

Salt

A Tangy Tale of Relationships

‘There must be something strangely sacred about salt.

It is in our tears and in the sea.’

Khalil Gibran

A pinch of salt is all a relationship needs!

Dr. Nivedita Poddar



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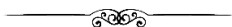
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Acknowledgments



To Mummy and Papa ji

For passing down, through your very genes, the boundless gift of imagination and creativity. For guiding me to understand the many shades of human emotions reflected in the myriad silhouettes of relationships. You are our anchor. *Shabd mere hain, ehsaas aapse hain!*

To Nishant

My friend, philosopher and guide. For being that patient spouse— carefully going through the manuscript, brainstorming ideas with me, and giving those raw and honest feedback. Both you and I know you are a gem of a husband!

And both you and I know that I won't acknowledge!!

To my loveliest daughter, Nivisha

Thanks for being the sweetest and most patient child when Mumma was busy breathing life into fiction with ink and imagination.

About the Author



Dr. Nivedita Poddar

Language hums like music to her, and the spirit of literature drenches her soul in bountiful bliss. A Gold Medallist in English Literature and a Ph.D. holder in Macro-linguistics, Dr. Nivedita Poddar treads the incredibly magical voyage of language and literature like a wanderer—lost in a compendium of genres, each waiting to unfold in the most mystical ways.

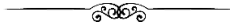
A writer with a deep-rooted sensitivity to human emotion, she finds herself drawn to the silhouettes of relationships—their unsaid words, their aching pauses, and the delicate fractures that both wound and bind us. Her pen moves not just with ink, but with empathy—an instrument to explore longing, conflict, resilience, and the quiet triumphs of the human spirit.

In her world, stories are not made—they are unearthed from the soft spaces of memory and imagination, where love is never just love, and loss is never just an end. *Salt*, her debut novel, is a reflection of that inner terrain—a lyrical excavation of what it means to love, to lose, and to live with the salt of both.

Dr. Poddar also brings this same passion to her academic work, where she encourages young minds to explore literature through dramatization, role play, and active inquiry. With a blend of communicative and structural approaches to language, she nurtures not only comprehension but connection—between text, context, and the self.

To her, literature is not a subject. It is Soul craft.

The Editor's Voice



A haunting exploration of love, identity, and the fragile fractures that define us—Salt delves into the depths of human connection, where every relationship leaves its mark and every memory carries the weight of loss.

This poignant narrative examines the intricate dance of love, doubt, and self-discovery. It captures the turmoil of grappling with identity amid the erosion caused by choices and the complexities of intertwined lives. The story embraces contradictions—faith and doubt, beauty and ugliness, loss and liberation—inviting readers to navigate the grey areas of morality and desire.

With lyrical prose and psychological depth, Salt asks unsettling questions: Can we truly know ourselves through another? Is love a salvation or a slow dissolution?

Prepare to be immersed in a story where emotions run as deep as the sea, and every soul must confront the salt of their own wounds before healing.

In Salt, love is an echo, identity a shifting shadow, and every bond a delicate wound—where the past lingers like a storm, and the heart's deepest truths are written in scars.

Dr. Deepika

MA (Gold Medal), PhD Linguistics

Editor's Profile



Dr. Deepika

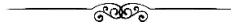
Editor-in-Chief

A prolific writer and voracious polymath reader, she has spent a decade crafting stories that transcend borders and bridge the chasms between minds and cultures. Acclaimed for her published works in India and Qatar, her narratives are celebrated for their lyrical precision, emotional depth, and unflinching authenticity—striking chords with readers and critics alike.

A recipient of the Best Blogger Award by The Doha Globe, Dr. Deepika wields language like a master sculptor, shaping raw thought into profound, resonant art. With a rare fusion of editorial rigor, groundbreaking storytelling, and an almost meditative command over human contemplation, she does not just edit words—she orchestrates experiences.

"Editing is the art of listening—to the silence between words, to the heartbeat of a story."

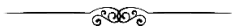
Contents



The Storm.....	1
On the Edge.....	4
Of Matches and Marriages.....	8
In the Space Between Yes and Forever	17
Together, Forever?	21
Ice to Ice.....	34
Jolted Back to Reality	40
From No to Forever?	44
Of Summer Hearts and Mountain Valley	47
To New Beginnings.....	57
Hello, Namit	61
The Estranged	71
The Intervention.....	76
The Echoes	83
Being 6 th	87
Engagement and Beyond.....	94
Midnight Murmurs.....	99
Velvet Whispers	106
Purva-Smriti; Past Memories.....	111
The Dual Dilemma	120
The Prerogative Paradox	130
Skin to Skin.....	138
Suffocating Silhouettes	142

Of Mails and Messages.....	155
Stills and Sobs	169
Clatter and Calm.....	177
Fractured.....	184
Vidhi ka Vidhan- The Design of Destiny.....	190
A Sprinkle of Rain.....	199
Boundaries and Bridges	215
Sakhi – Setu; Of Friendship and Beyond	258
Vidhi Speaks	270
Namit Speaks	276
Sandhi Setu- Building Bridges.....	282
Epilogue.....	306

The Storm



December 2016

Vidhi's House

2.34 am

In the silence of the night, when darkness sliced open the sky, dripping

blood by blood the shades of black, she leaned against the railing of the third-floor balcony, contemplating the impact of the fall she was about to make.

The chocolate cake still lay on the table, untouched.

December 2016

Mayank and Niyati's House

8 pm

'He likes chocolate cake, it's his fav! I will help with the order'. It was Niyati's suggestion, earlier that day, after a fiery round of discussion with Mayank and Vidhi.

Mayank leaned back on the railing, watching Vidhi as she stared into the distance, lost in thoughts she hadn't voiced yet. He let the silence linger before nudging her gently.

'Come on, Vidhi. What's on your mind?' His voice was calm, patient.

She hesitated, pressing her fingers together. *'Nothing... just like that.'*

Mayank scoffed lightly. *'Just like that? If it was nothing, you wouldn't look like you're carrying the weight of the world. See*

Vidhi, I understand there is some problem, but you need to be precise only then can anyone be able to help you.'

She sighed, pressing her fingers together. *'Sometimes, it feels like... what bothers me is invisible to everyone else. Like mist—it's there, wrapping around me, but no one can see it.'*

Mayank nodded, his expression softening. *'Maybe not everyone can see it, but the fact is no one will be able to help either if you don't voice it out. Tell me what's bothering you.'*

A small, relieved smile touched Vidhi's lips as she tucked her hair behind her ear. Mayank always knew how to create space for someone's feelings, how to make the unspoken feel acknowledged. And in that moment, that was enough.

Mayank had an art of understanding people. It wasn't that he could read minds, but he had his way of drawing out exactly what he needed from a conversation. It wasn't manipulation; it was more like he had a gift for creating the right atmosphere for others to be honest with themselves.

Contrastingly, Vidhi often found it challenging to articulate issues that felt thin and suffocating like mist—problems invisible to many but profoundly felt by her. Despite the elusive nature of her concerns, Mayank was always receptive, all ears, neutral, arms open to help. His empathy and understanding of the issues, otherwise difficult to put across, made Vidhi feel seen and heard in a way that comforted and reassured her. Mayank was attuned to these emotional undercurrents. He could sense the subtle shifts in her mood and the silent weight of her unspoken worries. He embraced her vulnerabilities with an open heart, providing solace.

On the starry terrace, hunting for moon, they spoke at length, Vidhi and Mayank, while Niyati worked her way through fumes and flames to lay table for dinner. She was nowhere a part of the discussion. Her mind raced and wrestled; she couldn't take it anymore.

'Could you guys please come down', she bawled, biting back anger.

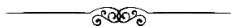
She could never take it. A single word, a blow or even a thought that went slightly toe-to-toe with Namit. Without any restraint, she snubbed Vidhi, for, to her the problem was non-existent. Mayank, soft and sober, yet firm and fair minded intervened.

'Just because it didn't happen to you doesn't mean these problems are non-existent Niyati. You need to be kinder'. Knowing Niyati's unparalleled love for Namit, he didn't say much.

As much as Niyati disdained Mayank's comment, she yielded and forwarded support.

'He likes chocolate cake, it's his fav! I will help with the order', she had said.

On the Edge



December 2016

Same Night

Vidhi's House

1.00 am

That very night the Mumbai to Bangalore flight served well as the interloper. The flight got delayed leaving three of them, the night, confectioneries and a restless heart at fortune's fate.

The scent of perfumed candles filled the living room, which adorned itself with embroidered satin cushion and silk sheets. The soft air caressed the white airy curtain of the balcony, as the wind chimed tunes of love and longing.

The stereo, softly and subtly, drifted into the breeze the hums of velvet vocals *ye sama, sama hai ye pyaar ka, kisi ke intezaar ka, dil na chura le kahin mera, Mausam bahaar ka.....*

The door clicked at around 1.30 am.

The throbbing heart of the eighteen months old bride raced to grab the handle. Her hands rubbed against his. He withdrew, with a slight involuntary jerk.

A smile of varied degree rested on both of their faces; hers gleamed yearning, shrouded in sheets of shyness, his, awkwardness.

They both sensed.

She retreated.

'It's all in your mind. He sleeps with you, it clearly means he loves you', Niyati's words reverberated in Vidhi's head.

Vidhi had never understood the correlation between love and sex. Love ensues physical intimacy, she knew, but sex alone ensuing

emotional intimacy was beyond the realms of her understanding. The thought played in her head, like a broken record, every single time, when Namit's smoked lips devoured her tender body inch by inch.

Tall, dark, handsome! Namit was nothing of this sort, nor any fragment of his body sculpted like the great Greek god, or even an average handsome man, yet there was something Vidhi admired. He was a good guy, rather a very good person.

He loved her well in the bedroom. But was that love! Is that love! If yes, she failed to feel!

To her it was an act, the consummation of marriage, the blazing need of body, the sparking heat of the moment, desire of flesh and blood, sex.

It's passion that unfolds behind closed bedroom doors, for love bursts forth in the living room, weaves through the corridors, dances on the balcony, and lingers on the kitchen counters. It blooms in the garden and finds its way everywhere. Love knows no confines, no curtains. It resides in the lover's eyes! Very much like she could see in Baba's eyes, for Ma!

But Vidhi never saw her reflection in Namit's eyes.

All she needed from Namit was emotional fulfillment of her feminine being, yet she stood there with her being parched, untouched, undesired, unloved.

She dodged the thought.

'Welcome home', she said.

'You didn't sleep', he asked.

'No... I like waiting for you', she murmured reticently, with the ruby of wine softly blushing on her cheeks. 'Well, all these days you never had anyone waiting back home when you travelled. I wanted you to feel the bliss of homecoming', she chirped.

'You should have slept.... Don't wait for me', he smiled.

She wanted to. She said nothing.

The candles still burnt bright, and the floral fragrance engulfed the room.

He didn't notice. He was tired.

She noticed.

'.....I have.... got you a cake..... was excited for your return..... kind of... you know....missed you.....'.

He said nothing.

The sound of his silence was loud enough to convey things that were never said.

'I am not used to these', he said softly, phlegmatically.

'Yea! I know! You have stayed all by yourself, most part of your life. But don't you think that calls for an even extra effort to make you feel..... (she fumbled) ... loved... comfortable... at home', she looked at him for affirmation.

He said nothing.

'Well, never mind, come cut the cake, have a slice', she smiled and signalled him to the sofa.

He breathed a sigh!

The special décor, perfumed ambiance, the soft stereo, the decked-up wife silently pleaded for his glance.

He was too indifferent to notice.

'I don't prefer having cake, putting on weight you see'

'At least take a bite.... Or.... or just slice it.... It's ok'

'Please Vidhi..... Can I go to bed?'

Namit sighed away into the coziness of his bed and his precious ally, the Blackberry phone.

She stayed on the sofa while he drifted into dreams. Something stirred and churned inside of her. Her glance affixed on the flickering flames.

She felt suffocated and drifted to the balcony to breathe free.

Thoughts flooded as she found herself standing on the edge of the balcony. It wasn't as if she wanted to jump. Not really. But the thought lingered, a quiet suggestion rather than an impulse. Just a step forward, and everything would stop—the aching emptiness, the questions, the feeling of being utterly unseen. Not just today, but every day, ever since she became his.... orhe became hers. The difference hit hard. Was this what marriage was supposed to feel like? Loneliness, even with someone living in the same house, sleeping in the same room? She could do nothing to save her sinking heart. She wanted to scream! Scream hard! Hard enough to pierce through his ears and make him see her. Make him see the pain of neglect that was eating her up every single day and making a monster out of her.

But she knew it wouldn't help. For when confronted, he would end up saying *'But What did I do?'*

She hated it whenever he would say that. As if he could see right through her pain yet chose to unsee.

She tasted blood in her mouth, not realising her lips bore the grunting pain of her teeth and soul for a while.

'Whoosh', she gasped.

'.....You will never find someone romantic like me.... Taras jaaogi pyar ke liye....'

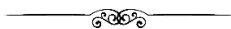
Out of the blue Samar's voice clinked in her head.

Her heart sank deeper.

It was difficult to tell if the stereo jinxed or charmed the ambiance with the soft notes of *O rasiya....baawali si preet mori, ab chain kaise paaye... aaja rasiya mohe ang laga le....*

The chocolate cake still lay on the table, untouched.

Of Matches and Marriages



.....Out of the blue Samar's voice rang in her head....

November 2011

Pradhan Niwas

Being born and raised in Indore, away from sand and sea, was probably the immediate reason for Vidhi to accept the proposal readily when Baba had asked about Samar, for the Software Engineer was based out of Bangalore.

Vidhi was always awed and mesmerised by the immensity of beauty of the South.

The clustered palms and coconut trees, the perfect arboreal canopy, the lustre of sand and hues of sea, at dusk and dawn, had her heart.

But that wasn't all!

The other day, while Ma was still in Gurgaon with Kritika, helping her settle down in her newly shifted house post marriage, Baba had returned late, around 11 pm.

It was a chilly winter night of November, with cold waves and drizzle creating an illusion of magically misty view. The oil lamp lit low and flickering, as Vidhi, with a huge black umbrella in her hand, hustled her way through the portico to open the door.

She sensed Baba's mood. He was happy.

She was eager to know all about the meeting, for Baba had been to Samar's hometown.

Since Ma was not there, Baba handed over an envelope to Vidhi asking her to keep it safe as it had the prospective groom's photograph.

‘Beta isko theek se rakh do, isme ladke ka photo hai’.

‘Ok Baba’, Vidhi answered reluctantly, trying hard to keep her fluttering excitement at bay.

She stood with the enclosed photograph for a long time. No one knows how long. Her eyes affixed on the envelope as her cheeks grew hot and pink. Drowned in shyness, she hadn’t the courage to open the envelope. Cold sweat broke from her forehead as intense thirst snapped her trance.

She breathed heavily over sips of water as her fingers gained strength to find their way through the wrapper.

And there it was!

The crisp white collared shirt with a pair of regular fit faded jeans, the slight stubble and black ray ban, contrasting the fair tone, created a picture-perfect look- a look charming enough to fall for. Samar was handsome by all means!

Vidhi envied her luck with an affirming smile biting the tip of her thumb coyly.

It was at a wedding function, amidst the glow of marigolds and the hum of laughter, when Samar’s father had noticed Vidhi. Her grace, her quiet elegance—it was enough for an idea to take root.

Later, as Baba stood greeting guests at Kritika’s wedding, Samar’s father approached him.

And the proposal hung in the air, unexpected yet undeniable.

And now, three months from then, she stood with Samar’s pic in her sweaty hands, gleaming like a new bride.

Vidhi had never known life beyond home and college. Growing up in a super-protective environment, she had been shielded from the complexities of modern life. Yet, despite her limited exposure, she wasn’t oblivious to the world. Books had been her escape, her window to realities she had never lived but deeply understood.

‘Reading is transformational. It’s magical. A well-read mind is a treasure house of infinite possibilities, a place where life is both

understood and rewritten,’ Ma would often say. And Vidhi would frequently find herself lost in such thoughts, dedicating hours to the world of words.

Vidhi belonged to the distinguished Pradhan family of Indore. Her father, Samarth Pradhan, a revered professor at the University of Indore, was a man of intellect and stature. Known as ‘Pradhan Ji’, he commanded both respect and admiration, his words carrying the weight of wisdom. Her mother, Pratima Pradhan, an accomplished lawyer, was equally formidable—sharp, articulate, and unwavering in her principles. A Bengali by birth, she brought a different kind of fire to their home, balancing the scholarly atmosphere with her keen sense of justice.

Growing up in a house where intelligence and discipline were non-negotiable, Vidhi had charted her own path. She was a Software Engineer at IBM, Kolkata, with an MBA in Marketing and Finance. A blend of logic and strategy, she had built a career she was proud of.

But emotions? Love? They had never been a part of her equation. She had never dated. Never allowed herself to develop feelings for anyone. Not because she wasn’t capable of love, but because she had been raised to believe that such matters would be handled at the right time, in the right way. Honestly, love was still a taboo topic in the yet flourishing alleys of Indore.

Whenever Vidhi would look at the mirror, a fair and graceful girl, with an air of quiet elegance, would look back at her. Her almond-shaped eyes, long, wavy black hair cascading past her shoulders, the fuller lips, the rose-tinted cheeks, and the slight dimpled smile had a way of leaving a lasting impression.

Right since her school days, she was no stranger to admiration. Through her college years and even in her office at IBM Kolkata, young men had tried to strike a chord—some with subtle glances, others with earnest words, and a few with outright confessions.

'Vidhi, you never give anyone a chance,' a colleague had once teased her at the office cafeteria.

'Maybe I'm just waiting for the right one,' she had replied with a soft smile, leaving the conversation at that.

Yes. She never gave a chance to anyone to approach for more than friendship. Despite the attention, her heart had remained untouched, guarded, waiting for the special man who would be her husband. She nurtured the typical old school thought. Love, for her, had always been something sacred, not to be frivolously explored but to be deeply cherished when the time was right.

With Samar, that 'right time' seemed to have arrived.

The proposed alliance, a persistent pursuit by Samar's family immediately after Kritika's wedding, had been Vidhi's first brush with romantic yearnings as she continued to gaze at the photograph of the 27-year-old B. Tech graduate, employed at Accenture in Bangalore.

Roka ceremony was finalised for 14th of January.

Baba adjusted his glasses and looked up from his notes. *'Samar is coming on 6th January. He and his family want to meet Vidhi on the way.'*

Ma, stirring the tea on the stove, frowned slightly. *'On the way? How is he traveling?'*

'He's taking a flight from Bangalore to Indore,' Baba explained. *'He'll land in the morning, meet his family at cousin's place and then everyone will come to meet us and Vidhi for a few hours, and then leave for Kanpur the next day at 2 pm with Indore Patna Express. There's no direct flight. One of his cousins is joining him in Bhopal for the ceremony. Something they have said.'*

Ma sighed, pouring the tea into two cups. *'And where will they stay?'*

Baba took the cup from her and blew on it lightly. *'Most likely a good hotel, but I think we should invite them to stay here itself. What do you say?'*

'Ki bolcho tumi'. Ma gave a questionable look to Baba.

She then settled into the chair opposite him. *'Hmm.... I see... But Vidhi meeting him like this—do you think she'll be comfortable?'*

Baba took a slow sip of tea. *'She should at least talk to him. It's just a conversation, not commitment.'*

Ma nodded, but a hint of concern still lingered in her eyes. *'I hope she finds clarity.'*

The day finally arrived and Vidhi found herself getting ready for the occasion of meet and greet. Not exceptionally pretty, but at 23, Vidhi was beautiful in the blooming years of her youth. Her flawless skin carried a natural glow, and her firm, voluptuous curves sculpted an irresistibly feminine silhouette. There was something about her—graceful, yet unassuming. She wasn't the kind to turn heads in a crowd, but when someone did look, it lingered.

From a nearby function, the song played loud— *'Tham ke baras... mujhe Mehboob ke paas jaana hai...'* Vidhi hummed along, her fingers idly brushing the edge of the dupatta draped over her shoulder. She and Ma were overseeing the final touches for the evening.

Baba, meanwhile, was growing restless. He had already cleaned the garden twice, arranged the chairs on the portico ten times, and stretched the bedsheets at least seventeen times, checking for non-existent creases.

'Weren't they supposed to arrive in the morning?' he grumbled.

'Call ta koro na,' Ma suggested.

No answer.

Morning gently gave way to afternoon, the afternoon quietly slipped into lunchtime, and before long, lunch seamlessly transitioned into cool spring evening. After three rounds of mopping the drawing room and dining area Vidhi's empty stomach grumbled and demanded a morsel of food.

Meal was denied.

Ma raised an eyebrow. ‘Go, *have something.*’

Vidhi hesitated, her face turning scarlet. ‘*How can I eat before him... and them?*’, she coyly thought to herself.

With immense effort she curbed the flustering butterflies. Not that she couldn’t eat, she just didn’t want to. She wanted to wait for him.

Love is strange and stranger are its ways of expression. The relation between denying food to hungry stomach and affection was an undecipherable mystery even to Vidhi, yet she happily persisted with a cheerful resolve.

Ma sensed the shyness in her voice, the way she fidgeted with the loose end of her dupatta. A knowing smile tugged at Ma’s lips.

Vidhi ignored it and busied herself with the mop—again. By now, the floor gleamed like glass, but her anxious heart refused to settle.

At exactly 4 PM, Ma’s voice cut through the house. ‘*Vidhi, wash your face. They’re here.*’

A sudden jolt ran through her. She ran to the mirror, splashed cold water on her face, and checked her reflection. *Breathe, Vidhi. It’s just a meeting.*

Outside, the by-lane leading to *Pradhan Niwas* bore Baba’s name. Samar’s Scorpio halted at the nearest intersection, its tires screeching against the gravel. The moment he stepped out, he removed his black Ray-Bans, his sharp gaze sweeping over the grand bungalow, the towering coconut trees swaying with the late winter breeze.

Vidhi peeked through the blue curtains, catching a glimpse of him.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. Dressed in a crisp white shirt, sleeves folded to his elbows. A fragment of the setting sun cast a golden glow on his face. He looked composed, confident.

Vidhi bit her lip and pulled back.

Her heart raced.

She had waited the whole day for this moment. And now, suddenly, she didn't know what to do!

Samar and his extended family of nine were welcomed with pomp and warmth.

The drawing room of *Pradhan Niwas* exuded an old-world charm, its plush sofa set adorned with luxurious fabric, large cushions, and an elegant cover in classic hues. The tall, glass-panelled windows allowed the late afternoon light to cast soft golden patches on the marble floor. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, its intricate designs reflecting the glow of the setting sun.

Juice and snacks arrived as conversations flowed effortlessly. Laughter echoed. Compliments were exchanged. The air carried the distinct fragrance of freshly brewed coffee and rose and jasmine flowers from the garden.

Then entered Vidhi.

Dressed in a blue embroidered cotton suit, she carried a silver tray of tea, her movements deliberate yet delicate. She bent down to touch everyone's feet.

A sudden twist of the wrist made her pause.

'I'm younger than you, Bhabhi. Don't you know?'

The hefty woman, mother of three, smiled, half in jest, half in declaration.

Vidhi, taken aback, nodded, her gaze still fixed on the floor.

As she served tea, someone stole a conceited glance at her. But as much as she longed, she didn't — she couldn't!

The room filled with stories and laughter as the elders delved into discussions of wedding formalities. Dates were suggested. Rituals were recalled. The excitement in the air was tangible.

Then came the announcement.

'Bhaiya wants to meet Bhabhi on the terrace. Alone.' Grishma, Samar's only sister, grinned mischievously.

Baba relayed the message to Ma and Vidhi.

Vidhi's heart pounded. 'No,' she whispered.

'Children can talk in one of the rooms. Grishma can accompany if needed.' Ma handled the situation with quiet authority.

Samar respected the decision.

Inside the room, Grishma didn't take long to start.

'I heard you work at IBM, Bhabhi,' she said, her voice laced with amusement. *'Better serve your notice period on time. You can't be working after marriage. Who will take care of bhai?'*

Vidhi was too intoxicated by happiness to notice the red flags in Grishma's tone.

Samar, however, had spoken little—mostly responding to the teasing from his siblings and brother-in-law. But now, all eyes were on him. He chose silence.

'Daddy ji told me you're a hardcore non-vegetarian,' Grishma pressed, raising an eyebrow.

Vidhi had met *Daddy ji* twice. He had adored her instantly, never missing a chance to praise her.

'With you joining our family, our emotional, intellectual, and social stature will only rise, beta!' he would say with pride.

But one conversation stood out in her memory, distinct.

'Do you eat non-veg?' he had asked casually.

'Yes, Daddy ji,' she had replied honestly.

He nodded, pausing for a moment before leaning in slightly. His voice dropped to a whisper. *'Don't mention it to Samar when he comes to meet you. We'll figure it out later. We are vegetarians now. Samar and all the children don't even remember the taste now.'*

Vidhi looked up, startled. Then she spoke hesitantly, *'I can't do that, Daddy ji. I can't start a new relationship on the foundation of lies.'*

Silence.

'Truth and respect are the most important pillars of any relationship,' she said firmly, her gaze lowered but her resolve unshaken.

All he could do was sigh!

Had daddy ji asked her to give up on nonveg, she would have happily tried, but lying for such petty things fell beyond the premise of her principles.

Grishma awaited a response. *'Ye sab chorna hoga Bhabhi. You will have to leave nonveg; you see bhaiya doesn't eat. At least this much you need to do for him, well you will have to',* she continued.

Vidhi smiled. She was too ecstatic to weigh the tone and choice of Greeshma's words. The instant decision of relinquishing her favourite delicacies was thus taken by the hard core non vegetarian.

Like all good things the get together came to an end.

Ma and Baba escorted the guests to the porch downstairs, overlooking the beautiful lawn and garden.

Her eyes searched for Samar.

Samar was not to be seen.

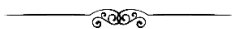
The next moment he was before Vidhi. She swallowed her heart.

'If any of Greeshma's or anyone's words offended you, my apologies.'

She froze. Her heart melted inside. The look in Samar's soft eyes posted a peck on her cheeks. She skipped a beat.

The night was spent in sweet dreams.

In the Space Between Yes and Forever



January 2012

The house was a flurry of activity, brimming with voices, movement, and the occasional sound of laughter echoing from the courtyard. The morning air was crisp, carrying the scent of marigold garlands and freshly brewed *chai*. A faint trail of *dhoop* smoke curled through the hallway, its woody fragrance mixing with the rich aroma of *besan laddoos* and *shakkarpas* being packed in shiny tin boxes.

Vidhi stood at the doorstep, wrapped in her maroon shawl, watching as Baba oversaw the final preparations. The white bolero and two black Scorpios stood in the driveway; their trunks open as gifts were carefully arranged inside. The helpers moved swiftly, lifting and placing boxes, their voices blending into the morning's hum.

'Arre, *carefully!* *That's a glass set,*' Baba called out, adjusting his muffler. He turned to Ma. '*Did you check the sarees?*'

Ma, balancing a steel *dabba* filled with sweets, nodded. '*Haan, everything is set. The Benarasi ones are packed separately. I have checked twice.*'

Aunties and cousins stood huddled in groups, wrapped in woollen shawls, their excitement apparent. Choti Ma was ensuring that the important gifts were handed securely to Baba—the *shagun* thali with betel leaves, coconut, and saffron-wrapped currency notes sat securely in Baba's car. A brass *lota* filled with *gangajal* rested beside it.

Vidhi's eyes drifted to the parcels she had personally picked out and packed artistically.

A dark brown leather wallet, sleek and elegant, lay inside a finely carved wooden box. She had debated between shades, finally settling on this one. A charcoal grey woollen muffler was folded neatly beside it, its soft fabric tempting her fingers. Would Samar wear it? Would he even know she had chosen it?

For his family, she had put equal thought. The *Benarasi* saree for his mother had an intricate golden zari border—Ma had approved the choice instantly. His father's silver watch gleamed inside its case, and the pearl earrings for his sisters were simple yet elegant. For his younger cousins, small silver *kadas* and colorful hair clips had been packed in tiny velvet pouches. Gold ornaments were reserved for his sister and mother.

Upadhyay Uncle adjusted his cap and grinned. '*Vidhi beta, you sure you don't want to sneak into the car? We can smuggle you in with the gifts.*'

Vidhi blushed, shaking her head. '*I don't think that's how it works, Uncle.*'

He chuckled. '*A shame! Would have been fun to see your Baba's reaction.*'

Ma walked over, brushing a strand of hair off Vidhi's face. Her hands were cold, but the touch was warm. '*Take care, beta. We'll be back soon.*'

Vidhi nodded. '*You take care too, Ma.*'

Baba took a long look at her before stepping into the car. The last of the luggage was loaded, doors slammed shut, and the convoy of cars slowly rolled out of the driveway.

She stood still, watching until they disappeared down the road. The silence that followed felt strange. The house, which had been bustling just moments ago, now seemed too large, too quiet.

She turned on her heels and stepped inside. The day had changed something.

Vidhi paced around the living room, her fingers clutching the edge of her shawl. She had been restless ever since Baba's call came,

announcing that the *roka* had gone beautifully. The rituals had taken place in a warm, celebratory atmosphere—elders blessing Samar, sweets being distributed, laughter ringing through the house.

And now, she was waiting.

Her phone buzzed.

Unknown number calling...

Her heart skipped a beat. She knew who it could be. She quickly picked up, pressing the phone to her ear.

'Hello?'

For a second, there was silence. Then, his voice—warm, teasing. *'So... I guess it's official now, Miss Vidhatri Samar Adhiraj.'*

She smiled instinctively, sinking onto the sofa. *'I suppose it is, Mr. Samar Adhiraj.'*

'You missed quite a show. Your Baba looked so proud, and your cousins? They nearly finished half the rasmalai before the elders even got their share.'

Vidhi laughed, picturing it all. *'Sounds about right.'*

There was a pause before he said, softer this time, *'Your gifts... You chose them, didn't you?'*

She hesitated. *'How do you know?'*

'Because they feel... personal.... Samjho na...' He paused, then added, *'I liked them.'*

Something warm bloomed inside her. She bit her lip, staring at the floor, feeling silly at how much his words mattered. *'I'm glad.'*

'Especially the muffler,' he continued. *'I'll wear it tomorrow. It's warm... like you.'*

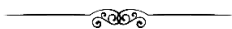
Vidhi's cheeks burned. *'You're just saying that.'*

'I don't say things I don't mean.' His voice was low, sincere.

She didn't know what to say. So, she just smiled, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

A new feeling settled inside her—something light, something sweet. Something like happiness.

Together, Forever?



January 2012 to December 2012

Vidhi never thought love could feel this way—like a gentle tide, pulling her in, making her want to stay. Samar had a way of making her feel cherished, like she was the centre of his universe. As if they were already husband and wife! Their conversations, which started as hesitant, polite exchanges, soon turned into long, late-night calls that stretched until dawn.

One night, long after the world had quieted, her phone buzzed. She picked up, already smiling.

‘Vidhatri, I can’t sleep,’ Samar whispered. His voice had that soft, familiar warmth she had begun to crave.

She nestled deeper into her blanket. *‘And what do you expect me to do about it?’* she teased.

‘Talk to me.’

‘About what?’

‘Anything. Samjho na.... Tell me what you were like as a child.’

She laughed, thinking back. *‘A menace. At least that’s what Ma says. I used to climb trees like a monkey and get into fights over marbles.’*

‘Really? You? Fighting?’ he chuckled.

‘Oh, I was unbeatable!’ she boasted. *‘I had a prized collection of marbles. Once, a boy tried to take them, and I punched him so hard he ran home crying. Baba had to apologize to his parents,’* she chuckled.

Samar burst out laughing. *‘I would pay to see that! And then?’*

She smiled, the memory playing in her mind like an old movie. *'Then I climbed the guava tree to celebrate my victory and fell. Scraped my knee so badly Ma had to use an entire strip of band-aids.'*

'Ouch. And Baba?'

'He scolded me for being reckless. But later, he sneaked me sweets. That was Baba—strict but soft when no one was looking.'

There was a pause, a silence that wasn't empty but full—of shared warmth, of unsaid words.

'I wish I had known you then,' Samar murmured.

She felt her heart skip. *'And why is that?'*

'So, I could have stolen your marbles.'

She burst out laughing, the sound carefree and unguarded.

It was in moments like these that Vidhi started falling for him with all her heart.

They shared memories in secret whispers and that made them feel amazing. Samar felt assured with Vidhi, and Vidhi felt wise.

Samar, too, had his stories. He told her about how he and his friends once bunked school just to watch *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* in a rundown theatre.

'We didn't have enough money for tickets, so we sneaked in through the back door,' he confessed.

Vidhi gasped. *'You little criminal!'*

'Oh, please! We got caught in the interval and were thrown out. But the first half was totally worth it!'

She shook her head, grinning. *'You must have been a nightmare for your teachers.'*

'Ask my principal,' he admitted. *'He used to say, "Samar, you either have the sharpest mind in class or the laziest. I just can't figure out which."'*

Vidhi laughed. *'And what do you think?'*

He sighed dramatically. *'A little of both, I guess. Samjho na...'*

She loved these conversations. He loved these conversations—unrushed, honest, wrapped in laughter and nostalgia.

Months passed in giggles and laughter, in whispers that stretched till dawn. Samar's calls had become a part of Vidhi's routine, as natural as breathing.

Their days would begin with *'good morning'* texts and end with *'good night'* with many such *'what are you doing'*, *'where had you been'*, *'You know what..'* in between. He would call her every day after waking up, then during breakfast, while riding his bike to office, when bored at office, drop a text when busy at office, call during lunch, way back from office and of course at night. They didn't realise how much time they spent together on calls and messages despite staying in two different cities.

Sometimes Vidhi would say *'half of you time goes in talking to me Samar, so when exactly do you work'*

And he would teasingly reply *'Oh hello Madam ji, kabhi main na rahoon to taras jaogi pyar ke liye'*

'Aaa hahaaha', Vidhi would retaliate.

'Samjho na, patni ji.... arrey sahi me. You will never find someone romantic like me.... Taras jaaogi pyar ke liye....', he would flirt.

And two hopeless romantics, with shared dreams of new lives, would laugh off.

It was almost like sharing life, together, miles apart. There was nothing in the world and beyond that they hadn't talked about. Life after marriage, future plannings, financial plannings, even education for kids, everything! It felt so surreal! So blissful!

But that night, something was different.

The call came later than usual. 12:07 AM.

Vidhi frowned at the screen. Samar never called this late. Has something happened?

Miles away Samar leaned against the dilapidated pillar, his fingers tightening around his glass of whiskey. It wasn't the alcohol that burned his throat—it was something secretive.

'Samar? It's so late... What's going on?' she asks, her voice still heavy with sleep.

There was a long pause on the other end before Samar's voice broke through, sounding strained and distant.

'Vidhi... I need to tell you something,' his voice trembled with an uncharacteristic vulnerability. *'Something I've been struggling to say for a long time now. I've wanted to tell you, but I didn't know how... I don't know how you'll react, but I need to say it.'*

Vidhi's heart skipped a beat at his tone. She straightened in bed, suddenly wide awake, the toll of his words sinking in. This wasn't the casual Samar she knew. Something was wrong.

'Wha..... what... is it, Samar? What are you trying to say?' she asked, her voice a mix of concern and confusion.

There was another silence before he spoke again, his words coming out in a rushed, almost desperate whisper.

'Vidhi, I... I've been experiencing things—things from another time, another life, I think. And I can't explain it, but everything feels so real. I've been seeing flashes, dreams, like memories... like I've been here before. And I don't know why, but I know I had to tell you.'

Vidhi's pulse quickened. Her mind raced, trying to piece together what he was saying. 'Samar, have you been drinking? Weed? Anything that sort?'

Samar's voice faltered, and he spoke slowly now, as if carefully weighing every word, *'I knew it would turn like this. You see! So, I was scared to mention this to you. ... you wouldn't believe it. But it's driving me insane.'*

'Do you love me Vidhi?'

She didn't know what to say.

'Samar I am there for you, but I guess you need a good sleep'

'No. No.. no.. no.. Vidhi, you are not getting it', he seemed to break.

'So, you don't believe me. Ok check it for yourself. Meet the pandit at the old Shobhabazar Rajbari. I don't know why, but I keep seeing the place and the priest in my dream. And in those dreams, I see him looking at me, holding my picture in his hand... as if he knows who I am. And I know it sounds crazy, but I remember myself dressed as the maharaja.'

His breath hitched, and Vidhi's mind spun. She knew the place he was talking about—Shobhabazar Rajbari—the ancient mansion near the river, known for its eerie past, the old stories surrounding it. But this? This was something else entirely.

'I remember.....' his voice broke.

'Remember what, Samar? What do you mean you remember?' Vidhi's voice shook; concern flooding her thoughts. She couldn't comprehend what he was saying, it felt odd.

'I remember... I remember being there before. Long ago,' Samar continued, his words growing more frantic, more urgent. *'It wasn't just a dream. I've been there... and the priest... he said something.....'*

Vidhi felt a chill run down her spine.

There was a sound of rustling in the background. A faint creak of wood, as if something or someone was moving. Samar paused, his breath coming in quick gasps.

'Samar? What's happening? Are you there?' she called into the phone, her heart pounding now.

The line crackled, and then his voice came through, barely above a whisper, trembling with fear.

'Meet him Vidhi....immediately..... for me..... Please.... Go to the Rajbarinow... samjho na!!!!'

'Vidhi... Vidhi.....'

The phone cut off abruptly, and Vidhi's chest tightened with a cold, sinking feeling. She was shit scared! The line went dead. She tried calling back, but it went straight to voicemail.

She immediately dialled home, but realising about the time she quickly disconnected.

Without the faintest idea of what to expect, Vidhi mustered the courage to go to *Shobhabazar Rajbari* that night. The strange phone call from Samar still echoed in her ears—his trembling voice, that urgent tone, and then... silence.

She didn't want to go alone. So, she dragged Mainak, Rushali, and Rishabh along, giving them only bits of the truth. *'He said something about a dream... a priest... and remembering a past life. And then the call just... dropped.'*

'Vidhi, are you sure this is okay?' Rushali asked, glancing around nervously as they pushed open the rusty gate. *'It's almost midnight. This place looks like it belongs in a horror movie.'*

The courtyard was dark and empty. The old mansion loomed ahead; its grand pillars half-eaten by moss. A chill crept down everyone's spine. But they kept walking, drawn in by something.

And then, without warning—a soft hum of light blinked alive.

All four of them stopped in their tracks.

In the centre of the courtyard, a heart shape had lit up on the ground, made of tiny electric candles—flickering in perfect symmetry.

No one spoke. The stillness was suddenly loud.

And just then...

'Bahut pyar karte hain tumko sanam...'

The old tune floated through the air—thin, ghostly, and deeply haunting. It was as if the walls themselves had begun to sing. The voice trembled with emotion, like someone had pressed play on an ancient memory.

Vidhi and Rushali screamed clutching tight on Rishabh's tee shirt.

And before the three of them could even think of running—hearts thudding, pulses racing—three silhouettes jumped out from behind the massive pillars with loud jingles, holding fairy lights in their hands.

'Happy Birthday Vidhatri!' shouted Abhiraj, Mridul and Prayag in unison, their voices echoing in the quiet courtyard.

Rushali let out a full-on scream, dropped her phone, and clutched Rishabh's arm for dear life. Rishabh almost stumbled backward, whispering, 'Holy—! What the hell is going on!'

Mainak looked like he was ready to swing a brick at whoever came close.

And then... in the centre of that heart-shaped light, someone stepped forward slowly, the faint flicker of candles catching the soft glint of something in his hand.

It was Samar.

Dressed in a simple white shirt, eyes locked at Vidhi, he stepped into the light, holding a single red rose. His breath was slightly uneven—not from fear or cold, but from the nervous thrum of the moment he had played over and over in his mind.

He dropped to one knee.

'Happy birthday, Vidhatri,' he said softly, his voice finally steady. *'I'm sorry for scaring you.....'*, he laughed. *'Actually... I'm not. Because this is exactly how I wanted you to remember it—terrifying, unforgettable, and straight out of a crazy dream.'*

Vidhi stood frozen. Her hands were still trembling. Her lips parted to speak but no sound came out.

Rushali gaped, mouthing, *'Are you kidding me right now?'*

Mainak let out a low whistle. *'Bhai... you nearly gave us all heart attacks for this?!'*

Samar chuckled sheepishly. *'Worth it.'*

'I hate you!!!'. Vidhi finally spoke composing herself from the shock, fear and excitement to see Samar.

'But I love you!', Samar said as he pulled her closer, gripping her tightly in his arms.

A long silence stretched between them. Then she laughed—a soft, stunned, tear-lined laugh that melted everything strange and surreal about the night.

