trying to hold her hand, to offer comfort in the only way I knew. But she pulled it back quickly, like I'd burned her.

"Anirudh," she said sharply, "what the *hell*? Just because I agreed to be your *prom date* doesn't mean I'm ready to be your girlfriend, goddamnit. "I flinched. "I said yes to prom because I *wanted* a prom. And I said yes to *you* because I trusted you. I thought you knew your limits. That you'd stay within them. And talking about the girlfriend part, Anirudh, it took me *years* to be ready for this again. Years. And I'm not letting old patterns repeat themselves. Because four years ago, I was *broken*. And now?" Her voice cracked again. "Now, I'm a whole mess. But at least I *know* that. I *own* it. And once you realise just how messy I really am, you'll leave again. "

Her fists were trembling now.

But she didn't walk away.

I took a breath, unsure if I had the right to speak. But I did anyway, because I had to.

"Tarini... I'm sorry. For everything. *Really*. "

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat.

"I just don't get it. Why do you always move past the topic of us like it never mattered? Was... was loving me that embarrassing for you, Tarini?"

I reached out again, not for comfort this time, but because I *needed* her. I needed her hand in mine like it was a lifeline.

This time, she didn't pull away. Not immediately.

She looked at me, and I saw the storm behind her eyes. She had tears too, but like mine, they didn't fall. They just shimmered, stubborn, restrained.

Her lips trembled.

"There were nights," she whispered, "when I didn't care if I woke up the next morning. "My breath caught. "But that's the universe's way of punishing you, I guess. It ensures you wake up anyway. Loving you was never embarrassing, Sisodia. Not once. I would never regret the books I wrote for you. Or the nights I spent awake, trying to hold onto someone who was already slipping away. " Her voice was breaking now. "You were never my regret. You never

will be. You were my bestselling novel... and my most loved poetry. Your love made me successful, Anirudh. It made me *strong*. But I never *wanted* to be a hard rock. I never asked to become unbreakable. I just," she choked,"I just wanted to be a soft lily. "

Her eyes finally dropped to the floor.

"And you snatched that away from me. "

Then, slowly, she turned toward the exit. Her body language firm, like she was choosing herself this time.

But I couldn't let her go.

Not this time.

I had to rock myself up. Reinforce my nerves like stone, like armor. And finally, finally ask the one question that had been sitting inside my chest ever since I saw her again for the first time. "Tarini. Tarini, stop. *Please*. Just... listen to me. " She stopped. Slowly turned.

I stepped forward. "Tell me. " My voice wasn't desperate, it was *firm*, maybe louder than it should've been. People looked. I didn't care. "Tell me why the word *love* freaks you out so much?" I asked, locking eyes with her. "Why have you become this... alien version of yourself? Why have you built these walls so high, Tarini?" She stood still for a moment.

Then she wiped the tears from her cheeks, not like someone wiping pain away, but like someone erasing evidence

Her eyes were bloodshot, but her gaze was steady. It wasn't me she looked angry at, it felt like she was confronting something inside her, something ancient and raw. Then, she spoke. Her voice was quieter than before, but steady. It wasn't sharp. It wasn't soft. It was like she wasn't even talking to me, she was telling the story to herself.

"How do I explain it to you, Anirudh? It's like... okay," she said, pausing.

"Think of it as a house. An apartment, okay? We buy a house. And to start off, we buy the furniture, right? The main stuff. The foundation. Because a house can exist without a TV or an AC, but not without a bed, a sofa, a table. That's like the chemistry and compatibility in a relationship, the essentials.

“Then what happens? We bring in the other things. Fans, a television, a microwave, an air conditioner. The fancy stuff. Then I add my interests, I decorate the kitchen with dozens of ceramic mugs, the ones we pick and choose together. You hang a painting in the living room.

“We start filling our closets. I fold my clothes neatly, place them on my side. You do the same on yours. That’s the only part of the house that doesn’t belong to ‘us’, but to ‘me’ and ‘you’. Then we put on a new bedsheet. I place the lilies you brought me in a vase by the bedside. And then... months pass. The bedsheet starts to fade. Our closets get messy. So we decide, we’ll clean our individual closets first, then fix the rest of the house. You take days to clean yours. And then you look around, searching for me. She paused. Her lips shaking. She moved her hands, explaining it all.

“You find my clothes, on the bed, on the floor. You walk into the living room. Our painting has fallen. The curtains are dusty, stained. And then you find me. In the kitchen. On the floor. Surrounded by broken cups. The ceramic ones we chose together. My hands are bleeding from the cuts. And you ask me what happened. And I tell you, I stopped fixing my closet because I saw the house falling apart. So I tried to fix the house instead. And in doing so... I fixed nothing. Not the house. Not my closet. You pick me up. You hold my hand. Months pass again. You still hold it. Tight. But eventually... you notice something. I’m still on the floor. Still gluing our mugs together. I still haven’t touched my closet. And the house? Still broken. You also notice the cuts. That in gluing our memories back together, I’ve hurt myself. Again and again. And one day, you give up. You pack your neatly arranged things. You walk out the front door.

“And who’s left inside the house? Just me. Me, and the broken house. And I don’t even know who to give it to anymore. Because it was ours. And yet again, I’m left alone, with a mess in and around me. ”

She said it, and then she broke down. Her knees gave in as if the weight of the words she’d carried for years finally became too much. She sat down right there, on the ground of the park, her arms wrapping around herself. I stood still, frozen, too startled to process everything she had just said. Then, slowly, I sat beside her. I didn’t speak. I just placed my hand gently on her shoulder.

She looked at me. Her eyes were red, her face wet, but her expression had steadied, as if she'd cried out everything that remained. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and whispered, barely audible "I'm leaving for Kolkata in the next few days." I blinked. "I don't know if I'll come back for the next semester."

"It was great meeting you again, Anirudh," she said softly. "Really. But we don't belong with each other. We don't."

She stood up. I didn't. I couldn't. I watched as she pulled out her phone, called an auto, and without looking back, left.

And just like that, we were standing on opposite ends of the same memory. Again. Last time, I was the one who left. This time, she did. What she didn't know, what she may never know, is why I left her first, all those years ago. Why I distanced myself before she could. Because I *knew*. I knew that if *she* left me, it would mean *forever*. I thought if I let go first, I could come back one day. When we were both in better places. When I could finally make her mine again. Now, the end had come. She left. And it meant forever.

Tarini

The last few days felt like my entire teenagehood playing out in fast-forward. If I could, I'd go back and delete it all. I preponed my trip to Kolkata, I fly tomorrow. Today, we meet our co-authors. I'll probably tell mine there's an emergency back home and that they can continue the project without me. Honestly, our story wasn't anything extraordinary. It was never going to be a *Bombay Times* bestseller. Somehow, every story I start turns into a tragedy, both on the page and in real life.

I had taken charge of writing the prologue and quickly noted it down in my journal. I carried it with me today.