She took the rose from his hand, shook her head in disbelief, and whispered, *'You're insane.'*

He grinned. *'Only for you.'*

Rushali finally found her voice. *'Okay but can we eat cake before the next ghost pops out?'*

Everyone burst into laughter. The Rajbari, once eerie and breathless, was now filled with warmth, lights, and the buzz of celebration—haunted not by the past, but by a night that would live forever in their memories.

After Samar left that night, Vidhi found herself fondling the rose. The one he had given. There was something undeniably magnetic about Samar—adventurous, full of life, fearless in expression. He didn't just exist in the moment, he *owned* it. He had this rare ability to turn an ordinary night into something unforgettable, something worth holding onto. He wasn't just charming or spontaneous—he was worthy, in the truest sense of the word. A man who dared to dream, and more than that, dared to make someone feel deeply seen. Deeply loved. Deeply valued. It was more than enough for Vidhi.

Months passed by ease. Winter had already chucked its white sheet, and spring was long blooming in the corners, awaiting 'summer'.

As usual Vidhi's lonely flat buzzed to life with Samar's call. It was 11:48 pm, a little later than usual.

'Vidhi,' he said, quieter than usual. *'What's your worst fear?'*

The question caught her off guard. They had talked about everything—old songs, childhood mischief, the little quirks that made them who they were. But never this.

A pause. Not the easy, comfortable kind they often shared—but a silence that felt like standing at the edge of something uncertain. She heard him exhale, slow and measured, as if gathering himself. ‘Vidhi,’ he said, softer this time.

There was something in his tone—something weighed down, like a secret too heavy to carry alone.

‘Tell me Vidhi, what’s your worst fear?’

She hesitated before answering. ‘Losing people I love.’

He swallowed.

‘And yours?’ she asked.

He exhaled, rubbing his temple. ‘Being left behind.’

There was silence. A long, heavy pause where he knew she was trying to understand.

‘Has it happened before?’ she asked gently.

He could have told her everything right then.

But instead, he forced a chuckle. ‘Maybe.’

Vidhi didn’t press. She never did.

‘You won’t be left behind, Samar, we’ll walk together,’ she said, her voice steady, certain.

He wanted to believe her.

‘Promise?’ he whispered.

A lump formed in her throat. ‘Promise.’

And for the first time in a long time, Samar felt something close to peace. But peace was a fragile thing—one that never stayed for long.

It had been more than eleven months since their courtship began. Their wedding was set for the 7th December—less than a month away!

Vidhi barely had time to breathe between work, family, and wedding preparations and of course sweet little surprises from Samar.

That evening, as she stretched her stiff shoulders after a long day at IBM, her phone buzzed.

'Step outside,' Samar's voice was warm over the line.

She frowned, glancing at the time. *'Outside where?'*

'Your office.'

She almost laughed. *'Very funny.'*

'I'm serious, Vidhi. Come out.'

Curious, she walked outside, expecting nothing more than a playful prank. But there he was—leaning against a sleek black sedan, hands in his pockets, looking perfectly at ease. As if waiting outside her workplace was the most natural thing in the world.

'You actually came?' she asked, incredulous.

He shrugged, a half-smile playing on his lips. *'Wanted to see you, Patni ji'*

Warmth spread through her chest as she scuttled down the stairs.

That evening, they walked along the Hooghly River, sipping tea from kulhads, their fingers brushing occasionally. She spoke about work—how a project deadline had nearly driven her insane—while he listened intently, nodding at the right moments, teasing her for using too many technical terms.

'You work too much,' he mused, watching her with quiet amusement.

She smirked. *'And you don't?'*

'Not when I'm with you.'

His attention was intoxicating, like standing under a warm sun after days of rain. But there were moments that made her pause.

One evening, she casually mentioned having lunch with a male colleague. Samar's easy-going tone shifted almost instantly.

'Who?' he asked, his tone suddenly sharper.

'Just a friend from work,' she said lightly, not thinking much of it.

'You never mentioned him before.'

She blinked. *'Should I have?'*

There was a short silence before he smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. *'I just like knowing who's important in your life.'*

It felt sweet at first; possessiveness disguised as love. But then, there were other things—small, almost invisible at first. The way he always wanted to know where she was, the way he dismissed her opinions when they didn't align with his.

'You should take the Gurgaon offer,' he said one night, referring to the transfer she had mentioned. *'It'll be better for us.'*

'But I like Kolkata,' she countered.

He exhaled sharply. *'You're not thinking long-term.'*

She wanted to argue, but the way he looked at her—like he knew better—made her hesitate. He had a way of making her question herself. But wasn't love supposed to be like that? A little sacrifice, a little compromise?

Samar never spoke of his possessive streak, but it showed—in the quiet clench of his jaw, in the way his silence sometimes screamed. Yet Vidhi saw he was trying, battling his own nature with quiet resolve. He couldn't bear to be the reason for her hurt, and that effort, however unspoken, made him all the more real to her.

One night, as they sat on a park bench, she asked, *'You said there was a surprise for me.'*

'Ahh yes..... sea or mountains?'

Vidhi shrugged, not understanding enough.

'Arrey bhai honeymoon.....', Samar nudged her.

She turned pink.

'Okay listen...' Samar said, fidgeting with the strap of his watch, 'you know I'm into all this adventure stuff—treks, climbs, mountaineering, right'

Vidhi looked at him, a little amused. *'Sort of... you've mentioned it. Once or twice. Or a hundred times.'*

He grinned. *'Fair. Anyway... so, our boys' gang— Arjun, Karthik, Raghav, Niti, Jiggy and Venky. we've finally locked it. We're doing a proper mountaineering expedition... end of May. Not very sure of Venky though'*

Vidhi's eyebrows rose. *'Niti? Girls are joining in too?'*

'Arrey nai re, Niti is a guy. We never address our close friends with their real names; it's always a distorted one. Feels extra special. Frankly speaking we don't even recollect real names at times. Niti is something from parliament policy, Jiggy is from Viggys, that's Vignesh. Guess what they kept your name?..... 'Abby' from 'Able' which came from 'Samarth'....hahah.....Tell you these guys are impossible sometimes!'

'Seriously!!; Abby!!!' Vidhi had a huge hearty laugh at the humorously accurate yet cute translation of her name.

'.....Hmm'..... She continued. *'So Proper expedition for you guys?'*

'Pura...Samjho na... Like, full gear. Ice axes. Ropes. Crampons. That kind of proper.' He leaned forward; eyes gleaming. *'We're going Brahmatal Trek, you know Chamoli district, Uttarakhand ...approx. 3–4 hours' drive from Dehradun. It's one of those snow-capped little monsters in the Garhwal Himalayas. Base camps in Uttarkashi... we report to the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering on November 26th.'*

Vidhi blinked. *'That's... intense.'*

*'It is!' he laughed. 'We'll do acclimatisation, get our gear cleared, and then push toward the summit. If all goes well, we reach the top by the **last week of November**. But...' he shrugged, 'you know mountains. They don't care for your plans.'*

She smiled. *'And you're excited about freezing to death?'*

'Obviously,' he said, mock serious. Then, softening, 'It's beautiful up there, Vidhi. Wild. Brutal. Pure. Everything down here feels... noisy after that. I'll send you a video from the glacier. Just... don't freak out if I look like a frozen chicken.'

Vidhi chuckled. *'Can't wait.'*

Ice to Ice



30 November 2012

It was Baba who found out first. Mishra Uncle, an old acquaintance from Dehradun and a senior with ties in the mountaineering circuit, had called him—his voice hesitant, but firm, heavy with the cursed news no one ever wants to deliver.

'Bodies...', Baba mumbled.

'Pradhan ji... I'm so sorry to be the one saying this... but there's been an accident,' he said, pausing as if searching for steadier breath. *'—they were hit by a sudden avalanche. Just after Camp II, near the glacier ridge. Two of them... didn't make it.'*

Baba froze. The room around him seemed to still.

'What... what about Samar?' His voice was barely audible, as if he wasn't ready to hear the answer.

'He's alive. But critical. He was airlifted by the rescue team to the Max Super Specialty Hospital in Dehradun. He's in the ICU. Four others are injured—some with fractures, one with frostbite. But Samar...' Another pause. *'His condition is... unstable.'*

The call ended, but the words kept ringing in Baba's ears like an echo that wouldn't stop. He sat still for a long time, staring at nothing, the world suddenly far too silent.

Down the hallway, Vidhi's laughter rang faintly—unaware, untouched. Baba closed his eyes, dreading how to tell her.

And when he did, Vidhi's mind raced, but her body remained frozen in place. The room around her blurred, as though the walls were closing in, tightening like a noose. Her heart hammered in her chest, each beat louder than the last.

'No... no, this can't be happening...' she repeated, her voice breaking as tears welled in her eyes. She stood up abruptly, stumbling back a few steps, the ground beneath her unsteady.

Ma's hand shot out, gripping Vidhi's arm. *'Vidhi...'*

But Vidhi couldn't hear her, couldn't process anything except the deafening silence in her head. She kept calling his number, not knowing what else to do.

'But he... he was fine,' she whispered, shaking her head, as if denial could somehow make it all untrue. *'I just talked to him a few days back... He was fine, Baba! He—he—he was ... coming back soon!'*

Her voice cracked as she tried to steady herself, but it was like trying to hold back a flood with bare hands. The tears came then, unbidden, hot and sharp.

'He can't be... he can't be...'

Baba stepped forward, his hand hovering in the air as if he wanted to comfort her but wasn't sure how.

'No!' Vidhi's voice broke through, a raw, desperate scream that echoed through the house. *'I won't believe it. I won't!'*

She turned away from him, her breath shallow, fighting against the tears that threatened to drown her. The love she had for Samar—untouched, unspoken, hanging in the balance—suddenly felt too fragile to hold onto.

The cold antiseptic smell of the ICU clung to the air, sharp and clinical. *'Meet him, he doesn't have much time,'* the doctor had said.

The beeping of the heart monitor was the only sound in the sterile silence. Vidhi sat motionless in the chair beside Samar's bed, her fingers gripping the edge of the blanket as if holding onto him, trying to keep him tethered to the world she knew.

Samar's face was pale, almost ghostly, with a thick bandage wrapped around his head. Tubes snaked from his arms, feeding

into his veins, keeping him fastened to life. His chest rose and fell with shallow breaths, the steady beep of the heart monitors the only sign that he was still here.

His body—so full of life, so full of stories and laughter—was now a fragile shell, fighting against the forces of nature, fighting against death itself. His eyes were closed, but Vidhi couldn't shake the image of him smiling, laughing—alive.

'Samar,' she whispered, the name coming out in a fragile breath, barely a whisper as if she was afraid that saying it too loudly would disturb the delicate balance of life that hung around him.

Her eyes burned with unshed tears as she leaned forward, brushing a lock of his hair away from his forehead. She could feel the coolness of his skin, the way it didn't feel like him, like the warmth and energy he once had were slipping away, retreating somewhere deep inside.

She squeezed his hand, but his fingers didn't twitch, didn't respond. She kept holding on, even though she knew he might not be able to feel it. She didn't care. She couldn't let go.

'*You can't leave me like this,*' Vidhi murmured, her voice breaking. Her heart felt like it was being ripped apart by invisible hands, the load of her fear crushing every inch of her body. '*I can't... I can't let you go, Samar. Please, fight for me. Fight like you always do.*'

She glanced at his battered form, the bruises that marred his face, the cuts and scrapes that told the story of a violent fall, of a struggle against nature's fury. But what hit her the hardest was the stillness. Samar had always been the one who moved, the one who stirred up life wherever he went. And now... now, he was so still, so quiet, it felt like the very air in the room was holding its breath.

'.....*Come back to me, Samar....,*' she whispered, her voice trembling. '*Come back, please...*'

Time stretched on, as moments bled into one another, but it felt like an eternity. Vidhi didn't move from his side. She couldn't.

There was no world without him, not one that made sense. She whispered to him, her words low and full of desperation, trying to keep him as long as she could.

The monitors beeped.

Samar's eyelids fluttered weakly, the soft sound of his breath hissing through the tubes. His eyes scanned the room tiredly before focusing on her. His voice was hoarse, barely audible, but it was unmistakably him.

'Vidhi...' he rasped, a weak smile tugging at the corners of his lips, despite the pain that surely gripped his body. *'I guess... I finally pulled off the surprise, huh?'*

Vidhi couldn't help but laugh through her tears, a shaky, disbelieving sound. It felt surreal—like something out of a dream, as if this moment was too fragile to be true.

'You—!' she choked, pressing her hand to her mouth, unable to fully process what she was hearing. *'You're joking... now? After everything?'*

Samar's grin widened just a little, though it was more of a tired quirk. *'I always keep you on your toes, don't I?'* he whispered, his voice weak, but there was still that mischievous twinkle in his eyes. *'I didn't plan on leaving you so soon. Just... thought I'd make it interesting, like always.'*

Vidhi's heart twisted at the lightness in his words, *'please don't say that.... please Samar....'*, she begged.

'kyun? main na rahoon to taras jaogi pyar ke liye?', he teased, she cried.

Samar's expression shifted then, his smile fading, his voice becoming more serious. The joking tone was gone. *'Vidhi... Listen to me very carefully. I know... I know I can't make it through this...'*

The words felt like a punch to her stomach, her breath hitching as she gripped his hand tighter, afraid to let go, even for a second.

'I wish I could've... I wish I could've lived that life with you, Vidhi,' Samar continued, his voice cracking, each word feeling like it took everything he had to speak. 'But I know I can't. I'm sorry... I didn't want to leave you like this... alone.'

'.... No...Samar...no....no...', that was all she could say, or plead, to him, to anyone!

'Don't let my memories fade away Vidhi. Don't let my love fade out in the tears that fall from your eyes, okay?' His voice was so gentle, but the after affect of his words hit her hard. *'I want to live in your laughter, Vidhi. Smile for me, always. Even when I'm gone... I want to live in the liveliness of your life that you will create.'*

Vidhi could hardly keep herself from crying out in pain, her heart in pieces as she clutched his hand.

'Choose your husband wisely, Vidhi. Give him all the love you had ever wanted to give me. Don't let me come between you two. Never deprive him of what he deserves. But... never push me away from your memory. Let me live there, in silence, not in words. Promise, you won't talk about me, ever. Think of me as a beautiful chapter in your life. I'll always be there, in the joy you create, in the love you shall give. You have to stay strong for me, Vidhi. For us.'

'.... two days Vidhi.... just two days... mourn my death as much you want.... But after that I shouldn't see you crying! Smile whenever my thoughts come to your mind. Promise you will...'

'How can you be so tough on me...so cruel...! how Samar...how...! I can't.....', Vidhi wailed. *'I want to live as Vidhatri Samar Adhiraj and die as Vidhatri Samar Adhiraj'*

'No Vidhi.....no..... Promise me. Promise me, Vidhi.... please... Samjho na' Samar said, his voice faint but firm, his eyes searching hers.

Vidhi's breath hitched, her throat tight with emotion, and despite the agony of the moment, despite everything breaking inside her, she nodded firmly. *'I promise, Samar. I promise...'*

And in that moment the crooked lines of the monitor beeped one last time and then stopped forever.

A sharp, piercing silence followed—a silence that screamed louder than anything Vidhi had ever heard. Her breath caught mid-sob, her fingers still clinging to Samar's now-limp hand, willing it to move, to twitch, to show even the faintest sign that he was still in there somewhere. But there was nothing. Just the dead weight of finality.

A nurse stepped forward gently to turn off the monitor, her movements quiet, practiced. The soft whirring of the machines died down, and the room felt colder—emptier—as if something vital had been sucked out of the air.

'No...', Vidhi whispered, her voice trembling like a child's, her tears blurring her vision. She shook her head violently, her body swaying with the refusal to accept what was right in front of her. 'No, no... *not like this... not now...*'

'Baba... no..... Samar... Maa... Samar...' she cried, her voice a wailing, heart-wrenching sound that filled the sterile hospital room.

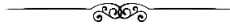
'Samar... no... *please!* 'Samar... Samar... God, *please!!*

'*You don't get to leave me now. You don't get to leave like this!*'

She leaned over him, placing her forehead against his chest, hoping—praying—to feel the rise and fall of breath. But there was only stillness. Her world—the world she had come to know with Samar in it—shattered in that moment.

And all she could do was weep. Wail. Break. Until there was nothing left in her but the aching silence he left behind.

Jolted Back to Reality



December 2016

The wind was sharp, slicing through the night like a blade. The city lights shimmered far below, flickering like distant fireflies, indifferent to the turmoil within her. Vidhi wrapped her arms around herself, leaning against the cold railing of the third-floor balcony. The thought lingered—dark, consuming. What if...

A thud broke through the silence.

Vidhi gasped, jolted back to the moment. The bedroom door creaked open, followed by the soft shuffle of feet.

Namit.

He stood at the threshold, his hair ruffled from sleep, eyes heavy with drowsiness. ‘Vidhi?’ His voice was hoarse, low. ‘*What are you doing here?*’

She turned, masking the storm within her. ‘*Just... couldn’t sleep,*’ she murmured. ‘*Thought some fresh air would help.*’

He blinked, as if trying to process her answer through the fog of sleep. ‘*It’s cold. Come inside.*’

‘*I will. In a while.*’

Namit exhaled. A beat passed. Then another. He stepped closer, scanning her face in the dim light. ‘*You sure you’re okay?*’

She forced a small smile. ‘*Yeah.*’

He hesitated, his gaze lingering for a moment longer. Then, without another word, he reached for her wrist—not forcefully, not gently, just enough to make her move. She let him.

Back in bed, he turned to his side, already slipping into sleep. But Vidhi lay awake, staring at the ceiling, the weight of the moment pressing down on her.

She had wanted to disappear into the night. And yet, when Namit came looking for her, she let herself be led back.

She closed her eyes, but sleep refused to befriend her tonight. She turned from one side to the other, the cold sheets offering no comfort, her mind slipping back into the continuity of her unfinished thoughts—the ones tied to Namit.

The slit in understanding, an evidence of the faith in doubt, was the herald to the dawn of new discoveries.

The commandments of identifying an entity with her true self demanded the integrity of the integral component of her being. The components fail, the 'being' falls. She knew.

She wondered when did she give up being what she had always been, what she had always wanted to. What was more lethal, the loss incurred, or the loss itself.

The question led to a complex matrix of contradictions of extremes. The sense of withdrawal was obvious. But was mere knowledge of the situation a solution to the problem. She smiled. She knew that *he* knew.

The turmoil ceased to exist for a while. The dance of swaying faith and flickering doubt still showed their ugly face. Uglier than ugly itself. So did the beguile beauty in disguise.

It was pouring heavily. The petrichor and the song of the rain carried her few years back in time, when she first met him and.....

What a day it had been!

It played before her eyes like an old film, every frame vivid, every word etched deep. The moment she had said yes. Not because her heart had leaped at the thought, not because love had whispered in her ear—but because there had been no reason to say no. And there had been a promise to keep. Her thoughts continued to

linger. The memory played again—her family’s approving smiles, the quiet nods, the unspoken understanding that this was the right thing to do. No excitement, no fluttering heart, just a calm acceptance that felt more like surrender.

She had mistaken silence for peace. She had confused comfort with happiness. And now, lying on her bed, she wondered if she had ever really been a part of this story or if she had simply followed the script given to her.

And that thought unsettled her more than anything else.

Vidhi thought of the untouched cake, the flickering candles casting shadows on the walls. Was it really that difficult? Couldn’t he have shown the slightest warmth, even a flicker of happiness at the effort she had put in? A hug, a soft ‘*sorry*’ for not calling her in the past four days—was that too much to ask?

How could someone be so busy that they couldn’t even check on their wife? Not a single call, not a single message. And now, standing here, he didn’t even acknowledge the effort she had made. He could have taken just one bite of the cake, given her a small nod, a hint that he had noticed; that she mattered.

But no. Nothing. Just indifference, like she was invisible. Like her existence was nothing more than a background detail in his perfectly structured life. How could he be so brutally cold towards her!

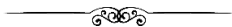
She felt a pang in her gut, sharp and unforgiving. She wanted to scream, to shake him, to make him see—it hurts. She was in pain. His indifference, his silence, his constant disregard—it tore her apart, piece by piece, day after day. She wanted to beg him to stop, to just look at her, really look at her, and see the woman who longed for the simplest of things—a touch, a word, a sign that she mattered.

But she knew. She knew that if she spoke, her feelings would be dismissed, brushed aside like a stray thought. Because he was a good man. A gentleman who cared, who provided, who never

raised his voice, never demanded, never played the role of a chauvinist. And wasn't that enough? Wasn't that what a woman should want?

No one would understand. No one would see the slow unravelling of her soul, the way her heart pleaded—inch by inch, moment by moment—just to be acknowledged. Just to be loved in a way that went beyond duty. She tasted the salt of her tears and closed her eyes. A helpless chuckle skipped her lips.

From No to Forever?



September 2014

Life had to move on with its own pace, especially if she had to keep Samar's promise. It wasn't easy, when her world had crumpled down so unexpectedly, yet she tried to rebuild her life, for her. For him. Immersing herself in work and reading was her medium of escape.

The crisp pages of 'Brainy quotes by Great Poets' flipped as Vidhi read between the lines, enjoying her favourite leisure activity, after life had begun to fall on track. *'Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up.'* She read with quiet intensity, her lips barely moving, as if tasting each word. A faint smile played on her face, teasing the corners of her mouth with amusement at the poets' eloquence. Byron's musings on love and life struck a chord deep within her, making her feel as if she too, like the women in his verses, was woven from the fabric of passion and longing.

'Love is not just about saying 'I love you'; it's about making your partner feel valued, wanted, and irreplaceable every single day.'

'A strong marriage is built on the quiet reassurance that you are important to your partner, not just loved, but needed.'

She continued reading, lost in appreciation of the brevity of the poet's words in decoding the complexities of relationship with such simplicity. The world outside her room seemed distant, irrelevant.

Her freshly washed hair smelled of orchid and honey. The aroma lingered as she swayed and tossed on the soft linen of the bed, the sheets rubbing against her bare peach arms.

'Aye Rangrez Mere...Aye Rangrej Mere...' the phone came to life with the melody from 'Tanu weds Manu'. The die-hard fan of

R. Madhvan casted a glance at the screen and sat stunned. The gesture grew some rough crease on the sheets. She didn't bother. The wrinkles beneath her body mirrored the subtle tension in the air.

This was it. Her first call. How precious it felt. She had waited four long months for this call!

It was two years back in August 2013 when the landline had buzzed to deliver an unsettling message for Baba while Vidhi was still recovering from her heartbreak. *'My son is not ready for an alliance this year; he needs some time. We will see if we can consider this proposal a little later'*. Vidhi could clearly hear the voice through the phone as she devoured her chicken-do-pyaza with jeera rice. Her happiness knew no bounds, but she tried hard and succeeded in keeping herself neutral.

'The guy was good only, maybe he has an affair out there hence didn't marry', Ma muttered. *'But they should have had a talk with their son first before proceeding with the alliance'*, her soliloquy continued.

'Good only ma, anyway I didn't like him', said Vidhi.

'I know he's little dark, but there's shine on his face'

'Little dark? Amma, he's literally black. Kalua. Full stop', Kritika buzzed. *'And have you seen his eyes. Looks like a goat's. And his elbow! Seems he hasn't taken a bath in days! Moreover, it's not about colour, he looks dirty, that's why. Good only they called it off. I am very happy. What do you say Vidhi?'*

Vidhi decided it was best to focus on jeera rice and chicken do pyaza and deal with a fresh mind and heart about what and who comes to her life. She knew the sting of heartbreak too well. But if there was one thing she was certain of, it was this—she would love her spouse fully, fiercely, and without holding back, just as Samar wanted. Just as she had promised to him.

Kritika giggled. The matter dropped. She also went back to her chicken and rice and was reassured that Vidhi ain't any Namit's.

A year later, in May 2014, draped in blue and beige, with fluttering fingers, Vidhi offered the cup of hot coffee to Namit's father and his relative. They had come to 'see' her to proceed with the proposal.

'Sit down beta'.

She obeyed.

Tea and coffee were served as per the likings. While one of the guests was quiet and intent in observing everything, the other munched heavily on the snacks. Struggling with the half-swallowed food, amidst the scrunch and crunch he managed to mutter instructions.

'Why don't you write something and show us. We would like to know about the depth of your studies beyond your certificates', said the relative.

She felt smoke oozing from her red, hot ear. Her angry eyes glanced at Baba, who compassionately and with a hint of understanding convinced her.

'They are from older generation Vidhi, and such things do happen with them. Don't get upset, you see Namit's father didn't say a thing to make you feel embarrassed or awkward'. Baba tried to console her after the flock had left.

With showers from heaven, the alliance was sealed.

'Next month Namit is coming to Dehradun, why don't you guys plan a trip, children can meet each other'. Colonel uncle, Mr. Vinayak Shekhar 'Purva' Namit's father proposed to Baba.

Tickets were booked.

Of Summer Hearts and Mountain Valley

May 2014

'Of all the places in the world, it's Dehradun! Are you playing with me Samar', Vidhi thought.

Baba Sensed it and held Vidhi's hand.

'I am fine baba...', she smiled. A tear trickled down her face, as much she tried to control.

'He has deprived me of the rights to even think of him, unless I am happy'

Baba didn't know what to tell her. All he could do was to extend his hand for blessing.

'For Samar', she said sniffing. 'For Samar', Baba nodded.

When the Doon Express pulled out of the bustling Indore station, its whistle pierced the thick, warm evening air. Vidhi felt the same contradictions stir within her. It had only been two years. She didn't even know if she was ready. She didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to think about anything.

'Ankhon ke sagar, hotoon ke sagar...' played softly in her ear, weaving itself into the rhythm of the train.

With every rattle, the train bid farewell to the city's frenzied life—a chaotic orchestra of the mundane. The windows, streaked with the day's dust, framed a shifting world, where the urban jungle slowly melted into the untamed wilderness of Uttarakhand.

Vidhi had chosen the window seat. It always gave her a quiet thrill, offering a glimpse into the calm and chaos of a world that her extroverted soul—trapped in an introverted mind—longed to

embrace. Baba's constant chatter did offer company, the one she never needed while travelling. Trains had always been her solitude, her escape. The unbound wilderness outside was enough to keep her company.

'chai...chai'

The aroma of smoking tandoori chai stole her attention as she tilted her neck to call the vendor.

'Bhaiya teen chai please'

'Why do you want three?', Baba intervened.

'To keep me awake through the night'

She didn't like sleeping while traveling—except on flights. There was always a fear of missing out. Missing out on life. On nature. On her only true connection to the wanderlust that she was.

Night descended like a velvet curtain, cloaking the train in shadows of foggy darkness. The rhythmic clatter of the wheels on the tracks became a hypnotic lullaby.

It was already 10.30 and Baba was fast asleep after a scrumptious train meal of chicken curry, boiled egg, jeera rice, ghee roti, gobhi fry, salad and sweets.

She pulled her blanket up and got back to her beloved Dan Brown. *'Life is not the thing that happens to you, but the thing that you create.'*, she read. There was a pause. A deep introspection drifted her into slumber, not long before she was woken up by some muddled hubbub.

'Arrey pakdo teeno ko', someone screamed.

Three young men in their late twenties scurried through their compartment from the connecting boggy.

Startled, Vidhi rose and reclined. Baba climbed down his berth. Other eight members of the second AC looked equally puzzled. The gang kept moving frivolously, looking for something or someone.

'Ho kya raha hai yahan?', enquired the stout aunty from the side upper berth of the adjacent compartment.

'Aunty ji relax', Vidhi heard the faint voice of the muscular guy in red shirt, three compartments away.

The TT arrived.

'Such young boys and acting like lafandars', said the TT agitated.

'Sir, we didn't intend to board to travel without a ticket. We came to see our friend, but the train started moving and we couldn't alight, maaf kar do sir ji', said the tallest guy with a gasp.

'Whatever. A fine will be levied accordingly'.

The muscular guy with red tee and blue jeans intervened. *'Give us some time sir to manage the levied amount, we will pay shortly.'*

Others glanced at him unbelievably.

'Hmm. I will come back in 15 minutes.'

'Ok sir'.

The train was running late. As dawn broke, the train wound its way through the hilly terrains of Uttarakhand, the first hints of the Himalayas rising like ancient giants on the horizon. Vidhi, unaware of the ticketless intrusion next in the adjacent compartment, stretched in an attempt to wake up and fully understand what was happening. But by then the chaos was over. There was an electric tension in the air, and her mind alike. She glanced outside. The valleys grew deeper, winds fresher. The occasional sight of a tea stall perched precariously on the edge of a cliff vanished in a blur as the train thundered past, leaving behind a curl of steam and the faintest aroma of chai hanging in the crisp mountain air.

'Haan beta ji... very nice...'

She heard Baba speaking to the 28ish year-old figure who had made no attempts to register his presence during the past 12 hours.

She thought of the man who had just descended from the opposite upper berth to be seated next to Baba for the rest of the journey.

The other lower berth still occupied by her. He had arrived quietly, slipping in like a shadow, and since then, he had existed almost like an afterthought in the room. His deep-set eyes seemed to look right through the world around him. Not once had he spoken directly to anyone since boarding the train. Even when the passengers around him exchanged pleasantries or tried to strike up casual conversation, he remained immersed in his own world. His responses, when they came, were short—almost as if he had no interest in being a part of their conversations. Vidhi felt drowned in boredom just looking at the man.

And then, as the train entered Dehradun, the unmistakable coolness of the air swept over, carrying with it the scent of pine and fresh mountain breeze. The trees seemed to nod in approval, their branches swaying as though welcoming the weary travellers to their destination. The long, winding journey had come to an end, but the memory of it—the sights, sounds, and the slow revelation of landscapes unseen—lingered like the last notes of a symphony, echoing in the mind long after the train had come to a halt.

The first twelve hours of the journey had passed in blissful ignorance. She had barely noticed the ‘boring guy’ on the opposite berth. They had exchanged nothing more than a glance when boarding—just another passenger in a long journey.

She had spent most of the time reading, napping, and watching the scenery blur past the window. He, from what little she had observed, had kept to himself too. Sometimes he had his headphones on, sometimes he scrolled through his phone, and once, she had vaguely noticed him scribbling something in a notebook. But she didn’t care. They were just two strangers sharing a compartment, nothing more.

Until *it* happened.

It was mid-morning, somewhere past the twelfth hour of the journey, when the train made an unscheduled stop at a small station. Vendors rushed to the windows, selling tea and snacks, and a few passengers stepped out for a breath of fresh air. She

barely paid attention—until she heard an elderly man’s panicked voice.

‘My wallet! It’s gone!’

Heads turned. The old man, sitting a few berths away, looked distraught as he searched his belongings. The other passengers quickly got involved, offering suggestions, checking under seats. Someone suggested the possibility of a pickpocket during the station stop. The atmosphere grew tense.

And then, her eyes landed on *him*.

He was sitting there, calm, too calm— leaning back against the berth, watching the commotion with an unreadable expression.

Something about it rubbed her the wrong way.

She wasn’t sure why, but suspicion curled in her stomach. He hadn’t stepped out at the station. He had been quiet this whole time. *Too quiet*. And now, while everyone else was concerned, he seemed... indifferent. Almost entertained.

Her eyes narrowed.

Then, as if sensing her gaze, he looked up and met her stare. For a second, neither of them spoke. Then—

‘Don’t look at me like that,’ he said, amusement flickering in his voice.

She stiffened. *‘Like what?’*

‘Like you think I stole it.’

Her breath caught. Has she been that obvious? She felt a flash of embarrassment, but it was quickly drowned by irritation—because he *was* amused. Like the whole thing was some inside joke only he understood.

‘I didn’t say that,’ she muttered, looking away.

‘You didn’t have to,’ he replied, leaning forward slightly. *‘You already decided.’*

That was it. That *smirk*, that *tone*—it sent a fresh wave of dislike through her. She had met his type before. The kind who thought everything was a game, who never took anything seriously.

Just then, a commotion near the door distracted them. The TT walked in, holding up a wallet. *'Found it near the washroom!'*

A collective sigh of relief swept through the compartment. The old man hurried forward to collect it, thanking everyone profusely. The tension dissolved. Life moved on.

She hesitated before glancing back at him. He was watching her again, one eyebrow slightly raised, waiting.

'You were saying?' he asked, voice laced with quiet amusement.

Heat crept up her neck. She scowled, turning back to her book. *'Nothing.'*

He chuckled. *'Thought so.'*

And just like that, she couldn't stand him.

The train had just settled back into its rhythm after the wallet incident when another commotion erupted near the compartment door. Loud voices, laughter, and the unmistakable sound of a group trying (and failing) to be discreet filled the space.

Then, all at once—*they burst in, again!*

Seven of them. Three girls, four guys. Loud, grinning, *trouble*.

'Surprise, loser!' Nikhil bellowed, throwing an arm around Shekhar's shoulders before he could react. Shekhar, the guy Vidhi just doubted of having stolen someone's wallet, was unprepared for the surprise.

'You thought you'd escape without telling us, huh?' LuvKush chimed in, nudging Shekhar so hard he nearly fell off his seat.

The entire compartment turned to stare. Vidhi turned to stare.

Shekhar—who had been so calm and collected all this time—groaned, rubbing his face. *'What are you people doing here?'*

'Wouldn't you like to know?' Smriti teased, flopping onto the empty side of his berth. But she didn't stop there. Without missing a beat, she threw an arm around Shekhar's neck, pulling herself closer, her head lightly resting on his shoulder.

'We tracked you down, my friend. You're not that hard to find.'

Shekhar stiffened, but it wasn't from discomfort. This was Smriti, his best friend—he should've been used to her quirky closeness. But for a second, there was something in the air, something unspoken, that made the whole thing feel a little different.

'Uh—Smriti,' Shekhar began, but his tone was more playful than anything. *'You do realize I'm trying to look like the cool, mysterious guy, right?'*

'Right,' Smriti replied with a wink, *'But you fail miserably every time, Purva'*

'We were at a wedding in the nearby town,' Sarika explained between bursts of laughter. *'Then we found out you were passing through, and we had to come see you!'*

'By illegally boarding a moving train?' Shekhar demanded.

'Pfft. Minor details,' Vrisha dismissed with a wave of her hand.

The ticket collector, sensing chaos, immediately re-appeared at the entrance. *'You! This is not your compartment! Where are your tickets?'*

Silence.

Then, *LuvKush*, the boldest of the bunch, turned to the ticket collector with a dazzling smile. *'Ah, sir! We were just about to buy them. Special emergency ticket, friendship quota.'*

'That does not exist,' the TT snapped.

Another friend nudged Shekhar. *'Come on, man, cover for us! You're the reason we're here.'*

Vidhi watched in fascination as Shekhar rubbed his temples, clearly regretting every life decision that had led to this moment. *'I refuse to take responsibility for this circus.'*

Smriti turned to Vidhi suddenly. *'Hey, you're his co-passenger, right? Has he been moody the whole journey?'*

Vidhi blinked. *'Uh— what is even this woman!'*, her face read all over.

'He does that,' Sarika cut in. *'Thinks he's the 'mysterious, brooding hero' type.'*

Shekhar groaned, but Smriti leaned in closer, still grinning. *'Oh, he's way more fun than he lets on. You just have to know how to get past that grumpy facade.'*

As the group continued to tease Shekhar and joke around, Baba, who had been sitting quietly at the other end of the compartment, looked up from his newspaper with a bemused expression. *'These kids!'* he muttered under his breath, shaking his head. *'I tell you, they don't know what a quiet train ride means.'* He adjusted his glasses and gave Vidhi a knowing smile, as though to say, *'I feel your pain.'*

Several other passengers, who had been dozing off, stirred in irritation at the noise. One elderly lady, with a serious expression, called out from the corner. *'Hey, do you all have tickets or not? This is not a playground!'*

The group fell silent for a moment, but then, as if they were all in on some shared joke, they burst into a fresh round of laughter.

'Don't worry, aunty ji, we'll get off at the next stop!' LuvKush called out playfully, before one of the other girls, Vrisha, waved her hand in the air dismissively.

The ticket collector, who had been shouting for silence, finally lost his patience. *'Enough! Either pay for the tickets or get off at the next stop!'*

The friends huddled for a dramatic, exaggerated whispering session before one of them stood up. *'Fine, fine. We were leaving at the next station anyway.'*

'But we had to see our boy,' Vrisha grinned.

'And embarrass him,' Nikhil added with a wink.

'Mission accomplished,' Atul declared proudly.

As the train neared the next station, they got up one by one, dragging their chaos with them. Just before stepping out, one of the guys, *Atul*, turned to *Vidhi*.

'Hey, co-passenger!'

Vidhi looked up.

'Make sure he doesn't brood too much, okay?'

Vidhi rolled her eyes. *'Not my responsibility.'*

The group howled with laughter as they finally jumped off the train. The moment they were gone, silence settled back in the compartment.

Vidhi turned to look at *Shekhar*.

He exhaled dramatically. *'I swear I don't usually attract this much nonsense.'*

Vidhi smirked. *'Somehow, I don't believe you.'*

And just like that, she found herself irritated by him. The loud, chaotic group, *Smriti's* overwhelming closeness, and *Shekhar's* inability to rein them in all grated on her nerves. But then, just as the ticket collector prepared to leave, a sudden shift made everything feel a little better.

The *TT*, who had been trying to manage the group's noise, turned back toward *Shekhar*. *'You're the one who brought them here.'* he asked.

Shekhar blinked. *'What?'*

'You're responsible for the fine,' the conductor announced. *'For each of them—per head.'*

Vidhi couldn't suppress a small smile. *Shekhar*—the one person she'd been mildly annoyed with—had to pay for everyone. He reached into his pockets, frowning in disbelief.

For a moment, she almost felt bad for him. Almost.

But seeing him begrudgingly hand over the money, she couldn't help but feel a little satisfaction. He looked utterly defeated by his friends—and by the situation. For once, the chaos seemed to be catching up with him.

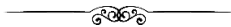
It made her happy.

As the deboarded group stood next to Shekhar's compartment window, Shekhar shook his head with a resigned smile, glancing at his friends. *'Let me get back to Bangalore,'* he said with a soft chuckle. *'I'm going to see each one of you for this stunt.'*

The friends burst out laughing, but Shekhar wasn't done. He added with a smirk, *'Aise dost se to dushman bhale.'*

The group roared in response, cheering, *'We love you too, Shekhar!'* And with that, they left, their laughter echoing through the compartment. Shekhar waved them goodbye with a smile.

To New Beginnings



May 2014

The next day...

Mountains are not just landscapes; they are feelings—silent keepers of those who find comfort in their vastness, their stillness, their timeless embrace.

Dehradun was simply stunning. As the train pulled into the station, the landscape unfolded like a painting—serene, untouched, almost dreamlike. The cool mountain breeze carried the crisp scent of pine, while mist draped itself over the towering green hills like a soft embrace. The sky stretched out in a brilliant blue, and the air itself felt different—refreshing and alive.

The station, with its colonial-era charm, seemed to exist in a space between the past and present, blending effortlessly with the lush greenery around it. Trees lined the streets, their branches swaying gently, while flower beds exploded in a riot of colours, as if nature had taken it upon itself to welcome every traveller.

Even amidst the bustle of passengers, the beauty of Dehradun had a way of quieting everything down. The distant hills stood layered in endless shades of green, offering the kind of peace that felt almost sacred. There was something undeniably romantic about this place. It was bound to make people fall in love, Vidhi thought, with a quiet smile.

Shekhar was already lost in the crowd. So was his thought.

As Prof Manthan and Vidhi deboarded, they were greeted with the loud and bold voice of Colonel Sahab.

‘*Namaskar professor Sahab. Welcome! Welcome!*’, he greeted them with a warm smile, his voice carrying the weight of respect and hospitality.

‘Arrey Namaskar Mahoday’, Baba acknowledged warmly, exchanging customary side hugs.

‘Swagat hai aapka. Welcome to Dehradun! How was your journey? I hope it was comfortable enough despite the long hours on the train.’

‘Haan ji haan Purva Babu journey was quite smooth, though a bit tiring. But nothing like the beauty of Dehradun to make it worthwhile.’

Vidhi, smiling, bent forward for a charan sparsh, adding, *‘Absolutely, uncle ji! The landscape outside is breathtaking. It’s just as beautiful as they describe it in books!’*

She was struggling in her mind and body to flung across certain thoughts she was denied to anchor. And with a smile she made ‘him’ her strength. And somewhere above the clouds Samar smiled back!

‘Bahut Badiyan Beta’, the Colonel nodded, clearly pleased. ‘It is indeed a special place, one that offers both peace and adventure. I trust you are not too fatigued, Beta ji. The drive to the hotel will be short, and you can rest there. We’ll ensure all your comforts are taken care of.’

Prof Manthan jovially thanked him.

‘Now, let’s get you to the hotel, and I’ll leave you to enjoy the peace and quiet here.’

Shortly after that it was just Vidhi and Baba, left to their own ponderings till the evening before they could meet Namit’s family.

When the clock struck 5, she knew it was time.

Dressed in a soft pink floral kurta, its mirrored thread work catching the dim light, Vidhi stood before the mirror. The semi-Patiala draped effortlessly, and her chiffon dupatta pooled lightly at her wrists, but her hands trembled—almost imperceptibly.

The impending meeting with the prospective groom stirred an unsettling mix of emotions. A quiet storm brewed within her—

apprehension laced with a thread of reluctant curiosity. Was this the next chapter of her life unfolding, or just another expectation she was bound to fulfil? The weight of tradition pressed against her shoulders, firm and unyielding, yet somewhere beneath it, a whisper of possibility lingered.

She exhaled slowly, eyes searching her own reflection as if it held the answer. Perhaps it was beyond her now. Perhaps it had never been in her hands at all.

With that, she let it go—left it to fate, to destiny, to the unseen hands of her creator.

Baba, who had gone to the reception area to receive Namit's family gently knocked on Vidhi's door, his voice carrying a mix of warmth and quiet authority. *'Vidhi, beta, they've arrived. Are you ready?'*

Vidhi glanced at the clock, feeling the weight of time pressing against her. She smoothed down her dress, trying to steady her breath. *'Just a minute, Baba. Almost done.'*

'Come on, we're waiting,' he replied, his tone patient but urging. *'Come to the other room. Everyone's there.'*

Vidhi took a deep breath, gathering the courage to step out. *'I'm coming, Baba.'*

He hesitated for a moment before adding, *'By the way, Choti Ma from Delhi is here too. Since your mom's at a conference in Rajasthan, Choti Ma has joined us for now.'*

A small smile touched Vidhi's lips at the mention of her aunt. It was a comfort, a familiar face amidst the unfamiliar.

Choti Ma entered the room and hugged Vidhi. *'You look stunning!'*, she sighed.

'Thanks Choti Ma'. Did you meet the guy'

'Not yet'.

Choti Ma then led Vidhi to the other room.

As Vidhi entered the room, a mixture of anticipation and nervousness washed over her. She had imagined this moment countless times, but now that it was happening, everything felt surreal. She could sense her heart race as Namit's family greeted her warmly, each of them offering a smile, yet she couldn't help but feel out of place.

'Alright, Vidhi, just stay calm,' she thought to herself, trying to steady her breath. *'It's just a family meeting. Nothing to be nervous about.'*

Namit's mom immediately welcomed her with a smile. *'Aao Beta, it's so nice to finally meet you!'* Her voice was soft and friendly. Vidhi smiled shyly in return, lowering her eyes a bit, trying not to seem too nervous. She was met with the warm smiles of Namit's extended family, Nani Ma, Mama ji, and later, his brother Akash. But Namit? He was nowhere to be seen.

The conversation flowed as they asked about her hobbies, daily routine, and interests. Vidhi answered each question with calmness, but her voice was soft, the shyness in her posture betraying the calm words she spoke. *'I enjoy reading... I'm a morning person, I like starting my day with some yoga...'* she said, her eyes downcast, trying to avoid looking too forward.

Throughout, Namit's mom observed her with a gentle, understanding look.

Vidhi was devoid of any make up. It was just a soft lip balm that she had worn besides a moisturiser. No kajal, no foundation, nothing. Yet she blushed and glowed. Two delicate bangles adorned her left wrist, a silver watch graced the right, and a simple chain with a pendant, and a small black bindi completed her look.

The family looked pleased and elated.

Chit chat followed, and then there was a knock at the door.

Enter Namit.

Hello, Namit



Enter Namit.

Vidhi gasped.

Namit gasped.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The memory of the train journey flickered between them.

Namit cleared his throat, forcing a polite smile as he extended a hand.

‘Hi. Namit Shekhar.’

Vidhi hesitated for just a beat before accepting the handshake.

‘Vidhatri Samarth.’

Their hands met briefly—warmth, familiarity, hesitation. Then silence again, thick and charged.

‘Let the kids talk in another room, Privacy bhai sahab. Comfort factor ji’, suggested Namit’s mother and both landed up in the adjacent room at the mercy of awkwardness.

Namit noticed the slight hesitation in Vidhi’s posture, so he offered a reassuring smile. *‘Would you like some coffee or something else?’*

Vidhi shook her head, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. *‘No, I’m good. Thanks.’*

He nodded. *‘Alright. So... I guess we should start with the usual introductions?’*

Vidhi gave a small, polite smile. *‘Yeah... I suppose.’*

Sensing her nervousness, Namit kept his tone light. *‘Okay, I’ll go first. I’m Namit Shekhar. MBA, currently working with MensXP’*

in Bangalore—digital strategy and content, and I don't steal wallets'

Vidhi smiled embarrassingly. She then glanced up. *'MensXP... that's lifestyle, right?'*

'Yeah, lifestyle, tech, relationships... all things men read but won't admit to.' He chuckled.

She smiled faintly. *'Interesting. I'm a software engineer with IBM, Kolkata. Mostly backend development.'*

Namit's expression was appreciative. *'That's impressive. Backend sounds... complicated.'*

She shrugged slightly. *'It can be. A lot of debugging, fixing things people don't see.'*

'Ah, the unsung hero of the tech world.' He smiled. *'And when you're not busy fixing things, what do you enjoy?'*

Vidhi hesitated for a moment before answering. *'Reading. Mostly fiction. And music.'*

Namit nodded. *'Nice. I love traveling. Football too. And... cooking, sometimes.'*

Vidhi looked surprised but quickly lowered her gaze. *'That's... rare.'*

He smiled. *'Why do I feel like you're sceptical?'*

She shook her head quickly. *'No, just... most people say they like cooking but don't actually cook much.'*

He chuckled. *'Fair point. But I promise I can manage more than just Maggi.'*

A soft silence followed. Namit let her settle into the conversation before asking gently, *'So... what are you expecting from this?'*

Vidhi took a small breath. *'Just... emotional intimacy and communication, mutual respect and a sense of belongingness. Everything else will follow, I guess.'*

Namit nodded, his tone warm. *‘That sounds just right. For me, I think it’s about companionship, stability and shared responsibility. A partner I can talk to, travel with... and maybe cook for sometimes.’*

Vidhi glanced up at him, a small, genuine smile appearing. *‘That sounds nice.’*

The conversation settled into a quiet ease—still tentative, but promising.

‘By the way I could almost hear your thoughts back on the train.’ With a small chuckle, he leaned back.

Vidhi blinked, caught off guard.

‘Well, the wallet incident, plus the circus my friends created when they boarded without a ticket.’ He shook his head with a grin. *‘Not my proudest moment, I’ll admit.’*

Vidhi looked down, suppressing a smile. *‘It was... quite a scene.’*

‘Tell me about it. And to top it off, the way they just sprawled everywhere, talking loudly...’ He sighed. *‘Not the best first impression, I’m sure.’*

Vidhi hesitated before saying softly, *‘It wasn’t that bad.’*

Namit arched his brow. *‘That’s generous of you.’*

A brief silence settled before he gently steered the conversation forward.

They talked about life- work, books, travel, the little things that made up their worlds. Slowly, the initial awkwardness faded, replaced by a quiet, uncertain ease.

As they spoke, Namit noticed Vidhi shifting slightly, her fingers brushing against her sleeves. It was late evening, and the cold air from the half-open window behind her was unmistakable. She didn’t say a word, but he caught the way she subtly tried to tuck her hands into her dupatta.

Without breaking the flow of their conversation, he got up and walked over to the window, pushing it shut with an easy, casual motion. Then he returned to his seat as if it were nothing.

Vidhi blinked. The warmth from the gesture reached her before the warmth of the room did.

She looked at him—just for a second longer than necessary—but he had already moved on, asking her something about her favourite author.

She answered, but a thought lingered in her mind.

‘He notices things’, she pondered.

Twenty minutes passed, their conversation now comfortably paced, when a voice broke in.

‘Shall we go to the other room if you’re done?’

Vidhi turned to see Prakhar at the doorway—Choti Ma’s son, her cousin. His eyes flickered between them, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his lips.

She nodded. Namit stood up as well.

In the next room, the seating arrangement was sparse. Prakhar reached for two chairs, but before he could hand them over, Namit silently took one from his grasp. Not in a rush, not as a show—just effortlessly, as if it was the most natural thing to do.

Vidhi noticed.

A small, fleeting moment. But enough.

She didn’t say anything, but her mind registered it.

Some things aren’t spoken. They’re just understood.

Somewhere between the closed window and the shared weight of a chair, she realised one thing about Namit—something simple yet defining.

He was a gentleman.

Later, when Baba asked for her will, she had no reason to decline.

But a reason too compelling to say anything but ‘Yes.’

The room echoed with joy.

‘Badhai ho, Rishta pakka hua’

That night in Dehradun, after everything was said and done, after the elders had exchanged smiles and spoken of auspicious dates, she found herself seated on the broad designer sofa, her posture composed but her mind restless. Namit sat on the soft, cushioned bed, reclining against a pillow, his expression calm—perhaps even indifferent. The weight of the day still lingered between them, the unspoken realization that their lives had just been tied together.

She stole glances at his reflection in the huge wall mirror opposite the bed. It felt less daunting to observe him this way, without the discomfort of direct eye contact. He looked at ease, flipping through his Blackberry absentmindedly, as if this evening was just another routine affair.

‘So...’ he finally spoke, breaking the silence, *‘you like reading?’*

Vidhi blinked, caught off guard. ‘Yes,’ she answered softly. *‘Mostly fiction.’*

He nodded, as if storing the information somewhere. *‘Any favourite author?’*

She hesitated for a moment. *‘Jane Austen, maybe. And Charles Dickens.’*

‘Ah, classics.’ He gave a small smile, the usual trace of warmth in an otherwise measured demeanour. *‘I haven’t read much fiction, to be honest. But I could give it a try.’*

She nodded, unsure of what to say next.

‘What about you?’ she asked, attempting to keep the conversation going.

‘Mostly non-fiction,’ he said. *‘History, business, that sort of thing.’*

She wasn’t surprised. He seemed like the kind of person who preferred facts over fantasies. A man who was pragmatic, grounded—practical in a way that reassured but did not stir.

The conversation continued in fragments, polite and careful. No grand confessions, no dramatic realizations. Just two people speaking because they were expected to, learning things about each other in the most measured way possible.

She caught another glimpse of him in the mirror. He didn't look at her the way she had once imagined a man would look at the woman he was about to marry. But then again, did she look at him that way either?

Next moment Vidhi stood at the doorway of her room, unmoving. The voices had faded, footsteps receding into the night as Namit's family left. Baba, Choti Ma, and Prakhar had accompanied them downstairs, but she remained behind, watching the empty corridor.

She had stolen one last glance before they departed, hoping—expecting—that he would do the same. A moment of hesitation, a small acknowledgment, even a fleeting glance. But Namit hadn't looked back. His attention had stayed on his phone, fingers moving across the screen as if this evening had been just another formality to check off a list. The lift arrived, the doors closed, and he was gone.

The realization settled slowly, quietly. One part of her recognized the truth—his indifference was not accidental. The other part tried to reason with it, offering explanations that softened the sting. Perhaps he was simply not expressive. Perhaps emotions came slowly to him. Perhaps he had been too preoccupied to notice the moment slipping away.

Perhaps.

But the silence around her carried no such assurances.

She lingered longer than necessary, staring at the space where he had been, as if it might offer an answer. But there was nothing. Just an empty hallway and the echo of an unspoken farewell.

Finally, she turned back into her room, closing the door softly behind her. The mirror on the wall reflected her figure—still,

thoughtful, caught between expectation and reality. It was the same mirror through which she had observed him earlier that evening, watching him recline against the pillow, his expression unreadable. Their conversation had been polite, measured, touching on books, interests, and other surface-level details. Nothing in his words or tone had carried the forethought of a new beginning.

She sat down on the bed, hands resting idly on her lap, eyes unfocused. Namit was a good man—responsible, well-mannered, thoughtful in small ways. And yet, something felt missing.

She thought of her parents, of the quiet understanding between them, the warmth in her father's eyes when he looked at her mother. There had never been a need for grand gestures; love had always been present in the simplest of things.

But tonight, there had been nothing. No moment to hold onto, no reassurance, no quiet certainty.

The room felt heavier, as if the weight of the evening had settled into its corners. She lay down, staring at the ceiling, trying to convince herself that this was enough. That love would come with time. That his indifference was not final, only unfamiliar.

But the heaviness remained.

Vidhi had drifted into sleep long before Baba, Choti Ma, and Prakhar returned. It was late—later than she had expected. Namit's family had insisted they stay for dinner, an invitation extended to her as well, but Baba had politely declined. '*She will come only after the proper rituals and ceremonies,*' he had said, and that was that.

It didn't bother her. Not really. She wasn't sure if she would have gone even if given the choice. There was something about tonight, about the way it had ended, that left her unsure of what she was supposed to feel. Sleep had come in restless waves, interrupted by thoughts of Namit, of the way he had remained so unaffected, so distant.

Morning came quickly. The house stirred with the quiet urgency of departure—bags being checked, last-minute calls being made, goodbyes waiting just beyond the threshold. Their train was scheduled for the afternoon, and by midday, the reality of leaving had begun to settle in.

At exactly 4 PM, Namit's parents arrived to see them off. His father, composed and formal, exchanged pleasantries with Baba, while his mother, warm as always, reassured Choti Ma that they must visit again soon. Everything was seamless, effortless— duty carried out with precision.

But Namit was absent.

He had already left. He had booked a 10 AM flight just the previous night. No call, no message, not even a word through his parents. Just a fact casually slipped into conversation, as if it held no significance.

Colonel Uncle, however, had paused before they left. With a smile both expectant and affectionate, he had turned to Vidhi. *'Beta ji, ab toh tumhe hi dhyaan rakhna hai Namit ka. Keep in touch, ok. You must talk to him. Now he's your responsibility.'*

She smiled, nodded. Said the things she was expected to say. But inside, something wavered.

Keep in touch?

For that, he had to want to. He had to reach out.

She wasn't the kind of person who would impose herself where she wasn't needed. And so far, Namit had shown no urgency, no curiosity, no inclination to make this equation anything more than what it was—a formality, a well-structured arrangement.

Apprehension curled inside her, mixing with a quiet sort of happiness, a nervous energy, an uncertainty she couldn't define. This was supposed to be a new beginning, yet why did it feel so... incomplete?

As the car moved toward the station, she stared out at the passing streets, lost in the blur of it all. A part of her told her she was

overthinking. Another part—the quieter, more insistent one—whispered that she wasn't.

The next day, life resumed its usual rhythm. Namit was where he had to be. Vidhi was where she had always been. Two people bound by a promise, yet existing like forgotten friends—perhaps even strangers.

There were no messages, no calls, no hesitant check-ins to bridge the gap between yesterday and today. It was as if the past few days had been a brief interlude, a carefully orchestrated event that now faded into the background of their separate lives.

Vidhi woke up to the familiar sights and sounds of home. The morning sunlight filtered through the curtains, casting soft patterns on the floor. The distant hum of household chores filled the air—Ma in the kitchen, Baba reading the newspaper, life moving as it always had. But something was different.

There was a name tied to her now.

Namit.

The thought of him came like a quiet knock on her consciousness, uninvited yet persistent. She felt distant. He felt more distant than ever.

Wasn't there supposed to be something? A message, a simple 'Good morning'? Some small gesture that acknowledged the change in their lives? Or was she expecting too much?

She reached for her phone, more out of reflex than intent. Nothing. No call. No text.

Perhaps this was normal.

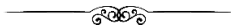
Perhaps this was how it was meant to be.

On the other side of the city, Namit was likely back at work, flipping through emails, responding to calls, slipping seamlessly into the mundanity of his routine. She could almost picture it—him in his office, his attention fixed on his laptop, the same composure, the same quiet detachment.

And she? She had stepped into something new, yet nothing had changed.

Their lives ran parallel, like two lines that had crossed briefly only to move forward in their own separate directions.

The Estranged



May 2014 to September 2014

Days passed, stretching into weeks. The house buzzed with preparations—Baba and Colonel Uncle often sat together over phone calls, discussing the wedding dates, venues, and guest lists. Relatives called, offering their enthusiastic blessings. The excitement in the air was undeniable. Yet, for Vidhi, a quiet, unspoken expectation went unanswered.

She had thought Namit would reach out. Not much—just a message, a word, a sign that he acknowledged this new equation between them. That he, too, was adjusting to the idea of them.

But fifteen days passed. Then twenty. And more.

Nothing.

She wasn't the type to overthink or demand attention. But silence—silence had a way of making itself known. She had seen Choti Ma's daughters whisper excitedly to their fiancés before their weddings, heard stories of stolen late-night conversations, the thrill of a new beginning. And her own story with Sa..... She was not allowed to think that. The goddam promise. And now she knew exactly why Samar did that! But here she was, stepping into an arranged bond with a man who hadn't even thought to say *hello*.

Then, one afternoon, when she had long stopped checking her phone with expectation, it buzzed.

A message. Namit's name flashed on the screen.

'Then how are you, shall I call?'

Vidhi stared at the words.

For a second, she felt... What was it? A flicker of warmth? Annoyance? She wasn't sure. She only knew that if this message

had come days ago, it might have made her smile. Now, it just left her with questions. Why now? Has someone reminded him? Or had he simply remembered, between meetings and emails, that a woman somewhere was waiting—no, *expected*—to hear from him?

Well there are people in life you can't live without and yet more than often they make you feel like screaming right across their face 'get lost'

She typed back, keeping it simple.

'My phone is not topped up. I'd prefer to keep things to messages for now. Hope that's okay.'

The reply came almost immediately.

'Arrey bhai, you can't talk, but I can talk, no? Over messages at least? I can tell you about my whereabouts, my day, office, everything... you just listen. Hope that works!'

Vidhi let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

This was... unexpected. He sounded eager, chatty even. Nothing like the quiet, distant Namit she had imagined all these days. A part of her wanted to hold on to her earlier irritation—how could he just appear after twenty days as if nothing had happened? — but another part of her... softened.

She had been in love once. A reckless, all-consuming love. Samar's messages had flooded her phone at all hours—sometimes teasing, sometimes possessive, always intense.

'Miss me? What are you wearing?'

'I swear, if you don't pick up my call, I'm coming to your office.'

He had made her feel wanted, irreplaceable. And when he left, he had made sure she never forgot him.

'...You will never find someone romantic like me.... Taras jaaogi pyar ke liye...'

She had laughed when he had said it. Called him dramatic. But some nights, when the emptiness stretched longer than the day, she wondered if he had been right.

Vidhi shook the thought away. This was different. Namit was different. And maybe that was a good thing.

She let her fingers hover over the keyboard before replying.

'Okay, tell me about your day then.'

And just like that, things happened.

The messages weren't frequent. Not from him, at least.

Vidhi found herself checking her phone more often than she admitted, waiting for the familiar buzz, for his name to light up her screen. But Namit was... sporadic. Sometimes, he'd reply within minutes. Other times, hours passed, and she had to remind herself not to reread their last conversation, wondering if she'd said something wrong.

One evening, after another long day at IBM, she saw his message.

'Busy day. Just got free.'

She smiled, relieved.

'Same here. Meetings all day. You must have had calls too?'

A while later, his reply came. *'Yeah. Brand pitches. Same old.'*

She wanted to ask more. *How did they go? Are you excited about any of them?* But she hesitated. He wasn't giving much, and she didn't want to come across as too eager.

Still, she couldn't help herself.

'Sounds hectic. Do you ever take a break?'

'Not really. Work keeps piling up.'

She stared at his message, feeling an odd restlessness. He wasn't impolite, wasn't dismissive—but he wasn't exactly *there* either. Just enough to keep the conversation going, never enough to pull her in.

Days passed like this. She'd text first most times. Sometimes, he'd respond with a full sentence, other times just a word or an emoji.

One night, she decided to wait. *Let him text first for once.*

Hours passed. Her phone remained silent.

By midnight, she sighed, giving in.

'Long day?'

This time, his reply was instant.

'Yeah. Just got done with work.'

A beat. Then—

'You don't sleep early?'

Vidhi smiled, settling under her blanket.

'Not really. I like this time of night. Feels quiet.'

'Hmm.'

That was it. Just *hmm*.

She let out a breath. Maybe she was overthinking. Maybe Namit just wasn't the texting type.

But something in her still waited.

The next night she stared at her phone longer than she wanted to.

She had sent the last message—again. And while Namit had replied, it had been short, indifferent. He hadn't asked anything back. He hadn't given her a reason to continue.

So, this time, she decided to wait.

Let *him* text first.

The second day passed in silence. No message. Maybe he was busy. Maybe his calls stretched late into the night. Maybe he'd forgotten.

The third day, she grew restless. How hard was it to type a simple *hey*? Even a half-hearted emoji? Surely, if he had even a fraction

of interest, he'd reach out. But her phone remained stubbornly silent.

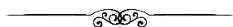
By the fourth day, she felt something shift inside her. A mix of irritation and hurt. It wasn't just about the messages—it was what they represented. She had been the one keeping the conversations alive, the one asking, the one eager. And without her efforts, there was... nothing.

By the fifth day, she told herself it didn't matter. She immersed herself in work, stayed longer in the office, helped the cook in the kitchen, and went for extra-long walks with roommates. But no matter how much she distracted herself, the silence sat heavy in the back of her mind.

By the sixth day, she stopped checking her phone as frequently. Stopped expecting. Stopped hoping.

And by the seventh, she accepted what the silence had been telling her all along.

The Intervention



May 2014 to September 2014

The silence had stretched long enough. A week, then another and another. It had turned from something unusual to something unbearable.

Namit had withdrawn completely—no morning texts, no late-night one-liners, nothing. It was as if their conversations had never existed.

Vidhi told herself she wouldn't be the first to break. *Let him text if he wants to.* But how long was she supposed to wait?

One evening, unable to take it anymore, she gave in to her own stubbornness.

Hey... is everything okay?

The message was simple, neutral. Not demanding. Not emotional. Just enough to nudge him.

Nothing.

She watched the message sit there, unread, untouched. Hours passed. Then a day.

Maybe he hadn't seen it. Maybe he was caught up with work.

The next evening, she tried again.

Namit, I understand if you're busy, but at least tell me if everything's fine.

Still nothing.

A hollow ache settled in her heart. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. Yes, there were disagreements between their parents—she knew that much, she recollected a hot argument on dates. But wasn't that normal? Every wedding had its share of

family arguments. That didn't mean the two of them had to stop talking.

Another day passed.

Then another.

By now, the silence felt deliberate.

Vidhi stared at her phone that night, debating whether she should try one last time. A part of her wanted to let it go—to match his silence with her own. But the other part, the one that still cared, refused to give up so easily.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard before she finally typed—*Namit, I don't know what's happening, but I'd rather hear it from you than keep guessing. Just let me know.*

She hit the send button and waited, expecting another void of silence.

This time, his reply came. Short. Blunt. Final.

'Let's not talk until things settle down between our parents.'

She read it twice, feeling something inside her sink.

That was it? No explanation, no reassurance? Just a decision he had made on his own, without asking what she felt?

Her fingers clenched around the phone. She wanted to tell him—*Colonel Uncle had already assured her—disagreements didn't matter. She was the one for Namit, and he would bring her into the family grandly.*

She wanted to ask—*Why are you making this harder than it needs to be? Why are you shutting me out?*

But she didn't.

Because in the end, Namit had already chosen how he wanted to deal with this.

Vidhi exhaled slowly, her thumb hovering over the keypad. There were a hundred things she could say, but none of them would change anything.

So, she typed just one word.

Okay.

And with that, she let him go.

A month had passed. A long, silent month.

Then came Shivaratri.

That evening, Baba's phone buzzed, breaking the quiet hum of the house. It was Namit's mother.

'How long will the kids not talk to each other?' her voice carried a forced lightness, but the concern beneath it was evident. *'This distance will affect their relationship. We shouldn't let our differences come in the way.'*

Baba frowned. *'I'm not aware of any such thing.'*

A brief silence. Then, Namit's mother pressed on.

'Let Vidhi break the silence. Ask her to message Namit.'

Ma, who had been listening from the other end of the room, finally spoke up. Her tone was calm, but firm.

'It was Namit who stepped away. It should be him who rebuilds. How can an unmarried girl initiate talks?' Ma played the stereotypical trump card. She didn't want to let her daughter down. Vidhi's state of mind was not concealed from Ma's prying eyes.

Vidhi sat still, listening, her fingers curled into her lap. A strange mix of emotions swirled inside her—frustration, hurt, something dangerously close to resignation. *Why was it suddenly on her to fix this?*

But Namit's mother had made her decision. And finally, as per her intervention, Vidhi's phone buzzed.

She looked down at the screen.

Namit: *Hmm, kya kar rahi thi?*

Vidhi exhaled, staring at the message for a moment longer than necessary.

Just like that. After a month of silence. *Hmm.*

Something in her chest tightened, but she pushed it aside. With steady fingers, she typed back.

Vidhi refused to let the silence settle back in completely. If Namit had finally reached out, she would at least try to keep the conversation going.

The next morning, she sent a simple message—*Good morning.* A habit she had formed early on, back when she still believed in the warmth of their connection.

His reply came an hour later—*GM.*

Nothing more. No *How's your day?* No *What are you up to?* Just two letters.

She stared at the screen, then placed the phone aside.

By evening, she debated whether to message again. Maybe he was waiting for her to take the lead? Maybe if she asked about his day, he would finally talk?

She typed—*How was work today?* — and hit send.

No reply.

Hours passed. She went about her evening routine, had dinner with Ma and Baba, scrolled through her phone mindlessly. Still nothing.

At night, she tried again—*Good night.*

This time, the response came within minutes. *GN.*

That was it.

Good morning. *GM.*

Good night. *GN.*

Nothing in between.

The same pattern continued the next day. And the day after that. She woke up hoping today would be different, that maybe he would text her before she did. But he never did. If she messaged

first, she got her two-letter response. If she didn't, there was nothing.

Vidhi sat on her bed one evening, staring at her phone in frustration. Was this what he meant by resuming conversations? Bare minimum replies, just enough to acknowledge her messages but never enough to make her feel like she mattered?

What could it mean?

Was he just going along with this because of his mother's intervention? Because it was expected?

Or was this his way of slowly stepping away, hoping she would get the hint?

She wanted to believe that things were fine, that this was just a phase, that once the family disagreements settled, he would return to how he was before.

But a deeper voice within her whispered—*Were things ever right to begin with?*

She wanted to think of someone but instantly put the thought away.

It took days and weeks for their conversations to grow longer. Vidhi felt the shift—slow but steady. The stiffness was fading, replaced by a more natural rhythm. Namit was talking, really talking.

One evening, as she lay on her bed after dinner, she asked about his weekend again, expecting the usual *nothing much*, but this time, he gave her more.

'Atul and I went out for dinner. Nikhil and LuvKush joined too.'

She smiled at the familiarity of the names. He had mentioned them before, but never like this—never as part of an effortless conversation. She had seen them as a part of the ruckus group on train on her way to Dehradun. She had known Namit's ease with his friends, even before she had actually known Namit.

'That must've been fun. Where did you go?'

‘Some place near Indiranagar. LuvKush insisted on trying their kebabs. Ended up being okayish.’

She chuckled. *‘LuvKush and his food obsession!’*

‘Always! Nikhil was just there for the beer. Atul and Naina, as usual, had work calls in between bites.’

‘And you?’

‘Me? I just ate.’

Vidhi rolled her eyes. *‘Typical.’*

Then she hesitated, but only for a moment before typing—
‘Smriti?’

She wasn’t sure why she asked, but she did. Maybe because she had noticed how often Namit mentioned his other friends but rarely Smriti. And yet, she had a feeling Smriti mattered, when she had seen them during the train journey.

A pause. The typing dots appeared, then disappeared.

Then finally—

‘She was busy. Didn’t come.’

Vidhi stared at the message, feeling something unspoken in those words. She didn’t know what exactly, but it was there—something softer, something unsaid.

She debated asking more but decided against it. Instead, she said—

‘She seems like a nice person.’

Another pause.

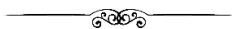
‘She is.’

There. Just two words, but something about them felt different. Deeper.

Vidhi let the conversation flow past that moment, but the thought lingered. There was something in the way he said it.

She had spent weeks trying to get him to talk, to open up. But maybe, just maybe, there was someone else he had already done that with.

The Echoes



May 2014 to September 2014

The past few weeks had been... steady. If not exciting, at least predictable.

Vidhi and Namit had fallen into a rhythm—one that wasn't exactly intimate but wasn't distant either. A **social connect** had begun to form, a friendly one at best. While Namit wasn't particularly expressive, he had started to share bits of his daily life. Not deeply, not emotionally, but just enough to keep the conversation going.

She had learned that his work kept him occupied, that Atul was the messy one in their flat, and that Nikhil had an unmatched love for late-night Maggi. He would sometimes share random office incidents, a joke Atul cracked, or a frustrating meeting.

When upset, he mentioned Smriti. When overtly joyous, he mentioned Smriti.

Namit hadn't texted in two days. Vidhi told herself he must be busy. Work, meetings, deadlines—things he had casually mentioned before. It wasn't unusual for him to go silent.

But then, her phone finally beeped.

Vidhi stared at the screen, reading and rereading his message.

'Was at Smriti's place. Stayed overnight.'

That was it. No explanation, no added details—just a simple statement, thrown casually into the conversation.

She hesitated before typing. *'Oh, must've been fun.'*

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. Should she ask more? Should she just leave it? The words felt heavier than they should

have, like she was trying to balance on a thin rope between indifference and curiosity.

After a long pause, a reply came.

'Yeah, it was good.'

Good. That's all?

She swallowed the lump rising in her throat. He hadn't texted her through the teej festival, and now, this. She didn't know if the mention was casual or deliberate. Was he saying it for a reaction? Or was it just one of those effortless truths that meant nothing to him but everything to her?

More than what he said, it was what he didn't say. *Was at Smriti's place.* Not *we* were at Smriti's place. *Stayed overnight.* Not *stayed over with friends.*

Was it just him? Was it them?

Vidhi hated how her mind clung to those possibilities. Hated how, despite all her reasoning, the thought gnawed at her.

'You were with Atul and Nikhil too, I guess?' she typed, hoping to keep it light.

Another long pause.

'No, just a few of us. LuvKush dropped by in the evening. Left early.'

That was it. The conversation shifted after that, but her thoughts didn't.

She told herself it didn't matter. They weren't in love. Not yet. Maybe never. But that one message sat heavy in her chest long after they had moved on to other topics—his office work, a new campaign, Atul's obsession with some new business idea. She responded, laughed where needed, reacted as she should.

But her mind was still stuck on that one sentence. *Was at Smriti's place. Stayed overnight.*

She wasn't sure why it bothered her. But it did.

Vidhi had started noticing it—**Smriti** was slipping into their conversations more and more.

It wasn't deliberate. Namit never brought her up in a way that seemed intentional, but somehow, her name always found its way into the discussion. When he was frustrated, he mentioned something Smriti had said to calm him down. When he was happy, he casually recalled a joke she had cracked. He loved talking about her, that much was clear. Yet, there was a weight in his voice, something almost unspoken lingering beneath his words.

One evening, as they chatted about nothing in particular, she finally asked, *'How did you guys meet?'*

A pause. Then, his reply came, easy but distant. *'We studied together at college. All of us—Atul, Akash, Nikhil, LuvKush, Naina, and Smriti.'*

Vidhi absorbed the names. Most of them she had heard before, but now, they sounded different. Smriti's name, especially.

'Long time, huh?' she said, keeping her tone light.

'Yeah...' A short chuckle, but not quite. *'Feels like another lifetime.'*

'You all still manage to stay so close.'

'Some bonds are like that, I guess.'

Vidhi listened, piecing together an image of Smriti through fragments of stories. She was smart—Namit had mentioned more than once how she was the kind of person who always knew what she wanted. Confident, outspoken, the kind to call people out on their nonsense without hesitation.

'She's impossible sometimes,' Namit had laughed one evening. *'Once in college, I bunked a lecture, and she stormed into my hostel room and dragged me back to class. Actually dragged me.'*

Vidhi smiled at the image. *'So, she was the responsible one in your group?'*

‘Something like that. More like she made it her job to keep us all in line.’

‘And you listened to her?’

‘Not always,’ he admitted. ‘But she had a way of making you feel like an idiot if you didn’t.’

Vidhi could almost hear the warmth in his voice. A fondness that wasn’t just about the past, but something deeper—something that stayed.

Another time, when Vidhi had casually mentioned how she hated confrontations, Namit had responded, *‘Smriti is the opposite. She doesn’t let things slide. If she has a problem with you, you will know.’*

‘Must be exhausting.’

‘Or refreshing.’

Vidhi noted the way he said it. Smriti wasn’t just someone from his past. She was Smriti, who still mattered. Smriti, who still occupied space in his life.

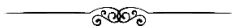
She waited, hoping he would say more. That he would elaborate, offer something deeper. But he didn’t. Instead, the conversation loosened, floating to something mundane—his work, her project deadlines, Atul’s latest antics in the flat.

Still, even as the words moved on, the feeling remained. The weight in his voice when he said Smriti’s name. The hesitation, as if there was more than what he was letting on.

Vidhi didn’t press.

But she felt it.

Being 6th



September 2014

Days slid well. It was already September. The engagement had been finalized for November.

Namit had wanted to call, but Vidhi had insisted on keeping their conversations to messages—at least until they were tied in some ceremonial knot. She didn't know why exactly. Maybe it was the burden of expectations, the uncertainty of hearing his voice, the fear of letting something slip before she even understood what she wanted to say.

But Namit had assured her—his first call would be special. And she had held onto that promise like a secret wish, wondering what *special* would feel like. Because she knew what 'special' felt like. She pushed away the thoughts of Shobhabazar Rajbari.

And then, on a warm, golden afternoon in mid-September, her phone buzzed.

Her heart stopped.

She blinked at the screen, her breath catching. **Namit.**

'Aye Rangrez Mere...Aye Rangrej Mere...' the phone came to life with the melody from 'Tanu weds Manu'.

This was it. Her first call. How precious it feels. She had waited four long months for this call!

For a second, she just stared, fingers frozen. Should she pick up immediately? Wait for another ring? Would that make her seem too eager? But wasn't she? And why did her palms feel warm and wet suddenly?

A rush of thoughts tangled in her mind. *How will his voice sound? Will it be deep? Steady? Will he say something thoughtful? Will I fumble?*

The phone buzzed again, impatient.

A nervous, excited energy curled in her stomach. With a quick breath, she swiped the screen.

‘Hello?’

‘Mere andar ki insaniyat jaag gayi, isiliye tumhe call kiya, warna kabhi nahi karta,’ he said, frustration lacing his voice. *(My inner humanity woke up, that’s why I called you. Otherwise, I never would have.)*. *‘Smriti was important, is important, and will always be important. After my family of four, she’s the fifth most important person in my life. You are sixth. I want you to know that.’*

Vidhi stiffened. His words landed awkwardly, unexpectedly. But almost immediately, he composed himself, his tone shifting.

‘Leave all that,’ he said quickly, brushing aside the moment. Then, with forced cheer, *‘I’m going to the Netherlands for some office work.’*

Vidhi pressed the phone closer to her ear, unsure how to respond. She couldn’t process anything further. Something pressed in her ears and the room appeared distant. The world appeared distant.

‘What should I get for you from there?’ he asked, as if offering a bridge to normalcy. Then, after a slight pause, he added with a forced chuckle, *‘Do you want to come along?’*

Something in his voice—half-joking, half-testing—made her uneasy.

‘Tell something, re Baba. Why so quiet?’ he prodded.

Vidhi forced a smile, though he couldn’t see it.

‘I will call you a little later. Excuse me,’ she said, her voice steady, controlled, with infinite effort.

And then, before he could respond, she hung up.

Silence.

The phone slipped from her hand onto the bed. The room felt heavier, the air still, as if holding its breath.

She stared at the ceiling, Byron's words from earlier now mocking her— *'The heart will break, but broken live on.'*

And Sylvia Plath echoing in silence *'I have fallen in love with a ghost again.'*

He is the silence between my words.'

Back in Baba's room played *'Rangeela re.....chaliya re.. na bujhe hai kisi jal se ye jalan.....khele ye kaisa re kaisa re saathi.....'*

It was time to speak up and discuss things.

Vidhi sat on the edge of the bed, her mind tangled in thoughts. The conversation with Namit felt off—his words, his tone, something about it unsettled her. She needed clarity. And so, she went to Ma.

She found her in the kitchen, rolling out rotis, the familiar rhythm of her hands grounding, comforting. The warmth of the stove, the soft aroma of ghee—it was a contrast to the cold confusion inside her. Ma and Baba often visited her over weekends. At other times, she would board a train to Indore. It never felt like they lived in different cities.

'Ma...' she began hesitantly.

Ma glanced at her, instantly reading her face. *'What is it, beta?'*

Vidhi exhaled. *'Namit called today.'*

Ma raised an eyebrow but remained quiet, waiting for her to continue.

'He sounded... I don't know. Frustrated. He said something strange—'Mere andar ki insanियat jaag gayi, isiliye call kiya, warna kabhi nahi karta.' Then he quickly changed the topic, said he's going to the Netherlands for office work. Asked what I wanted from there. Even joked about taking me along. And also, I was the.....'

Ma flipped the roti, then turned to her, wiping her hands on the edge of her saree. ‘And?’

Vidhi hesitated. *‘I didn’t know what to say. So, I just... cut the call.’*

Ma studied her carefully, her gaze filled with both understanding and concern.

‘Beta, I know this isn’t easy for you. And maybe not for him either,’ she said gently. *‘But conversations build relationships. Baat karne se baat banti hai. Avoiding them won’t help.’*

Vidhi lowered her gaze, unsure.

Ma placed a warm hand over hers. *‘Listen, if something feels off, address it. Don’t let misunderstandings pile up. Talk to him openly, directly. Ask him if this alliance is truly his choice or if he feels pressured into it. If he’s unwilling, then this could ruin three lives—his, yours, and the girl who might truly be his choice.’*

Vidhi swallowed, her throat tight. *‘And if he says it is his choice?’*

Ma smiled sadly. *‘Then ask him why it doesn’t feel like it. And don’t just listen to his words—listen to his heart.’*

Vidhi nodded slowly, feeling both the weight of the conversation and the relief of finally putting her thoughts into words.

Vidhi took time’s refuge to heal before she finally made an appointment to talk to Namit, a week later.

She typed out a message—*‘Can we talk? Properly this time?’*—and hit send.

Namit’s reply came almost instantly. *‘Of course. Let’s fix the time.’*

And just like that, the conversation she had been avoiding was now waiting for her.

Vidhi held the phone to her ear, trying to keep her voice calm. She had thought about this conversation for hours, weighing every word, every possibility. Now, there was no point in overthinking—it was time for clarity.

'I don't want to force myself on you into this alliance,' she said gently. 'If you feel otherwise, you can tell me.'

A brief silence. Then Namit replied, *'No, nothing like that.'* His voice was measured, careful.

'Then why this behaviour?' she asked, unable to hide the confusion in her tone.

A quiet sigh. *'Just... occupied.'*

Vidhi shook her head slightly. *'We always find time for people who matter, Namit.'*

'I will try,' he said after a pause.

She let out a slow breath. *'Don't do this to yourself and me.'*

There was a shift in his tone now, softer, almost hesitant. *'I understand. I'll improve... just give me some time.'*

Vidhi closed her eyes briefly. *'That's exactly what we don't have—time. The engagement is next month. If there's any doubt, now is the moment to talk. It'll only get more complicated later, and we'll be left carrying the weight of a choice neither of us fully made.'*

'Aisa kuch nahi hoga,' he assured her.

She wanted to believe him, she really did. But something still felt unsettled. After a beat, she asked, *'Do you have feelings for Smriti?'*

Silence. Not defensive, not guilty—just... silence.

A pause that spoke of hesitation, of unspoken thoughts.

'Vidhi...' His voice was careful, like he was trying to find the right words.

She waited; her heart heavier than before.

'Vidhi, give me time—that's all I'm asking,' Namit said, his voice steady, almost pleading. *'Everything takes time. Even love. Relationships take time to grow and nurture.'*

He sounded reasonable, and maybe he was. But the question remained unanswered.

Vidhi let out a quiet breath, steadying herself. *'If I am to become your wife, Namit, you need to share yourself with me.'* Her voice was calm—not accusing, just honest. *'It's okay to talk about Smriti. It might help you heal.'*

She heard a faint inhale on the other end. He didn't interrupt.