"I stood there, knowing it was the last time I'd ever see you.

We made promises,

You said I'd be part of all your victories,

I said I'd make you a memory in mine.

You promised to forgive,

I promised to forget. Forget you. Forget us.

You let go.

And yet, I stood there again, waiting. "

I closed the book. Not with pride, but with quiet relief. At least now, I could fully focus on my own novel. On my research. And honestly, I was just glad to be going home. Durga Pujo was around the corner, and this had been the longest I'd stayed away from Mumma and Pa. I missed them. I missed being in a space that didn't feel like goodbye. After that night, I stopped leaving my room. Technically, Anirudh should've been the one upset, but somehow, it was the guilt that ate me alive. It always has. Since I was a kid.

The guilt that maybe Mumma and Pa could've had a normal life if I didn't have this heart condition.

That after Veronica, hospitals must've become a nightmare for Mumma.

That I've always been a bit too much for my friends.

That maybe I was never enough. That thought stayed with me. Constantly.

For the past two days, it's all I could think about. I wasn't in the mood to dress up, but I had to. I couldn't show up to college in my night suit after skipping two whole days.

I dragged myself out of bed, tied my hair into a loose bun, grabbed my journal, and stepped out.

We were asked to gather at the university's conference hall. Everyone seemed excited, buzzing with energy, talking loudly, smiling wide. And all of that just made me feel smaller. I could feel the anxiety crawling up again. Then I spotted Dan standing in a long line near a table, where students were being handed slips with table numbers.

I walked over and stood beside him.

"Heyya," he said, giving me a casual side hug. I looked at him.

"You doing better?" he asked. Something about that question, so simple, so warm, made me pause. He was Anirudh's friend. He probably knew everything. And still, he was kind. It warmed something in me.

"Better," I said. "They're giving us table numbers," Dan explained. "That's where we sit. Our co-authors have the same number, that's how they're matching us. "

"It's giving American TV show energy," I said.

"Like a blind date setup. " "Something like that," he smiled.

Table number 21. My token was called. I walked over, expecting a stranger. Instead, I saw **Anirudh** already sitting there.

My heart dropped.

Out of everyone in this college... why him?

I froze. For a second, I considered pretending I hadn't seen him. But there he was, leaning back slightly, watching me like he'd been expecting this.

I placed my journal on the table, turned around, and started walking away. I couldn't do this. I *could not* do this. "Tarini, wait," he called, standing up.

The conference hall went quiet. Too quiet. I could feel eyes on us.

"Don't make a scene, Anirudh," I muttered without turning. "Then sit," he said simply. I turned back, glanced at the stares, the silent curiosity on everyone's faces, and realised the sanest thing I could do was to sit down. Even if my insides were spiraling. I took the seat next to him, stiff and silent.

"You don't look surprised," I said, narrowing my eyes.. He looked at me calmly. "Because I knew. "

"What?"

"Your... poems. They gave it away. "

That made something inside me snap.

My chest tightened.

The fury came before the pain this time.

"Anirudh. What the hell. You *knew* it was me and didn't even think it would be nice to tell me? Even after that night? And you still showed up today?"

"I didn't want to show up," he said. "But I thought... if we can't finish *our* story, then why not at least finish Rohan and Aisha's? It needs quite a lot of editing. " His words replayed in my head: *We couldn't finish our story.*

"I leave for Kolkata tomorrow. I planned to work remotely for the edit. I didn't know it was you. And now... I don't want to finish this. Do it alone if you want. I don't mind a zero in this assignment. "

"Will you be back after Pujo?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, and left.

The moment I turned around, the first tear slipped down my cheek.

I didn't even try to wipe it.

But just before I could walk through the gates and disappear, I turned back. I marched straight to Anirudh. "Anirudh," I said, voice trembling,"it doesn't matter how much you try, you can never give Rohan and Aisha a happy ending. Goddamn it, we couldn't even give two fictional characters a happy ending. How did you ever think we could give us one?" I paused, chest heaving.

"Happy endings are for movies. And I... I'm not an actor. "

And with that, I left.

This time, my shirt wasn't just wrinkled, it was soaked with tears.

“Tarini... come down for breakfast!” Pa yelled from the first floor at 9 in the morning.

I wasn’t drunk, but I felt hungover, from yesterday. From the flight. From everything.

Pa and Mumma had come to pick me up from the airport even though I’d told them I could come home alone. Typical.

I texted Erica once I reached, then muted all the notifications from the group chat.

Just seeing Anirudh’s name flash on my screen made my stomach twist.

“What’s for breakfast?” I asked, trudging downstairs. “Your favourite,”

Mumma smiled, pulling me into hug.

I looked at the table, luchi, rosogolla, the whole spread.

Momos could never. (You can take the girl out of Kolkata, but not the Kolkata out of the girl. Lolz.).

I wrote all morning. And then through the afternoon. Didn’t even realise it was past 3.

Maybe I could squeeze in a nap. But the moment I shut my laptop and closed my eyes, the flashbacks came, like nightmares.

Five years ago

I knew something was definitely wrong with Anirudh.

He just wasn’t telling me. Because otherwise, why wouldn’t he ask me to be his date for the dance tonight?

I know it’s just an unofficial party at Esha’s farmhouse, but this isn’t like him. Not even close.

And honestly, it’s not just about today. He’s been distant for a while now. Usually, I understood Anirudh better than anyone. We’ve known each other since forever.

Back when Anirudh, Ishita, and I used to build sand castles on the school ground in primary, I could always tell when he was bored, when he wanted to do something else, or when he was just done.

Decoding Anirudh Sisodia has always been my favourite job.

Especially after ‘best friend Anirudh’ turned into ‘boyfriend Anirudh.’

It’s been a while since that shift happened, but honestly, even now, it still feels surreal to say he’s mine.

Except, standing here today, it doesn't feel exciting anymore.

It feels terrifying. The happiness of Anirudh coming into my life has slowly been replaced by the fear of him walking out of it. He doesn't plan anything for us anymore. No late-night calls, no long walks, no shared playlists.

Not like I haven't tried.

I do. All the time. Just last week, I went all the way to Ishita's nani's house, just because it's close to Anirudh's.

I hoped he'd see me. That he'd walk over. That maybe we'd talk and finally clear the air.

And he did see me. But unlike the old Anirudh, the one who used to run toward me like I was his favourite song, he just smiled... and walked away. Didn't come. Didn't say a word. Didn't call. Didn't text.

Nothing.

Mumma always told me, when both your personal and professional life feel like they're falling apart, fix the personal one first.

And I've always believed in the religion of love.

Maybe I'm young, sure, but the love in me? That's never been young.

It's always been deep. Fierce. Honest.

After all, love doesn't look at age, haina?

Mumma got married when she was 30, and that was her time.

This is mine. Right now, it just feels like Anirudh has turned into a ghost.

No effort. No clarity. No warmth.

I did hear something about Ishita's parents, something serious, but with how things are between us, I didn't feel right asking. Felt... insensitive.

I did text her, though. Told her it'll be okay. She's been spending a lot of time with Anirudh lately.

Might even move in with his family for a while, perks of being family friends, I guess. But I'm not worried. Not about her.

I know what people say in school, all the stupid rumors, but Ishita and Anirudh have one of the purest bonds I've ever seen.

And I trust him. I always have. Tomorrow, I'll talk to him. I'll catch him during basketball practice.

"Tarini! Tarini, Tarini!"

Abhijeet came running into my classroom, panting like he'd just sprinted across the ground.

He was sweating, his hair sticking to his forehead. Recess had just started.

"Abhijeet?" I said, confused. "What happened?"

He stopped in front of me, chest rising and falling, eyes unsure. "Tarini... I'm so sorry. I, I don't know how to say this..." We'd known each other for years, since our parents met at Durga Pujo seven years ago.

He was like a brother to me. "Say it, Abhijeet," I said, heart thudding a little harder now. He looked at me, eyes filled with something heavy.

"Anirudh cheated. "

For a second, I almost laughed. He had to be joking. Or confused. Something. "With Ishita," he said softly, sitting down beside me.

"Who said that?" I asked calmly.

I had to stay calm. Because Anirudh would never do something like that.

Yes, he was distant. Yes, we were off.

But I was sure, it was just a phase. A conversation or two and we'd find our way back.

We always did.

"Everyone's saying it," Abhijeet mumbled.

Then quickly added, "Okay, gotta go, take care, yaar," and walked away.

I stepped out of the classroom, and instantly, I heard it.

Whispers. Gasps. The echo of my name. His name. Her name.

It wasn't even subtle.

The hallway was buzzing, like a reality show just dropped its finale twist. A girl I barely knew walked up to me and hugged me.

"It's okay," she whispered like she was at a funeral. "High school sweethearts rarely last anyway. " I wasn't heartbroken yet. I was just... confused.

Everything felt like a blur, but one thing was clear,

I had to find Anirudh.

I had to stop this before his name was dragged through more dirt.

I went straight to his class.

"Where's Anirudh?" I asked. One girl turned to her friend, looked me up and down and said loudly enough for me to hear,

"That's the chick who got cheated on. I mean, look at her. And look at Ishita, straight hair, beautiful, chilled out. No wonder. "

Then she scoffed. "God, her unstyled bangs are giving me OCD. " I stopped in my tracks.

She looked straight at me. And I felt weak.

Not angry. Not sad. Just... hollow. Like this battle I was meant to fight with him, I was now fighting for him.

Alone.

Was I wrong all along?

Does love make you stronger...

or just leave you broken in new ways? I held myself together. Just enough.

Until I saw him. He was at basketball practice. Sitting with Amit and Varun.

Laughing. And for the first time ever, seeing him smile didn't make me happy.

It made me rage. Of course he was okay.

Of course he was out here laughing, chilling, like none of it mattered.

While I was falling apart.

While I had been crying every night, defending him silently to a school full of whispers.

I walked up to him.

"Anirudh?" I tapped his shoulder. He turned.

The smile dropped.

He looked at me like he'd just seen a ghost.

"Can we talk?" I asked.

"I'll go first," he said.

Then turned to Amit and Varun, nodding for them to leave. "Tarini, I... I really can't do this. "

seven words. That's all it took for my heart to fall to my feet.

"I like you, okay? I do. But this whole relationship, it's too much right now.

Everything back home is a mess, and I don't have the bandwidth for this anymore. "

He wasn't even looking at me fully. Just enough to say what he needed to.

"And I hope you know... it has nothing to do with you," he said, his voice low, final.

"The time I spent with you, I'll cherish it forever. In fact, it was the best part of my school life. "

He paused.

"But... every relationship has an expiry date, you know? And I think... ours is now. "

"I love you, Tarini. But I can't. " He slipped the ring off his index finger, the promise ring I had given him. The one that meant forever.

I stared at it in his palm.

"You can keep it," I said, voice barely audible. Tears spilled without warning, quiet but unstoppable.

"I don't want you to promise me forever," he whispered, closing my fist gently around the ring. "I heard from Abhijeet," I said, gathering courage.

"You and Ishita...?"

"I needed to ask. I can be in love. But never blind. " i added.

He looked at me, calm and steady.

"Do you believe it's true?" he asked.

"No," I said, without hesitation.

He gave a small, broken smile. "That's all I needed to hear. " Then he turned.

"Happy life, Tarini," he said.

"May we meet again... when the universe wills. "

God, these flashbacks.

I wish we could switch them off. Like TV channels.

Forever.

"TARINI, HOW DARE YOU!"

Esha's voice snapped me out of it.

The door burst open and she stormed in. "How dare you not meet me first!" she scolded, eyes wide, arms already reaching for me.

She plopped beside me and pulled me into a hug.

And that hug, It broke something open inside me.

All the pain, all the bottled-up mess of the last few months,

It came pouring out.

And I sobbed. Not softly. Fully. "Tarini?" she asked, suddenly alarmed. But I couldn't speak.

My heart thudded in my chest like it wanted out.

My stomach twisted.

I couldn't breathe right, my hands and feet moved nervously without reason. Esha held my hand, firmly but gently.

"Breathe, Tarini. Just breathe. " She came around and tied my hair into a loose ponytail, like Mumma used to when I was sick.

And I slowly began to gather myself again. "Sorry... it's just that the past

few days have bee,” Before I could finish, she hugged me again.
Tighter this time.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Tarini. We all have our seasons. And maybe this one... this one’s just rough for you. ”

She cupped my face.

“But don’t ever be sorry for breaking down. It’s okay to fall. I’ll always be here, to make sure you don’t fall so deep you can’t come back. ”

“I’m here. Now, and forever. ”

Anirudh

“ANIRUDHH!”

I heard someone yell the moment I stepped out of the airport. I was finally home. For the festival.

Before leaving, I'd told Professor Patel that we didn't want to edit the book anymore. We were submitting it *as is*.

He looked disappointed.

“This is really not what I expected,” he said.

“You and Tarini are two of the brightest students in the batch. There's a reason I paired you. I wanted you to align your different magics, and create one.” That line stuck with me.

“Combine your separate magics and make it one.”

It echoed in my head the entire Delhi-Bangalore flight. At the arrivals gate, I spotted Amit and Ishita waving like maniacs.

God, I'd missed them.

Ma didn't know I was coming. I wanted to surprise her.

But just *seeing* these two made something shift in my chest. I walked over and pulled them into a giant group hug. And somehow, in that one silly hug, it felt like all the weight I had been carrying for months quietly dissolved.

Amit had brought the car. Ishita took the wheel while Amit and I sank into the back seat.

We drove through the Bangalore traffic, and for once, I didn't mind.