'We can collectively decide where our relationship should go. Don't worry, I won't leave you just like that.' She paused, then added gently, *'We will call off the marriage and yet be friends. At least, I will.'* Then, softly, almost coaxing, *'Ab toh bolo...'*

A silence stretched between them, not heavy, but thoughtful. Then, finally, Namit let out a sigh, a small, tired smile audible in his breath.

'Vidhi...' he murmured, as if weighing his words.

She waited, patient.

And this time, he didn't run from the conversation.

'Whatever it was, everything is alright now,' Namit said, his voice firm yet gentle. *'I have chosen you over everyone else, Vidhi. Have faith in me. No one else matters. The past is past, it's over. Just give me time to let go of it.'*

Vidhi listened, absorbing his words, his reassurance. But she wasn't looking for a perfect answer—she was looking for honesty, for a space where he didn't have to suppress what he felt.

'You don't have to bury yourself under the weight of your feelings, Namit,' she said softly. *'There is nothing wrong in loving someone or having loved someone.'*

She heard his quiet intake of breath, as if her words had caught him off guard.

'I'm rather happy to know that you're capable of love, of being romantic,' she continued with a small, almost wistful smile. *'That takes away all my worries.'*

Namit let out a quiet chuckle, more at ease now. *'How so?'*

'Because love is a wonderful feeling,' she said simply. 'You just don't have to confine it to one person.'

There was a thoughtful pause on the other end.

'You make it sound so simple,' he murmured.

'It is, if we allow it to be,' she replied. 'Love is not a limited resource, Namit. Just because you once loved someone doesn't mean you can't love again. It doesn't mean your heart is any less capable of something new, something different.'

Another pause. Then, softly, *'You really think so?'*

'I know so,' she said, her voice steady. 'And if you give yourself the chance, you'll know it too.'

'You had a beautiful past, Namit. One where you have loved and you were loved,' she said gently. 'You don't have to forget it. You don't have to let go of her; you just have to let me in. You just have to let your past and present co-exist'

She had said what she needed to.

And in that moment, she knew—this wasn't about seeking promises or guarantees. It was about understanding what marriage is really about- it's about partnership—not just in love but in life and in pain. It's about choosing someone, every day, through the good and the bad, through certainty and confusion. It's about understanding that love isn't a fixed quantity. That hearts don't have to erase memories to make room for new ones. That a relationship isn't built on perfect beginnings but on honest conversations, on the willingness to navigate the complexities of emotions together. Marriage is about companionship, trust, and patience. It's about knowing that love may not always be grand gestures or fiery passion—it may simply be the quiet reassurance that, no matter what, you have someone walking beside you.

She did her part well, in all sincerity.

Engagement and Beyond



November 2014

The day of the engagement had finally arrived.

It was a grand affair—grander than Vidhi had ever imagined for herself. Palace Grounds glittered under a canopy of fairy lights, the sprawling lawns adorned with fresh jasmine and marigold garlands. The air was thick with the scent of tuberose and expensive perfumes, mingling with the hushed murmurs of politicians, bureaucrats, and academicians. The State Education Minister, other dignitaries, and the University Vice-Chancellor were all in attendance, elevating the evening from an intimate celebration to an event of social prestige.

Vidhi stood at the centre of it all, draped in a sheer azure and pink saree with intricate zardozi work, the touch of the light pearls pressing gently against her collarbones. Her hands, freshly adorned with mehndi, trembled slightly as she adjusted the pleats of her saree.

Amidst the crowd, she caught glimpses of Baba's beaming face, Ma's proud eyes scanning the hall, and Choti Ma ensuring every guest was looked after. Prakhar stood beside her—a reassuring presence—throwing in the occasional joke to make her smile, while Kritika and Jiju teased her playfully.

And then there was Namit. He looked impeccable in his ivory sherwani, composed as always, offering polite smiles and measured words to those who came to congratulate him. When he finally stood beside her for the ring exchange, Vidhatri Samarth shivered at the first touch of Namit Shekhar, as he held his hand for the ceremony, and life.

The camera flashes went off, the rings were exchanged, and applause echoed through the grand hall. Everything went as planned. Everything was perfect.

However, beneath the grandeur, the applause, and the seamless perfection of the evening, Vidhi felt an absence—one that no diamond ring, no lavish celebration, and no sea of well-wishers could fill. She thought of someone, a certain promise, closed her eyes and held a pearl in the corner of her eyes.

Up in the heaven someone smiled.

Love, to her, wasn't about extravagant events or the presence of powerful guests. It wasn't measured in the size of a solitaire or the scale of a ceremony. It was something quieter, something deeper. A shared glance that spoke more than words, an unspoken understanding, a presence that felt like home.

And in that moment, as she smiled for the cameras and exchanged pleasantries with guests, she realized she was still waiting for that feeling.

A few days after the engagement, Namit had handed her a neatly wrapped package. She had unwrapped it to find a book—a love story, the kind that filled bestseller lists but rarely touched her soul. She smiled politely, thanked him. It was a sweet gesture. But how could he have known? Her love lived in the verses of Byron and Dryden, Shakespeare and Wordsworth. It wasn't in contemporary fiction but in poetry that had endured through centuries—where love was a sonnet, not just a statement.

Still, she couldn't ignore the way his message had lingered in her mind long after she had read it. *Hope you like it. Thought of you when I saw this.* And the way he had stayed online, waiting for her response. The way he had signed off—*Always, Vidhi.*

It wasn't poetry. But it was something.

And for the first time, she let herself believe—perhaps she was starting to feel that connection with Namit.

Soon time was flying. Namit had started to call every night post engagement.

And gradually, night began to pour its magic, weaving something delicate and unspoken between them. The air between their calls softened, conversations stretching past the mundane and tiptoeing into something more... intimate.

One such night, it was late—close to eleven. The Samarth household had settled into its usual rhythm of silence, the only sounds being the distant honks from the main road and the ticking of the wall clock in the hallway. Ma and Baba had gone to bed long back, Kritika, who had come for a visit, had dozed off with the book lying across her torso, and Utkarsh, as usual, was in his own world with headphones plugged in.

Vidhi lay on her bed, her phone warm against her ear, the familiar timbre of Namit's voice washing over her.

'So... *what else?*' he asked, after another round of discussing wedding outfits and family drama.

She yawned lightly, stretching her arm. '*Nothing much. Just lying down. Feeling sleepy. Need to get back to Kolkata tomorrow.*'

There was a pause. A slight shift in the air. And then, casually—too casually—he asked, '*What are you wearing?*'

The question was unexpected. Uncharacteristic. Not like Namit at all.

Her breath hitched for a fraction of a second.

'*Umm...*' she stalled, blinking at the ceiling, suddenly very aware of the soft cotton night suit she was in—light blue with tiny white floral patterns, a far cry from anything remotely romantic.

'*Vidhi?*' His voice was smooth, unreadable.

'*A... night suit,*' she replied, trying to sound unaffected. '*Why?*
Just like that.'

A slow, deliberate silence stretched between them. It wasn't uncomfortable, but it carried something unfamiliar. A quiet charge.

She exhaled, running a hand through her hair, trying to steady the sudden quickening of her pulse. *'And what about you?'* she countered, surprising even herself.

She heard him chuckle softly. *'A T-shirt and pajamas. Nothing fancy.'*

She smiled into the darkness. *'Hmm.'*

'And what were you expecting?' he asked.

'I don't know... a suit, maybe? Since you're always so proper.'

He laughed, the deep timbre sending something strange through her. *'I'm not that formal, Vidhi.'*

'Debatable.'

Another pause. This time, longer.

'Do you always sleep in a night suit?' he asked, his voice quieter now.

She hesitated, not because of the question itself, but because of the way it made her feel. As if this conversation was walking a fine line—one she had never imagined crossing with him.

'Mostly,' she answered, keeping her tone light. *'Except for winters. Then it's a sweatshirt.'*

'Practical.'

'Always.'

The warmth of the phone against her ear, the low hum of his voice, the stillness of the night—it all created something new, something uncharted.

She wasn't sure what had just happened, but when she finally said goodnight and placed her phone on the bedside table, her heart was still beating just a little too fast.

Whatever it was, the smile on her face wasn't meant to leave her anytime soon. Even as she turned on her side, pulling the comforter up to her chin, she could feel the heat creeping up her cheeks.

Even in the dim of the night, she found herself blushing.

It wasn't as if Namit had said anything overtly romantic or flirtatious. And yet, something about that moment—the unexpectedness of his question, the subtle shift in the air between them—left a lingering warmth inside her.

She reached for her phone again, her fingers hovering over the screen. No new messages. She debated for a second—should she text him something? Maybe a simple *Goodnight again*? Or was that too much?

She sighed, setting the phone back down.

This was so unlike her. Blushing over a late-night phone call, her heart reacting to something so small. But that was the thing about moments like these—they weren't grand, they weren't loud. They crept in quietly, unnoticed, and before she knew it, they were settling deep inside her.

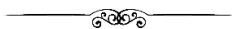
She turned to stare at the ceiling, her mind replaying the conversation, the exact tone of his voice, the slight chuckle when she had teased him.

Was this how it started? The slow burn of something unspoken? The gentle unravelling of walls?

Whatever it was, she didn't want to overthink it tonight.

For now, she just wanted to stay in this feeling a little longer.

Midnight Murmurs



November 2014 to June 2015

They were close to their wedding bells.

A comfortable silence stretched between them. Not the awkward kind, but the kind where neither felt the need to fill it. The hum of the ceiling fan on his end. The occasional rustle of her bedsheet as she shifted. The quiet understanding that neither was in a hurry to hang up.

‘So,’ Namit spoke again, his voice lower now, *‘what are you thinking?’*

Vidhi hesitated. *‘Nothing.’*

‘Come on. People don’t sit in silence thinking nothing.’

‘Then tell what you are thinking.’ she challenged.

‘Hmm... that I ate too much.’ A pause. *‘And that I should hit the gym tomorrow.’*

She smirked. *‘Good idea.’*

‘And...’ he continued, voice deliberate, *‘that we’ve never really talked about certain things.’*

Her stomach dipped. *‘Certain things?’*

‘You know.’ His voice was laced with amusement now. *‘Things.’*

Vidhi knew exactly what he meant, but she wasn’t going to make it easy for him. *‘Be specific.’*

Namit laughed, a soft, throaty sound. *‘Okay. Like... what you think about us.’*

That made her pause. *‘What do you think?’*

‘I asked first.’

Vidhi exhaled, pressing her fingers against the bedsheet. *'I don't know. It still feels... new.'*

'It does.' His tone was thoughtful. *'But not in a bad way, right?'*

'No. Just... unfamiliar.'

He hummed. *'And what about...'* he trailed off deliberately, waiting.

She knew exactly what he was doing. *'What about what?'*

Then, in a voice that was quiet but steady, Namit said, *'I've never... you know.'*

Vidhi's breath caught for a fraction of a second.

Vidhi's fingers stilled against the bedsheet.

Before she could respond, he continued, as if he had already decided to be honest about it. *'I mean, I'm a virgin.'* A pause. Then, more thoughtfully, *'I always wanted to save it for my wife.'*

Vidhi hadn't expected him to say it so plainly, without awkwardness or hesitation. Men didn't usually confess these things so easily. But Namit wasn't saying it to prove a point, nor was he ashamed. It was just the truth—simple, unembellished.

And something about that made her trust him.

'I just thought you should know,' he added, lighter now. *'Before... everything.'*

Vidhi exhaled. *'Okay.'*

He let out a soft laugh. *'That's it? Just 'okay'?''*

'What do you want me to say?'

'I don't know. Something more dramatic?'

A small smile tugged at her lips. *'You want me to gasp in shock?'*

'Would be nice.' He was teasing now. *'Maybe say—Oh, Namit, I had no idea!'*

She rolled her eyes, but the warmth in her eyes remained. *'I appreciate the honesty.'*

He hummed. ‘Good.’

A beat of silence. Then, a quiet ‘*Hmm.*’ No surprise, no unnecessary questions. Just acceptance.

Another pause. Then, more playfully, ‘*Should I start working out, by the way?*’

Vidhi frowned. ‘*What?*’

‘*I mean, do you have expectations?*’ He was grinning again. She could hear it in his voice.

She rolled her eyes. ‘*I expect you to stop overeating at Andhra restaurants.*’

‘*Tough crowd.*’ He laughed. Then, more playfully, ‘*Anything else?*’

Vidhi hesitated. Then, before she could overthink it, she said, ‘*I’ll let you know.*’

He exhaled a slow, amused breath. ‘*Fair enough.*’

Neither of them said it, but they both knew—this conversation wasn’t over. It was just the beginning.

Neither of them hung up just yet.

The silence between them was not just silence anymore. It was a presence, thick and waiting, as if it knew something was about to be said—something that couldn’t be taken back.

Vidhi shifted under the blanket, pressing the phone closer to her ear, as if that could bring him closer.

‘*Vidhi?*’ Namit’s voice had dropped lower, quieter.

‘*Hmm?*’

‘*Do you ever... wonder?*’ His words were deliberate, careful.

Her fingers curled into the bedsheet. She knew what he meant. *Of course, she did.* But acknowledging it was something else entirely.

‘*About?*’ she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He exhaled a slow breath, like he was deciding how much to say. *'About us. About how it'll feel... to finally be together.'*

A warmth unfurled deep within her, slow and unfamiliar. She wanted to look away, but there was no one watching—only him, waiting on the other end.

'I don't know,' she murmured. *'I mean... I haven't thought much about it.'*

A chuckle. *'Liar.'*

Vidhi's cheeks burned. *'I'm not lying.'*

'You are.' His voice was teasing but edged with something else, something deeper. *'You just don't want to say it.'*

Her breath hitched slightly. *'Maybe.'*

There was a pause. Then, softer, *'You don't have to be shy with me, Vidhi.'*

She swallowed. *But I am,* she wanted to say. *I don't know how to talk about this. I don't even know how to hold this feeling in my hands.*

But Namit—he did. He wasn't pushing her, wasn't demanding anything. He was just there, waiting, letting her be part of this without forcing her to lead.

'I think about it,' he admitted, voice barely above a murmur. *'More than I should.'*

Vidhi's heartbeat was steady but heavy. *'What do you think about?'*

He let out a soft laugh, like she'd asked the right question. *'You. The way you'd feel in my arms. The way you'd react when I touch you. If you'd melt into me... or push me away just to tease.'*

Vidhi pressed her lips together, heat rising to her skin. *'I—I don't know.'*

'I think you'd be shy at first,' Namit continued, like he could see the way she curled into herself at his words. *'But then... you'd let me in.'*

Vidhi felt something deep in her, a slow ache, an awareness she wasn't used to. She didn't know how to respond, but she didn't want to end the conversation either.

'And you?' she asked hesitantly. *'What would you be like?'*

Namit's breath was slow, measured. *'I think I'd take my time. I'd want to see every expression on your face. Feel every hesitation... before it disappears.'*

Vidhi's toes curled under the blanket. She didn't recognize this version of herself—the one who was *listening*, not shutting the conversation down.

'You'd turn away at first, wouldn't you?' he asked, amused. *'Try to hide your face?'*

She exhaled a shaky laugh. *'Maybe.'*

'But I wouldn't let you.' His voice was hushed now, intimate in a way that sent a shiver through her. *'I'd want to see exactly how you feel.'*

Vidhi bit her lip, her entire body thrumming with something unnamed.

She had never had a conversation like this before. Never let herself step into a space where desire was not just hinted at but *spoken*. And yet, with Namit, she wasn't afraid.

'Vidhi?' he murmured.

'Hmm?'

A pause. Then, *'I can't wait to hold you.'*

Her eyes fluttered shut. She didn't need to say it, but he would know—

Neither can I.

Next day Vidhi woke up to the soft winter light filtering through the curtains, the world outside still quiet. She stretched under the blanket, but instead of the usual drowsiness, there was an awareness in her body, a leftover hum from the night before. *I can't wait to hold you.* Namit's voice echoed in her mind, deep and certain, making her cheeks heat even in the solitude of her room.

Shaking her head, she pushed the blanket off and stepped out of bed, her feet finding the cold floor. Two months. That was all that was left now. Two months until she wouldn't just be thinking about him—she would be with him.

The thought sent a ripple through her, excitement laced with nerves. *Am I even ready for this?*

She busied herself with her morning routine, trying to silence the thoughts swirling in her head. Tying her hair into a loose bun, she stepped into the kitchen, where Ma was already making tea. The familiar scent of ginger and cardamom filled the air.

'You're up early,' Ma observed, handing her a cup.

Vidhi nodded, taking the warm cup between her hands. She wanted to tell her mother why she was awake so soon, why sleep had felt light and restless—but how could she? How could she put into words the way her heart had raced last night, the way Namit's words had settled into places within her she hadn't even known existed?

Instead, she took a sip of tea and picked up the strainer, absentmindedly rinsing it under the tap. The simple act grounded her, but it didn't erase the quiet longing simmering underneath.

She had always known that marriage would change things. She had seen it in others, in the way newlyweds glanced at each other when they thought no one was watching, in the way love settled into routine. But last night, she had felt it—*her* life shifting, the distance between what was and what would be growing smaller.

'*Make some breakfast, beta,*' Ma said, stirring the pot. '*Your Baba will be up soon.*'

Vidhi nodded and turned to the stove, deciding on something simple—upma, with just the right amount of ghee and roasted cashews. As she measured out the semolina, her phone buzzed on the counter.

Namit.

A flutter ran through her stomach. She wiped her hands on her dupatta and picked up the phone.

Good morning.

She hesitated for only a second before replying.

Morning.

The typing dots appeared immediately, making her heart race a little.

Did you sleep well?

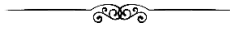
Vidhi bit her lip. *Not really.*

Me neither.

She exhaled, pressing the edge of the phone against her palm. *This is happening. This is real.*

And suddenly, two months didn't feel that far away at all.

Velvet Whispers



November 2014 to February 2015

Namit glanced at his phone. 11:43 PM. He ran a hand through his hair, exhaling as he leaned against the headboard. His room was dimly lit, the glow of his laptop casting shifting shadows on the wall. Outside, Bangalore was still alive—distant honks, muffled conversations from the street below. But in here, in this space between him and her, the world was slowing down.

He dialled her number.

It didn't even ring twice before she picked up.

'Hi,' she murmured, her voice quiet, warm.

He smiled. '*You were waiting?*'

A pause. '*Maybe.*'

He chuckled. '*Liar. You jumped on the call.*'

'So?' There was the sound of a rustling blanket on the other end.

'*You called late today.*'

'*Office work.*' He sighed. '*Had a deadline. But now, I'm all yours.*'

Vidhi shifted in her bed, adjusting her pillow, settling in as if his voice was something she could curl into. '*Hmm.*'

Namit imagined her then—her hair loose, draped over her shoulder, the soft glow of her bedside lamp highlighting the smooth lines of her face. It had been weeks since their engagement, yet there were nights when the distance between them felt unbearable.

'*What are you wearing?*' he asked.

Vidhi laughed. '*Why?*'

'*Just asking.*'

‘A T-shirt.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing,’ she said, teasingly.

His breath hitched. ‘Vidhi...’. He breathed heavily.

‘What?’

‘I wish I were there,’ he admitted, his voice lower now. ‘To see you. To hold you.’

She pressed her lips together. The way he said it—husky, unhurried—sent a ripple down her spine.

‘I miss you,’ she whispered.

He closed his eyes. ‘Say that again.’

She hesitated, then, softer this time, ‘I miss you, Namit.’

His fingers curled into the sheets. There was something about hearing it in her voice, in the way she said his name, that made his body with need.

‘Vidhi, you know what you do to me?’

Her pulse quickened. ‘Tell me.’

He exhaled slowly, as if trying to steady himself. ‘You—’ He stopped. ‘I can’t even put it into words. It’s... the way you speak, the way you breathe into the phone. The way I imagine you right now, lying in bed, wrapped up in that soft blanket...’

Vidhi swallowed. She wasn’t used to this—his words, their weight, the way they sent a flush creeping up her neck. ‘Namit...’

‘I want to be there,’ he continued. ‘To feel your warmth. To hold you close, kiss your forehead, trace my fingers along your arm, slowly, just to see if you shiver.’

She did. She shivered, just hearing him.

‘Do you know what that would do to me, Vidhi?’ His voice had dropped even lower, like velvet against her skin.

She felt a heat rise in her cheeks. ‘Tell me’. She breathed.

'I wouldn't be able to stop. You, soft against me, your scent, your warmth...' He let out a quiet sigh. 'I'd pull you closer, so close that I could hear your heartbeat.'

She bit her lip, gripping her blanket a little tighter.

'I want you in my arms, Vidhi,' he murmured. 'I want to fall asleep with you, wake up with you. I want to feel your breath against my skin when you whisper my name like that.'

She shut her eyes, her heart hammering against her ribs. The way he said things—not crude, not rushed, but intense, deliberate—left her breathless.

'Say something,' he urged.

She let out a shaky breath. *'What do you want me to say?'*

'Tell me how you feel.'

Vidhi hesitated. She wasn't as unguarded as him, wasn't used to laying bare what swirled inside her. But tonight, something in his voice, in the weight of their silences, made her want to try.

'I... I feel warm,' she admitted. *'Like my skin is buzzing, like I can't keep still.'*

His breath hitched. *'Where do you feel it the most?'*

Her fingers brushed absently against her own arm, mirroring the touch he had described earlier. *'Everywhere,'* she whispered.

A deep groan escaped him. *'.....God, Vidhi.'*

She smiled slightly, enjoying how her words affected him.

'You're not making it any easier for me, you know that?' he said.

'Easier for what?'

'For controlling myself,' he admitted. *'If you were here right now, in this moment...'*

'What?' she prompted.

He exhaled sharply. *'I wouldn't let you sleep.'*

Vidhi's breath caught. She turned on her side, hugging the pillow. *'You're impossible, Namit.'*

'Am I?' He smirked. *'Then why aren't you ending the call?'*

She bit her lip. *'Because... I don't want to.'*

'Neither do I,' he admitted. *'I want to keep talking, keep listening to you breathe, knowing you're here, with me, in this moment.'*

Her chest rose and fell in uneven rhythm. *'Namit...'*

'Hmm?'

'I don't think I've ever felt like this before,' she confessed.

His heart clenched. *'Like what?'*

She hesitated, then, in a voice so soft he barely heard it, *'Like I belong to someone.'*

His fingers pressed around the phone. He swallowed. His throat suddenly dry.

'Vidhi...' He paused, as if searching for words. *'You do. You belong with me. And soon, we won't have to wait for nights like these. I'll be there. You'll be mine to hold, to keep.'*

She shut her eyes.

All this while as Vidhi's voice spilled softly through the receiver, Namit felt the tension in his body coil tighter, a slow, insistent pull that refused to ebb. His breath grew heavier, his fingers gripping the sheets, his entire body thrumming with an aching need.

He was hard—had been from the moment her voice dipped into something softer, something unguarded. It wasn't just what she said, but how she said it—the unspoken longing woven into her pauses, the way she sighed, the way she whispered his name like it belonged to her.

Heat pooled low in his abdomen, his skin flushed, his senses drowning in the intimacy of their shared silence. Every breath she took, every quiet hum of agreement, sent another pulse of hunger through him, his body tightening with the effort to hold back. He

could feel the sharp throb of his own arousal, the way it pressed against the fabric of his boxers, insistent, almost painful.

His free hand flexed at his side, wanting—aching—to do something, anything, to bridge the distance between them. If she were here, if he could feel her warmth against him, if he could press his lips to the soft curve of her shoulder, trail his fingers along her skin, slow, teasing, just to watch her tremble...

A groan rumbled in his throat.

'*Namit...*?' Vidhi whispered, as if she sensed something shifting in him.

His control wavered. The tension that had been building for the last hour coiled impossibly tight, a rush of heat searing through him, consuming him. His stomach clenched, his muscles tensing, and in that single, shuddering moment—he let go.

His breath hitched, a deep, guttural sound escaping him as pleasure surged through his body, pulsing hot and unrelenting. His head tipped back against the pillow, his grip on the phone tightening as waves of release rolled through him, leaving him breathless, spent, and ... still aching for her.

For more.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Their breaths, their silences, said more than words ever could.

Finally, he broke the quiet. '*Vidhi?*'

'*Hmm?*'

'*Sleep now,*' he murmured. '*Dream of me.*'

She smiled into her pillow. '*Only if you do too.*'

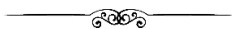
'*I already do, every night.*'

She sighed, content. '*Goodnight, Namit.*'

'*Goodnight, my love.*'

The call ended, but the warmth remained.

Purva-Smriti; Past Memories



March 2015 to June 2015

It was now just two months or so until their wedding. The Samarth and Shekhar families were caught in a flurry of preparations—finalizing venues, approving menus, coordinating guest lists. There was excitement, chaos, and the weight of a hundred tiny decisions.

Namit was supposed to leave for the Netherlands in two weeks, and work had kept him on his toes. At least, that's what Vidhi assumed. She had received only a handful of texts from him, mostly short and to the point. *'Sorry, crazy day at work'. 'Call you later. Meeting ran late', 'will text tomorrow. Hope your day was good.'*

She told herself it was normal. He was busy. It wasn't like she expected long romantic messages, but still... she had at least expected some....

She dropped the thought.

However, things were different for Namit.

It was *Smriti*.

Namit stood by the window; phone pressed to his ear. The traffic buzzed below, but his mind was elsewhere.

'You're getting married in a month, Namit.' Smriti's voice was calm, but there was something sharp beneath it.

'I know,' he said, exhaling.

'Do you?' A soft laugh. *'Because you don't sound like a man who's about to marry the love of his life.'*

He rubbed his forehead. *'Smriti, please.'*

'No, you please. Tell me, are you even excited?'

Namit was silent.

Smriti let out a small breath. *'Namit, this isn't just cold feet, is it?'*

He shut his eyes. *'I don't know.'*

'Wow.' A pause. *'Does she know?'*

'Know what?'

'That you're... like this. Conflicted. Distracted. Distant.'

'She thinks I'm busy with work.'

'And she believes that?'

'Why wouldn't she?' His voice was defensive.

'Because she's marrying you, Namit. And because I know you. You're not the guy who forgets to call someone you care about.'

Namit let out a bitter chuckle. *'I'm not sure what kind of guy I am right now.'*

Smriti hesitated before speaking again. *'Do you love her?'*

'I respect her. I care about her. She's—' He stopped.

'That's not love.'

'I want to love her, Smriti.'

'Love doesn't work like that.'

Another silence stretched between them.

Then, Smriti spoke, softer this time. *'You deserve more than this, Namit. And so does she.'*

He didn't reply.

'If you need to talk... I'm here,' she added.

Namit swallowed. *'Thanks, Smriti.'*

But long after the call ended, her words lingered.

Namit leaned back against his couch, phone in hand, fingers hovering over Smriti's name in his call log. Their conversation from earlier still echoed in his mind.

'Do you love her?'

'I respect her. I care about her. She's—'

He hadn't been able to finish the sentence.

Because deep down, he knew the truth. What he felt for Vidhi wasn't love. Not yet. It was a need, a commitment.

Next morning, a Saturday, his phone buzzed again.

Smriti: *You free?*

He sighed, running a hand through his hair before typing back.

Namit: *Yeah. Call?*

Seconds later, his phone rang.

'That was quick,' he said, trying to keep his tone light.

'I knew you'd be waiting.' Smriti's voice had that teasing tone, the one he knew so well.

'You think too highly of yourself.'

'Of course.' He could hear the smirk. Then her voice softened.

'How are you? I want an honest answer.'

'What do you think?'

'Miserable.'

He let out a dry laugh. *'That obvious?'*

'I've known you for ten years, Namit. I know when you're faking it.'

Silence stretched between them. Ten years. That was a long time. Longer than his engagement. Longer than his relationship with Vidhi. Smriti had been there through everything—college pranks, late-night drives, heartbreaks, career struggles.

And the mess in between.

'Namit...' She hesitated. *'I hate seeing you like this.'*

'Then stop looking,' he muttered.

'Stop running.'

He exhaled, rubbing his temples. *'I'm not running, Smriti. I'm trying to do the right thing.'*

'And what is the right thing?'

'Marrying Vidhi.' His voice was firm. Too firm.

'And being unhappy?'

'She's a great girl.'

'That's not an answer.'

He shut his eyes. *'I want to love her, Smriti.'*

She let out a breath. *'And do you?'*

He had no response.

'I know you, Namit. You don't do things half-heartedly. You're either all in or not at all.'

He chuckled bitterly. *'Not everything is that simple.'*

'It was. Once.'

His grip tightened around the phone. He knew where this was going.

'Smriti—'

'Remember when we first met?' she cut him off.

'Of course, I do,' he muttered. How could he forget?

First year of college. Smriti had walked into the lecture hall like she owned the place, in a loose red t-shirt and ripped jeans, a baseball cap turned backwards. A mix of confidence and chaos. Every guy had noticed her, wanted to be around her. He had, too. She got big boobs and was the fantasy of every other guy in college.

But unlike the rest, he hadn't chased her. He had befriended her.

And his charm—his effortless, gentlemanly charm—had worked.

'You were the only guy who didn't try to impress me,' she said, as if reading his thoughts.

'And yet, I did.'

'You did.' Her voice softened. *'You always do.'*

He swallowed. His fingers curled into a fist. *'Smriti, don't do this.'*

'Don't do what?'

'Don't dig up the past.'

'Why not? It's ours, isn't it?'

He sighed. *'It's complicated.'*

'It wasn't. Until.... I made the mistake, that even I regret.'

There it was!

Smriti sat on the edge of her bed, one leg tucked beneath her, the other dangling off, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the rim of her glass. The amber liquid inside barely moved, a testament to how long she had been holding it. Outside, the Bangalore night hummed softly — distant honks, the occasional whoosh of a passing car, and the low murmur of the city settling in.

She pressed the phone closer to her ear. *'Namit, can we just—drop the pretense?'*

Silence.

It was expected, really. He wasn't the type to react impulsively, not anymore. There was a time when he would have jumped in, eager to fill the gaps in their conversation, but that Namit had long since faded. Now, he let the quiet stretch between them, as if measuring the weight of her words before deciding what they were worth.

Smriti exhaled, her fingers stiff around the glass. *'You loved me once,'* she said, her voice softer, almost careful. *'And I—maybe I never said it, but I felt it too.'*

She heard his breath hitch, but still, he said nothing.

It wasn't the first time she had thought about this moment—this confession, this peeling away of the unsaid—but she had never been able to bring herself to voice it. Not when it mattered. Not when they still had time.

Finally, his voice came through, steady, restrained. *'But you chose Anurag.'*

'I did,' she admitted, the weight of it settling in the air around. *'And when he left, I—'* She hesitated, then let out a small, mirthless laugh. *'I thought you'd still be there.'*

There was a shift on his end. Maybe he was running a hand through his hair, maybe leaning back against the wall. She knew his habits well enough to imagine.

'Smriti...'

It wasn't a question. It wasn't anger. It was just—him. Namit, who had always been steady, always been there, until he wasn't.

She sighed, staring down at her glass. *'I was selfish,'* she confessed. *'I wanted you as my constant. Even when you were moving on. Even when you got engaged.'*

A long pause. Then, his voice, quieter than before. *'It's too late, Smriti.'*

'Is it?' She shut her eyes, as if that could stop the thoughts from spilling out. *'Because some nights, I wonder if it really is. If we had just—if I had just—'* She stopped, letting out a frustrated breath. *'I thought I had time.'*

She had thought he would always be around. That no matter what, no matter who she chose, Namit would be there. That he would be her safe place, her certainty. But certainty had an expiration date, and she had realized it too late.

'Smriti,' he said again, firmer this time. *'You can't do this.'*

'Do what?' she whispered.

'Make me question everything.'

She swallowed. *'I don't want to lose you, Namit,'* she admitted, her voice cracking. *'Not like this.'*

He let out a heavy breath. *'You lost me a long time ago, when you cheated on me'*

The words hit her harder than she had expected.

'I did,' she sighed, voice barely audible. 'Anurag was your best friend. You decided to send him to fill in for you when you were not available. He charmed me, I fell for him, what could I do? Was it a crime so big to lose you forever, duffer!'

'..... I cared for you dammit! He had a car while I just rode my bullet! I wanted you to be comfortable. Always! Knowing you were scared to ride a pillion. Hence, would send him to pick and drop you for work or hang ups. How was I supposed to know that I was just meant to be used per your convenience!'

This wasn't planned—what he hurled at her. *'Need to buy something? Call Namit. Assignments? Namit. Office politics? Cry on Namit's shoulder. Issues at home? Share with Namit. Book flights, go to the parlour, shop, fight for her, keep her happy—every damn thing in the world, Namit. And amidst all this, you still found time to fall for someone else..... But you know....it's not your fault. It's mine. Because Namit is an asshole!'*

After a long pause he continued.

'I tried, Smriti,' he broke. 'I tried to be just your friend. I tried to accept what we were. But you—you never made it easy.'

She laughed, but it was hollow. *'I was confused Namit. I didn't know what I was doing. Four years back even I was too young to understand the difference between infatuation and love. I was charmed and thrilled with Anurag, and calm and at peace with you. I didn't know what was important in the long run. At least you should have given me some time to understand and sort my priorities.'*

'I did tell you when I was going to meet Vidhi. You even saw her on the train,' he murmured.

She let the silence stretch between them again. She could hear something in the background on his end—a faint murmur, maybe his roommates, maybe just the television. The mundaneness of it all stung.

'I didn't know you'd decide so quick!' She sobbed. *'Please don't do this to yourself and to me Namit. Please.....'*, her voice broke and so did Namit's heart.

But he knew it was momentary. A fleeting decision; Smriti's sudden realisation. He couldn't let his life be steered at the impulsive decision of someone's brutal realisation. He had invested years in her, a part of his life, his soul, all his emotions. The sleepless nights, the pillow cries, the craving heart and everything in between. She failed to notice that in the last eight years and suddenly realised she couldn't do without him when he was going to get engaged to someone else.

Fickle mindedness might appear cute, charming and attractive on girlfriend, not spouse. The steadiness of your spouse's mind decides the steadiness of your life, he thought.

Once, they had been inseparable. Once, they had shared everything. Now, they were here. Two people who had held on too tightly, then let go too late.

'Will you be able to love her?' she asked again, recovering.

He didn't answer immediately.

She had spent months pretending she didn't care. Pretending that his engagement had been nothing more than a passing event in her life. But the moment she had seen his name linked to someone else's—Vidhatri, a girl she didn't know, a girl she hadn't even heard of until before—something inside her was restless.

'Vidhi's a good person,' Namit reiterated.

Smriti smiled bitterly. *'That's not what I asked.'*

He sighed. *'What do you want me to say, Smriti?'*

'I don't know,' she admitted. *'Something. Anything.'*

'I want this to stop,' he said quietly.

Her throat tightened. *'What?'*

'This—whatever this is between us.' He exhaled. *'I can't keep doing this. I can't keep feeling like I owe you something. Like I have to be there just because you suddenly realized you needed me.'*

She flinched. *'That's not fair.'*

'Isn't it?' His voice was steady. Too steady. *'You never needed me, Smriti. You needed a safety net. And now that it's gone, now that I'm—'* He stopped. *'Now that I'm moving on, you suddenly care?'*

'I always cared,' she said, defensive.

'Just not enough.'

She had no response to that.

She had spent so long convincing herself that Namit would always be there, that even when everything else fell apart, she would always have him. It had never occurred to her that he might stop waiting.

And he had.

'Are you happy?' she asked, because at the very least, she wanted to know.

There was another pause, then a quiet, measured answer. *'I'm trying to be.'*

Smriti let out a shaky breath, nodding, even though he couldn't see her. *'Good,'* she said, forcing a smile. *'You deserve that.'*

'So do you,' he said, softer this time.

She closed her eyes.

'Maybe.'

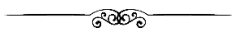
But for the first time, she wasn't sure she had earned it.

That night Smriti cried under her blanket.

Namit sobbed in the balcony.

Vidhi stifled under the lonely crescent moon.

The Dual Dilemma



March 2015 to June 2015

'You don't seem like yourself, bro. All good?' Atul's voice broke through Namit's trance.

Namit barely looked up from his phone. *'Yeah, man. Just busy.'*

Busy. That was the excuse he had been giving everyone. Work, wedding preparations, life—so much to do, so little time. But he knew better. He wasn't busy. He was drifting.

Ever since Smriti's constant calls and regret sagas, the long texts between Namit and Vidhi had stopped. The late-night conversations had shrunk to brief exchanges—customary, predictable. He tried to at least call Vidhi every night, but there was no warmth in his voice, no eagerness in his words. It wasn't that he didn't care. It was just... something inside him had quieted.

Vidhi never said anything. Never asked why his messages had become mechanical. Why did his calls end faster? Maybe she already knew. Maybe she was waiting for him to come back on his own.

But what if he didn't?

He had shared a part of this with Niyati one evening, unable to keep it all bottled up. She had listened; her expression unreadable.

'And does Vidhi know about how you feel?' she had asked.

'I don't know how I feel,' Namit admitted. *'I mean... I don't regret saying yes. I just—'*

'Just what?'

'I don't know if I'm giving her enough.'

Niyati had sighed. *'Namit Bhaiya, you're getting married. It's not just about you anymore.'*

She must have thought about it a lot after that, because later, she spoke to their mother.

The reaction was swift.

'We gave him enough time!' Amma's voice had been sharp, cutting through the quiet of their home. 'If he liked someone, he should have said so before we proceeded with his rishta!'

'I wasn't saying—'

'And you, Niyati! Encouraging such nonsense? Bachpan se sar pe chadhaya hai tum logon ko!'

'Ma, he's just confused—'

'There is nothing to be confused about! He's engaged. The wedding is fixed. Such talk should never take place in this house again!'

That night, Namit sat in silence, staring at his phone.

He should've known better than to share.

Atul leaned against the balcony railing, taking a slow drag from his cigarette before exhaling into the Bangalore night. Namit sat beside him, arms crossed, staring at the city lights without really seeing anything.

'So,' Atul said, voice calm, knowing exactly where to begin, 'how's Mohabbat doing?'

That was Atul's way of addressing Smriti. Namit's *'Mohabbat'*.

Namit huffed out a laugh, shaking his head. *'Seriously?'*

Atul flicked the ash off his cigarette. *'Ok tell me, how's your heart?'*

Silence. Namit had always found it easy to talk to Atul, but this—this was different.

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'I feel like I should be happier.'

'But you're not.'

'I'm not unhappy either. Vidhi is... she's great. She's patient. She doesn't ask for much. And maybe that's the problem.'

Atul frowned. *'What do you mean?'*

'She gives me space. Too much, maybe. She doesn't ask why I don't call as much. Doesn't push when I sound distracted. It's like she already knows I'm struggling, but instead of questioning it, she's just... waiting.'

'And that scares you?'

'No.' Namit rubbed his face, feeling the hoarse stubble. *'It makes me feel worse.'*

Atul studied him for a moment before speaking. *'Don't confuse healing with guilt. Somewhere, you're punishing yourself—you're looking for love in a place where you don't even feel ready to give it.'*

Namit clenched his jaw. *'It's not like I don't want to give, Atul. It's just—'* He exhaled sharply. *'I don't know if I can.'*

Atul took another drag, thinking. *'Do you want freedom from your past love, or do you want to feel that intensity again—with someone new?'*

Namit blinked at him. *'What does that even mean?'*

'I mean, what do you really want, bro? Just to end the pain? Or to feel something just as deep again?'

The words settled heavily between them.

'I don't know,' Namit said, quieter this time. *'I don't know how to unlove someone, Atul.'*

Atul sighed, looking out at the traffic below. *'Love isn't something you let go of at will, bro. But if you really want to move forward, you either accept this feeling fully—or be honest that you're not ready yet.'*

Namit swallowed. *'And what if I never feel ready?'*

Atul gave him a knowing look. *'You will. The day someone gives you more peace than your past love ever did.'*

Namit stared at Atul, the word echoing in his mind.

Peace.

Not love. Not passion. Not intensity.

Peace.

'That's what you think I need?' Namit asked, his voice quieter now.

Atul met his gaze, steady and certain. *'Yes. You keep chasing the feeling you had with Smriti, but maybe that's not what you need anymore. Maybe it never was.'*

Namit registered everything thoughtfully.

Namit's phone buzzed against the balcony railing, the screen lighting up in the dim night.

Smriti.

Atul noticed the name before Namit could react. He raised an eyebrow but said nothing, taking another slow drag from his cigarette.

Namit exhaled sharply. He could ignore it. Let it ring out. It wasn't the first time she had called since his engagement or that night, but it was the first time he hesitated before answering.

He picked up.

'Hello?'