We were playing loud Bollywood music, and I swear half the city joined us when *Gallan Goodiyan* came on. There was something so pure about it.

Amit laughing.

Ishita smiling in the mirror, singing off-key.

It hit me: as kids, we never imagined a time we wouldn't see each other every day.

Now? Festivals were the only excuse to meet again. I remember how I had to make up stories to convince Ma to let me go to Delhi.

And now... I invent excuses to come back *home*.

They dropped me off at home with a promise.

"We'll be back in the evening," Amit said.

"And we're going to Christ Street. Old times' sake," Ishita added with a smile. I smiled too, even if half-heartedly.

It had been a while since I let myself look forward to something.

I walked up to the front door and rang the bell.

But something felt...off. There was a pair of men's shoes on the rack.

Not mine.

Not Amit's.

Definitely not any of Ma's friends, Rita aunty, or Ishita's mom.

My heart sank.

Ma opened the door, and her face tensed the second she saw me.

That was all the confirmation I needed. I looked past her, and there he was.

Sitting on our sofa like nothing had ever happened.

"Ma, why is he here?"

I didn't bother lowering my voice. I *wanted* him to hear. "Anirudh, aise mat baat karo," Ma said firmly

"That's your father. "

I laughed. Cold. Bitter. "*Father?* Kaise father? Jo ek din boriya-bistar uthake chala jaata hai? And then years later, shows up saying 'father'?" I turned around to leave.

"*Ani, nuko. Baba baat karni hai,*" he called out. *Ani*.

That name, *his* name for me, froze me for half a second.

God, I hated how that still did something to me.

After all these years of pretending I was angry, I realized I wasn't angry.

I was *hurt*. But I couldn't let that show. Not in front of him.

"Don't you dare call me that," I said, pointing a finger at him. Ma gave me a look, *Put your hand down*.

So I did. Only out of respect for her.

"You want to talk?" I said, stepping back in.

"Okay. Let's talk. Are you here to say sorry for making us broke?

For walking out like we were a job you got tired of? Are you here to say sorry for forcing me and Didi to grow up too fast because *our father* left us?" My voice had risen by then. I was shouting. Trembling.

I turned around and started jabbing at the lift button like it would open faster if it sensed my pain. "*Don't leave, beta,*" he said softly.

I stopped. Just for a second. "*You left me, Papa. Remember?*"

And then the lift doors closed.

"Anirudh beta, kuch khaa lo," Amit's mom called from the kitchen. Of course Ma had called her. She always knew where I'd run off to.

Amit had called Ishita too. She was on the couch with her laptop, working on something, while Amit flipped through an old album filled with school photos. "Oh god, Ishi, look at this!" he said, laughing, as he sat behind her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "You two *couldn't stand* each other, remember?" I said, half-smiling.

"You've been the glue between us, Ani," Ishita replied, turning to look at me with that warm expression she always wore when we reminisced.

"Remember Miss Verma calling us the *Golden Trio*? And how mad Amit got when she called him Ron?" she giggled. "He was crushed," I added, "He was convinced he'd end up with you. Like Ron and Hermione. "

"How can I forget?" Amit muttered, embarrassed. We all laughed. Then Amit turned serious. Sat in front of me. "Anirudh," he said gently. "I don't want to get into what happened with Tarini. Ishi will talk to you about that. But I do want to say this, you should go home. Talk to uncle. "

"No, Amit. " My voice stiffened. "I'm not talking to him. I don't even know why Ma let him in. Wait... is he living there now?" Amit's mom walked in, setting down lunch plates. "I don't think so," she said.

"I think you should go home too," Amit's father added quietly from the dining table.

I didn't say anything. Just smiled. A small, tired smile. If I was going anywhere, it was to Ishita's house. Or her nani's. Not back there. Not while he was there.

After lunch, I went back to Amit's room and flopped on his bed. I opened Instagram and froze. It was a picture Tarini had just posted. Her and Esha, standing in a pujo pandal, lit up by fairy lights and festive chaos. She was wearing a white kurti, and the shimmer on her outfit almost reflected off my phone screen. Or maybe it just lit up my face. I was smiling. Her caption read:

"and this is just the beginning."

Of course.

These five days, Durga Puja, they were always her favorite time of the year. It was in her *Bong blood*, as she used to say. That's when it hit me. Maybe I should let myself have some fun too. I turned to Amit. "Can I borrow a kurta?"

He tossed one at me. Deep maroon. My favorite. As I got dressed, a wave of nostalgia washed over me.

The three of us, me, Ishita, and Amit, roaming the streets during Navratri. Dressed in our best kurtas and lehengas. Playing garba until our feet hurt. Ishita always complained her lehenga was too long, and Amit was always forced to carry her dupatta.

It felt like a lifetime ago. "I'll drive," I offered, keys in hand.

But Amit snatched them back. "Not today, bro. Let me take the wheel."

Ishita slid into the front seat beside him, and I took the back.

It felt good. Just the three of us.

"Yaar, the chapter ended before it even began," I said, exhaling sharply.

Amit looked at me. "Tarini?" I nodded. "Yeah. I didn't even realise how much I'd hurt her... or how deeply it affected her. It's like... she became *me*. The old me. And that hurts in ways I can't even explain."

"Maybe she just doesn't 'like-like' you anymore," Amit shrugged. "You both grew up. Maybe now she's not into you."

"Big lie," Ishita cut in, shooting Amit a look. Amit blinked. "What?"

"I was in Delhi for one day, Amit. *One day*. And it was obvious, Tarini *clearly*

still likes him. When Samar dumped her for Tisha, she didn't even flinch. But after *your* confession, Anirudh, she was shaken. Like, properly shaken. "

"That means nothing," I said quietly, looking away.

"It means *everything*, Ani," Ishita said, her tone soft but firm.

"Only the ones you love have the power to hurt you. And she's hurt. That's your answer. Your confession didn't just hurt her, it ignited something she'd been trying to bury."

I stared at the ground, chewing on her words.

She made sense. God, she always made sense.

Reason #500 why you need a female friend.

Tarini

"Esha, I'm so confused," I muttered, staring at my reflection as she curled my hair for the morning pujo. "Why?" she asked, curling another strand carefully.

"Anirudh. He liked my post yesterday," I said, not looking at her. "And...?"

"And nothing. Just, seeing his name pop up makes me feel things again. I don't think I can suppress it anymore. "Block him, then," she said, too casually. "No, yaar, Esha. It's not that easy. He was out of my life for *years*. And now, suddenly, he walks back in and... it's just," "Okay, okay," she interrupted, putting the curler down and sitting in front of me. "Tell me honestly, do you like him? Did you ever *stop* liking him?" "I don't know, Esha," I snapped, voice tight with irritation. "If not you, then who will, Tarini? Who will know what you actually feel?" Her tone sharpened, no longer soft.

"Your 'I don't know' basically means there is a chance you still like him.