There was silence on the other end, just the faint sound of traffic in the background. Then, her voice—soft, uncertain.

'Namit... can we meet?'

His grip on the phone tightened. Smriti never hesitated when she spoke. Not with him.

'Why?'

Another pause. Then, *'Please.'*

Atul was watching him closely now, reading everything Namit wasn't saying. He sighed. *'Bro, don't be an idiot. If you're going to meet her, at least know why.'*

Namit didn't respond.

Smriti exhaled. *'I just... I need to see you. One last time.'*

One last time.

He felt a flicker—nostalgia, anger, curiosity, he couldn't tell.

'Where?'

'Indiranagar. That café we used to go to.'

Of course. The one with the old wooden tables, the terrible cappuccino, and the corner seat where they had once made plans that never came true.

Atul flicked his cigarette away, shaking his head. *'This is a bad idea.'*

Namit ignored him. *'Fine. Tomorrow. 7 PM.'*

A relieved breath on the other end. *'Thank you.'*

The call ended. The silence stretched.

Atul sighed. *'You really think this is going to give you closure?'*

Namit didn't know. But he had to find out.

Namit reached Indiranagar fifteen minutes early. He hadn't meant to. If anything, he had told himself he'd show up late, keep it casual, detached. But here he was, parked across the street, fingers drumming against the steering wheel, staring at the dimly lit café where memories of another life still lingered.

He wasn't sure why he was here. Maybe for answers. Maybe to prove to himself that Smriti no longer had a hold on him. Or maybe—just maybe—because a part of him desperately wanted to know *why* she had called.

At 7:05, she arrived.

The moment he saw her, he felt a knot tightened within him — old habits, old feelings, ghosts of a love he had tried to bury. Smriti looked almost the same. The same sharp eyes that once held all her mischief, the same restless energy in the way she tucked her hair behind her ear. And yet, something was different.

She looked tired.

She spotted him through the glass and hesitated for a fraction of a second before pushing the door open.

Namit exhaled and followed.

She was already seated at their old table by the time he walked in. He slid into the chair across, neither of them speaking.

Finally, Smriti broke the silence. *'You came.'*
'You called.'

A small smile. *'Still the same.'*

Namit didn't respond. He flagged down a waiter, ordered black coffee—no sugar. Smriti ordered tea, something she never used to drink. Another sign that things had changed.

She looked down at the table, tracing patterns on the wood. *'How have you been?'*

'Good,' he said automatically. *'You?'*

A humourless chuckle. *'I don't know.'*

He waited. If she had called him here, she would have had something to say. He wasn't going to make it easy for her.

She sighed. *'You already know Anurag and I broke up.'*

There it was. The confession, the explanation, the reason for this meeting.

Something in him should have stirred—satisfaction, vindication, maybe even pity. Instead, all he felt was... nothing.

'Hmm,' he said.

Smriti blinked. *'That's it?'*

‘What do you want me to say?’

She looked frustrated now. *‘I don’t know. Something.’*

Namit leaned back. *‘Why did you call me, Smriti?’*

She hesitated. *‘I guess... I wanted to talk to you. To explain.’*

‘Explain what?’

‘Everything. What happened... Why I—’ She stopped, exhaled.

‘Why I chose him over you.’

He let out a small laugh, shaking his head. *‘I think we both already know the answer to that.’*

She flinched. *‘It wasn’t that simple, Namit.’*

‘It was. You wanted something else. Someone else. And you got it.’

He paused. *‘So why are we here now?’*

She looked away. *‘Because I made a mistake.’*

Silence. The words hung between them like a repeated confession neither of them knew what to do with.

Finally, Namit spoke. *‘And what do you want me to do about that?’*

She looked up at him then, eyes searching his face. *‘I don’t know.’*

Namit let out a breath, staring at the coffee cup in front of him. There had been a time when this moment would have meant everything to him. When he would have given anything to hear these words.

But now... now, all he felt was tired.

He thought about Vidhi. About how she never pushed, never demanded. About Atul’s words—*‘The day someone gives you more peace than your past love ever did, you’ll know.’*

He knew now.

Namit pushed his chair back, standing up. Smriti’s eyes widened slightly. *‘You’re leaving?’*

‘Yeah,’ he said simply. *‘I don’t need this conversation, Smriti. Not anymore.’*

She swallowed. *‘But I—’*

‘You made a choice,’ he interrupted. *‘And so have I.’*

She looked away, nodding slightly, as if she had expected this. Maybe she had. Maybe she just needed to hear it out loud.

Namit took one last glance at the woman he had once loved, then turned and walked out of the door.

And for the first time in a long, long while—he felt free.

Meanwhile Smriti’s breath hitched. Her fingers clenched around the edge of the table as she tried to hold back, but the tears came anyway.

First silent. Then shaking. Then broken.

Namit stopped. His fingers curled into fists at his sides. He should leave. Walk away. This was exactly what he *shouldn’t* be doing—standing there, caught between the past and the present, between closure and old chaos.

But then she sobbed, harder this time, her face crumpling, and before he knew it, he turned and took a step forward, towards her.

She looked up at him, her eyes red, lost, and in that split second, something inside him shattered.

She leaned in.

And he didn’t move away.

Her forehead pressed below his ribs, her body shaking. His hands hovered in the air, torn between pushing her away and holding her close.

He should walk out. He *wanted* to walk out.

But he found himself lowering to his knees instead, bringing her head to rest on his shoulder.

Smriti clung to him now, her fingers twisting into his shirt, and he hated how familiar it felt—the scent of her hair, the warmth of her breath against his neck.

‘*Namit... I—*’ She choked on her words, pressing her face against his torso. ‘*I’m sorry...*’

His eyes shut tight. His mind screamed at him—*this is not your place anymore. This is not your pain to fix.*

But his arms wrapped around her anyway.

‘*I know,*’ he whispered.

And for a brief, fleeting moment, everything melted—the walls, the distance, the years of being apart.

The old spark flickered. The restlessness returned, clawing at his heart.

He wanted to break free.

Yet, there he was.

And for a brief, fleeting moment, everything melted—the walls, the distance, the years of being apart.

The old spark flickered. The restlessness returned, clawing at his heart.

He wanted to break free.

Yet, there he was.

On his knees, holding Smriti together when he had barely put himself back.

They stayed like that. Locked in a moment that shouldn't have existed.

Namit could feel her heartbeat throbbing, fast and uneven, matching his own. Smriti’s arms tightened around him like she was afraid he would disappear if she let go. Maybe he should. Maybe he *would*.

But he didn’t.

He stayed. Kneeling on the café floor, his arms around the woman who had once broken him, feeling the weight of something he couldn't name pressing against his ribs.

Her breath came hitched on his neck, her fingers gripping his back like she was trying to hold on to time itself.

Neither of them spoke.

There was nothing to say.

Seconds blurred into minutes. The world around them faded—the murmurs of café conversations, the clinking of spoons against ceramic cups, the quiet hum of the city outside. None of it mattered.

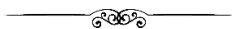
All that existed was this—her warmth, his hesitation, the quiet ache of something unfinished.

And still, he didn't pull away.

Maybe because a part of him had waited for this. Maybe because he wanted to see if the past could still hold him captive.

Or maybe—just maybe—because he still hadn't learned how to let go.

The Prerogative Paradox



6 June 2015

The day had finally arrived.

Namit stood before the mirror, adjusting the cuff of his sherwani, the faintest hint of a smile playing at his lips. For the first time in a long while, he felt light—no lingering doubts, no shadows of the past weighing him down. Things with Vidhi had fallen into place, the Netherlands trip had been better than he could have imagined, and now, he was ready.

Ready to tie the knot. Ready to start this new chapter.

Outside, the **baraat** was in full swing. Atul and Akash danced with unrestrained joy, pulling Namit's cousins into the madness. The dhol beats resonated in his pulse, matching the steady excitement coursing through him. He sat atop the white mare, but unlike the cliché of the reluctant groom, he felt... at peace.

Inside, Vidhi was getting ready, her hands steady as she adjusted her nath, looking at herself in the mirror. Today, she wasn't questioning. She wasn't overthinking. She knew. Knew that despite everything—the distance, the silence, the uncertainty—they had found their way back.

Her lehenga was a deep, regal maroon, the golden embroidery shimmering under the soft glow of the vanity lights. Her jewellery sat perfectly against her skin, but what stood out most was the way her eyes glowed—not with hesitation, but with quiet certainty.

The **varmala** ceremony felt like a dream. When Vidhi stepped onto the stage, Namit met her gaze, a small, knowing smile passing between them. This was real. This was happening.

She lifted the garland first, her fingers brushing against his. He leaned in slightly, letting her place it around his neck without

teasing her—Atul would be disappointed. Then he did the same, his hands staying around her neck just a second longer than needed.

The cheers erupted around them, but in that moment, it was just the two of them.

The wedding rituals began, each chant of the pandit echoing the promises they were making. As they walked around the sacred fire, Namit stole a glance at Vidhi. She was calm, her expressions unreadable yet familiar. When he tied the *mangalsutra* around her neck, his fingers briefly grazed her skin, and he felt her shiver ever so slightly.

And when he applied the *sindoor*, something settled in his chest and hers.

This was it.

As they looked at each other, the weight of everything—the past, the present, and the unknown future—came crashing in. But this time, there was no fear.

Only them.

Only this moment.

And for Namit, that was enough.

The wedding rituals were done. The guests had started to leave. But for Namit, peace was nowhere in sight—because his friends had other plans.

As soon as he stepped into the private lounge where they were gathered, a loud whistle cut through the air.

‘*Aur bhai, ab toh officially gaya tu!*’ Akash smirked, leaning back on the couch, legs crossed, looking every bit like he had planned this moment.

Luvkush grinned, rubbing his hands together. ‘*Tell me, how does it feel to finally belong to someone who isn’t a figment of your overthinking mind?*’

Namit rolled his eyes. ‘*I was never overthinking.*’

'Oh, really?' Nikhil raised a brow. *'So that whole 'Should I text her first or wait?' saga last year was a figment of our imagination?'* *'Exactly!'* Akash added, laughing. *'And those existential crises at midnight?'*

Out of the blue Atul asked and grinned *'Mohabbat kya hai'*. Everyone got the joke and burst into laughter.

Naina, who had just walked in with a glass of juice, shook her head dramatically. *'Poor Vidhi. She doesn't even know the number of times this man needed a full conference call to send a 'Good morning' text.'*

Atul placed a hand over his heart. *'I still remember the sleepless nights I spent counselling him.'*

'Sleepless nights, my foot,' Namit scoffed. *'You were the one who kept dozing off in the middle of our conversations!'*

'Arre that's called multi-tasking!'

Everyone erupted into laughter.

Sarika leaned forward, mischief in her eyes. *'But jokes apart, Namit, tell us... did your heart race when you saw Vidhi walk in for the varmala? Or was it a filmy slow-motion moment?'*

Namit smirked. *'I won't lie. She looked... beautiful.'*

'Ohooooo!' Naina whistled. *'And what about tonight, huh?'* She wiggled her eyebrows, making even Nikhil chuckle, when Luvkush suddenly erupted *'Saale you will sleep next to a girl today! Do check your weapon's functionality'*. There was a roar of laughter while poor Namit blushed.

Atul placed a hand on Namit's shoulder, his expression mock serious. *'Listen, my dear friend, aaj ki raat alag hai. Whatever happens, just remember—hydrate yourself, take deep breaths, and don't panic if—'*

'Oh, shut up, Atul!' Namit groaned as the entire room erupted into cheers and mirth again.

But beneath all the teasing, the banter, the endless jokes, Namit felt it again—that quiet warmth inside him.

This was home. His people. His life.

And as he glanced at the closed door leading to his bride, he realized something else—

His real journey was just about to begin.

The door clicked shut behind Namit. Vidhi sat on the edge of the decorated bed, her hands folded in her lap, fingers interlocked—tight, cold, almost clammy. The heavy silk of her red bridal lehenga pooled around her, its golden embroidery glinting under the dim, flickering candlelight. Somewhere outside, a distant murmur of laughter and voices signalled the last of the guests leaving. The weight of her jewellery, the tender scent of sandalwood and roses, the exhaustion from the rituals—it all sat on her like a second skin.

And then, there was Namit.

She heard him exhale, a quiet breath, like he was steadying himself before turning toward her.

‘Tired?’ His voice was gentle, low.

Vidhi lifted her gaze to him. He had changed out of his sherwani, now standing in a crisp white kurta-pyjama, the sleeves slightly folded. His hair was a little dishevelled, probably from all the ceremonies, but his face—there was something unreadable about it.

Was he nervous? Or just... neutral?

She gave a small nod. *‘A little.’*

‘Yeah... me too,’ he admitted, running a hand through his hair before looking around the room. *‘They really went all out with the decorations, huh?’*

Vidhi followed his gaze. The fairy lights, the flowers, the absurdly over-the-top heart-shaped arrangement on the bed that made her want to laugh and shrink into herself at the same time.

‘Yeah...’ she murmured, then added with a half-smile, ‘Your friends, I guess?’

Namit chuckled, rubbing his forehead. ‘Atul, for sure. He was smirking the whole time. Probably thought he was doing me a favour.’

A beat of silence.

Vidhi lowered her eyes to her lap, tracing the henna on her hands. The deep brown patterns curled over her fingers, winding around her wrists. Somewhere in that intricate web of designs was Namit’s name, hidden. He had yet to find it.

All couples need to do that for a happy marriage; find each other in their spouse, over course of time.

He sat down on the couch opposite her, stretching his legs out with a sigh. ‘Long day, huh?’

Vidhi nodded. ‘Feels like I lived a whole lifetime today.’

The weight of that statement settled between them. Because, in a way, it was true. This morning, she had woken up as Vidhi, Baba’s daughter, Ma’s little girl, the girl who had once laughed freely in the corridors of her Indore home. And now, she was Vidhatri Namit Shekhar, Namit’s wife. A new name. A new family. A new home.

A new man.

Her stomach twisted.

It wasn’t fear—not quite. Namit was a good man. She had seen enough to know that. Thoughtful and kind. It was her apprehension of the unknown.

He shifted in his seat, watching her with quiet consideration. ‘You okay?’

Vidhi hesitated, then nodded. ‘Just... a lot to take in.’

‘I know,’ he said, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. ‘Vidhi, I don’t want you to feel pressured tonight. I mean it. We

don't have to rush anything. We've barely had time to—' He exhaled, shaking his head. *'I just want you to be comfortable.'*

Something in her softened at that.

'Thank you,' she said, meaning it.

She wasn't sure what she had been expecting- awkwardness, maybe? Some kind of unspoken obligation? But Namit had always been like this. Steady. Considerate.

Her fingers curled around the edge of her dupatta, its sheer red fabric slipping between them.

'You should change,' Namit said, nodding toward her lehenga. *'It looks... beautiful. But also, it's really uncomfortable.'*

Vidhi let out a soft, breathy laugh. *'You have no idea.'*

He smiled, a small, knowing curve of his lips. *'I'll wait outside.'*

She watched as he stood, his movements easy, unhurried. Before stepping out, he turned back. *'Vidhi?'*

'Hmm?'

'You can take your time.'

The door closed behind him, and for the first time that day, she was alone.

Vidhi let out a shaky breath.

She changed into a simple red silk nightgown, one of the many things Ma had packed for her. It felt strange—lighter, freer, but also more vulnerable. She removed most of her jewellery, letting her bangles slide off her wrists, setting them on the dresser with a quiet clink. The Mangal sutra, though, remained. Its black and gold beads sat against her collarbone, unfamiliar yet permanent.

When she finally opened the door, Namit was leaning against the balcony railing, his back to her, staring at the night sky. He turned at the sound, eyes scanning her briefly before settling on her face.

'Better?' he asked.

Vidhi nodded.

He stepped inside, shutting the balcony door. The room felt smaller now, the air heavier.

He walked to the bed, sitting against the headboard, looking at her like he was waiting for her to make the first move.

Vidhi hesitated, then slowly sat beside him. A few inches apart. Not too close.

Minutes passed in silence. Neither of them spoke.

Then, quietly, he said, *'We're strangers, aren't we?'*

Vidhi turned to him. He wasn't looking at her; his gaze was fixed on the opposite wall, lost in thought.

'A little,' she admitted.

He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. *'Marriage is a strange thing.'*

She hummed in agreement.

Another pause.

'Vidhi?'

'Hmm?'

He turned to face her fully now, his expression serious. *'If I ever do something that hurts you... or if I ever fail you in any way... promise me you'll tell me.'*

The sincerity in his voice caught her off guard.

'I promise,' she said softly.

He studied her for a moment, then nodded. *'Good.'*

And then, slowly, hesitantly, he reached out.

His fingers brushed against her hand—not forceful, not demanding. Just a touch, light, asking.

Vidhi didn't pull away.

She looked down at their hands, the contrast of his larger, calloused fingers against her softer ones. His thumb moved, tracing a slow circle over her skin. It sent a quiet shiver up her arm.

Her breath caught.

She looked up at him. His gaze was different now—still patient, still careful, but laced with something deeper. A quiet want.

Vidhi swallowed.

This was it. The moment.

But—

She didn't know what she was waiting for.

Maybe a spark. A wave of overwhelming, undeniable desire. A rush of emotions that would make her forget every doubt, every hesitation.

But all she felt was warmth. A slow, spreading warmth.

Namit raised a hand, brushing a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. His fingers lingered against her jaw, tracing the curve of it. He leaned in, pausing just before his lips met her forehead.

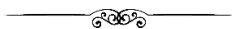
'We have time,' he murmured.

Vidhi closed her eyes.

Yes.

They had time.

Skin to Skin



It was their second night together, away from the crowd, with all rituals completed and most relatives having departed.

Namit stepped into his bedroom at around 11.45pm, after everyone had settled down.

His home in Dehradun stood tucked among quiet, tree-lined streets, its façade a blend of old-world charm and modern aesthetics. A two-story house with a sloping roof and a spacious verandah, it carried a welcoming warmth, the kind that spoke of years lived and memories made. Namit's room, located upstairs, mirrored his personality—simple yet purposeful. A queen-sized bed occupied one side, while a study table near the window held his laptop, a few scattered books, and notepads filled with hurried scribbles. The space had always been his—private, undisturbed. But now, with Vidhi here, something felt different—her presence weaving into the space, subtly transforming its essence.

The bedside lamp cast a dim, mellow light, draping the room in soft shadows.

Vidhi sat at the edge of the bed, her fingers nervously twisting in her lap.

'*You're not sleepy?*' Namit's voice was low, teasing, as he leaned against the headboard, watching Vidhi who sat at the edge of the bed, playing with the hem of her embroidered nightgown.

He walked towards the door and gently locked it, without any noise.

Her heart thudded as Namit stood before her, his gaze dark and intent. He slowly walked to her, his hand reached for her hand, his fingers warm as they laced with hers. Slowly, he pulled her up, closer, until their breaths mingled.

'Are you comfortable?' he asked as his other hand came to rest on her waist, sliding up over the silk of her nightwear, his touch both firm and reverent. She swallowed hard, unable to meet his gaze. But when his fingers brushed beneath the strap of her nightgown, a soft gasp escaped her.

'Vidhi...' His voice was husky, laced with something raw.

Vidhi's fingers stilled, her cheeks warming. She knew what he meant. The first night, they had slept side by side—close but untouched, still adjusting to the unfamiliarity of sharing a bed. But tonight... Tonight felt different.

She didn't stop him. She couldn't.

He didn't rush. Instead, he played with her fingers, tracing small circles over her palm, as if giving her time.

'You're beautiful, you know that?' His voice was huskier, his thumb grazing over her knuckles.

Vidhi's breath caught, and she glanced up at him, only to find his gaze already on her. There was something in his eyes—something warm, deep, and impossibly tender.

She looked away, but Namit didn't let her retreat. Gently, he cupped her face, tilting her chin up. *'You don't have to be shy with me. Not now!'*

Her pulse quickened when he leaned in, his lips brushing over her forehead, then her cheek. A shiver ran through her when his breath fanned against her skin.

'Namit...' she whispered, though she wasn't sure what she wanted to say.

'Hmm?' His lips hovered near the corner of her mouth, waiting. Silence.

His fingers trailed down, loosening the fabric, and the nightgown slipped off her shoulders in a whisper of silk. Vidhi sucked in a sharp breath as cool air kissed her bare breast. She crossed her arms instinctively, her body stiffening under his gaze.

'You are so beautiful Vidhi...' Namit exhaled; his voice uneven, reverent. His eyes traced the curves of her body—the soft swell of her breasts, the delicate dip of her waist, the fair expanse of skin that had never known a man's touch.

Vidhi felt her cheeks burn, her entire body thrumming with the fickle of his gaze. She wanted to hide, to shrink away from the intensity in his eyes. But then he cupped her face again, tilting it up until she had no choice but to meet his gaze.

The kiss was slow at first, deepening as his hands mapped her skin, his touch igniting something restless inside her. She trembled as his lips trailed down her throat, pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses down to her collarbone.

Her hands, hesitant at first, slid up over his neck, then below, feeling the heat of his bare skin. The hard planes of muscle beneath her fingers made something coil low in her belly. He groaned softly at her touch, his breath warm against her skin.

As her hands moved lower, her fingers accidentally brushed against the undeniable hardness of his desire. Namit let out a sharp moan, his body tensing.

'Ahh...Vidhi...' His voice broke, his hands pressing on her hips.

A shiver ran through her at the way he said her name—raw, aching.

Namit guided her back onto the bed, his body pressing against hers, and she gasped at the sensation of his heat against her cool skin. He kissed her again, deeper this time, his body settling between her thighs.

As he grinded against her, she gasped at the unfamiliar sensation, the stretch, the slow, deliberate way he moved.

'Tell me if it's too much, it might hurt slightly,' he whispered, his voice strained.

Vidhi gripped his shoulders, her breath shuddering. It hurt, a sharp sting making her fingers dig into his skin. Namit stilled

immediately, his lips still pressing against her forehead, her cheek, murmuring soft reassurances.

'Breathe, Vidhi,' he coaxed, his hands soothing over her sides.

She nodded, willing herself to relax. He moved again, slow, careful, watching her every reaction.

She took a shaky breath, nodding against his shoulder, allowing him to move again. The pain slowly dulled, replaced by something deeper, warmer. Namit groaned low in his throat, his hands gripping her waist as he moved inside her.

'Vidhi... oh God,' Namit moaned, his breath coming in harsh pants. He pressed his forehead to hers, his body trembling above her.

But then, as he pushed deeper, the pain built again, sharp and unbearable. She whimpered, pushing at his shoulder instinctively.

'Stop...' she whispered, her voice shaky.

Namit groaned, his body shuddering violently.

'Vidhi... I—I can't...' His voice broke on a rough moan, his body giving in as he buried himself to the hilt, his release ripping through him.

She felt the full weight of him collapse against her, his breath hot and erratic against her neck. His moans came in soft, helpless waves, his body trembling with the aftermath.

Minutes passed before he finally stirred, pressing a slow, lasting kiss on her shoulder. His arms squeezed around her, pulling her close.

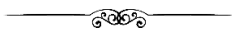
Vidhi lay there, her body still thrumming, her heart still racing. Namit's breath was warm against her skin, his hold possessive even in his exhaustion.

His dark eyes were heavy-lidded, spent, yet filled with something she couldn't quite name.

Without a word, he brushed his lips over her forehead, pulling her against his body.

And in the silence of the night, with his heartbeat against her ear, Vidhi let herself close her eyes.

Suffocating Silhouettes



August 2015 to July 2016

Both families had settled down after a week of post-wedding rituals. Time had flown by quickly, and now it was time for Namit to return to Bangalore and resume work.

The morning felt unusually quiet, except for the occasional rustle of bags and the zip of suitcases being fastened shut. Namit had been up early, freshened up, had breakfast, and now—just eight days after their wedding—he was ready to leave.

Vidhi, on the other hand, felt the heaviness in her head and heart. Two months in Dehradun—that was the plan. She was supposed to sort out her transfer or look for a new job. *'It'll be a good time to connect with family,'* Namit had suggested. But right now, standing by the door, watching him gather his things, she couldn't think of family or the time ahead.

She could only think of this moment.

Her heart pained at separation.

Her fingers curled around the fabric of her dupatta, her heart aching with a quiet desperation she couldn't put into words. She wanted something—something—before he left. A moment to hold on to. A pause to cling to. A sign that she wasn't just someone he had married, but someone who mattered to him.

She wanted a hug. Craved it, even.

But Namit didn't seem to think of it. His focus remained on his luggage, his journey ahead. He slung his bag over his shoulder and, with barely a glance, said, *'Ok, Bye.'*

Just that. A single, fleeting word.

Vidhi felt it like a slap on her cheeks. Her breath caught, but she swallowed back the lump rising in her throat and followed him downstairs. She watched as he touched his parents' feet, exchanged a few words with them, and then left—without looking back.

Her arms ached for touch, pained with the emptiness of what could have been. Her heart squeezed in silent protest. She gulped it all down to drown in the silence of night.

The moment the door shut behind her, the weight of separation collapsed. A tear slipped down her cheek, followed by another. She pressed a trembling hand over her lips, as if that could hold back everything breaking inside her.

She had held herself together while he was here. Now, she had the privacy to fall apart.

Vidhi stood still, her eyes fixed on the door he had just walked out of, reflecting in pangs of agony. How could he just leave?

Not a moment's hesitation. Not a glance back. Not even a lingering word she could hold on to for the two infinite months ahead.

Her heart ached with questions she dared not ask. Did he not feel it—the pang of separation? Did it not stir something in him, even a little? How could he just walk away as if this parting meant nothing?

Her fingers clutched deep the edge of her dupatta as a wave of emptiness crashed over her. Her lips trembled.

Perhaps this was just how he was—practical, unmoved by sentiments. And perhaps the best thing she could do was brush aside these thoughts, tuck them away somewhere deep, where they wouldn't disturb the picture of a happy married life she was supposed to build.

But could she?

Could this ache be ignored? Could feelings be silenced just because they were inconvenient?

She wasn't sure.

And as she stood there, alone, the silence of the house pressing in around her, she realized—this hurt was hers alone to bear.

Downstairs music was playing loud on the stereo ‘.....sab jhoote jhoote wade the unke, chal piche piche aaya tu jinke... wo piya aaye na...’

Every night, Namit called. Almost like clockwork.

Vidhi would answer, a quiet ache already settling in her core before the conversation even began. She talked of longing—the load of distance, the way days stretched endlessly without him, the ache of waiting.

He talked of sexual intimacy, mostly

She waited the whole day for a word or two from him. He waited for nights for emotional and physical release.

Two different people. Two different plains of thought.

‘How do you imagine our life?’ he asked one night, his voice light, almost playful.

Vidhi closed her eyes, letting herself picture it. ‘Holding your hand by the seaside, forty years from now... feeling pleased with where we’ve come.’

There was a pause. And then—he laughed. Laughed.

‘Arrey bhai, think of now! What are you talking about, forty years ahead?’

The ease in his voice, the way he dismissed it so effortlessly—it stung.

She quietened, swallowing the hurt, unwilling to let him know. If she showed too much, would he only laugh again?

So, she let the moment pass, let the conversation shift.

And finally, the time came for these late-night calls to end—for the waiting to be over. As she boarded the flight to Bangalore, her heart was a storm of emotions she couldn't quite name.

She was going to him. To their home.

And as the plane took off, she blinked back her tears, pretending they weren't there at all.

Vidhi sat by the window, the soft hum of the plane filling the silence between her thoughts. She wasn't traveling alone—Amma and Appa, Namit's parents were beside her, in the row ahead. Yet, despite their presence, an unsettling loneliness settled deep within her.

Namit hadn't called.

Not a single message. No *'Safe travels,'* no *'Let me know when you land.'* or *'I am eager to see you'* Nothing.

Her thoughts wrestled within her. Was she overthinking? Was this normal?

Namit was a good man. A gentleman. She had told herself that over and over again. But why, despite his kindness, did she feel so adrift? Why did she not feel desired, wanted—beyond their bedroom?

She turned her gaze to the window, blinking back the sting in her eyes.

She should be happy. She was going to Bangalore. To Namit. To their home.

But why did it feel like she was traveling toward more questions than answers?

As the plane descended into Kempe Gowda International Airport, Bengaluru, Vidhi's heart throbbed with elation. The pain and doubts that had consumed her hours ago seemed to vanish. She was here. She was finally going to meet him.

After collecting their luggage from Belt 4, she walked alongside Amma, Appa, her eyes scanning the waiting crowd. Her heart raced, expecting to see Namit standing there, waiting for her with a smile.

But he wasn't there.

Instead, Niyati and Mayank stood near the exit, waving at them.

Vidhi's steps faltered. Why weren't they seeing Namit first?

'*Ma! Papa!*' Niyati reached them first, enveloping her mother in a hug before greeting her father. '*Finally, you're here!*'

Niyati and Akash, Namit's younger sister and brother addressed Mr and Mrs. 'Purva' as Mummy, Papa, whereas Namit, raised and educated in Bangalore under cultural influence, had always addressed them as Amma, Appa. His friends called him half South Indian given his huge inclination and reverence for his associated cultural identity. And he identified himself more as a Kannadiga than a North Indian.

Mayank, Niyati's husband and Namit's brother-in-law stepped forward, folding his hands in respect. '*Namaste, Mummy, Namaste Papa.*'

Amma smiled, though her gaze flickered behind them, still searching. '*Namaste, beta.*' Then, after a pause, '*Namit nahi aaya?*'

Niyati hesitated for a fraction of a second before plastering on a smile. '*Bhaiya got caught up with some urgent work. He's trying to wrap it up but will take some time to reach.*'

Appa exhaled sharply. '*Work again?*'

The wait stretched to almost half an hour. Niyati and Mayank kept up the chit chats, but there was an underlying restlessness in the air surrounding Vidhi. She checked her phone, then the entrance, then her phone again.

And then, finally—Namit arrived.

Dressed in green t-shirt and blue jeans, laptop bag slung over his shoulder, he walked toward them with his usual composed stride. No rush, no urgency.

'*Sorry, got held up,*' he said, greeting his parents first. His tone was casual, as if arriving late to pick up his newlywed wife and family was just another usual occurrence.

Appa gave him a measured look but didn't say much. *'Hmm. Chalo, let's go.'*

Vidhi stood there, waiting for... she didn't even know what. A look, a smile, something to acknowledge that she had been waiting for him.

'Hi,' he said, finally glancing at her. A brief, polite smile.

She smiled back, heart sinking at how formal it all felt.

They headed toward the cars. There were two—one for Appa, Niyati, and Mayank, and the other for Namit, Amma, and Vidhi.

As they reached the car, Namit softly gestured for her to take the backseat.

Without a word, she slipped into her seat while Amma took the front beside Namit.

The car hummed to life, rolling onto the Bangalore roads, the evening air cool against the glass.

'How was the flight?' Namit asked, glancing at his mother.

'Good,' Amma replied. *'No issues. Vidhi managed everything well.'*

Vidhi smiled slightly. *'Amma and Appa were there, so it was easy.'*

Namit gave a small nod. *'That's good. You must be tired?'*

'Not too much,' she said lightly. *'It was a short flight.'*

The conversation drifted between Amma and Namit—home, work, the things that needed to be arranged to settle them down etc.

Vidhi leaned back against the seat, her gaze naturally falling to the rearview mirror from where she could catch glimpses of Namit—his sharp profile, the way his fingers tapped the steering lightly, his occasional glances at his phone when it buzzed.

She waited, unconsciously, for his eyes to meet hers in the mirror. Just a fleeting glance.

But that moment never came.

Not when they stopped at a signal. Not even when the car halted briefly for a call.

Once or twice, he chuckled at something Amma said. She didn't know what. She wasn't listening anymore.

She looked away from the mirror, out at the passing streets.

It wasn't hurt exactly—just a quiet, lingering thought in the back of her mind.

That she was here.

And he was here too.

But somehow, they weren't here together.

As they pulled into the driveway, the evening sun cast long shadows on the pavement. The house looked neat, just as expected. Namit was always organized. Even though he had been busy, everything seemed in place.

Niyati stretched as she got out of the car. *'Ahh, finally! It felt like a long journey.'*

Amma looked around approvingly. *'Ghar achha lag raha hai. Clean bhi hai.'*

'Of course,' Namit said, locking the car. *'I kept everything managed.'*

'Yeah, yeah,' Niyati smirked. *'Managed, because bhai follows a system. But tell me, what's the food situation? The cook didn't come today, right?'*

'Nope,' Namit said, checking his watch. *'Saturday. He takes off mostly. I didn't bother because I thought we'd figure something out after you all arrived.'*

Amma shook her head.

'It's fine, Amma,' Niyati assured her. *'We'll order something.'*

Vidhi listened, adjusting her dupatta. The house was her new home now, but at this moment, she felt more like a guest—a welcome one, but a guest, nonetheless.

Inside, Namit placed his keys on the console, his movements as precise as ever. Appa settled into the couch, stretching his legs. *'Kuch chai-waai milegi?'*

'I'll make it,' Vidhi offered.

'Main bhi help kar dungii,' Niyati added, walking toward the kitchen with her.

Vidhi entered the spotless kitchen, taking a moment to absorb the space that would soon become hers. Everything was arranged neatly—no clutter, no mess.

'Good luck adjusting to bhai's super-structured way of living,' Niyati teased, pulling out the tea leaves.

Vidhi smiled. *'It's nice, actually. Organized.'*

Niyati laughed. *'Yeah but wait till you realize how particular he is about everything—folding clothes, setting the table, even the way shoes are kept by the door.'*

Vidhi chuckled. *'I'll manage... I ought to!'*

By the time they brought out the tea, Appa was watching the news, Mayank was scrolling through his phone, and Namit was leaning back against the armrest, casually checking messages.

'The tea is really nice,' Amma said, taking a sip. *'Vidhi, you make it just right.'*

Vidhi smiled. *'I'm glad you like it.'*

'So, what's the plan for dinner?' Niyati asked.

'Let's order something,' Namit said, setting his phone aside. *'Does anyone have any preferences?'*

Amma thought for a moment. *'Something simple and homemade would be nice.'*

Vidhi hesitated before saying, *'I can cook if that's okay?'*

Amma's face lit up. *'Are you sure, beta? You must be tired from the journey.'*

'It's alright, Amma. Something simple— dal, sabzi, roti. It won't take long.'

Namit didn't object, just gave a small nod, as if leaving the decision to her.

Vidhi headed back to the kitchen, this time feeling a little more at home.

And all this while, Namit never stole a glance at Vidhi.

She did—every bit.

When he stretched, when he scrolled his phone, when he spoke, when he didn't.

Not once did he look back. Not even unknowingly.

Vidhi noticed. Everything.

When night came and the house fell silent, Namit reached for Vidhi.

She lay beside him, distant, her mind elsewhere. All this while, she had longed for a connection—a sign that he had missed her, waited for her. But there had been none.

Not at the airport. Not in the car. Not even when they were finally home.

And now, suddenly, he craved her.

Vidhi hesitated, the weight of the day pressing on her. But Namit, ever patient, ever knowing, worked his charm—his touch gentle, his voice soft. He drew her close, made her forget, melted away her resistance.

And despite everything, she gave in. Because she wanted to be wanted.

The week flew by in a blur of laughter, chatter, and the comforting hum of family life. Amma and Appa had settled in like they belonged there, filling every corner of the house with their presence. Every evening, Niyati and Mayank would come straight from work, their arrival adding to the lively energy of the home.

Dinner was always a joint effort—Amma and Vidhi in the kitchen, stirring, chopping, tasting, while the others gathered around, offering unsolicited advice or simply stealing bites before the food was served. Conversations flowed as effortlessly as the aroma of home-cooked meals. They went shopping on weekends, exploring Bangalore’s bustling markets, picking out things they didn’t really need but loved anyway. One night, they dimmed the lights, curled up with bowls of popcorn, and watched a movie—laughing, teasing, creating yet another memory to hold on to.

And then, just as suddenly as they had arrived, it was time for them to leave. The house that had been brimming with warmth and voices now seemed to exhale into silence. As Vidhi and Namit stood at the door, watching the taillights of the cab disappear, a quiet emptiness crept in.

It was just the two of them now.

No buffer of family, no distractions. Just Vidhi and Namit—left to navigate their life together, one day at a time.

The next morning was eerily silent.

Vidhi woke up before Namit, slipping out of bed carefully so as not to wake him. The apartment was still dark, the city outside barely stirring. She tiptoed to the kitchen, switching on the light with a soft click.

The cook wasn’t coming today—she had already gotten used to his unpredictable leaves—so Vidhi took it upon herself to make breakfast. She heated milk for Namit’s coffee, toasted bread, and made a quick omelette just the way she thought he liked. By the time she finished, the aroma of food filled the house, bringing a sense of warmth to the otherwise unfamiliar space.

She rolled out soft aloo parathas, whisked curd to a smooth consistency, and packed it neatly with some salad and a few other things. She wanted him to have a proper homemade meal, even if he didn’t say it aloud.

By the time she was done, it was 8 AM. She placed Namit's office clothes on the bed, neatly ironed, and walked over to wake him up.

'Namit,' she said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He groaned, shifting slightly. '*Hmm?*'

'*It's 8:15. You'll be late.*'

He ran a hand through his hair, still half-asleep. '*Mmm... coffee?*'

Vidhi smiled. '*Already on the table.*'

That got him moving. He stretched lazily before heading to freshen up. Meanwhile, Vidhi set his breakfast—toast, an omelette, and hot coffee. When he walked out, dressed and ready, he looked at the neatly packed lunchbox on the counter.

'*You packed lunch for me?*'

She nodded. '*Aloo paratha, curd, salad... thought you'd like it.*'

For a brief second, something flickered in Namit's eyes—a warmth, an unspoken appreciation. He felt happy, the way she cared for him. It was new, unfamiliar, but comforting in its own way. But he expressed nothing. He just smiled within himself, picked up his bag, and said, '*See you in the evening.*'

Vidhi never got to know how he felt.

'*Bye,*' he said, grabbing his laptop bag.

She nodded. '*Have a good day.*'

He gave a small smile and left.

And just like that, the house was empty.

The walls stood still, the furniture was quiet, and even the ticking of the clock felt louder than usual. Vidhi had never been alone in her life. There was always someone—Ma, Baba, or even Lata Didi, the permanent house help moving about. But here, in this unfamiliar apartment, she had no one.

She busied herself, cleaning up, arranging things in the kitchen, and scrolling mindlessly through her phone. But there was no

message from Namit. No call. Not even a casual *'How are you doing?'* She waited, checking her phone every few hours, hoping for something.

Nothing.

Evening arrived, and she took extra care in getting ready. She wore a nice outfit, brushed her hair well, and applied a hint of perfume. She wanted to look good when he returned. She wanted him to notice.

At 7:30, earlier than usual, the key turned in the lock.

She smiled. *'You're home early today.'*

'Hmm,' he murmured, stepping in. He loosened his tie and glanced at her. *'You look nice.'*

Vidhi's heart lifted. *'Thanks. You should freshen up first. I'll get dinner ready.'*

He wasn't in the mood to listen.

His gaze darkened as it fell on her. He stepped closer, his hands instinctively reaching for her waist.

'You actually smell so good,' he murmured, his breath warm against her skin.

Vidhi stiffened slightly *'Namit... I was waiting for you all day. You didn't even.....'*

But he wasn't listening.

His grip tightened as he pulled her closer, his lips trailing along her jaw. *'I missed you,'* he whispered, his voice rough with need.

She wanted to resist—to tell him how pained she was that he hadn't bothered to check on her even once the whole day. But her words dissolved against his lips as he kissed her.

His manly desires overpowered his senses. He didn't stop to ask if she wanted this, didn't bother noticing her hesitation. His hands explored her body, urgent and demanding.

'*Namit... please,*' she whispered, her hands pressing against him, trying to slow him down.

But he was lost in his own world, in the hunger that had consumed him all day.

He led her to the bed, his breath ragged, his fingers working their way through the fabric of her clothes. Despite her resistance, despite her soft protests, he wouldn't stop. His body demanded release, and he took what he wanted.

Vidhi lay still beneath him, eyes staring at the ceiling as he worked his way to pleasure—until finally, he found his release, his body shuddering in satisfaction letting out a soft moan.

As Namit lay beside her, breath still heavy, he chuckled, running a hand through his hair.

'*Had I known this is the treat you get after marriage, I would've married earlier,*' he murmured, his voice laced with satisfaction.

Vidhi just smiled.

It would have been more pleasurable had she been missed during the day as well—not just at night to satiate his sexual hunger. But she said nothing.

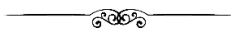
Instead, she slipped out of bed, straightened her clothes, and walked toward the kitchen to lay dinner.