And if you do, then ask yourself *why*. Why, even after he,"

She paused.

"Even after he *cheated* on you. "He didn't. He did *not* cheat," I said instantly, almost too fast.

"Then why are you so sure?" she asked, eyes narrowing. "Maybe you don't remember, but *I* remember you bawling your eyes out in the bus that day. And when you *asked* him if he cheated, Tarini, he never gave you a proper answer. "

"Because an answer was never needed, Esha," I said quietly. "You're talking about Anirudh Sisodia and Ishita Bidsaria. Yes, Ishita and I had cold air between

us... but she would never do this to me. And neither would Anirudh. Now we know why he left. ”

Esha paused. Her eyes softened. “Tarini,” she said, “you either love somebody, or you don’t. There’s no in-between. And if you do love him, then fight for it. But first, know yourself. Know what *you* want. ” She stood up and left the room.

You either love somebody, or you don’t.

Her words echoed.

Maybe I *never* really moved on from Anirudh.

Maybe I tangled myself too deeply in him, just the way first love tends to go.

Wild. All-consuming. Reckless.

But the real question is...

Would he be my last love, too?

Suddenly, I remembered something Anirudh once said:

“You know, Tarini, when a relationship ends on bad terms, the weight of the bad memories becomes so heavy we forget all the good ones. ”

I wondered, what if he never broke me in the first place?

Who would I be today? Because honestly... who *am* I now?

A coward? A human who’s terrified of love?

Or just a girl who’s too tired to begin again? I’ve never been this confused in my life.

And maybe, the reason I couldn’t make space for someone new wasn’t because no one was good enough...

...it was because I was still busy trying to forget him.

Anirudh

It feels like just yesterday that I landed in Bangalore. And now, somehow, I have only four more days left here. I'm still crashing at Amit's place, basically one long sleepover. And honestly, it's been great. Spending time with him after so many months feels like slipping into an old hoodie: familiar, comfortable, full of old laughs and new layers. But today, I decided to go visit Ma at her college.

What I didn't expect was the news that *dad lives at home now*. "Ma..." I called out as I stepped into the staff room. She looked up and gestured for me to sit beside her.

"Anirudh," she said, her voice softer than usual. "Talk to him once, beta." I blinked. "Not you too, Ma. I didn't come here to talk about him. I came to meet *you*. If that's not on the table, then maybe I should just leave." "Okay, okay," she sighed. "Sit down. Didi has come." "Didi?" I asked, surprised. "When did she get here? Where is she now?" "At home," she replied. Wait. *Didi's* at home? **With dad there?** That doesn't add up.

I left the staff room and jumped into an auto. On the way, I called her. "Didi? Why are you home?" "Who told you I'm home?" she said.

"Ma did. Said you're at home." "I'm not! I'm at Christ Street. Shopping." "Yeah, right. You're broke. What are you shopping for, air?" "I'm with Papa."

The moment she said it, I ended the call. What the hell was going on? Frustration, confusion, and something dangerously close to heartbreak welled up inside me. I didn't want to go back to Amit's. I didn't want to go home. So, I let my feet take me somewhere I hadn't been in years. The arcade.

My favorite place in all of Bangalore. The place where Ma and Papa used to take me as a kid. Birthdays, good report cards, or just random Saturdays, we'd be here. And every time I was sad, when the world didn't make sense, I'd come back.

"Ticket for one," I said quietly to the guy at the counter, barely meeting his eyes. I walked straight to the bowling arena. Familiar smells, butter popcorn, rubber soles. It still felt like a weird, noisy kind of therapy.

And that's when I saw them. **Him. And Didi.**

He was laughing.

Papa. He was actually *laughing*, head thrown slightly back, and Didi too, shaking her head at something he said. The sight hit me like a brick I wasn't braced for. Then he saw me.

And his laugh didn't vanish, it shifted. A smile. And then he walked toward me. Slowly. Almost like he didn't want to scare me off. I stood frozen, fingers curled around the bowling ball rack, throat closing up. He stopped a few steps away.

"Hi, beta," he said. "I was just passing by," I replied, cold, keeping my eyes anywhere but on him.

"How are you?"

"Not bad. "

Short answers. Safe answers. I wasn't giving him more. He tried to smile.

"Such a big boy you've become. Going to college and all, huh? You know... I read all your blogs. Every article, every word. " I turned, jaw tight.

"Drop the act, Papa. Why are you back? What the hell do you want now?"

I spun around, ready to walk out. Again. But Didi ran after me, blocking my way.

"Anirudh, he's really trying, give him a chance. "

"He's trying?" I laughed. A bitter one. "Where was this effort all these years? I don't need him anymore, Didi. You want a bond with him? Fine. I don't. I *don't need him anymore.* "

Her eyes welled up. "Anirudh, you can lie to me. But not to yourself. You missed him. All these years. We both know that. And now that he's back, what's the harm in trying?" I snapped.

"Didi, he came back when everything is *fine*. But where was he when things were *bad*?

When you were buried in books trying to get into your dream college. When Ma was too poor to even afford a broken heart. You remember those nights? We were counting coins for grocery runs. If Nanu hadn't bought that house back then, we'd be *on the streets*, Didi. Don't you remember that? You had your books. Ma had her students. And me? I had *Tarini*. And I let her go too, because I wanted this family to not fall apart. And in the end? I lost her anyway."

I couldn't hold it in anymore. The weight broke me. I sat down, on the goddamn floor of the arcade.

People stared. Let them. I didn't care. Didi sat beside me, quiet for a while. Then softly, "Ani... you know why he left. He didn't walk out because he stopped loving us. He walked out because... he was scared. Scared that he would ruin us. That he'd hurt Ma. That he'd fail as a father." I cut in, choking on my breath, "So he left?" My voice cracked.

"He *did* end up hurting Ma. He *was* a bad father, Didi. You don't disappear to protect someone. You *stay*. You *fight*." She wiped her eyes, put a hand on my knee.

"Maybe his way was wrong. Maybe it'll never make sense. But his intentions... they weren't evil, Ani. They were scared. And broken. And I'm sorry. I'm so *sorry* I didn't know how alone you were. But do you think it was easy for us either? I've never attended a single university fest. Not one. Because every time I smiled, I felt guilty. I felt like I was betraying you and Ma by being happy. It was hard for all of us, Anirudh. Even Papa."

"Can I take my children out for dinner, then?" Papa said from behind us. "It doesn't have to be some official 'father-children' dinner. Just three friends catching up," he added, trying to sound cool.

"You're too old to be a friend," I said flatly. "Wow? He jokes? That's new," he shot back, mock offended, and gave Didi a silly high five. I didn't laugh. But I noticed it.

The way he tried.

The way he failed.

The way I still saw myself in him.
Maybe that's where I get my sarcasm from.

"One plate soup momos, two plates chowmein," I told the guy at the stall. The same stall I used to go to with Tarini, every other week. "They make the best momos," I mumbled, more to the momo steam than to anyone in particular. "I can tell," Papa said, watching me eat like it was the first time he'd seen me enjoy something. Then quietly whispered, "Anirudh... are you okay? You don't seem... well. Everything okay at college?" "I don't know, Papa," I said, without looking up. "Tell me what happened." "Did you do something?" Didi asked, "A mistake, Ani?" I paused. The words clung to the edge of my throat, heavy. "What if I told you..." I started, still staring at the plate, "...that I made a huge blunder years ago? And I've regretted it since?

And now... the product of that mistake walks past me. Every single day. And every time I see her... it feels like I'm bleeding from somewhere I can't even see."

"Then I'd tell you to risk it again," Papa said. "But this time, don't lose the chance. Do everything... except repeat the old mistake. "

I smiled. A small one. How could I tell him that the mistake I made when I was sixteen would cost me my life? I wish someone had stopped me. What was I thinking?

I shut Tarini out because I was too afraid, too afraid to be a mess in front of her. Afraid she'd see the real me and maybe... judge me too.

And then I went and told the basketball team I was with Ishita. Just so Tarini would break up with me *before* I could.

God. What was I thinking? Even after everything, she *still* believed I didn't cheat.

And she was right.

I didn't.

I could've died for her. But I'd never cheat.

She loved me too much... and I couldn't deal with that. I couldn't deal with her leaving, so I left first.

Stupid. So, so stupid. And now? She's gone. For good, maybe. But right now, right now I have this.

I'm with my father.

And I would've done anything to have this moment, years ago.

Now I do.

"Beta, I'm sorry," he said, as he drove us home. "I know your Ma will take time. And if she doesn't want me back, I promise, I'll leave.

I left because I thought I was a bad person.

But it'll make me worse if I don't try... try to undo the damage I caused. "

"Why did you come back, Papa?" I asked, turning to him in the passenger seat.

"Because I want to be your father," he said, eyes flicking between the road and Didi in the rearview mirror.

"Both of yours. " He paused. Then said softly, "Will you be my children again?" We didn't speak. We just smiled.

When we got home, Ma was waiting at the dining table. "We already had dinner," Papa said, half-sheepishly. "I bet you didn't have halwa," she replied, pointing to the warm dish on the table. And just, like muscle memory, I was a child again.

Back to nights where Ma waited with halwa. For him. And this time, after all these years, he came back.

We sat together.

A little awkward.

A little broken.

But together.

One family. Finally.

When I got up to head to my room for bed, Papa called me to the balcony. "Ani," he said, his voice low under the stars, "I made the mistake of letting my love go all those years ago. And now, I stand no chance.

Fight for your love, beta.

Because let me tell you, if your love is real, nothing can ever stop you from turning your story into a fairytale. Some stars... they're written in different skies.

But they still belong to one galaxy. There's a hundred reasons why you can give up, but all you need is one reason to stay. " He placed his hand gently on my back. "Papa," I said, turning to him, "you can fight for it too. " I nodded toward the dining room, where Ma was quietly packing halwa into

his old tiffin box. He followed my gaze and smiled. A quiet, heart-heavy smile.

Just as he was about to walk away, the question struck me. "Papa... how did you know it was about a girl?" He didn't miss a beat.

"As I told you before, Ani... you are just like me. "

And that's the truth.

I *am* just like him.

Tarini

“Tarini? I read your email, why are you not coming back for sem two? You have to write your finals to get into second year. ”

Patel sir’s voice call jolted me awake at 6:30 AM. I sat up, blinking through the haze of sleep.

“I sent you an email last night, sir,” I said quietly, staring at the ceiling. “I found a college in Kolkata. I’ll go there instead. Anyway, Delhi is way too polluted and... and I miss my home. ”

I lied.

There was a pause. I imagined him sighing, adjusting his glasses the way he always did during tough conversations.

“Tarini, you’re in one of India’s top-ranked colleges in literature.”

“I know,” I murmured. “That’s what makes this harder.”

“You’re one of the brightest students of the batch, Tarini.”

I gave a dry, bitter laugh. “Really, sir? You’re calling a student who barely scrapes 85% ‘bright’? Sir, we both know I’m not that. I don’t even know what I was thinking when I registered here. ”

And I meant it. Some days I truly didn’t know. Was it ambition? Or simply trying to follow a version of myself I didn’t recognize anymore?

“Tarini, do you know why I asked all of you to author a book instead of writing exams on literary history?”

“No, sir,” I whispered, my throat suddenly tight.

“Because it takes courage to create. To look at a blank page and fill it with something that wasn’t there before. Only 0. 6% of people who start a book

finish it. And you? You've finished four. You started at sixteen. That's rare, Tarini. That's brilliance. You and Anirudh were the only ones who completed a full draft. I read it. And Tarini..."

He paused.

"...you can still change the ending. That's the beauty of stories. You don't have to let them end in pain. Not if you're willing to rewrite. "

His words settled on my skin like goosebumps.

Change the ending.

Wasn't that what I wanted, deep down? A do-over? Not just in fiction, but in life? Wasn't I tired of being the girl who ran?

Mumma knocked gently on my door before stepping in, holding a packet of incense for the morning pujo. "We'll go college hunting after breakfast. Pack your certificates into a file, okay? Mid-semester admissions might be a little tricky." I nodded numbly, but something inside me shifted. A quiet rebellion, maybe. Or a surge of clarity.

This wasn't courage. This was avoidance wrapped in nostalgia.

I stood up, walked to my desk, and picked up the half-opened file of certificates. The same ones I had carried to Delhi, wide-eyed and breathless. And now here I was, ready to walk away.

Why? Because it got hard? Because the past came knocking in a college corridor?

Was I really going to spend my life undoing every decision the moment it got inconvenient?

No.

I picked up my phone with trembling hands and called Patel sir back. "Sir..." My voice cracked. "Is it possible to courier the draft to me here? I... I want to change the ending before it's published. I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't have run."

He didn't speak for a moment. But I knew. I knew he was smiling.

"This is where you belong, Tarini," he said softly. "This is your calling. " And then the line went dead.

But something had been reignited.

And I knew, I didn't just want to change the ending of the story. I wanted to change the ending of *mine*.

Because sometimes when things get difficult, you don't leave. You stay, you fight because no one, honestly has the power to change your story other than you and sometimes this power is the only superpower one needs to change fate. Stars maybe written in different skies but the cosmos, is one.

Anirudh

“Patel sir told me Tarini won’t return next semester,” Daniel said when he called this morning.

I was packing for my flight tomorrow, and suddenly, I didn’t want to go anymore.

I had come to Delhi to find myself, and ended up finding *me*, and the first girl I ever loved. And now that I know I won’t be seeing her again, it shatters me in ways I can’t even explain.