Behind her, Namit stretched lazily, still lost in the haze of his own pleasure, unaware of what was festering within her—slowly, gradually, burning her day by day, piece by piece.

He had no idea what was coming for him.

Neither did Vidhi realize that the unrest she was nurturing would soon consume everything in its wake, like Midas' curse.

Of Mails and Messages



July 2016

Namit had never been the kind of man who expressed too much. It wasn't that he didn't feel—of course, he did. He just didn't see the need to put everything into words. He believed love was in the little things, in unspoken gestures. A home that ran smoothly, a partner who was dependable, a life without unnecessary drama—wasn't that what truly mattered?

He cared for Vidhi. He really did. He valued her presence, the way she took care of things without needing to be asked. He noticed the effort she put into their home, the way she dressed up in the evenings, the way she packed his lunch with little details—sometimes cutting mangoes the way he liked or adding an extra piece of sweet because she knew he enjoyed it. He noticed all of it. *He just didn't say it out loud. He thought she understood.*

But Vidhi? Vidhi *felt* things deeply, differently. She needed words, emotions, acknowledgment—something Namit struggled with. She had a way of looking at love that was different from his. For her, it wasn't just about the things one did but also about how one *expressed* them. She wanted to hear affection, feel warmth in words, experience love in glances and touches that weren't just need-driven but tender, drifting.

That was where they contrasted. Their differences lay in the way men and women are emotionally and intellectually wired to express affection. Neither of them realised that these unbridged differences had led many marriages to die a silent death — because relationships need communication not just in words, but in gestures, soft touches, and stolen glances.

She longed for something Namit didn't know how to give. And he never even realized it was missing.

To him, marriage was about stability. He had done everything right— married at the right time, chosen a good life partner, provided her with a home. He didn't understand why there was still a void, why she sometimes seemed distant despite being right next to him. Why she sometimes smiled in a way that felt incomplete, as if she was holding back something.

He didn't know that when he came home at night, tired but content in the knowledge that she was there, she had spent the entire day waiting for a call that never came.

He didn't know that when she laid dinner for him in silence, she had been hoping for a simple *'Did you miss me?'* or *'that looks nice'* or even a look that suggested things mattered, she mattered beyond chores.

For Namit, intimacy was proof of love. If he desired her, if he reached out for her at night, didn't that mean she was wanted? He never noticed how she sometimes lay beside him, staring at the ceiling long after he had turned away, feeling something slip away inside her.

Vidhi, on the other hand, needed something deeper—something beyond the physical. She needed to feel missed, to belong, to feel cherished. And Namit? He didn't understand what was missing.

Neither of them was wrong. They just loved differently.

And yet, that difference was slowly becoming a gap too wide to ignore. She did bring it up occasionally, but, with certain people, the question is never the real problem, and the answer is never the real solution — and the most painful part is, they know it all too well. Who would make him understand that sustaining relationship is not about finding the right person but learning to love the person one finds. Love could be a feeling but 'to love' is a decision.

Vidhi had imagined a different kind of life when she married Namit. She had known he wasn't the most expressive person, but she had thought love would seep into their marriage in its own quiet way. That over time, she would see the warmth in his eyes, feel the care in his words, hear the tenderness in his voice.

But love never came—not in the way she understood it.

She took out her personal diary and scribbled something as few drops fell from her eyes.

Dekha hai, kaise patjhad mein sookh jaati hain shaakhen

Aur toot jaati hain pattiyan.

Mausam ka patjhad dikh jaata hai pedon par,

Par man ka sookha kaun samjhaaye?

Man ka patjhad kaise dikhlaye?

Kahaan se laayein ummeed,

Registaan ka phool.

At first, she told herself it was just an adjustment phase. Every marriage took time. She put in effort—small, thoughtful things. She cleaned the kitchen meticulously, wiping down the countertops and organizing the cabinets. She tidied up the living room, arranging the cushions and dusting the shelves, making sure everything was in place. The clothes in the wardrobe were folded and organized, and the floor was swept clean. As she worked, she paid attention to the smallest details, wanting everything to be perfect for when he returned. She tried to create moments—simple ones, where they could just sit together and talk.

But Namit never seemed to notice.

Mornings were a routine. She woke up first, made tea, and packed his lunch. He woke up at 8:30, scrolled through his phone while having breakfast, and left by 9:30. Not once did he ask how she slept or if she had been up early. Even on the rare days she was unwell, he simply assumed she would manage.

At night, he came home, ate dinner, and slept. Some nights, he reached for her, needing her body, and she gave in, hoping to feel something—some emotion, some connection. But even that left her feeling emptier than before.

She longed for something deeper. Not grand gestures, not expensive gifts—just *presence*. Just a moment where he looked at her, really looked, and made her feel like she mattered beyond the meals she cooked, beyond the bed they shared, beyond the quiet efficiency with which she ran the house.

But Namit had never been the kind of man who thought about these things.

He wasn't unkind. He wasn't disrespectful. He was simply... absent in all the ways that mattered to her.

Special days were never special.

Their first Diwali, she had worn a new saree, lit diyas all around the house, and waited for Namit to notice. He had come home late, had some personal work, nodded in approval, and said, '*Looks nice,*' before moving on to his laptop.

Their first anniversary, she had planned a dinner at a restaurant she had been excited about. He had forgotten. By the time he came home, tired and unaware, the evening had already lost its meaning. She didn't remind him. Instead, she quietly changed out of her dress and made dinner like it was any other day.

There were no pictures of them together.

It wasn't as if Namit didn't like photography—he was an enthusiast, owned a Nikon, had spent hours, before their marriage, clicking landscapes, street shots, portraits of strangers. But he had never once thought of clicking a picture of them.

On trips, when she asked for a photo, he would take one of her and hand back the camera. '*Want me to click another?*' he would ask. But never once did he pull her close, set up a frame, and capture *them*.

Sometimes, Vidhi wondered if they had ever really existed as a couple—if anyone looked at them and saw love.

She stopped trying after a while.

She no longer dressed up in the evenings. She stopped waiting for him at dinner. She stopped looking at her phone during the day, hoping for a message that never came.

The first time she saw a couple at a café—laughing, leaning into each other, holding hands across the table—she felt something ache deep inside her. Not jealousy, not even sadness. Just a quiet, painful recognition of something she would never have.

Namit never understood.

He didn't even bother to call her name out, if she wasn't around. They existed as roommates, sharing bed and home, existing in two different corners of the house, unaware of the other, beyond needs.

She wished she could make him see her, but how does one explain the pain of being unseen? Of being in a marriage where silence filled the spaces where love should have been?

He didn't know why she had stopped smiling the way she used to. He didn't know why she no longer talked about little things. He didn't know why, sometimes, at night, she lay awake beside him, staring at the ceiling, feeling lonelier than she ever had in her life.

And the worst part?

She wasn't even sure if he would care if he did know.

Not because he was cruel. Not because he was selfish.

But because he simply wouldn't understand.

Namit had never been a man of grand emotions. Not the kind to be swept away by love, or to sit with his feelings long enough to name them. He lived life the way one folded clothes—neatly, methodically, without letting anything spill over the edges. There had been moments, once, when his heart had thudded a little louder, when his hands had twitched to hold on to something before it slipped away. But he had taught himself that such things

were distractions. That life was about moving forward, keeping things under control. And he had done just that as he moved on with Smriti.

Then, he got married.

Vidhi entered his life with soft footsteps, the rustle of freshly ironed sarees, the faint scent of mogra in her hair. She wasn't loud in her presence, but she was there, filling the silences he hadn't even known existed. She spoke in ways that lingered. With questions that asked for more than one-word answers. With eyes that searched his face, waiting, always waiting, for something he never quite knew how to give. She made space for him, in a way that felt both welcoming and overwhelming. And Namit... Namit didn't know what to do with that space.

Somewhere, Namit knew he was torn between planes. The past had a way of throwing deafening echoes, curling around his present like an old habit he couldn't shake off. Feelings took time to settle, emotions took years to fade, and Smriti—Smriti had been a part of that blur. A presence too familiar, too deeply ingrained in the years that had built him. He had spent countless moments—formative, defining moments—believing that she was it, the person he would eventually end up with. Best friends who had once imagined a future together, walked the fine line between love and companionship until the line blurred altogether.

But walking away was his decision. Despite Smriti's pleadings, despite the way she had looked at him that last time, asking him to stay, to reconsider, he hadn't. He was then about to get engaged to Vidhi and Vidhi was by all means a very good girl. He couldn't. And yet somewhere things held him back. It hit him at random moments. He was helpless.

Vidhi was his quiet place, the safe harbour where he could battle the dimensions of his life without the fear of being watched too closely. She was steady, constant—never demanding, never forcing him to be more than he was ready to be. And maybe that was why he had let himself believe that time would fix everything

without him making any effort. That one day, the weight in his mind would ease, the haze would clear, and he would wake up feeling something more than obligation towards Vidhi.

All he needed was time.

But Vidhi was restless. Time was slipping from her hand. It was tiring her mind, draining it immensely. When she found herself utterly lost in the dark alleys of conflicting thoughts she reconsidered communication. Communication, she believed, could solve problems, always.

That weekend when she decided to stay over with her college friend at her apartment, she opened her laptop to write a mail to Namit, for him to read, re-read and understand, for it was a matter of both their lives.

Dear Namit,

I write this not as your wife, but just as Vidhi.

It's been over a year since we began, and while you stayed where you were, I kept moving—shaping my path toward you. I chose love, not just in words, but in the quiet ways it shows itself—in actions, in how your name gives meaning to my thoughts.

I love you when I embrace my new identity as Vidhi Samarth Shekhar, searching for a sense of belonging in its unfamiliar contours.

I love you when I stay up late watching daily soaps with Amma, despite knowing nothing about their characters.

I love you when I sit with Appa, listening for hours, trying to memorize every thread of your family's tapestry—from your Buaji to his Bauji—so I could stitch myself into its fabric.

I love you when I address your younger sister Niyati as Didi, offering her the reverence I hold for my own elder sister Kritika.

I love you when I bicker with Aakash over his meals, discuss his friends, or slip him money for a New Year's drink that Amma would never allow without a scolding.

I love you when I choose to eat Kadhi Chawal which I never like, just because you love it! Or when I contemplate giving up non-vegetarian food altogether.

I loved you when I chose to stay in Dehradun immediately after our marriage, even when Appa wanted to send me to you.

Even during the initial stage of our relationship, pre and post engagement, when you were distant—when your words cut deep, your indifference stung—I didn't fight back, didn't demand explanations. I didn't question your silence; I only tried to understand it, to adjust to it, to help you through it. Because I loved you. Your feelings, your emotions, your perspective—they mattered to me.

Through all those endless days when our only exchange was a perfunctory 'good morning' and 'good night'—when I wept into my pillow through sleepless nights, waiting desperately for a word, a sign, a moment where you'd acknowledge me—I never complained to the Almighty about the ache of being unseen, unheard, untouched. Instead, I prayed for strength. Strength to endure. Strength to understand. Strength to love you beyond duty, beyond expectation... because you mattered more than my pain.

Like anyone, I too longed to matter—to be seen, cherished, missed. Not just as a wife, but as a person. To feel emotionally safe, to belong. It was a simple wish—one anyone could fulfil, each in their own way. But you were different. And I adjusted myself to that difference, because my commitment to you goes beyond duty.

I may not be the woman you had envisioned for yourself, I can't be Smriti, but I have tried, with all my heart, to become the partner you would want and need. Love isn't just meeting halfway; it's walking in step, with understanding. That's what I meant every time I said, I love you.

It isn't a grand sacrifice to wait until you've eaten before I take my first bite. It isn't a burden to sit up till midnight just to greet you with a whisper of good night after a long day. Maybe these gestures don't mean anything to you, but they mean everything to me—because

to me, this is the language of love. This is companionship. This is togetherness.

You give reasons, you give logic, you rationalize emotions. You are genuine. You are a gem.

And yet... I feel empty!

Why Namit?

Maybe you know, but you choose not to understand. But I am dying inside Namit. Please help me!! Please save our marriage before it's too late!

– Vidhi

That mail was never responded to, as if it never existed.

December 2016

The morning light seeped through the curtains, stinging her tired eyes. Vidhi blinked, her head heavy. She had barely slept—thoughts of the past had kept her awake, circling endlessly in her mind.

Dragging herself out of bed, she felt anything but rested. Her head throbbed; her limbs heavy with exhaustion. She had to push through—the day wouldn't wait for her to feel better. The same daily chores awaited: making the bed, tidying up, stepping into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. The clang of utensils felt sharper today, grating against her already frayed nerves. She moved through the motions, her hands working mechanically while her thoughts drifted elsewhere.

She barely noticed when the tea boiled over, snapping back only when the hissing sound filled the silence. With a sigh, she turned off the stove, rubbing her temples. She longed for a moment of peace, but peace had become a stranger.

And days passed.

And months passed.

And years passed.

March 2018

Namit's life had settled into a predictable rhythm. He woke up early, went to the office by 9:30 AM, and returned home by 8:30 PM, his days consumed by work. On weekends, he kept to himself, unwinding after the week's grind. Vidhi, on the other hand, was drifting. After finishing her MBA and working at Cognizant, she had grown bored with the corporate life and decided to pursue certain research work in Marketing and Finance. It wasn't that she didn't love her research, but the disconnect between her and Namit had started to take its toll. They hadn't gone out together in months—not even for dinner.

One evening, as Vidhi sat beside Namit on the couch, her thoughts weighed heavily on her. She couldn't keep pretending everything was fine.

'Namit,' she said, breaking the silence.

He looked up briefly, distracted by the phone in his hand. 'Hmm?'
'Can we talk?'

He glanced at her, frowning slightly but not putting his phone down. 'About what?'

'I've been thinking,' Vidhi said slowly. 'We don't go out anywhere. Not even dinner. Can we change that? Maybe take a weekend trip, go somewhere?'

Namit didn't immediately respond. He shifted his focus back to his phone, typing a quick message. When he finally spoke, his tone was casual, almost dismissive. 'I get it, but weekends are for me to recharge, Vidhi. You know that. Work's exhausting. I need to relax, not go running around. I don't really see the point of going out anywhere. I am more of a home person Vidhi.'

A wave of disappointment washed over Vidhi. She had expected this response, but hearing it still stung. 'But it doesn't have to be complicated,' she pressed, trying to sound light. 'Just something simple. We could go to Nandi Hill. I've seen so many beautiful

pictures of it. People say the view is amazing. It could be nice, don't you think? '.....I haven't been anywhere in Bangalore ever since I came here three years ago..... and mostly I work from home, it would give me a change you know..'

Namit didn't look up. His eyes stayed fixed on his phone as he replied, *'Nandi Hill? It's just another place. It's not worth the hype. It's too ordinary. Trust me, you're not missing out.'*

Vidhi heard him. She tried not to show her agitated disappointment, but it was hard. Namit hadn't even considered her feelings or how much she longed to share these moments with him. She nodded quietly, hiding her frustration.

The following weekend, when Mayank suggested the same trip, Namit replied without a pause— *'Sure, sounds good'*—his tone light, almost too eager, as if it had never been dismissed before.

Vidhi's surprise showed. *'You're okay with going now?'*

Namit looked at her briefly and then shrugged. *'Arrey you only wanted to go no. I did it for you.'*

The gaslighting was more than evident to her.

Namit's response was always like this *'I do it for you'* kind. It often sent a surge of resentment in Vidhi. The other day when she was newly married, and was staying with ma, Baba for a few days during the first month of their marriage, she couldn't hold her excitement to call Namit over the weekend. Weekdays they could hardly speak in the morning.

At 10 AM, she had dialled his number, smiling to herself.

The call had connected.

'Hello?' Namit's voice sounded groggy, irritated.

'Hey... did I wake you up?' she smiled, teasingly.

There was a pause, then an exasperated sigh. *'Itni subah koi call karta hai?'* he had muttered. *'Why are you calling now? I will talk to you at night.'*

Vidhi blinked, taken aback. *'I just... wanted to check if you had breakfast.'* She had softened her tone, hoping to ease his irritation. *'Vidhi, I'm busy.'* His words had come clipped, impatient. *'Don't call me for such things. I will eat when I feel hungry.'*

The line had gone dead before she could have said another word.

That night, when she had confronted him, he had simply shrugged. *'Arrey, I had been fixing the bed lamp for you. Doing something for you, and you are complaining instead of appreciating it?'*

And such gaslighting had continued.

But right now, she didn't want to spoil the plan by arguing. Hence chose to keep quiet.

The next morning, Vidhi, Namit, Niyati, Mayank, Tushar and Vidisha set off for Nandi Hill. As they rode along the scenic roads, Vidhi could hardly contain her excitement. The landscape was stunning—lush greenery, winding roads, and the cool breeze. She had never seen anything like this. By the time they reached the top, she was lost in the view.

She stood there for a long time, soaking in the beauty, but something tugged at her heart. She wished Namit were beside her, sharing the moment. But he was busy, talking to Mayank and Niyati. Vidhi felt her longing grow.

In that moment, her mind swirled with questions. Why had Namit called this place *'too ordinary'* when she found it breathtaking? Why had he refused to go with her? Vidhi didn't want to admit it, but she felt a deep emptiness inside. It wasn't just about the trip—it was about their entire relationship. Did Namit see her the way she saw him? Was this all just a routine to him?

She turned to him, hoping for a sign that he felt a connection with her. But Namit was engrossed in a conversation. She stood silently, watching the sunrise, her heart heavy with doubt.

Namit had been here with Smriti and the others countless times, making memories that Vidhi could only imagine. Standing at the

edge, she felt a sharp ache in her bosom, a longing that seemed to echo against the hillock in the quiet of the morning.

She glanced at Namit, laughing with Mayank, Niyati, Tushar and Vidisha, their bond effortless. For a moment, his eyes met hers, but there was no warmth—just a casual glance. Her heart sank, and without a word, she turned back to the view, the beauty of the moment overshadowed by the emptiness inside her. Soon the group dispersed. Niyati and Mayank laughing in the corner holding hands, Tushar and Vidisha soaking in the serene view, Tushar's arms gently wrapped around Vidisha's. While Namit chose a rock to be seated as Vidhi walked about alone to explore the place.

And when they were back by mid-morning, she thought she couldn't continue like this. These invisible issues, the invisible pains were eating her up. She thought to confront Namit, again, more logically, to address the issue together. She took out her laptop to type a mail. Instead, her pain dribbled in ink.

Dear Namit,

I'm at a point where I have nothing left to lose, so I'll say this before it breaks me further.

Both of us cherish physical intimacy as an expression of love. But without emotional closeness, it feels empty—like holding a beautiful shell with nothing inside. I have been waiting, hoping, aching for that connection with you. And until I feel it, I beg you to forgive me for my inability to give myself to you in a way that feels untrue to my heart.

Perhaps after reading this, you won't want to speak to me. I understand. I respect you enough to accept that as a consequence. But isn't it strange? We are each other's priority, the ones who should understand, comfort, and complete each other. Then why does it feel like we are worlds apart, despite sharing the same bed, the same home?

Namit, this silence, this emptiness—it is poisoning me. Slowly. And one day, it will consume me entirely.

So, I beg of you—for my own sake—if you need time, take it. Take as long as you want. But when you are truly ready to embrace the role of a husband, do so completely, without hesitation. Be mine—not just in name or duty, but in spirit, in feeling. Let this bond be more than an obligation. Let it be something you cherish.

I don't need assurances. I will manage, as I always have. But know this—I don't just want to share a life with you. I want to live it with you. From the most nonsensical, fleeting moments to the ones that define us. I long to be a part of you, to have you let me in—not just into your arms, but into your heart.

And so, I will wait.

I have loved you, Namit, and I always will. Just try—try to accept me as your wife. Please.

Still yours,

Still waiting,

Vidhatri.

No reply.

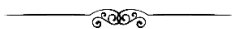
And years passed.

Four years precisely.

Namit was still the same.

Vidhi was still the same.

Stills and Sobs



September 2017

It was best to give their marriage time to pick its own momentum, Vidhi thought as she sat back with her laptop to search for a job that required mandatory physical presence. It had already been more than a year with the new startup that allowed her to work from home at her own pace. They needed to start a family, hence she opted for the work from home option. But with prevailing circumstances, the one that had led her to develop acute anxiety, stress and depression, things seemed difficult. She was already on medication for depression and was gradually developing underlying signs of auto immune conditions. Namit was unaware of all these except the constant mention of muscle pain, rashes and frequent visits to doctors.

But given the situation at home—her constant combat between mind and heart, her longing for Namit—she decided to keep herself extra busy, to not even think about him and carry out the act mechanically.

That day her Google Drive was 80 percent full. She thought of transferring her old pictures into the hard disk.

She had seen one in Namit's neatly stacked drawer. She hardly touched his things. They were always clean, arranged with such precision that she hesitated to disturb them. Namit was particular about his stuff, and she preferred to avoid meddling. But now she needed the hard disk.

She connected it to the laptop, and as the folders loaded, a soft smile touched her lips. It was a collection of his pictures, right from his college days.

Ah, *Mr. Photographer*, she thought, clicking through them.

Namit looked young and carefree, his face still carrying the innocence of his early twenties. A burst of nostalgia ran through her as she saw him posing with his gang of friends, frozen in time, laughing, teasing, living.

She once again fell head over heels for her not so dark, tall, handsome husband. A smile hugged her lips.

And then a thought dawned upon her.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she clicked through the images, her heart sinking deeper with each one. Namit looked effortlessly happy in those moments—unfiltered, unguarded, *alive*. His eyes held a warmth she had never seen directed at her.

Vidhi scrolled through the pictures, her heart hammering in her ribs, her fingers hesitant yet unwilling to stop. The hard disk had unfolded an entire chapter of Namit's life before her—a chapter she had never been a part of.

The first set of pictures were group shots—Namit with his friends, arms slung around each other, grinning at the camera. Some were from college events, some from trips, others from casual hangouts. In each one, he looked different yet the same—lighter, freer, untouched by the weight of life's obligations. There was an ease in his posture, a liveliness in his smile, something Vidhi rarely saw now.

And then there were the solo shots.

Some taken by his friends, some seemingly captured by himself—selfies, random mirror reflections, even artistic silhouettes of him against the setting sun. He had been someone who loved capturing moments, someone who had frozen time with his lens. A part of her wondered—when had he stopped? When had he lost the desire to preserve his life in frames? And most importantly 'why'?

Vidhi scrolled through the pictures, watching Namit's life unfold—smiles she hadn't shared, moments she hadn't lived. His world, his laughter, his friendships—all lived without her, rooted in a time that felt like a different version of him.

There they were, in Bangalore—lounging at *Matteo*, their coffee cups half-empty as they laughed over something undoubtedly ridiculous. Atul had his arm around Namit, mid-conversation, while Nikhil grinned beside them, eyes crinkled with amusement. Sarika and Naina leaned into the frame, making exaggerated faces, while LuvKush attempted to balance a spoon on his nose. And Aarav and Atul, ever composed, stood just behind them, smirking at their antics. Another photo showed them outside *Empire* late at night, plates of shawarma and kebabs in hand, the city buzzing quietly around them.

The next set was from one of their impromptu road trips—Udupi. The group stood barefoot on *Malpe Beach*, the waves crashing behind them. The wind had tousled Namit's hair, and someone had caught him mid-laugh, his head thrown back in a rare, unguarded moment. A temple visit followed, their foreheads smeared with vermillion, plates of prasad in their hands. Vidhi could almost hear the bells echoing in the background, the scent of incense lingering in the air.

Then came Pondicherry—their carefree grins against the yellow-and-white facades of *White Town*. Someone had clicked a shot of Namit leaning against a bicycle, shades perched on his head, as the others huddled around. A late-night picture at *Rock Beach* showed them sitting in a circle on the rocks, shoes tossed aside, the waves stretching endlessly into the darkness.

The warmth of the coastal towns gave way to the still waters of Alleppey. There was Namit, lounging on the deck of a houseboat, beer in hand, the others sprawled around in a lazy afternoon stupor. A candid shot caught Naina and Sarika laughing over something, while Atul and LuvKush tried to strike some exaggerated Bollywood pose. Namit had taken that picture—Vidhi could tell by the angle, the way it focused on the simplest, most fleeting moments.

Masinagudi was wilder, greener, untamed. A snapshot of them in a safari jeep, peering into the dense forest, expressions caught

between excitement and feigned terror. Namit stood at the edge, sunglasses on, arms crossed as if he owned the place. Another picture had them gathered around an elephant sanctuary, their hands stretched out, feeding the gentle giants, and one on the roof of the bus, ready to jump down.

She kept scrolling, her breath catching with every frame. They had been happy, unburdened, alive in ways she had never seen Namit before. There was a different ease to him in these pictures, a lightness that never quite reached him now.

And the cruellest part?

She had never seen herself in any of his memories. She still wondered why he stopped clicking now!

The answer lay in the next folder.

‘Us’ it was labelled.

Vidhi hesitated before clicking it open. The moment the images loaded, a sudden ache gripped her.

Smriti.

Her presence wasn’t loud or overwhelming, but it was undeniable. She was there, woven seamlessly into the background of Namit’s life, as if she belonged there. Some pictures had her standing at the edge of the frame, laughing mid-conversation. In others, she was looking directly at the camera, smiling, unaware—or maybe aware—that Namit had clicked them.

Then came the pictures of just the two of them.

Vidhi’s stomach twisted.

One in particular stood out—a candid shot of them sitting across a table at a café. Smriti was sipping coffee, a soft smile playing on her lips, while Namit gazed at her with an expression Vidhi had never seen before.

A quiet admiration. A gentle, unspoken fondness.

Love.

Vidhi tried to hold something inside her that felt like collapsing.

Her eyes skimmed to the next set—pictures from a trip. Beachside sunsets, long drives, blurry images of them laughing, running, drenched in the rain. They weren't extravagant moments, just stolen pieces of time, but they held something Vidhi longed for—*effortless intimacy*.

Then came the polaroids.

A few of them stuck together in a collage—some silly, some playful, some painfully tender. In one, Smriti had her head thrown back in laughter, and Namit was looking at her, not at the camera, but *her*. As if she were the only thing in focus.

Vidhi inhaled sharply.

She had spent months, and years, trying to understand Namit, to find love in his touch, in his presence. She had built a home around him, tried to become a part of his world, but standing here, looking at these pictures, she realized—she had been trying to love a man who had already *loved*.

And maybe, just maybe, he still did, but not her.

A lump formed in her throat as she scrolled further, searching for something—anything—that would tell her he had moved on. That he had let go.

But the pictures only got heavier.

There was one of Smriti holding a book, her short hair falling over her face as she read, oblivious to the camera. Namit had captured her in a moment so natural, so real, that Vidhi could almost hear the silent affection behind it.

Then there was a birthday celebration. Smriti cutting a cake, Namit standing beside her, his hand resting on her back — light, casual, but familiar.

Vidhi clenched the corners of her bedsheet.

It wasn't jealousy that burned inside her. It was the realization that she had never been looked at that way. That her pictures, her memories with Namit, would never hold this kind of depth.

A dull ache spread through her as she clicked on the last few images.

One was taken at what seemed like a farewell party. Smriti was surrounded by friends, hugging people, smiling—but there was something different in Namit's face. He stood a little apart, his expression unreadable, but Vidhi could see it.

The pain. The restraint. The loss.

She knew that look.

Because she had seen it herself. With Samar. With Namit.

Vidhi stared at the screen, her voice wavered, brittle with the effort to not cry. She had always known about Smriti, but knowing was different from seeing her with his lens. And now, as she scrolled further, she came across Smriti's pictures—standing beside him, leaning into him, her eyes mirroring his. Their smiles weren't just captured in pixels; they were woven with familiarity, with a history Vidhi could never step into.

She exhaled shakily, finally closing the folder. But the weight of what she had seen didn't leave her. It settled deep inside her, pressing against her ribs, suffocating.

For months, she had convinced herself that Namit's quiet nature was just *him*. That he wasn't expressive, that he loved in ways that weren't grand. She had forced herself to believe that maybe love didn't always come with passion, with longing glances and heart-fluttering moments.

But now she knew.

He had *felt* it before. He had *lived* it before.

Just not with her.

Her fingers hovered over the laptop's trackpad, a storm raging inside her. A part of her wanted to shut it down, erase what she

had seen, pretend it didn't matter. But another part of her—a deeper, aching part—wanted to confront it.

Because this was the truth.

And the truth was, she had been trying to carve a place in Namit's heart when someone else's shadow already stayed there.

She closed her eyes, a tear slipping down her cheek.

Some realization shattered something inside her beyond repair.

Vidhi's fingers hovered over the touchpad, her pulse quickening. She searched for the pictures she had sent Namit before their marriage—the ones she had carefully chosen, the ones where she had smiled just a little more, hoping he'd notice. But there wasn't a single one stored in the folder.

Her heart clenched. Maybe they were in another location. She typed her name in the search bar, hoping to find something—anything.

Nothing.

She swallowed and tried again, this time looking for their post-marriage pictures or even engagement pics. Surely, he had saved something.

Still, nothing except the wedding pics.

Vidhi exhaled, her fingers curling slightly as she sat back. Something deep inside her twisted and sank, like a heavy stone dropping to the ocean floor.

Namit had held on to everything—his past, his friends, his travels, his laughter. But her? Their moments? Their memories?

They weren't here. They had never been.

Vidhi wasn't envious. It wasn't about Smriti. It was about *Namit*.

It was about what he was *capable* of doing—how effortlessly he had once loved, how deeply he had engaged, how naturally he had *been present* for someone. He had done it before. He knew how to

do it. And yet, even after taking vows with her, he had chosen not to.

That's what pained her.

He shouldn't have married her, she thought—not because he clung to the past, but because he refused to build a present with her. That's what truly broke her.

And a note slipped into her diary.

Jo dard tumhaare seene mein kabhi nashtar ban kar chubhte the

Woh dard paraaye kaise hain, jab meri aankhon se jharte hain.

Do took laho ke behte the

Har siski mein teri chahat ke

Woh boond paraaye kaise hain

Jab meri palakon pe sajte hain.

Main laakh mana loon tumko hi

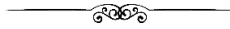
Main laakh mana loon khud ko bhi

Haalaat paraaye the na kabhi

Jazbaat paraaye kaise hain.

'If you've once felt everything I feel now, the longing, the ache, the helpless love... then how is it so easy for you not to understand me? How can you be blind to the very emotions you once lived through!!'

Clatter and Calm



December 2017

Vidhi let out a sigh and wiped her tears. There was no point dwelling on it now—there were chores waiting, a day to get through.

Should I talk to Amma? she wondered. But what would she even say?

Kritika? No. She was expecting. Vidhi didn't want to burden her with this.

Niyati? Maybe. Would she understand? She had to, at least to take some of this weight off her.

Or should she just talk to Namit again?

Her heart pounded at the thought. But wasn't that what she truly needed?

Better talk to Namit, she decided with finality.

It was Friday night. *Apt time to speak would be post dinner,* she murmured to herself.

Despite the turmoil inside her, Vidhi prepared a hearty meal—*his* favourites. Mushroom biryani, paneer tikka masala, and raita. The cook had been away for a long time now, but she didn't mind. She preferred cooking for him out of love, out of a desire.

Once dinner was sorted, she resolved not to drop the topic casually. It needed to be addressed—properly, directly. Vidhi had always believed in healthy conversations to solve any and every issue.

As Namit lit his second cigarette post-dinner, she took a deep breath. *Now or never.*

'*Namit, I need to talk to you,*' she said, her voice steady.

'*Haan, bolo na,*' he responded, casually, eyes still on the screen.

Vidhi didn't reply. She just *stared* at him.

He felt it—heaviness in the air. His fingers hesitated mid-air, holding the cigarette between them. A moment later, he exhaled, stubbed it out, and paused the TV.

Then, he turned to her, finally giving her his full attention.

'*Namit...*' Vidhi started, but her voice wavered. She swallowed, trying to steady herself. '*It's been more than four years since we've known each other... and there's something I've felt for a long time... even before marriage.*'

She exhaled shakily, fingers curling into her lap. '*I... I don't think you're as emotionally invested in our relationship.*' The words felt heavy, like clenched earth before a quake.

'*I don't feel seen by you, Namit. Not in the way a woman wants to be seen by the man she loves. I don't*' She looked down, blinking rapidly, a lump forming in her throat. '*I don't feel... feminine the way I should.*' Her voice faltered, but she forced herself to continue. '*I've never seen you... craving for me. Never caught you stealing a glance when you thought I wasn't looking. Never felt your touch... beyond bedroom... You never bother to drop me a text or call through the day....there are no conversations between us, until I initiate one....*'

She inhaled sharply, her fingers tightening. '*I don't feel that connect with you, Namit. And it—*' her voice cracked, and she clenched her jaw to hold back the emotion, '*—it's tearing me up inside.*'

She dared to look at him, her eyes pleading, desperate for something—anything.

'*I don't want to keep feeling this way—unwanted, emotionally abandoned—in a relationship that's supposed to be built on love, not just responsibility or care.*' Her voice dropped to a whisper.

‘Please, Namit... help me.’

Namit was slightly taken aback by her words. He hadn’t expected this conversation—at least not now, not like this. His fingers tensed slightly before he exhaled and leaned back, regaining control. His defences shot up instinctively.

‘Vidhi, what are you even saying?’ he scoffed, shaking his head. *‘You’re overthinking things. Just because I don’t constantly say something or do some grand gesture doesn’t mean I don’t care. I do everything that you tell me to do.’*

His tone was firm now, almost dismissive. *‘You’re making it sound like I don’t value our relationship at all, which is not true. I come home to you every day, don’t I? I share my life with you, I—’* he paused, rubbing his temple. *‘Not everyone expresses things the same way, Vidhi.’*

His eyes flickered with something—kind of frustration. *‘And honestly, this whole ‘craving’ thing you’re talking about? What does that even mean? I’m here, with you. Isn’t that enough?’*

His voice was calm but distant, as if he was trying to irrationalize her emotions rather than truly acknowledge them. *‘You’re expecting some filmy romance. Real life doesn’t work like that, Vidhi. Love isn’t about constantly proving something. It’s about... being there.’*

He sighed, rubbing his forehead. *‘I don’t know what you want me to say.’*

‘Being there?’ she repeated, her voice quiet but firm. *‘Namit, just being in the same house doesn’t mean you’re with me.’* She cut him in between. *‘If I sit in the next room the entire day, you don’t once call me to sit beside you—and yet you call this a healthy relationship? When I’m away, there’s no call, no message, no sign that I’m missed. You don’t hug me, don’t kiss me, don’t even touch me unless we’re in bed—and still, you call it love. I’m a woman, not just a body. My mind, my heart—they crave closeness too.’*

'Where am I supposed to feel fulfilled, tell me? You work late, we don't step out on weekends, we don't do anything that brings us closer. We don't talk about life, dreams—nothing. I feel suffocated, Namit. I can't live like this. Do you even understand what it means to not be desired, not be longed for by your own husband? It's heartbreaking... it's depressing.'

Silence.

She let out a hollow laugh, shaking her head. 'Even the maid is there half the time at home. She does things for me too—cooks, cleans, makes sure everything runs smoothly. But that's not love, Namit. That's not connection.'

'I don't feel missed, Namit. I don't feel wanted. And that... that's not me overthinking. That's me feeling—every single day. So please stop dismissing my feelings!'

She shook her head slightly. 'And if you don't know what to say, maybe try to feel what I'm saying instead of brushing it off.' Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'Because this... this is breaking me.'

Namit didn't say anything. Vidhi got up and left for her bedroom.

That night, they slept facing opposite directions. Neither of them moved. Neither of them spoke.

And as the night stretched on, the space between them felt wider.

But Vidhi wouldn't give up that easily.

Another mail piled on Namit's id. And some words landed in her personal diary.

'Mere saawan ki har ek boond pyaasi hai

Ki tum ho reth

Samjha tha main baadal

Uff main paagal!!

Hai mann sookha

Baras jaati hai phir bhi dhaar aankhon se

Ki us khaare se paani ki jalan ko tum kya samjhoge

*Ki tum nashhtar ho
Samjha tha main kajal
Uff main paagal!!'*

February 2018

Nayantara, Vidhi's cousin, had come for a month's long trip to India, starting from Jaipur, her native. Kritika, Vidhi, Prakhar, and all cousins who could make it gathered there.

Jaipur was a refreshing change. The city's grandeur, the forts bathed in golden hues, the bustling bazaars—it all provided a much-needed distraction. A break from the mundane, from the suffocating routine of a life where she was the only one trying. The air was different here, lighter, untouched by the weight she carried in Bangalore. But even amidst the beauty, a truth remained—no matter where she went, she carried her ache with her.

Ever since that night, when they had slept facing opposite directions, an invisible wall had risen between them. She had confronted him, bared her heart, and he had brushed it aside, defending himself instead of seeing her pain. Since then, she had stopped expecting. She had tried to bridge the distance on her own, covering the gaps even when he refused to take a step.

'Keep loving. How long can one not return love for love?' Ma's words echoed in her mind. She had believed them, held onto them like a lifeline. She had convinced herself that if she kept loving him, kept taking care of him, one day, he would see her. That day hadn't come yet.

That night, after settling in, she called him. She didn't *have* to. He hadn't asked her to. But she *wanted* to.

'Did you have dinner?' she asked softly.

'Yes, I did,' he replied.

'What did you have?' she chirped, hoping to stretch the conversation a little longer, beyond *yes* or *no*.

But his tone was dismissive, impatient. *‘Arrey bhai, I ate something. You don’t have to worry about me, I can manage Vidhi. You’ve gone there to enjoy, and not bother about me. Keep your mind and heart there, don’t bother about me.’*

She exhaled, a dull ache spreading in her chest. *Don’t bother about me.*

How could she make him understand that she wanted to bother and worry about him.... someone.... anyone. That’s the right of every married woman. How could he deprive her of even this? That it wasn’t about whether he could manage or not—it was about her. About her need to care for someone, to belong to someone, to be someone’s first thought, someone’s habit, someone’s need. Who’s else could she be, if not his?

Why *couldn’t* he understand these little things?

The pain, the disappointment, it was all too familiar. But this time, something was different. This time, instead of just hurting, it burned. Slowly, steadily, her pain was turning into resentment. And she wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep suppressing it.

The night was cool, and Jaipur’s evening air carried the scent of wet grass and faint perfume from the trees. The park was alive with people—some jogging, some strolling leisurely, some engaged in hushed conversations. But for Vidhi, the world had shrunk down to just the two of them—her and Namit.

She hadn’t planned this. She hadn’t planned to lose control. But ever since that conversation—ever since she had poured her heart out and received nothing in return—her resentment had been simmering beneath the surface, waiting to explode. And now, she couldn’t hold it in anymore.

Her voice, sharp and trembling, cut through the night. *‘Why the hell can’t you understand me, Namit? My needs, my desires? It is my desire to care for someone, to be desired by someone! And who else is that someone but you, Namit?’*

He blinked, taken aback by the outburst, his usual composure shaken.

Vidhi felt her breath coming in short gasps. *'You know what? I've had enough. I can't keep sharing a life with someone who won't even meet me halfway. I just... I just can't stay in this marriage with an emotionally withdrawn person. I can't deal with this... this mental abuse further. I am done with you.'*

The words tumbled out before she could stop them, raw and final. A few people nearby turned their heads, momentarily distracted from their own lives by the intensity of hers. But Vidhi didn't care. *'I'm calling it off,'* she said, her voice steady now. *'I want a divorce.'*

Fractured



Vidhi's voice trembled, but her words were firm, cutting through the thick tension between them. *'Marriage isn't about two people living parallel lives, Namit. It's about building something together. It's not just me—it's we. And you're not allowing us to exist.'*

There was silence on the other end, but she could hear his exhale, the faint flick of a lighter—probably lighting a cigarette. It made her stomach churn.

'Main aisa hi hoon. Main pehle bhi toh aisa hi tha a Vidhi,' he finally said, his voice distant, almost mechanical, as if that was supposed to justify everything.

Vidhi let out a bitter laugh, shaking her head. *'It doesn't work that way, Namit. Once you commit—once you take vows—you can't just say main aisa hi hoon. That's not marriage. That's you choosing not to grow, not to make room for me in your life. And that... that's not fair.'*

'Ok Vidhi you come back and then we'll talk', he said calmly.

Vidhi closed her eyes, pressing a hand to her forehead. It was exhausting—this endless loop of conversations that never led anywhere. She was pouring her heart out, laying bare her pain, her longing, her loneliness. And Namit? Namit was as composed as ever, his voice steady, his words measured, unaffected by the turmoil raging within her.

It was like banging on a closed door, like screaming into the void. He heard her, she knew that much. But did he *listen*? She wasn't sure anymore.