I opened her Instagram, not like a crazy stalker, but because I missed her. Just *missed* her. It was the last day of Pujo. She’d posted a picture in a white and red saree, her cheeks stained red with some colour?, it’s some traditional Bengali ritual, I don’t remember the exact name.

But God.

How am I supposed to survive the rest of my life without her?

Even the *hope* that she might come back, it’s gone now.

Papa walked into my room.

“So,” he said, “you leave tomorrow?”

“Yes, Papa. ”

He sat beside me for a moment, then spoke, his voice soft but certain.

“You know, all these years, I kept wondering... was I right? Was I wrong? I went over it in my head a million times. ”

He looked at me.

“But after everything, I’ve learned this, nothing is fully right or fully wrong. We’re all just... hanging somewhere in between the ifs and buts. That’s life, Ani. ”

He patted my back.

And I just nodded, my throat tight. Because I was living in the same in-between.

Caught between the boy I was and the man I wanted to be.

Between Delhi and Kolkata.

Between what we were, and what we could’ve been.

Between if I had stayed...

And but I didn’t.

I went back to the ground near the apartment where Tarini used to live, all those years ago. The kind of ground that always smelled faintly of rust and damp earth. Children played there now just like they did ten years ago, when i was a boy. Nothing has changed, yet I do not remember this place.

After she moved out of Bangalore, I’d come here a lot. Because every part of that ground, the swings, the tree stump, the broken slide, had a piece of her in it.

I sat on our old bench. The paint was peeling, the wood warped, but it was still ours.

And then I saw it.

Still there. Faded, but breathing.

“Ani x Tar Tar. ”

Written in pen. The ink almost washed away now. But not completely gone.

Of course I wouldn’t let it disappear.

My hands shook a little as I pulled out a pen from my pocket and slowly traced over the faded letters, as if reviving a memory.

“Excuse me, mister,” a voice said behind me. “How dare you ruin public property?”

I froze.

The pen slipped from my fingers.

I turned around.

There she was.

“Tarini?”

“Han, Tarini. Why do you look so surprised?” she said, walking closer, “And why are you ruining benches?”

She sat beside me like no time had passed.

I blinked, still not trusting reality.

“But, how did you, I just saw your post this morning. How are you here?” I stumbled over my words.

“Stalker,” she smirked, but her eyes softened at the corners.

“I caught the first flight I could after pujo. Asked Ishi where you were. And of course, this place hasn’t changed at all.” She looked around, taking in the swings, the children, the fading graffiti.

Her gaze lingered on the bench.

Then, she turned fully toward me, her eyes meeting mine.

“You know, Anirudh... after you left, I was shattered. Completely. But what I didn’t realize back then, was that every shattered piece of my heart still had your name written on it. Maybe we had to break apart just to find our way back.” she said

“Remember that night anirudh? In your hostel room? When we had roti sabzi with no salt on the floor of your room? That felt like home. Somehow the saltless food on a cold night with you felt like a calling, as if that is exactly where I belong, as if you are exactly where I belong.”

My heart was pounding so loud I thought she could hear it. Was this real? I wanted to reach out, but my hands stayed rooted to my lap.

“Tarini, I’m sorry, I,”

“Anirudh” she sad and cupped my face. I held her hand and got it down, to my lap and pushed myself closer to her. “You don’t have to sa-” she said but i cut her off.

“No, yaar. Tarini, listen to me. I’m sorry I didn’t fight for you before. I was scared. Not of being vulnerable, but of not being enough. You were this radiant girl I was randomly made to sit next to in pre-primary, and somehow

you just... stayed. You were my first love, and I promise, we'll be each other's last. I swear I'll never break your heart again. "

She smiled, cutting me off.

"Why are you giving marriage vows already? Ruko, we have time," she giggled, her bangles clinking faintly.

"So you're telling me... Tarini Bose flew all the way from Kolkata just for me?" I asked, still stunned.

"Tumhare liye nahi, I came for the momos," she said, crossing her arms, her nose scrunching in mock seriousness.

"Tell me what I want to hear," I whispered,

She looked at me, eyes shining, as if the years between us had finally collapsed.

"Um... momos khaane chaloge?"

I laughed.

"As your friend?" I asked, testing the words like they could shatter me.

She shook her head, eyes soft.

"As my boyfriend sounds good enough too. "

And then, from her bag, she pulled out the same promise ring she gave me years ago. The one I returned when we broke up.

She held it for a moment, as if weighing the years, before sliding it onto my hand.

And this time, my fingers curled around hers.

This, this is exactly how it's meant to be.

Tarini and me.

Forever and now.

Maybe our chapters ended before because the story wasn't ready. But this time, it is.

And we'll make sure our story doesn't just end well,
...it becomes unforgettable.

Just like a fairy tale.

Epilogue

Tarini

The banquet hall smelled faintly of lilies and furniture polish. “Bhaiya, roses nahi, I told you lilies,” I barked at the florist dada, my voice sharp even to my own ears.

“Madam, ye glasses kahan rakhu?” another man asked, his head popping out of nowhere.

“Table pe, obviously, juice station pe rakhoge na?” I snapped, then pressed my palms to my face. God, I was already becoming that bride-zilla type of host, except this was worse.

“Tarini, sit still!” my makeup artist groaned, tugging at my face as she tried to wing my eyeliner. “If you keep moving, we’ll be here all night. And we still have hair and outfit left. ”

I froze for a second, then panicked.

“Shit. Shit. The saree. I didn’t iron it. ”

“This one?” Erica’s voice floated in from the doorway. She held up my pear white saree with the most elegant embroidery. it had soft designs made with rose gold. It shimmered faintly under the hotel light, softer than I remembered. “Chill, Tarini. We got this. Don’t stress so much. ”

“How can I not stress, Eri?” My voice cracked as the artist filled my brows. “This isn’t just another book success party. The publishing house owner is flying in from Bombay, people from Times of Delhi are coming, the whole university will be here. Ma, Pa. Anirudh’s parents, his sister. Baapre. Do I even deserve this?”

“What do you even mean?” Erica shot me a look, crossing the room to set the dress on my bed. “Your book is ranked number one in bestselling all over India. You know how insane that is? You’re living a dream, Tarini. Heights you never thought possible. I’m so proud of you.”

She bent to hug me, and I let myself lean into her warmth for just a moment, swallowing the knot in my throat.

She looked through my makeup kit and started putting on some lipstick and eye shadow.

“You’re doing this for Tushar, aren’t you?” I teased, a crooked smile tugging at my lips.

Her smirk was quick, but her eyes flickered.

“Of course not, Tar-Tar,” she said, tapping the tip of my nose.

Immediately after prom, tushar said no to erica. He believed they were too different from each other and they’d never, ever work out. “I love being the prettiest in the room. And Tushar? Kon Tushar?” She winked, but I caught the way her fingers tightened briefly on the doorframe before she slipped out.

The room fell quiet again except for the steady strokes of the eyeliner. And in the silence, my thoughts came rushing in: the girl I had been in Kolkata, scribbling in notebooks under the blanket; the woman I was now, standing at the cusp of a future that didn’t feel real.