His voice came through the receiver, calm and unwavering. *'Don't worry about all these things right now, Vidhi. You're there to enjoy with your sister, to get a break from your routine. Focus on that.'*

Once you come back to Bangalore, we'll talk. We'll discuss. We'll sort things out. You shouldn't feel that I don't love you. I do. I don't know why you get so bothered... you need to trust me that I do.'

Vidhi swallowed, staring blankly into the night. He *said* the right words. But there was no urgency, no emotion, no fight in them. Just like always, he was calm, reasonable, logical—too logical. As if her pain was just another issue to be *sorted* rather than *felt*.

And that's what hurt the most.

His words didn't calm her. They never did. One thing she knew about Namit for sure—he was great at the art of manipulation. Every time she tried to confront him; every time she laid her heart bare; he twisted the conversation just enough to make her question herself. It wasn't outright gaslighting, but it was close—just enough to make her feel unreasonable, dramatic, *wrong* for wanting what their relationship required for survival, but he was incapable of giving

But not this time.

'If that's the case, Namit,' she shouted back, her voice cracking, 'then why don't I feel you? If you really love me, why didn't you once check on me when I left? Not a single text when my flight took off or landed. Not even a simple 'Did you reach safely?' Why didn't you bother to ask me if I had dinner, how I was feeling, if I was missing you? Just anything!'

Her breath hitched, her fingers curling around the phone as she forced the words out. *'Why, Namit? Why are you not able to perform these simple gestures that keep a marriage alive? Are you that incapable? Or is it just me that doesn't matter enough?'*

The line went silent. For a moment, just a fraction of a second, she thought she had struck something deep. But then—

'Vidhi, you're overthinking this.'

And just like that, the door remained closed.

Dehradun, Late Night

Vidhi's hands trembled as she disconnected the call with Namit. A lump sat heavy in her throat, but she swallowed it down and dialled home. The phone barely rang twice before Appa picked up.

'Pranam, Appa... I need to speak to Amma.' Her voice carried an urgency that couldn't be masked.

Appa hesitated for a moment. *'Is everything okay, beta?'*

'Just call Amma, please.'

There was a rustling sound as the phone was handed over.

'Vidhi?' Amma's voice was laced with concern. *'Is everything alright?'*

And just like that, the dam inside her broke.

'No, Amma, nothing is alright...' Her breath hitched as she tried to gather her words. *'Just listen to me... please, just listen.'*

Amma's voice softened immediately. *'I'm listening, beta. Tell me what happened.'*

Vidhi closed her eyes, trying to steady herself, but the words tumbled out in a rush. *'Amma, I remember before marriage, you told me to give it some time... that things would fall into place... that love may or may not be there, but a man's nature changes when he starts seeing someone as his own. But Amma, it's been four years. Nothing has changed.'*

Amma remained silent, listening.

'Namit hears me, but he doesn't listen. He wants me, but he doesn't crave me. Do you understand what I'm saying, Amma? He does everything a husband is supposed to do, but he never feels anything for me... or maybe he doesn't want to.'

Amma sighed. *'Beta, every person expresses love differently. Does he treat you badly?'*

Vidhi let out a bitter laugh. *'Badly? No, Amma, he speaks so properly that sometimes it feels like nothing matters to him. Amma,*

he is emotionally unavailable. And I am exhausted... I am tired of begging for love.'

There was silence on the other end before Amma spoke, her voice lower, measured. *'Then what do you want to do, Vidhi?'*

Vidhi exhaled shakily. *'I don't know... I just know I can't keep doing this.'*

Amma took a deep breath. *'Beta, this isn't a small thing. You shouldn't decide in haste.'*

Vidhi clutched the edge of her saree, her fingers trembling as sobs wracked her body. *'No, Amma... I've had enough of your son!'* Her voice cracked, raw with pain. *'I can't stay with him anymore! I won't! I want a divorce'*

Her chest heaved, her decision pressing down on her, suffocating yet freeing. *'But I still love you all... I do. If things stay peaceful between the families, I don't mind coming to Dehradun. I'll find a job there. I'll fulfil all my duties toward your family—toward you, Amma. But no... not with him. It's over.'* Her breath hitched. *'It's over.'*

Amma reached for her, her own hands shaking. *'Beta ji, let me talk to Namit—'*

Vidhi let out a hollow laugh, broken and bitter. *'Talk to Namit?'* Her eyes, swollen with tears, flashed with something fierce, something defeated. *'Do you think he'll listen? Do you think he'll care?'* Her voice dropped to a whisper, hoarse and heavy. *'You can't get past him, Amma. No one can. He has already shut the door... and this time, I won't stand outside, waiting.'*

She wiped her tears, but they kept falling. It didn't matter. Nothing did anymore.

Amma was still processing things. *'You say he is a kind and nice guy and provides for you, anything that you ask, then what is it that's missing?'*

Vidhi sighed. *'Tell me, Amma... if I cooked five-star meals for you every day—your favourites, with every ingredient measured just*

right—but left out just one thing... salt, would you still enjoy them? Would they satisfy you?’

Amma frowned, unsure. ‘No... maybe once or twice, but not every day. How can anyone eat without salt?’

‘But I’m adding everything else, Amma. Then why does that one missing thing matter so much?’

‘Arrey beta, salt is the most important thing. We can skip the spices but not salt. But why are we—’ she paused, confused.

Vidhi looked somewhere far in the sky, voice steady but aching. ‘Exactly, Amma.

That’s what’s missing in my marriage with your son—salt.’

Not care, not responsibility—those exist, neatly arranged like furniture in a well-kept room. But salt... salt is what makes the mundane meaningful. It’s the pinch of warmth in everyday moments, the unspoken belongingness in a passing glance, the craving that lingers after the words have run dry. Without salt, even love tastes flat Amma! A marriage without it is like a dish prepared to perfection yet missing that one thing that stirs hunger. You can swallow it, live through it—but you never savour it Amma!! I crave for the expression of love, like verb not like noun. I crave for a pinch of salt in my blatantly bland life Amma!’

She sobbed. Amma felt helpless.

Tell me, what does a woman really want from her man, Amma?

She just wants to feel like a woman.

She wants to feel desired—not as an object, but as a presence.

She wants to be craved—not just for her body, but for her laugh, her chaos, her quiet.

She wants to be missed when she’s not around.

She wants to belong... not to a house, not to a surname—but to someone’s heart.

I sometimes look around, Ma, and I see we’re doing everything right.

The house runs. Meals are made. Groceries come on time.

Bills are paid.

But I'm not felt.

I'm not seen.

And I wonder... is this all marriage is?

Because if two people are independent in every way—emotionally, financially, socially—then what's the point of being together? If I have to be my own support system, then what are we really sharing?

Love is not duty, Ma.

It's the choice to hold space for another soul, even on the busiest day.

You tell me how come he's always the busiest man when it comes to his wife—and always kind enough to be available to friends and family?'

The sobs and shudders continued.

'It's not anger.

It's not rebellion.

It's just a quiet realization:

I'm fading in a place where I was meant to bloom.

You know, he's totally indifferent to my presence or absence—and has the audacity to call it understanding, love, and care.

*And when I confront him,
he outrageously dismisses my emotions and concerns.*

Blames me. Says I overthink. Says I'm too much.

No woman deserves this, Amma.

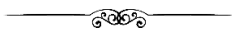
So, Ma... I choose to walk out—free from a marriage that makes me question my self-worth.

But no... He is a wonderful person, no doubt, Ma.

But he failed as a husband. And he fails me as a wife. He has brought out the worst in me. And I don't have the energy to fight his beast... or mine... anymore.'

There was no one to console as she broke down in the green stretch of the dark, lonely lawn, wanting her scream to fill in all that was vacant and empty in her life.

Vidhi ka Vidhan- The Design of Destiny



April 2018

After much intervention from Appa, Amma, Ma, and Baba, Vidhi relented. Perhaps she had no choice, or perhaps a part of her still wanted to believe in their marriage. Namit apologized—sincerely, in his own way. He wasn't someone who could weave emotions into words, but he tried. For a few days, he made an effort—coming home earlier, asking about her day, noticing the little things. And Vidhi, despite everything, softened at these gestures.

But habits don't change overnight. Caring came naturally to Namit; it was in his nature to ensure she was comfortable. But beyond that, beyond the surface-level acts of responsibility and affection, he struggled. He was like a traveller who starts a journey with enthusiasm but loses direction midway, distracted by routine, by work, by his own mind. The efforts faded, slipping back into the pattern that had always been.

Vidhi saw it coming—she had seen it before. She had lived this cycle of hope and disappointment.

Amidst all this her pressure at work also mounted. She had switched job and was now employed with Vega Tech Solutions, a global IT consulting firm based in Prestige Tech Park, Marathahalli. The office was a modern high-rise, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the bustling city below. It exuded a modern corporate vibe, with open-plan workspaces, glass-walled meeting rooms, and brainstorming zones designed to fuel collaboration. The cafeteria was always buzzing—some grabbed a quick meal, while others lingered over coffee at the Starbucks corner, discussing work and weekend plans. The company promoted employee well-being with a gym,

meditation lounge, and recreation zone, offering moments of respite from the fast-paced corporate grind.

As part of the Marketing and Finance team, Vidhi played a crucial role in handling market research, financial planning, and budget allocations for Vega Tech's digital transformation projects. Her days were packed with client meetings, strategy discussions, and performance reviews, ensuring the company's services were not only cutting-edge but also profitable. The job kept her engaged, her calendar always full, a respite from her internal turmoil— an escape.

The workspace had an open-plan layout, but each employee had their own semi-private cubicle—partitioned just enough to give a sense of personal space while still allowing easy collaboration. Her desk was tucked into a cozy corner by a large glass window, adorned with a few potted succulents and a framed picture of her family. The workspace smelled of freshly brewed coffee from the office pantry and the faint scent of marker ink from the brainstorming board on the far end of the floor. She shared her cubicle with Gaurang Ganeshan, Vidhanshu Sindhu Setu and Emma Thomas Sarabhai.

Four months in, Vidhi had started blending into the rhythm of the team. Mornings were always the same—Gaurang would walk in with his usual exaggerated gestures, narrating some office drama from the previous day. *'Can you believe it? The printer jammed, and somehow, I ended up fixing it while the IT guy just stood there,'* he'd say, waving his hands animatedly while rolling a fidget cube between his fingers. Across the room, Sritakshi Saikia Bourua would be immersed in her spreadsheets, pausing only to sip her herbal tea or share some odd fact about the history of typewriters. And then there was Prajakta—the Delhi fresher whose bold fashion choices turned corridors into catwalks and who wouldn't think twice wearing metallic boots and a sequinned shrug to a Monday morning meeting.

Meetings were where Ira Arundhati Iyenger Ma'am's presence was the strongest. She never raised her voice, but when she spoke, the room quieted. If a report was half-baked, her sharp yet motivating critique left no room for excuses. Ishani, the youngest in the team, often sat scribbling in her notepad—half doodles, half notes—until Ira ma'am's glance would make her straighten up and focus.

Venkat, ever calm and methodical, was the silent fixer. If someone's system crashed mid-task, he'd appear without a word, click a few buttons, and the problem would disappear. His patience was legendary, especially when dealing with Gaurang's chaotic approach to work. *'You have a system, right?'* Venkat once asked to which Gaurang had grinned, *'Of course! It's called improvisation.'*

Vidhi often worked closely with Venkat, the genius and Vidhanshu Sindhu Setu, a bundle of contradictions. Some days he'd be brimming with creative energy, throwing ideas around like confetti. Other days, he'd be lost in thought, scribbling poetry in the margins of meeting notes. *'Deadline was yesterday,'* Vidhi reminded him one evening. He sighed dramatically. *'Ah, but creativity is not bound by time.'* She would hand him a reminder post-it, and he would groan, getting back to work.

Himadri was harder to decipher. He spoke little but observed everything. When he did speak, it was either profoundly insightful or dripping with dry humor. Once, after a particularly long debate over color schemes, he muttered, *'We're not defusing a bomb here, you know.'* It was enough to send the entire team into laughter, breaking the tension.

Lunch breaks were a mix of office banter and light-hearted debates. Vidhaan would be flustered over some task, and Ira Ma'am would step in, her guidance more maternal than managerial. Afternoons were the quietest, with only the occasional sigh from Sritakshi as she stared at an endless row of numbers or the tapping of keyboards filling the space.

By evening, as deadlines loomed, the team would gather for a final check-in. Gaurang would, without fail, pitch a weekend plan, which Venkat would nod at but never actually commit to. Vidhi, despite her initial hesitation, found herself settling into this world of quirks and brilliance, feeling less like an outsider and more like a part of the team.

Vidhi's interactions with the team had become natural, effortless even, but it was Vidhanshu, Vidhaan or Setu as they called him, who had started standing out in the smallest, most unexpected ways.

She hadn't noticed it at first—the quiet nearness of him, always hovering on the edge of her awareness. Never obvious, never asking to be seen. But over time, the small moments began to weave themselves into something undeniable.

On days when she sat lost in thought, staring blankly at her screen, he wouldn't ask her directly what was wrong. Instead, she'd overhear him casually asking Ira Ma'am, *'What happened to her?'* in a tone so neutral that if she weren't paying attention, she might have missed it. Ira ma'am's responses were brief, sometimes just a shake of the head, and that was it—no follow-ups, no pressing. But it was enough for Vidhi to realize he noticed.

Once, in the middle of a workday, she accidentally knocked over her water bottle, spilling a small puddle onto her desk. She barely had time to react before a folded tissue appeared in her periphery. Vidhan, without looking away from his screen, extended his hand with the tissue in it, as though the act required no effort at all.

'Thanks,' she murmured, dabbing at the wet surface.

He only nodded, continuing with his work, but the moment stayed with her.

Sometimes, she would catch him watching her. Not in an obvious way—his glances were fleeting, just a second too long before he turned away as if he hadn't been looking at all. It wasn't

uncomfortable or intrusive, just... there. A quiet observation, withdrawn the moment she became aware of it.

Their places were adjacent in the cubicle, close enough that she could hear him sigh in frustration when a task dragged on longer than expected, close enough that she could sense his occasional bursts of energy when creativity struck.

Vidhi wasn't sure when she started noticing him in return. Maybe it was the way he sometimes scribbled random quotes in the margins of his meeting notes, or the way he'd lean back in his chair, lost in thought, before snapping back to the present with a quiet determination. Or maybe it was just the fact that, in a world that moved too fast, Vidhan noticed things others didn't.

Despite the quiet growing understanding between them, Vidhi and Vidhan never missed a chance to bicker. To the outside world, they seemed like perpetual rivals—always arguing, teasing, and passing sarcastic and tossing sarcastic comments like confetti. Those small quarrels were the silent threads weaving a softer bond.

It wasn't the big conversations, but the small, almost stupid things—like Vidhi 'accidentally' moving Vidhan's water bottle just out of his reach, or Vidhan swiping a bite from her lunchbox before she could protest. She'd roll her eyes, he'd shrug like a child caught red-handed, and somehow, those moments stuck.

Sometimes, he'd nudge her chair just slightly when she was about to sit, making her stumble and scowl. Sometimes she'd hide his pen and watch with a straight face as he searched the whole desk before finding it tucked behind his laptop—where she'd clearly placed it. Their shared screen on Excel would have more comments of personal digs than actual notes.

'Some people are just like that,' Vidhan would say with a pointed look in Vidhi's direction, as he casually flipped through some reports.

Vidhi, never one to let an opportunity slip, would smirk. *'And some people just can't stop bothering certain people.'*

Ira Ma'am, ever observant and fond of Vidhan, would often intervene—always on his side. *'Vidhi, you should listen to Vidhan once in a while. He does make sense sometimes.'*

Vidhi's mouth would fall open. *'You too, Ma'am? I give up!'* she'd exclaim, throwing her hands up dramatically, while Vidhan would lean back in his chair, arms crossed, enjoying every second.

'The world is finally recognizing my wisdom,' he'd say smugly.

'The world is losing its sanity,' Vidhi would mutter, making a face, which only made Vidhan laugh—his deep, effortless laughter that made others chuckle too.

One afternoon, as seating arrangements were being shuffled for a project, Vidhi pointedly declared, *'I don't want to sit next to this guy.'*

Vidhan raised an eyebrow, feigning offense. *'That's unfortunate because there are people who would love to sit next to me. In fact, there are letters to prove it. Do you get any?'* He smirked, knowing exactly how to push her buttons.

Vidhi huffed. *'I don't need letters to validate my existence, thank you very much.'*

'Ah, the classic response of someone who doesn't get any,' he quipped, biting back a grin.

The team, now used to their banter, chuckled as Vidhi narrowed her eyes at him, shaking her head. But she couldn't stop the small smile playing at the corner of her lips.

This was them—always at each other's throats, yet somehow, neither of them would have it any other way.

July 2018

It was a mid-July afternoon. The sun was already scorching with sweltering heat outside. That day, Vidhan wasn't himself. He wasn't making his usual witty remarks, nor was he indulging in their daily arguments that had become a ritual the entire team

secretly enjoyed. Instead, he sat unusually still, his fingers barely moving on the keyboard, his face drawn.

Vidhi noticed.

She rarely called him by his full name—Vidhanshu Sindhu Setu. To her, he was simply ‘Setu’, the surname she had picked up without much thought. He, in turn, had his own name for her.

To Vidhan, she was *Sakhi*.

It all began on her first day. He had been expecting someone else—a certain *Shikha Shekhawat*—and his Hindi, tragically, took the first hit.

‘*You are... Shekhu?*’ he asked, frowning like he’d just bitten into a lemon.

Vidhi blinked. ‘*Excuse me?*’

‘*No, no... Saaki? ... Shikha? ...sorry... Shekaar...no...Sakhi?*’ He was spiraling.

Then under his breath, he muttered, ‘*Yaaru idu, swalpa clarity kodri!*’ (Who is this, someone please give me some clarity!)

And a moment later, scratching his head, ‘*Ivattu hesarana nodu... yaaru itara kashta hesaru haakthare?*’ (Just look at this name... who even gives such complicated names?)

The team burst out laughing. Someone choked on their coffee.

Ira Ma’am, without even looking up from her screen, smirked. ‘*Vidhan, she’s Vidhatri Samarth Shekhar. Not a crossword clue.*’

But by then, it was too late. He never bothered correcting himself. She was *Sakhi* from that day on—like a software bug that everyone learned to live with. He had never really tried to get it right after that. She was *Sakhi*, that’s it, and somehow, it stuck.

Vidhi walked into the office lounge, her usual energy muted, sensing a change in Vidhan. He sat there, his fingers tapping nervously on the table, his usual calm demeanour replaced by something more turbulent.

'Setu,' she said gently, pulling up a chair, 'what happened? You've been off today.'

He looked up at her, eyes weighed down with something. He paused before answering, as though unsure of how to put it into words.

'I... I've been dealing with something,' he began, his voice uncharacteristically soft. *'Something I haven't been able to get off my chest.'*

Vidhi leaned forward, sensing his distress. *'What is it? You know you can talk to me, right?'*

Vidhan shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. *'It's... it's about someone at the office. A fresher from IT. Madhavi. She's been sending me these letters... professing her feelings. I've tried to ignore it, told her I'm married, that I love my wife Dharaa, but this fellow is not backing off. It's getting worse. She's even hinted at doing something that could hurt my reputation.'*

Vidhi blinked, surprised. *'Wait... what...she's threatening you?'*

He nodded, running a hand through his hair, *'You have seen those notes on my table no, and all those gifts I had been wondering about...'*

'That's her!', Vidhi exclaimed.

'Hmm', Vidhan nodded. *'She was my junior during my engineering days. We had dated for a few months, casually, and then mutually broke off as I couldn't give her enough time.... and some other reasons. And now she pops up out of nowhere.'*

Vidhi sat back, processing his words. *'That sounds like a mess. But you can't let her get to you like this. Have you considered talking to Dharaa about it, or even Ira Maam?'*

'I'm worried, Sakhi' Vidhan admitted, his voice tight. *'I don't want to hurt Dharaa and I don't want her to think that I didn't try to handle this myself.'*

Vidhi took a deep breath, her voice calm but firm. *‘Setu, the truth is always better than silence. Hiding this from Dharaa or Ira ma’am won’t help. You need to face it, deal with it, and most of all—be honest with your wife. You know that.... what if this Madhavi presses any charges against you out of agitation. Ira Maam should know it’s not you but her harassing you. You know how seriously they take up POSH’*

Vidhan stared at her for a long moment, his eyes conflicted. He exhaled slowly. *‘I know. But... I keep wondering if I should just meet Madhavi, talk to her directly, and end this once and for all.’*

Vidhi nodded thoughtfully. *‘I think that’s the right approach. Face it head-on and make it clear to her. She has no right to keep pushing this on you. But keep Ira Maam in loop, for your own safety against any sexual harassment charges....you never know..’*

He nodded slowly, her words settling in. *‘Thanks, Sakhi. I didn’t know how to deal with this, but thanks for hearing it out.’*

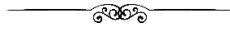
Vidhi smiled, her voice warm. *‘haan....now don’t begin with your nonsensical serious tone of thank you and all..’*

‘Thanks,’ he said quietly, his voice sincere. *‘I really needed to hear that.’*

Vidhi smiled softly. *‘Anytime, Setu. You know where to find me.’*

And in that simple exchange, their connection deepened, not just as colleagues or friends, but as people who stand by each other.

A Sprinkle of Rain



December 2018

It had been four years. Four long years of a marriage where Vidhi had learned to stop expecting. Not because she didn't want love, but because asking for it had only led to disappointment.

And then there was Vidhan!

She didn't know when it started. Maybe the first time they sat next to each other at a work dinner, when he instinctively pulled out the chair for her—a simple gesture, yet one that sent an unfamiliar warmth through her. Or maybe it was when, during a particularly hectic day, he noticed she was struggling with a stack of files and quietly took them for her, as if it was the most natural thing in the world or when he came with a chilled drink when her face showed signs of fatigue. She didn't know when.

Namit never noticed such things. He didn't *forget*—he simply never thought to do them.

One evening, Vidhi sat in her office, her head throbbing. It was morning, when she had inadvertently mentioned it to Namit, thinking she should take a day off. It had been a long day since. Namit had messaged her once in the morning—a forwarded joke. He didn't ask anything about her headache. That was it. She stared at her desk where a cup of coffee had gone cold, forgotten amidst deadlines.

'*Still working?*' Vidhan's voice broke her trance. He stood beside her, leaning against the frame, a coffee cup in his hand.

Vidhi managed a tired smile. '*Almost done.*'

He walked in and placed the cup on her desk. '*You forgot your coffee again.*'

She frowned. *'How do you—?'*

Vidhan shrugged. *'I noticed. You always make one and then get so caught up that you don't drink it.'*

Vidhi stared at the fresh cup, warmth seeping through the ceramic. The scent was familiar. Exactly the way she liked it—no sugar.

Her breath choked. Namit never noticed.

Shaking the thought away, she picked up the cup and took a sip. *'Thanks.'*

Vidhan smirked. *'See? That's all it takes to make you happy. If only the world knew your secret.'*

She laughed lightly, but a part of her ached. *If only Namit knew.*

It wasn't that Namit was a bad husband. He provided. He was responsible. He was just—*Absent.*

Vidhi had never stayed alone in her life until marriage. And yet, she had never felt lonelier than in her own home, with a man who hardly noticed whether she was there or not.

She stared at her phone. Not a single message from Namit. Not even a *Did you eat?* or a *How was your day?* He never did, except for occasionally forwarding a joke or any urgent communications like his travel or about keys and such.

And then, as if the universe wanted to mock her, her screen lit up exactly at snack time.

Vidhan: *Eat something before your headache punches again.*

Vidhi sucked in a breath. She had mentioned her headaches once. *Once.*

She typed back: *How do you always know?*

Vidhan: *It's a superpower.*

A smile touched her lips before a wave of guilt crashed into her.

Why did it feel like betrayal to be noticed?

There were many such small little things that brought her closer to Vidhan.

It was a cool evening when they all stepped out of the office after a late client meeting. The wind had a bite to it, and Vidhi shivered. She hadn't carried a jacket.

She was about to rub her arms for warmth when something soft landed on her shoulders.

Vidhan's jacket.

She turned to him, startled. 'Setu, I—'

'You're cold,' he said simply. 'Don't do drama, just wear it.'

Her breathed deep. Namit had never done this. Not once. Even when she had shivered in the Ireland cold, he had barely noticed. She had always wrapped her own arms around herself, warmed her hands with her own breath, longing for his arms around her.

Vidhi hesitated. 'But you'll feel cold.'

Vidhan smirked. 'I'm a man, Sakhi. We're genetically immune to mild inconvenience.'

She laughed despite herself, draping the jacket around her. It smelled faintly of him—woody, clean, familiar. *Caring*.

A sprinkle of rain on the desert of her mind.

Vidhi wasn't naive. She knew these things shouldn't mean so much.

But they did.

Because she had once *begged* for such moments from Namit. Begged in silent pleas, in hopeful glances, in efforts he never noticed. And here was Vidhan, doing them effortlessly, unknowingly making her feel seen.

It wasn't a romanticised attraction.

It wasn't love. It wasn't an affair.

But it was *something*. Something unusual

Something that terrified her.

Because what happens when a parched soul finds water?

Does it drink? Or does it run?

Vidhi wasn't sure.

But she knew one thing—Vidhan had become the rain she never knew she needed.

January 2019

The HR team spilled out of the bus, their excitement tangible.

'Le Pondy, baby! The French gonna be proud of us!' Mohit declared, stretching his arms dramatically.

'Abe, at least let us check in first,' grumbled Sritakshi, adjusting her backpack.

'Ayyō, eshtu sundaravāda sthala!' (Wow! What a beautiful place!), sighed Venkat.

Gaurang and Rachit were already taking selfies, and Chetna was bargaining with the resort staff for a better sea-facing room. Rahat, ever the peacekeeper, tried to calm everyone.

Vidhi found herself laughing at the familiar chaos. She loved these people.

But amidst all the noise, her gaze drifted to Vidhan.

He was looking at the ocean.

His expression was intense, but there was something about the way he stood, his hands tucked into his pockets, watching the waves roll in. He looked.... Irresistible.... Vidhi's heart raced. She quickly pulled away her glance. She shouldn't be thinking like this. She made efforts to not see him.

Vidhi had always loved the ocean. There was something freeing about it—the way the waves rushed in, unafraid, uninhibited.

But Namit didn't like waters.

Three years ago, in the same resort, at the same beach, she had begged him to come with her into the sea. Just ankle-deep, just for a moment. He had refused. *'You go ahead. I'll watch from here.'*

And she had gone. Alone.

The memory felt fresh as she walked to the shoreline again, the foam kissing her feet.

'You coming in?' sneered Vidhan

His voice was playful, but his eyes held a quiet challenge.

A smirk tugged at her lips. *'You think I'd miss this?'*

Without another word, she ran toward the water, letting the waves wrap around her feet. A moment later, she heard the splash of Vidhan following.

As she turned, he shook off the droplets from his arms, his wet white shirt clinging to his broad shoulders, revealing a hint of his chest where the first button remained undone.

It was just them, the evening, and the sea; the others had stayed back, too busy with their own plans.

'Didn't think you were the type,' she teased.

'Neither did I.' He grinned, pushing his wet hair back. *'But some things are worth trying.'*

A wave crashed against them, and Vidhi lost her footing for a second. Before she could steady herself, Vidhan's hand caught hers—firm, instinctive.

The touch lasted barely a second before he let go, stepping back just enough to make it seem unintentional.

No one had noticed.

No one, except her.

The touch was intuitive. But it sent a current through her.

She looked at him.

And suddenly, Namit's absence on this very beach, three years ago, became unbearably loud.

Later that night, as everyone gathered for drinks, Vidhi found herself at the far end of the balcony, watching the waves again.

'*Sakhi*,' Vidhan's voice was softer now. '*You okay?*'

She turned to him, torn between truth and a lie.

'*Setu...*' she hesitated. '*Do you think we compare too much?*'

Vidhan frowned. '*Compare what?*'

She exhaled. '*Life. People. The past.*'

He was quiet for a moment. Then, '*We compare when we feel something is missing.*'

Vidhi's heart clenched.

Because that was the truth, wasn't it?

She wasn't falling for Vidhan. But she was falling for the feeling of *being seen*.

And that... that scared her more than anything else.

Later that night, the group gathered on the balcony with drinks, the sound of the waves a soft hum in the background.

'*Guys, we need a bonfire night!*' Rachit declared, already planning.

The fire cracked softly, sending sparks into the night like fireflies losing their way. Everyone had spread out in a loose circle, warm in their sweaters and the kind of hush that only good company brings.

Somewhere, from a Bluetooth speaker nestled between two backpacks, the soft notes of '*Phir Le Aaya Dil*' began to play. The kind of song that made the fire feel closer than it was. It was followed by '*Aaj jane ki zidd na karo..*'

Vidhan sat one twenty degrees from Vidhi, his long legs stretched out, shoulders relaxed. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, veins slightly raised under tanned skin. There was a

rugged elegance in the way he sat—quiet, rooted, his stubbled jaw catching the firelight just so. His eyes, though steady, held something unreadable. As if he was always halfway between thinking and knowing. The song changed to ‘*Aye dil hai mushkil*’.

She looked up just as he did. Their eyes met—not dramatically, but with a stillness that pulled something inside her. Something inside him. It was held. It stayed. Just a few seconds. Then he looked away, poking a log with a stick like he hadn’t just stirred something in her, and that nothing stirred in his, while ‘*mai tenu samjhawan ki...na tere bajo lagda ji....*’ played from the playlist.

Venkat whispered something to Sritakshi beside him. She laughed, her voice lilting, soft. He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, and the speaker quietly slipped into ‘*Kuch to hai tujhse raabta....kehte hain khuda ne iss jahan me sabhi ke liye.....*’—the kind of song that filled silence without breaking it.

Vidhi forced a smile, but her heart was no longer here.

A memory bloomed— as the playlist drifted to ‘*hansi bann gaye ho...*’

A monsoon evening in Kolkata, years ago. Samar had driven her to a quiet spot near Digha beach. They had sat on the bonnet of his car, watching the serene dewy sunset as the darkness gradually engulfed everything around. He had handed her a cup of cutting chai and played ‘*Iktara*’ on his playlist. She remembered the way he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close enough to feel the sense of belongingness and yet just far enough to keep things unspoken, restrained, respectful before the sacred wedding rituals could blur the boundaries between them.

And then came Namit’s thoughts with whom she was still waiting for these tender moments that get etched in the memory for life long.

A gust of wind brought her back. Vidhan leaned slightly forward, placing more logs in the fire, his eye scanning hers. He then placed his jacket on her lap. Just like that. No fuss. No comment. The

song had already changed to ‘*Iss pyar ko main kya naam doon.....bechain dil ko kaise araam doon...*’

Slowly, the playlist moved like a gentle tide—first to ‘*jhuki jhuki si nazar bekaraar hai ki nahi...daba daba sa sahi, dil me pyar hai ki nahi..*’. Then came ‘*Tere dar par sanam chale aaye.....*’, raw and pleading, carrying the ache of a lover who arrives despite the silence. And finally, ‘*Do dil mil rahe hain... magar chupke chupke*’—a whisper of forbidden connection, of hearts converging in quiet defiance, hidden from the world. It filled the space between them like a whisper.

And Vidhi realized—this silence was different. Not empty. Not aching. Just... peaceful.

But it scared her.

Because what if she let herself fall into it? What if this warmth, this quiet ease, pulled her too far from where she’d once promised her heart to be?

She clutched the jacket a little tighter, unsure if she was holding onto comfort... or resisting it. The young girl in her craved a hug. *She craved ‘to hug’!*

Then with a sudden jolt, she stood up and walked off, leaving the moment unfinished. Ira Ma’am and Venkat glanced up, calling out to stop her, but her steps were too quick, her mind too far gone to hear them. Vidhaan’s eyes remained fixed on the crackling fire—flames devouring the log, much like the quiet ache in his chest. He didn’t look up. He didn’t say a word. Didn’t reach out. Didn’t stop her. It was the only way he knew to protect what was left of himself- from a feeling he didn’t know the name of, an ache too unfamiliar to confront.

The next morning, the team set off to explore White Town. Vidhi walked beside Sritakshi, Gaurang, Eva and Himadri sipping her cold coffee as they strolled past pastel-coloured colonial buildings. ‘*Shopping time!*’ Eva announced, dragging Himadri toward a boutique.

Vidhi laughed at their enthusiasm but didn't move. She wasn't in the mood to shop.

'Not a fan of impulsive buys, Sakhi?'

The voice was familiar—one she'd been trying to silence all night. She didn't want to turn. But she did. And there he was—Vidhan, standing beside her, hands behind for a casual saunter, his gaze drifting past her toward the street performers playing jazz in the corner. He was there with Venkat and Mohit, but it was as if the crowd had thinned, and only they remained.

Vidhan was fighting a different battle—one where keeping things normal was the only way he knew to survive the storm within. Deep down both of them knew it wasn't anything like love. It wasn't supposed to be. They loved their spouses immensely. But it wasn't anything unlike strong sense of affection either.

'I like it when things have meaning,' Vidhi admitted. *'Not just something bought in a hurry.'*

The words left her lips casually, but inside, they echoed louder than she'd meant them to. She felt the contradiction tightening in her—how something so gentle could feel so heavy. How his presence calmed her and unsettled her all at once. With Namit, love was certain, familiar, mapped. With Vidhan, it was all grey spaces—comfort laced with confusion, distance woven with closeness. She didn't know what to make of it. Only that something inside her would go restless when he was near, something she couldn't name without breaking everything she'd built.

She tried to shoo away her thoughts and keep things as normal as possible.

Vidhan nodded, Venkat nodded, watching the others disappear into the shop.

'Then let's get something meaningful.'

Before she could ask what he meant, he started walking, expecting her to follow.

'Macha I need to be with the girls, they must be missing me, you know', Venkat grinned and escaped behind the group of girls in hot pants and tank tops.

Vidhan and Vidhi laughed as Vidhan led her down a narrow lane lined with bougainvillea vines, stopping outside a quiet café.

'You knew about this place?' she asked.

'Found it this morning while on a run,' he admitted.

Vidhi raised a brow. *'You run?'*

'I do things when they're worth it,' he said, holding the door open for her.

The café was like a secret tucked into a street no one spoke of—warm, timeless, heavy with the scent of coffee beans and cardamom. Outside, the world moved slowly. Inside, time paused.

They sat in the farthest corner, where the light was a little softer and the noise a little more distant. It was their first coffee together—so simple a thing, and yet, it felt loaded.

Vidhan held his black coffee like a shield. Vidhi stirred the foam of her cappuccino slowly, not because it needed stirring, but because her fingers needed something to do.

He said nothing at first. Just watched the way her gaze flitted from the sugar pot to the window to the corner of the table where their knees almost touched. Almost.

Then he noticed it—a tiny dab of foam clinging to the lower corner of her lip.

A ripple passed through him. He shouldn't have noticed. But he had.

'You have...' he said, his voice low, warm. He gestured gently to his own mouth.

Vidhi blinked. *'Where?'* She wiped the wrong side.

'Other side,' he said, leaning slightly forward, before his instinct overrode reason. His hand moved on its own, slow and careful, his

thumb brushing the corner of her mouth, touching the lower lips.
Almost.

Just for a second.

But long enough.

Her breath caught. She didn't pull back. Didn't lean in either.
Just stilled.

Her lipstick had stained his thumb.

He didn't wipe it.

And in that stillness, the old café's record crackled to life again.

'Mere dil me aaj kya hai tu kahe to main bata doon.....'

Vidhi looked down. Then out the window. Anywhere but him.
Her cheeks flushed, and not from the cappuccino.

'You should wipe that,' she said softly, her voice dipping.

He looked at his hand. Then at her.

'I will,' he murmured. But made no move.

'So,' he said, as they were ready to leave, *'what do you want to take back from this trip?'*

Vidhi exhaled. *'Memories. Good ones.'*

His gaze softened. *'Then let's make some.'*

She smiled, stirring her coffee, wondering why simple conversations with him felt like deep dives into her soul.

As they walked back, Vidhan stopped outside a small art shop.

'You said you like meaningful things,' he said, leading her inside.

The store smelled of parchment and paint. A local artist was sketching something in the corner.

Vidhan picked up a delicate, handcrafted bookmark—pressed with real flowers, beautiful in its simplicity. He reached for his favourite book from the shelf—*SALT*, by Dr. Nivedita Poddar, a novel that delved into the intricate emotions of relationships, exploring the tension of unfulfilled desires and the fine line

between friendship and something more. With a quiet, intentional gesture, he slid the bookmark inside, as though marking a chapter yet to be written in his own journey.

'For someone who loves books,' he said, handing it to her.

Vidhi hesitated. *'But why—'*

'No reason,' he said lightly. *'Just something meaningful to remember this place by.'*

She took it, running her fingers over the dried petals.

It was just a book and a bookmark.

And yet, it felt like something more.

That night, the group had their bonfire again.

The flames crackled, casting golden light on everyone's faces. Someone played old Hindi songs on a speaker, and Venkat attempted to sing along, much to Ira Ma'am's amusement.

Vidhi sat between Dhriti and Mary hugging her knees. She should have been fully present, laughing at Rachit's terrible jokes, teasing Mary about her shopping spree.

But her thoughts kept drifting.

To the ocean.

To the café.

To the bookmark tucked inside her purse.

To Vidhan.

The night was drenched in silver as the full moon cast its glow over Le Pondy. The sprawling resort stretched towards the sea, its neatly paved pathways winding between clusters of private cottages and swaying palms. The infinity pool shimmered under the night sky, reflecting the soft flicker of lanterns placed along its edge.

Three years ago when Vidhi had walked these same paths with Namit, it had been different.

That evening, she had taken special care to dress up. A flowing, ivory nightgown with delicate lace lining—simple yet graceful. The sea breeze played with the loose strands of her wavy hair as she strolled beside Namit, their footsteps the only sound against the stone-paved walkway.

She had felt the romance in the air that night.

Something about the moonlit sky, the hush of the waves, the solitude of the vast resort grounds—it made her tender feminine heart swell with wonder, with longing.

She had always believed in stolen moments of intimacy that weren't just about desire but companionship. She had wanted to create one such moment that night.

Slowly, she reached out—just the soft brush of her little finger against Namit's as they walked.

Nothing happened.

Undeterred, she had tried again, gently slipping her fingers into his, hoping he would respond, hold her hand, maybe even pause for a moment under the moonlight and look into her eyes.

But before she could say anything, before she could even feel the warmth of his palm, he had yanked his hand away.

'Kya kar rahi ho Vidhi? Someone will see.'

The words had hit her like a splash of cold water.

She had stopped walking, stunned. The vast, empty resort stretched ahead, the only other soul around being a watchman half a mile away, going about with his night duty.

She had turned to Namit, her voice barely above a whisper. *'It's a huge ground, Namit. No one is here to see us. And most importantly, I am your wife. I have every right to touch you. Why this behaviour?'*

He had sighed, rubbing his temple as if exhausted. *'Vidhi, please... Don't start. It doesn't look good. Let's go back.'*

She had swallowed the lump in her throat, her hands curling into fists.

That night, she had skipped dinner. She hadn't spoken a word to Namit.

And on their six-hour drive back to Bangalore, silence perched between them like an invisible wall. She had stared out of the window, watching the fields blur past, wondering if marriages always felt this lonely.

Vidhi blinked, snapping back to the present. The same resort, the same moonlit night, the same hushed sound of waves—yet everything felt unusual.

This time, she wasn't walking beside Namit.

Later that night she leaned against the wooden railing of her cottage, her eyes tracing the moonlit waves that curled and crashed upon the shore. The sound was hypnotic, the air thick with the scent of salt and nostalgia. Somewhere nearby, her colleagues laughed over a late-night card game, their carefree voices drifting through the cool night air.

But inside her, a storm brewed.

She reminisced Namit's words. It had clung to her skin like a stubborn scar. Even now, they echoed in her mind, unshaken by time.

And yet, tonight, she wasn't alone.

Vidhan had unknowingly found her in this fragile moment. His cottage was adjacent to hers, with a common entrance. He was sharing a room with Venkat, and she with Sritakshi. Both Sritakshi and Venkat were away for a night stroll.

She heard his voice before she saw him. *'Why do I get the feeling that your heart is a thousand miles away, Sakhi?'*

Vidhi turned slightly, finding him standing a few feet away, careful—always careful—to maintain a respectable distance. His

dark green shirt was rolled up at the sleeves, and the dim glow of the lanterns cast a warm hue over his face.

She smiled, *'Maybe because it is.'*

Vidhan tilted his head, waiting, giving her space. He never pushed, never demanded. He just... existed in a way that made it impossible to ignore him.

Vidhi sighed, crossing her arms. *'I've been here before.'*

Vidhan said nothing, but his gaze encouraged her to go on.