“Tarini, look at you,” the makeup artist said, turning the mirror toward me.

And in the glass, I saw another reflection.

“Anirudh?” My heart leapt, and I spun, almost smudging the eyeliner as I threw my arms around him. He twirled me once, and in the mirror, I saw us both, my white saree hanging off the wardrobe, his black suit wrinkled from travel, our eyes catching like magnets.

“Who is this pretty woman?” he asked, laying a kiss on my forehead.

“Your woman,” I said softly, touching up my lip gloss with shaking hands.

His voice gentled.

“Tarini, I am so, so proud of you, my love. I always knew your passion would take you places. Remember those nights you cried to me, freaking out about the future? Today, tarini, today is that future. And I get to share it with you.”

My eyeliner smudged right then, but I didn’t care.

He unclipped my hair, letting it tumble over my shoulders, then picked up the kohl pencil himself. With a surprising steadiness, he traced my waterline.

“There,” he said, smiling. “Now this is my Tarini. ”

I blinked back tears.

“You go meet the media,” he continued, fixing my hair as if he’d been doing it all his life. “Delhi Times is already here. Then the publishers. Papa just landed, I’ll help him with his suit fittings. ”

I frowned. “Meeting with the publisher?”

He grinned.

“You’ve been nominated under the top five best authors of Asia. Memoir category. ”

The air stilled around me.

For a second, I forgot to breathe.

I stepped out of the room and Esha hurried up to me.

The media has been waiting for you, Tarini, where the hell were you?” she snapped, tugging at my arm. We almost ran downstairs to meet the media.

Suddenly, I felt weak.

The room was too loud, the camera clicks, the endless voices of reporters, the Delhi traffic humming in the background. But then, one voice rose above it all. A voice so familiar it could silence every other sound.

I turned to see where it was coming from, and there she was, my mother, standing in the crowd.

“I am her mother, tarini hiii!” she shouted with pride.

She stood there in her beautiful yellow blazer, holding my book in her hand as if it were a trophy. “Go, baby! Woohooo!” she screamed, clapping with all her heart.

I couldn't help but smile. There's a saying: "My mother clapped so loud, I didn't notice who didn't." They were talking about mothers like mine.

Somewhere at the back, I caught Pa quietly taking pictures of me, adjusting the angles, trying to get the perfect shot. My heart ached with love. God, how did I get so lucky with the parents I have?

The media kept firing question after question, and I answered each one, smiling, performing. That's when it hit me, this was all I had ever wanted as a little girl. I wanted paparazzi to click me, I wanted my name to be famous, I wanted the glitter and the limelight and the fame.

And now that I finally had it, why did I still feel incomplete?

I scanned the crowd, searching for Anirudh. But there were no traces of him. My chest tightened.

I think Pa noticed something was wrong, because he suddenly stepped forward and started pushing the media away.

"Chalo chalo, have some dinner and leave. Tarini has to assist the guests," he said firmly, distracting them just enough for me to slip away.

Inside the banquet hall, I searched desperately for him. Being away from him made my anxiety crawl back in. I scanned the room again. I spotted Anirudh's sister and his father walking toward me.

"Aye, look at you, Tarini. All grown up and gorgeous. Thank you for inviting me, child. The book is fabulous," his father said, raising his champagne glass to me.

I smiled politely and slipped away.

Then came Ishita and Amit.

"Tarini!" she squealed, hugging me. "You look beautiful."

"Nice book, han. I loved it," Amit added, shaking my hand.

I nodded and left quickly. Too many people. Too many voices. God, I needed Anirudh.

"Tarini, I'm so glad you stayed," Patel sir said as he stopped me mid-step. "I almost had tears when you mailed me about not coming back for the second

semester. I knew you'd reach great heights, and see now!" He tapped my head fondly.

I smiled faintly, but my legs were moving faster, my eyes still darting around the room. Where was he?

And then, finally, someone reached for my hand.

"Tarini... where are you going, looking all tensed? The publishers are waiting."

It was him. Anirudh.

There was something in his voice that made me instantly relax. Every single time. I looked into his eyes and finally let my breath out.

"Where were you?" I asked, almost accusingly.

"I was right there. Admiring you from afar. "

"You could've come, Anirudh. I was worried. "

"The moment is yours, love. I'll never not be there. I'll always be there to celebrate your special moments but not share them, they're yours. You might not always see me, but trust me, I'll always be admiring you from somewhere in the room." He pulled me into his arms, and my world stopped spinning.

"I'll take you somewhere," he whispered, tugging me gently away from the glitter and cameras.

We slipped into the backyard of the hotel. He covered my eyes with his hand, giving me major birthday déjà vu.

"Surprise!"

The moment my eyes opened, I saw Erica, Dan, Aahana, and Esha holding up a huge sign that said: **#1 BESTSELLING.**

Samar and Tisha were there too, standing hand in hand. My lips curved into a wide smile instantly what can I say, the hopeless romantic in me always noticed love first.

"I baked... well, something," Dan said, pulling out a small dabba from his bag. Inside was a tiny mug cake with the word Congratulations written on top. Nothing fancy, nothing over the top. But somehow, it warmed my heart more than anything else.

Samar grinned and pulled out a bottle of champagne.

"Let's celebrate!" he shouted, shaking it open.

And it was right there, in that simple backyard moment, that I realised,

Love isn't always about big candlelit dinners or Eiffel Tower proposals. Sometimes, love is this. Love is five friends celebrating you with homemade cake and cheap champagne. Love is a silly boy in a black suit who looks happier about your achievements than you do yourself.

There may be a hundred reasons why you shouldn't love someone, but all it takes is one good pair of eyes with a warm heart to prove it all wrong.

And for me, that person was him.

The first boy I ever loved.

Anirudh Crazy Sisodia.

Acknowledgement

There's a scene in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban where Harry almost gets killed. He sees the figure of a wizard saving him, but later learns that the wizard was none other than himself from the future. I remember watching the movies for the first time when I was nine, (which by the way happens to be almost 9 years ago) and that scene stayed with me. It taught me one thing: nobody, absolutely nobody in the end comes to save you. It's always you who has to save whatever of you is left.

This book was my way of saving myself.

Thank you, Papa, for turning what started as a time pass hobby into something real. Having a whole book authored by me is something I never even dreamed of, and if it weren't for you, I might never have made it a reality. Maa, who, by the way, fully resembles Tarini's mother, how does it feel having such a talented daughter?

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To my lovely friends, who are the reason I didn't leave this book midway: I love you <3 Thank you for choosing me on the days I couldn't choose myself, and for believing that I could actually do this.

And finally, to my lovely readers: I hope you enjoy reading the story of Tarini and Anirudh exactly the way I enjoyed writing them. This is the closest you can get to my world, and I can't wait to share it with you.