'With Namit. Three years ago.'

A flicker of something unreadable passed through Vidhan's face, but he didn't interrupt.

'I wanted to hold his hand that night,' she continued, her voice quieter now. *'I wanted to feel that... companionship. It was just a simple moment, but when I reached out—'* she exhaled sharply, as if reliving the sting of rejection, *'—he pulled away. Said someone would see.'*

She let out a short, humourless laugh. *'The ground was empty, Setu. Except for a night guard, there was no one. But that wasn't the point, was it? The point was... he didn't want it. He didn't feel what I felt.'*

Vidhan's fingers flexed slightly at his sides, as if he had to resist the urge to reach for her.

Instead, he spoke in a voice so quiet it almost got lost in the sound of the waves. *'Some people are afraid of love, Sakhi. Not because they don't feel it, but because they don't know how to show it.'*

Vidhi looked at him then, really looked.

Was that how Namit's love was? A closed fist instead of an open palm? Had she been searching for something he was incapable of giving?

And yet, here was Vidhan.

Not once had she ever needed to beg for a kind word from him.
Not once had she needed to fight for his attention. His affection
came in unspoken gestures.

Small things. Silly things.

And yet, they meant *so much!*

A gust of wind lifted her hair, and she shivered.

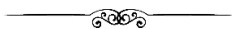
And in that moment, Vidhi realized something.

Sometimes, being seen wasn't about grand gestures.

It was about knowing when to step close and when to simply...
stand beside.

The conflict of comparison tore her heart apart as it ached for
Namt and resisted the urge to fall in Setu's arm to sooth her
agony.

Boundaries and Bridges



March 2019

It was a mid- March morning. The office floor was unusually colourful today. Silk, chiffon, khadi, and kanjeevarams had replaced the usual business casuals. Everyone was a little extra chirpy, a little extra flirty—Ethnic Day always brought out the soft chaos in people.

Vidhi adjusted her pallu nervously as she walked in. The deep emerald saree hugged her frame just right. The modest plunge of her neckline was enough to turn heads yet not scream for attention. Her hair was left open in soft waves, and a tiny bindi sat on her forehead like punctuation on poetry.

'Damn,' someone whispered. *'Did Vidhi just redefine saree goals?'*

And just then—

Prajakta walked in like she owned the floor. A deep maroon saree, strategically pleated, with a backless blouse that defied all conventional HR boundaries. Kohl-rimmed eyes, blood-red lipstick, and confidence that screamed Delhi.

'Setu, Gaurang, Mary' she called, walking right up to them, twirling her pleats flirtatiously. *'How do I look?'*

Setu and Gaurang cleared their throat. *'Uh... Ethnic.'*

Prajakta laughed, placing a manicured hand on their desk and leaning in just enough. *'Be honest, guys. You can call me hot. I won't file a case.'*

Before any of them could reply, Kalyan passed by, totally ignoring their conversation.

'Prajakta, what a woman yaar,' he muttered to no one in particular. *'Bomb lag rahi hai. Dilli wali heat, boss.'*

Venkat, dressed in a simple kurta, walked towards Vidhi smilingly, gently complimenting her. *'You should wear sarees more often. This is unfair to the human eye.'*

She laughed a shy, fluttery laugh of hers, while fixing her hair over one shoulder.

Setu, from his workstation, while sending an email, could hear her laughing.

Setu had never really paid attention to what Vidhi wore. She was always... present. Comfortably dressed, polite, warm when she wanted to be, withdrawn when she didn't. Kurta-jeans, a printed stole, loosely tied hair. She was like background music—pleasant, familiar, never intrusive.

He knew she would look good in a saree.

But *this*... this he wasn't ready for.

She looked devastatingly beautiful!

When she entered the cubicle, her bangles clicking softly, the scent of her lavender and eucalyptus oil and something faintly citrus—maybe her moisturizer—hit him first. Then her voice. Low, close, unintentionally intimate.

She leaned in, pointing at the screen making a suggestion in the balance sheet he was working with.

And then he saw it.

Reflected in the darkened part of his laptop screen—the way her blouse gaped enough as she bent forward. A glimpse of the inner curve of her breast, the faintest swell of supple skin below her cleavage.

It awakened something in him that had *no place* between them.

Vidhi undid something in that moment,

His gaze dropped instantly, like a reflex of guilt.

Today Vidhi, his Sakhi wasn't his *anchor*. She was *everything his body wasn't supposed to respond to*.

She had walked into his bloodstream like a slow-burning fever. His focus scattered. Her hand brushed his as she adjusted the mouse—light, unthinking. But it scorched through his nerves.

He shifted in his seat. Subtle. Controlled. But not quick enough. He could feel the arousal. And he hated it.

His jaw tightened. There was a kind of betrayal throbbing inside him—strong, visible, shameful, uninvited.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Not with her.

And that's what made it worse.

This wasn't about lust. This was desire born of closeness, twisted by a single accident of fabric and skin.

Setu felt disgusted with himself.

Sakhi was sacred. Uncrossable.

But his body didn't know reverence. It only knew response.

He had to escape. From the heat pooling in his spine. From the remorse crawling up his throat.

When she nudged to ask if he wanted coffee, he barely nodded and pretended to be on a call.

He couldn't meet her eyes. He couldn't trust himself.

When she bent over, fixing the pleats at the edge of her saree, asking playfully,

'How do I look?' he instantly looked away, pretending to search something he didn't need.

Catching his hitched breath he responded in coarsely cracked voice, trying to regain control. *'Who set you free from the zoo?'*

She frowned. *'You are terrible! Setu'*

He smirked, stood up, mumbled something about a con call, and walked off.

He didn't have a call. He just needed space.

From *her*, from himself.

He locked himself in the terrace stairwell for some time to regain composure. The one place no one would look for him.

He sat on the stairs, elbows on knees, palms pressed over his eyes.

'Shit, man,' he whispered.

How could he look at her like that?

He hated himself for it. For letting his eyes pause where they shouldn't. For noticing the dip of her blouse. For thinking momentarily what her skin would feel like under his fingers.

He hadn't *wanted* to think that. He hadn't asked for it.

But the thought came, like an unwelcome gust of wind in a locked room.

And now it wouldn't leave.

He could hear voices in the background.

'Vidhi surprised today, man. Didn't know she could pull off that bold a look.'

'That blouse though—damn.'

'That waist! If someone doesn't flirt with her today, it'll be a waste of a saree.'

One guy even said:

'Prajakta looks good but Vidhi? She's like... dangerous good.'

Setu wanted to punch someone.

Not because they were wrong—but because *he* had thought the same thing. And he couldn't blame them without blaming himself first.

For rest of the day, he kept himself busy, avoiding looking at her as much he could.

June 2019

What they felt for each other hadn't started with anything drastic—just small, almost imperceptible moments.

Like the way Vidhan's gaze often lingered on Vidhi when she spoke in meetings, as if her words carried weight beyond the discussion at hand. Or the way he seemed to time his coffee breaks with hers, making sure their paths crossed without it seeming intentional.

Vidhi, too, had noticed.

Initially, Vidhi had dismissed it as camaraderie—after all, they had been friends at work for quite some time now. But lately, there was something different. Something that wasn't said aloud but was felt in the quietest of spaces between them.

One evening, as they were leaving the office late, Vidhi and Vidhan found themselves waiting for the elevator together. The office corridors were nearly empty, the hum of computers and distant chatter fading into the background.

She glanced at him. *'You're not usually here this late.'*

Vidhan shrugged. *'Neither are you.'*

She smirked. *'Deadlines.'*

He chuckled. *'Always.'*

The elevator arrived. They stepped in. The doors closed.

A faint *clunk*, a flicker of lights. The elevator stopped.

Vidhi sighed. *'Of course. Office lifts and their impeccable timing.'*

Vidhan pressed the emergency button and leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets, as usual. *'At least we have company.'*

She gave him a look. *'Really? That's the silver lining?'*

He grinned. *'Would you rather be stuck with Venkat?'*

Vidhi laughed despite herself.

Minutes passed. A soft silence settled between them.

Vidhan tilted his head, observing her. *'You're too quiet these days.'*

She hesitated. *'Just thinking.'*

'About?'

She glanced at him, debating whether to say it. Then, with a soft sigh, *'Do you ever feel like... no matter how much effort you put into something, it never quite reaches the other person the way you hope?'*

Vidhan's expression shifted. He understood—perhaps too well.

'Yes,' he said, voice quieter. *'More times than I can count.'*

There was something raw in his tone, something that made Vidhi look away.

The lift whirled back to life, breaking the moment.

A month later, a leadership conference took them to Hyderabad. The team attended sessions all day, but the evenings were theirs.

One night, after an elaborate dinner with the team and delegates, Vidhi stepped out onto the terrace of the hotel, needing air. The city stretched before her, a sea of lights.

She wasn't alone.

Vidhan stood there, hands resting on the railing, lost in thought.

She walked up beside him. *'Thinking of running away?'*

He smirked. *'If I ever do, I'll let you know.'*

Silence. Then, he said, *'Do you ever wonder what life would've been like if a few choices had been different?'*

Vidhi turned to him, eyebrows raised. *'We're getting philosophical now?'*

He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. *'Just a thought.'*

She exhaled. *'I think we all do. But the past is a fixed script, Setu. No rewrites.'*

Vidhan chuckled. *'That's such a Sakhi thing to say.'*

She nudged him playfully. He smiled, looking at her a second too long before shifting his gaze back to the skyline.

Vidhan was careful—always.

No lingering touches, no words that could be misinterpreted. But there were things he did, things no one else noticed.

One afternoon they were at a team lunch, and the waiter had forgotten to place cutlery at her end. Before she could even ask, Vidhan had already picked up an extra one and placed it beside her plate.

She stared at him.

He didn't look at her. Didn't say anything. Just continued eating, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

And maybe it was.

But it wasn't natural for her husband to do that.

And that thought sat heavy upon her.

Vidhi too felt this pull towards Vidhan a little stronger than it should be. Honestly, she couldn't imagine herself in her office without him around. Talking to him was the only thing she looked forward to in recent times.

Vidhan too had never been a man of impulsive emotions. He carried himself with the restraint of someone who knew the weight of his actions, someone who made sure his words never hovered too long, his gestures never raised questions.

But lately, that restraint felt like a thread stretched too thin.

Vidhi saw it too.

The way his eyes searched for her in a crowded room. The way his laughter always softened when she was around. The way he instinctively looked for her reactions to things before reacting himself.

He had always been her *Setu*, her bridge through the monotony of work, a steady force in an otherwise transactional world. But now... Now, there was something more.

It had been months and months of these moments—small, quiet, building into something neither of them could name.

Until that night in the office cafeteria.

Vidhi knew she couldn't let it go on unspoken. She didn't want blurred lines. She preferred clarity, and Setu deserved it too. And Vidhi, unlike him, wasn't someone who would let things fester in silence, despite her own storm of contradictions.

And so, she finally decided to approach Vidhan.

It was a regular Friday evening at the office—except it wasn't. The air between them had been different for weeks now, filled with unspoken questions neither of them dared to answer.

The team had left, and the cafeteria was mostly empty, save for the staff cleaning up. Vidhi sat across from Vidhan, stirring her coffee, watching him.

'Setu,' she finally said, breaking the silence.

He looked up. 'Hmm?'

'We should talk.'

Vidhan didn't feign confusion. He knew exactly what she meant.

He leaned back in his chair, exhaling. 'You always prefer clarity, don't you, Sakhi?'

'Don't you?' she countered, tilting her head.

A smile flickered at the corner of his lips, only his lips, not eyes. 'Sometimes, things are better left unspoken.'

Vidhi shook her head. 'Not when they start affecting the way we breathe.'

That made him pause.

She continued, her voice steady. 'We both know something has changed. And I don't want to pretend it hasn't.'

Vidhan didn't respond immediately. Instead, he traced the rim of his cup, staring at it as if it held answers.

'You're married,' he finally said. 'I'm married. Our connection—no matter how strong—has limits. Our emotional commitment and any time beyond office should be dedicated to our family and not some blooming friendship.....I know.'

Silence stretched between them, heavy and undeniable.

Vidhi looked down at her hands, choosing her words carefully. *'I value what we have, Setu. I do. But I need to know we're still on solid ground. That we're not—'* she hesitated, then sighed, *'—not walking into something we shouldn't.'*

Vidhan's jaw tightened. *'Do you think we are?'*

She met his gaze, her voice soft but firm. *'I think... we're standing at the edge of something. And if we don't acknowledge it now, we might slip without meaning to.'*

Vidhan exhaled, rubbing a hand over his face. *'You always know how to put things into words.'*

'I try,' she said. *'Because silence makes it worse.'*

He nodded, looking past her, at nothing in particular. *'Sakhi... I never wanted this to be complicated.'*

'I know.'

'I respect you so much.'

'I know that too.'

He finally looked at her then, his eyes filled with something she couldn't quite name. *'Then what do we do, Sakhi?'*

Vidhi took a deep breath, letting the warmth of the coffee ground her.

'We draw our lines, Setu. And we hold them. Because I don't want to lose this—' she gestured between them, *'—but I also don't want to cross into something we can't come back from.'*

Vidhan studied her for a long moment. Then, with a small, tired smile, he nodded.

'Alright, Sakhi,' he said softly. *'We hold the lines.'*

And for now, that was enough.

August 2019

Vidhi had been noticing the changes in Vidhan, but before she could fully process them, something about Namit started unsettling her too.

It wasn't that Namit had changed—he was still the same meticulous, structured, emotionally distant man she had always known. But over the years, he had grown more attentive in practical ways—making her feel at home through thoughtful gestures—while still withholding the tenderness of affectionate words and fleeting touches.

One evening, as she placed dinner on the table, she watched him scrolling through his phone, answering work emails, oblivious to her presence.

She cleared her throat. *'Dinner is ready.'*

He nodded, still typing. *'Hmm... just a minute.'*

She sat down, waiting. The food was getting cold, the silence stretching.

Vidhi thought of Vidhan—how even at his worst, even when he was withdrawn and hurting, he would notice her, sense her presence, acknowledge her without her having to ask for it.

Finally, Namit put his phone aside and took a bite of the roti. *'Salt's a little less no.'*

'It is. It always was. You just noticed now,' she said, her tone even.

Namit looked at her, confused, unaware of what it meant.

Vidhi blinked, as if waking from a distant place. She exhaled, her smile fragile. *'Oh yeah...I'll get the shaker.'*

She got up, but her mind was elsewhere. A strange restlessness crawled under her skin.

That night, as she lay beside Namit, staring at the ceiling, she wondered—was it wrong to crave something she had never

received in her own marriage? Was it wrong to ache for what she had with Vidhan—a connection, a presence, a warmth she had often begged from Namit but never received?

She was torn between moral dilemma and guilt. The thought itself felt like betrayal.

Vidhan was pulling away too.

Vidhi was caught between two men—one who never gave her enough and one who had given too much and was now retreating.

She turned to her side, eyes resting on Namit's sleeping form—his breath steady, rhythmic. Unbothered.

She closed her eyes, but her mind stayed wide awake—restless, tangled in knots she couldn't name.

She wanted to hold him. Tight enough to let her turmoil dissolve into his skin.

She longed for him to reach for her, to pull her back from the edge of this quiet undoing.

She wished—desperately—that Namit could save her from the devastating storm she never meant to summon.

Namit lay still, eyes closed, trying to sleep. But inside, his mind wouldn't stop thinking. He had noticed Vidhi drifting lately. Not in any loud, dramatic way—just... quieter. Was she overworked? Homesick? Or was it him? That last thought hit the hardest.

Did I miss something? Did I say something wrong?
He wanted to reach out, to ask her, to hold her and assure her that he was there—but he didn't know where to begin.

It wasn't hard to guess what she needed—words, warmth spoken aloud, little affirmations that wrapped around her like comfort. But that had never come naturally to him. He loved in quiet ways—through his presence, his habits, the unnoticed things.

In his twenties, love had meant pursuit, proving, performing. Back then, he thought that was what it took. But life had sobered him.

What he longed for now was simpler, deeper—stability, sincerity, someone to come home to without pretence.

And with Vidhi, he had that. She was his calm, his home. He didn't need to chase anymore.

But maybe in slowing down, he had forgotten to express. Maybe she mistook his comfort for complacency.

He stayed still, breathing evenly, hoping she'd feel—somehow—that she was loved, even in his silence. And that he was trying... in his own quiet way.

His fingers ached to reach for hers but stayed where they were. Maybe tomorrow, he'd try again. In his own way. Quietly. Consistently. The only way he knew how to love.

Vidhi couldn't sleep. She opened her laptop to check a few mails and complete some pending tasks instead.

Vidhi's life dangled between what her mind knew of Namit and what he truly was to her.

And yet, here she was—confronting another quiet moment of distance, another invisible wall that had stood between them all along, unnoticed by him, unbearable for her.

It had never been about the big things. Namit had always been transparent—his emails, passwords, phone—she had access to everything.

And still, despite this openness, she found herself at a crossroad she hadn't anticipated, one that had quietly begun after a bitter argument in the early days of their marriage.

One evening, three years back, frustration brimming in her voice, she had finally asked, *'Why am I still not on your friend list on Facebook?'*

Namit, lying on the bed with his phone, barely looked up. *'Vidhi, I don't even use Facebook. What difference does it make?'*

'It makes a difference to me,' she shot back, arms crossed. 'It's been almost two years, Namit. Not just marriage—before that too. I thought maybe, just maybe, one day you'd send me a request.'

He sighed. *'Vidhi, this is such a non-issue. I don't post anything; I don't check my feed. Why does it matter?'*

'Because I matter, Namit!' The sharpness in her voice made him blink. *'It's not about Facebook. It's about acknowledging me. It's about the fact that for two years, you never thought to include me in your space, even though when you're friends with random colleagues and college batchmates you haven't spoken to in years.'*

'That's different,' he said, sitting up. 'I added them years ago. It's not like I actively use it now.'

'Then why not add me? What's stopping you?' Her voice wavered; anger laced with hurt. *'Do you know how discomforting it is that I had to ask for this? That I had to spell it out?'*

Namit put his hand behind his head, folded, exhaling sharply. *'You're overthinking this, Vidhi.'*

She let out a hollow laugh. *'No, Namit. You're underthinking it.'*

Silence stretched between them, thick and suffocating. She blinked away the tears threatening to spill.

'I don't know what you want me to say,' he muttered finally. 'I just... don't see the point.'

And that was it. He wasn't going to give in, not even to make her feel better.

That night, she cried. She begged. She pleaded. But Namit stood his ground. His logic was flawless, his reasoning impeccable. And yet, she was left feeling defeated. They weren't Facebook friends till date. And it wasn't even about Facebook.

After that, she let go—or at least pretended to. She never doubted him, never invaded his privacy. But sometimes, on sleepless nights, she would scroll through his old, tagged posts of common friends,

not searching for anything in particular, just trying to piece together a version of him that felt more accessible, more hers.

One such night, she was in Indore, back in the comfort of her Nani's house. Maa and Baba were asleep. Kritika and Karthik had come over earlier—the picture-perfect couple with their effortless love.

Vidhi had watched them, envied them. The way Karthik stole glances at Kritika, how her cheeks flushed in response. The silent conversations they held in crowded rooms. The way he would boldly take her hand, press a soft kiss to her temple while she blushed and whispered, *'Someone will see.'*

And Karthik, with his careless grin, would reply, *'So what? You're my legally wedded wife.'*

Vidhi longed for that. For a love that didn't need to be justified with logic or weighed against practicality. For a love that existed in gestures, in touches, in glances.

That night, after Kritika and Karthik had left, sleep evaded her. It was past 1 AM. Namit hadn't messaged all day. No call, no text.

Maybe he was busy. Maybe he would call tomorrow.

Maybe.

She opened her laptop, scrolling mindlessly, trying to distract herself. Out of habit, she clicked on Namit's old email account and skimmed through the inbox.

And then—

A subject line caught her eye.

I love you.

Her heart clenched. Her breath hitched.

She didn't have the courage to open it then.

But today, caught between two distinct feelings, she remembered the mail and clicked it open.

Date: 17 June 2004

Subject: Gargi, Please Read This. I Love You.

Jaan Meri,

I don't know how to start this mail because there's too much inside me, and I feel like I might explode. It's been months since school ended, but it still doesn't feel real that we're not together every day. I miss you. I miss you so much that it physically hurts.

Tum bin... jiya jaye kaise? Kaise jiya jaye tum bin?

You probably think I'm being dramatic, but I swear, this is how I feel. Every single day, I wake up and stare at my notebook, writing your name over and over. I flip through old slam books, reread the little notes we passed in class, and hold onto every memory like it's all I have left. But it's not the same. It will never be the same unless I have you.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

I don't care how childish or stupid this sounds. I don't care if I have to say it a million times. I just need you to know this forever.

Do you remember how we'd sit next to each other in class, pretending to pay attention while secretly talking in our own world? How we'd fight over the last bite of chocolate? How you'd scold me when I didn't study, but your eyes always gave you away? You love me too. I know you do. And I still feel it, even now.

So why are we here? Why are we apart? Why does life have to be so unfair?

I can't take this distance anymore, Gargi. I know things have changed, that we're in different places now, but my heart hasn't moved an inch. It's still stuck on you, still waiting for you, still refusing to let go. This long-distance thing sucks, my love.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

Gargi, please tell me you miss me too. Tell me I'm not the only one stuck in this madness. Tell me there's still a chance for us.

Yours, always,

Namit

Vidhi's eyes skimmed the email, her pulse quickening. The desperation in Namit's words, the relentless *'I love you'*—it was raw, unguarded, almost suffocating. This wasn't the Namit she knew. This was a college boy who had loved recklessly, who had ached for someone with a madness she had never seen in him.

Has he ever wanted her like this? Has he ever missed her with this kind of unbearable longing?

The room felt colder. A strange hollowness crept in.

This was a version of Namit she had never met—the Namit who loved with abundance, who poured himself into words without hesitation. It was so different from the man she lived with now, the man who measured his words, who never let his emotions spill over.

Her hands moved on their own, typing 'Gargi' into the search bar. A flood of emails appeared—some warm, some cold. She opened them one by one, each word cutting through her like a blade. She read until she couldn't anymore, until the weight of longing and neglect pressed down on her chest. Desire and pain blurred into one, pulling her into a hollow space where she was both lost and alone.

Date: 20 November 2004

Subject: Still Mad at Me?

Hey love,

I know I should have written earlier. Got caught up with work, and by the time I finally sat down, I knew meri drama queen must be upset. I can almost picture you—arms crossed, that little frown,

pretending to ignore me but secretly waiting for me to make it up to you.

Tell me, when we start our life together, will it always be like this? If I come home late, will you sit there, refusing to look at me, making me work twice as hard to earn that one little smile? Or will Biscuit—yes, your Biscuit, because I know you'll never allow me to name our dog sheru..... will he jump in to save me?

And then, like always, I'll find a way to melt that anger. Maybe with a hug, maybe with whispered apologies, or maybe by pulling you close and telling you how impossible it is to breathe when you're upset with me. Because the truth is, no matter how much you fight, no matter how much you push me away—I'll always find my way back to you. Main tenu samjhawa ki.....

So, still mad?

Tumhare maaf karne ka intezaar mein,

Sirf Tumhara, Namit.

Date: 10 December 2004

Subject: Can't Wait for Forever

Gargi, my love,

You know, sometimes I sit back and wonder—how did I get so lucky? Tum meri life mein kaise aa gayi?It still feels unreal that in just a little while, you'll be mine forever.

I keep thinking about our life together—our home, lazy Sunday mornings, you getting annoyed at my messy habits, and me distracting you with hugs so you forget why you were mad. And of course, Biscuit—our little furball, who I know will always take your side. I can already picture you pampering him while I pretend to be jealous.

The best part about us? It just feels right. Every conversation, every silence, every little fight—sab kuch bas aur special banata hai. I want to come home to you, tell you about my day, hear you

complain about yours, and then just pull you close till nothing else matters.

I wonder how it will feel to wake up next to you every morning, to see you lost in your thoughts while making chai, to steal moments in between our busy days just to be with you. I want to memorize every little habit of yours, every expression, every dream. And when life gets tough, I want to be the one who reminds you that we're in this together.

You know, every time I hear 'Abhi na jao chhod kar, ke dil abhi bhara nahi...' I think of you. Because no matter how much time we spend together, it's never enough.

Jaldi aa jao na. Life's waiting for us.

Bas Tumhara

Namit

PS- O Mere Dil Ke Chain, chain aaye mere dil ko dua kijiye!

She then typed Smriti and a folder of archived mails popped up.

Date: 1 February 2008

Subject: Quick Snack Run

Hi Momo,

Heading out to grab some snacks for our room. See you in the evening! And stop calling me 'Purva' in class. Even professors wonder! I use it only in official docs.

Take care,

Namit, your 'Purva' (urggggg)

Date: 3 March 2008

Subject: Off to Dehradun

Hey Momo,

Boarding the train to Dehradun today. See you in a week! Meanwhile eat well, rest well and miss me well!

Take care,

Purva

Date: 11 July 2009

Subject: In a Different Place

Smriti, My Momo,

I never thought I'd feel this way, but here I am, with so much left unsaid. College is ending, and placements are around the corner. The uncertainty of where I'll be, which city I'll end up in, is pulling at something deep inside me. But more than that, it's the thought of leaving this place, this time, behind... leaving you behind.

I'm not sure when it happened, but somewhere along the way, I started to care about you more than I ever planned to. Every conversation, every laugh, every quiet moment we shared... they mean more to me than I can express. And now, the idea of being in a different city, away from you—it scares me more than it probably should.

I don't even know if I'm making sense right now, but I guess what I'm trying to say is that this transition isn't just about college or work or any of the changes ahead. It's about the ache of knowing things might change between us too. And I'm afraid I might not be strong enough to let go of what we have.

I just needed you to know that I'm here, and no matter where I go, I'll always carry this feeling with me.

Take care,

Namit, only your 'Purva'

Date: 11 July 2009

Subject: A Truth I Can't Hold Back

Namit,

I've never been good with words, but today, I can't keep this inside any longer. All this time, I've been holding onto something, something so deep and powerful, and I can't pretend it's not there anymore.

I've been fighting it, trying to convince myself that this is just a phase, something that'll pass. But it hasn't. It's only grown stronger. And the more I try to ignore it, the more it consumes me.

Namit, I love you. I always have.

It's not just the little moments we share, though they mean everything to me. It's the way you make me feel understood, the way you calm my storm without even trying. It's the quiet way you show you care, even when you don't say it out loud. It's everything you are, and everything I've come to realize I need.

I don't know what the future holds for us, and I don't know where this path leads, but I can't go another day without telling you how I feel. I've tried to keep it hidden, tried to keep it just between me and my heart, but you deserve the truth.

I love you, Namit. And I'm scared of what this means, but I can't keep pretending it's not real.

Always Yours,

Smriti (your Momo).

There was an endless list to it- the mails and saved Vodafone messages.

It was best to not read them further, Vidhi thought and switched off the laptop, signing out.

Ever since Samar's death, Vidhi had developed the quiet and weird habit of speaking to him in her mind—sharing her deepest thoughts, seeking his advice, imagining his voice as if he were still guiding her, gently, from somewhere beyond. It calmed her and healed her from the heartbreaking loss and grief.

As usual, she typed, *'I feel stuck Samar'*

Ten minutes later her phone beeped, Samar's message flashing on screen, *'Because you are stuck with me Vidhi. Because you haven't let go of me. I was supposed to occupy just a corner of your memory, but you tried to keep me alive in your life! Let go of me Vidhi. Allow him to hold you!!'*

She didn't want to. 'How?'

'By being judicious and emotionally committed. By allowing time to heal you and him.'

On a pensive note, she typed 'hmm'

Of all the things she owned, it was Samar's phone that she held closest—like a lifeline to a world that once felt warm, known, and irrevocably hers.

It wasn't just a device—it was memory, comfort, ache and presence all packed into one. Her most cherished possession.

It had stayed with Ma in Kolkata. Vidhi would often recharge it and send messages when her heart felt tangled in dilemmas. The replies came—sooner or later—typed by Ma, healing and guiding just like Samar. As much as she knew it was Ma, her heart would find solace, believing it was Samar.

She didn't realise when she fell asleep while scribbling some random thoughts in her diary.

'I am.

I am more than what meets your eyes.

I am more than how I look or what I wear or how I act.

I am my thoughts, my words and the capacity to create.

I am bit of warmth and love, breeze and sway

And calm and peace and silence on way.

I am the bridge that connects you to you

I am the pole where your ego is held high for worship

And I am plane, like earth that reminds of home.

I am wind and wing alike.

I am.

You may not see with sight blinded by beauty

With attractions soothing or fatal

With heart flung in the spring of summer and fading youth.

I will not wait for you to find me.

I will not.

For I shall flow and still be.

I am not the darling daisy or Opulent orchid your heart seeks,

But a wildflower

That's rare and blooms in Meadows of ache and ease.

I come with prick and taste of blood.

I am raw and bare, exactly how I ought to be!

Next day Vidhi woke up with a heavy head. She wanted to let go of last night's burden as she readied for office.

Ira ma'am had kept a team meeting at 10.30. Vidhan was nowhere to be seen so far. And when he finally joined the meeting, he didn't look at Vidhi, not once. There was no customary exchange of words, no greetings, nothing. And this continued for days and weeks and months together.

Neither of them had spoken much since that last, uneasy meeting at the cafeteria. And Vidhi could feel it—an ache that wasn't born of silence alone. This distance wasn't circumstantial. It wasn't just work or exhaustion. It was intentional. Measured. Deliberate.

Vidhan—her Setu—was withdrawing, gradually.

Vidhan had agreed with Vidhi—not because it was easy, but because she was right. Her words had been clear, composed, mature. But being right didn't ease the heart. He'd gone home that evening with a quiet ache lodged in his chest—one that logic couldn't soften, and time refused to hush.

That night, as he lay beside Dharaa—his wife, his well-wisher, his constant—an unfamiliar restlessness pressed against him. By all measures, life was good. The marriage was steady, the home warm, and Dharaa, as always, kind. And yet, his thoughts kept drifting—softly, stubbornly—back to his Sakhi. To their

unfinished conversations, the quiet joy in her voice, the way she instinctively understood him without explanations... and the line that she drew.

Ever since Vidhi asked him to draw that line, something about him had changed. He wasn't in love with her—he knew that. What they had was something else entirely. It wasn't just friendship, not in the usual sense. But it wasn't love either. *It was quieter than love, deeper than friendship.* A space where words met without noise, where silences held meaning. And yet, the clarity of Vidhi's boundaries had unsettled something in him.

He hadn't been able to get close to Dharaa since. Not in the way a husband should. And he loved her—truly, deeply. But intimacy had begun to feel like an intrusion, a betrayal of something unspoken. So, he gave excuses—fatigue, deadlines, stress. And Dharaa, pretty as morning dew, charming as soft moonlight, yet gentle but perceptive, had noticed. She had asked, more than once, with pain veiled behind patient eyes. But he had no answers to offer. Only silence, and a heart quietly adrift.

At work, both of them—Vidhan and Vidhi were composed as ever—interacting way they should, except now there was an invisible restraint, something formal.

Vidhan found himself watching her more often, catching fleeting moments when she was lost in thought, when she brushed her hair behind her ear absentmindedly, when she tapped her pen against her notepad during meetings.

It was irrational. It was frustrating.

And yet, it was.

Two months later, it happened. The week had just started. A day's picnic was to be organised for the Finance and Marketing team the coming Friday.

Vidhi and Gaurang were working closely with the HR to finalise the entire plan, while Vidhi was also handling back-to-back calls, managing deadlines, juggling presentations. By evening, she was

drained, massaging her temple as she sat at her desk, eyes shut for a brief moment.

Vidhan passed by, intending to go straight to his cabin. But something about the sight of her—exhausted, lost in thought—made him pause.

He didn't think.

Grabbing a bottle of lemon water from the nearby counter, he placed it on her desk. *'Drink this.'*

Vidhi opened her eyes and looked up. For a moment, they simply held each other's gaze.

Vidhi took the bottle, her fingers brushing against his for the briefest second. *'Thanks, Setu.'* Her voice was soft, tired.

Vidhan nodded. He wanted to say something—anything—but words felt useless.

So, he walked away.

And Vidhi watched him go, feeling the ache, she had promised herself she wouldn't allow.

Vidhan had withdrawn like the tide pulling away from the shore, leaving behind traces of its presence but never quite returning with the same force.

He was still there, still spoke when needed, still professional, still polite. But the ease was gone. The subtle warmth, the unspoken understanding, the way he used to look at her across the room as if he could hear her thoughts—all of it was missing.

And it hurt.

At both ends.

She had been the one to draw the line, and yet, she hadn't anticipated this—the hollow ache of his absence, the void left behind by his retreat.

The finance and marketing teams had been buzzing all week. Friday's offsite picnic had finally arrived — a chance to unwind, disconnect from targets and presentations, and just be.

The Bangalore morning was crisp, the skies clear, and the hills beckoned with a gentle mist. The team members were bubbling with anticipation. There were playlists, sunglasses, dry snacks in ziplocks, and the typical office gossip weaving its way through every WhatsApp group.

It was a place called Singasandra Hills — off the grid, lush, unfiltered, and just far enough to feel like freedom. Nandi Hills was vetoed. Too cliché. Too seen. This place? Raw, beautiful, and less crowded.

Individual vehicles were allowed.

Venkat came in his white Creta, with Mohit and Sritakshi, blasting classic Hindi tracks.

Prajakta arrived with her girl gangs and few male admirers. She flexed her new sunglasses and a fancy accent she'd picked up from a trending reel.

Setu rode in — astride his Royal Enfield Interceptor 650. The signature thump echoed, deep and steady, like a heartbeat refusing to rush. He wore a casual white tee, fitting snugly over his broad frame, a light stubble catching the early sun. Aviators sat on his face like they belonged.

Prajakta, dramatically holding her iced coffee, almost whispered, *'I didn't know men like that still existed in finance.'*

Setu parked, unbothered, took off his gloves, and nodded at a few people. He looked composed.

Until Vidhi arrived.

She wasn't overdone — White linen kurti, denim, her hair loosely tied with tendrils falling along her neck. Simple. Effortless.

And she looked directly at Setu, smiling.

'Nice bike,' she chirped.

'Thanks,' Setu replied, tone measured. Cool. Distant.

'Can I ride with you?'

A pause.

A long, painful pause.

Not because he didn't want her.

But because he did.

Too much.

Setu didn't even look up. *'Seat's narrow. Suspension is rough on these roads. You'll be uncomfortable.'*

Vidhi blinked. *'Oh.'*

Setu nodded towards Venkat's SUV. *'Take the car. Safer.'*

Prajakta squealed from behind. *'I am coming with you then!'* she said, already swinging her sling bag across her shoulder.

He didn't protest.

He didn't wait for Vidhi's reply either. Her expression was unreadable — a mix of hurt and resignation, maybe even confusion.

Meanwhile he swung a leg over his Enfield, turned the key, and with a twist of the throttle, the bike purred back to life — loud, assertive, unapologetically masculine.

They moved in a loose convoy — cars leading, bikes trailing behind.

Setu, on his bike, kept his speed consistent, his mind blank. The wind against his face helped. So did Prajakta's constant chatter. But the rearview mirror — every now and then — would catch a glimpse of Vidhi's hair blowing through the open car window.

She was watching him.

He could feel it. Like a weight on his back.

The hill was quiet, shaded by tall eucalyptus and peppered with wildflowers. Everyone scattered — playing dumb games, taking selfies, passing around snacks.

The team hiked, laughed, posed for reels. The breeze was cool on the hilltop, but Setu's body felt anything but calm.

He stood a little apart, one hand resting casually on the Royal Enfield's handlebar, the other shoved deep in his pocket. His posture was easy, almost seductive—the kind of stillness that draws eyes without even trying. A faint shadow of a smile played on his lips as Saksham and Vishwa cracked a joke, but his eyes kept flickering away, avoiding the figure not far from him.

She noticed.

And it stung.

Avoiding her like she was fire.

Prajakta laughed loudly nearby, the unmistakable gleam of admiration in her eyes locked on Setu. She leaned in close to him, her words dripping with flirtation, *'You always ride that bike like you own the road, Setu. Wish I could keep up.'* or *'Do you just ride bikes...ummm...'*

Setu forced a grin, nodding politely.

Few steps away Venkat passed Vidhi some coconut water. *'Tired?'*

She shook her head. Her eyes were fixed on Setu — now laughing at some overdone joke by Prajakta.

'Setu's doing the classic 'don't look, don't talk' routine,' Venkat said, nudging Vidhi lightly as they sipped from their coconut water.

Vidhi chuckled, shrugging.

'So, he has space for everyone today. Just not me', she winked.

'I suggest you both sit and resolve whatever the matter is with you, before you both explode with the silent treatment', Venkat suggested and Vidhi burst into laughter.

They walked off to the edge of the hill, with Venkat casually talking about how Setu had been during their college days and their hostel dramas.

Vidhan saw them walk away.

And hated himself for ignoring her.

Post lunch Vidhi walked up to Vidhan quietly. He was sitting by himself, sipping water, face still, gaze distant.

'Why didn't you want me on the bike?' she asked softly, without accusation. *'And this whole time you have been deliberately avoiding me. What's this drama?'*

Setu looked at her, startled. She wasn't joking.

He exhaled, glanced away. *'It's not like that.'*

'Then what?'

Setu stood. Wiped his hands on his jeans. Voice low.

'Because I'm trying, Sakhi'

'Trying what?'

'To not... blur lines. Even in my head.'

'I told you once... I'm not that kind of man. I don't cross lines.'

He stepped back and walked away.

Vidhi watched his back — broad, upright, straining under the weight of honesty.

The picnic had music, laughter, wind, and hills.

But between two people who used to talk about everything, silence had taken root.

Days passed, and the distance solidified.

One afternoon, Himadri walked up to Vidhan's desk, holding a file. *'Setu, the client presentation needs some modifications. Can you check?'*

Vidhan barely glanced at it. *'Send it to someone else, I'm busy.'*

Himadri frowned. *'But you were the one handling this—'*

'I said, I'm busy!' Vidhan snapped, rubbing his temple as he turned back to his screen.

The office went silent. Even Vidhi, sitting a few desks away, looked up, startled. Setu never raised his voice.

Later, Ira Ma'am called him in. She shut the glass door behind her and folded her arms. *'Vidhan, what's wrong with you? This is the third time this week you've lashed out at someone.'*

Vidhan sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. *'Nothing, Ira Ma'am. I'll handle it.'*

She didn't buy it. *'Fix it. Before I must step in.'*

With every passing day Vidhan had withdrawn more, physically and emotionally. He avoided Dharaa's touch, her questions, even the warmth that once came so naturally between them. Late at night, he would lay awake, staring at the ceiling, with Dharaa beside, unaware of the storm raging inside him.

And somewhere across the city, Vidhi would lay awake too wondering if she was the storm or the shelter.

The terrace of their office had become Vidhan's second home. A place he never used to frequent was now where he spent most of his breaks.

Vidhi found him there one evening, a cigarette dangling between his fingers, smoke curling in the crisp air.

She sighed. *'Again?'*

He didn't respond. Just took a long drag, exhaling slowly.

'When did you start smoking this much?' she pressed.

Vidhan chuckled bitterly. *'Ninage problem ideya?'* (*Do you have problem?*)

'Howdu, ide.' (*Yes, I have.*)

She had learnt a bit of Kannada to at least understand Setu and Venkat's inside jokes, and also because she liked learning Setu's mother tongue.

He turned to her, exhaling a huge puff of smoke. *'How does it matter?'*

Vidhi stared at him. This wasn't her Setu. This was someone else—someone drowning.

A few days later, she found him again on the office terrace, smoking. Not one cigarette—three stubs already lay crushed near his feet.

She leaned against the railing beside him, waiting.

After a long silence, she finally spoke. *'You don't even like smoking.'*

Vidhan smirked, exhaling a cloud of smoke. *'Yeah? Seems like I do now.'*

'Since when?'

'Since things stopped making sense.'

Vidhi's fingers curled around the railing. *'Talk to me, Setu.'*

He let out a sharp laugh. *'What do you want me to say, Sakhi?'* His voice held a bitter edge. *'That I feel like I'm losing my mind? That I don't recognize myself anymore? That I have a life, a wife, everything I should be grateful for, and yet.....'*

He stopped, shaking his head.

'And yet?' Vidhi prompted, softly.

He turned to her then, eyes dark and searching. *'And yet I feel like I'm being pulled somewhere I shouldn't be. Like I'm standing on the edge of something dangerous.'*

Vidhi's heart clenched. She knew. She knew because she felt it too.

But she held her ground. *'Then step back.'*

Vidhan scoffed. *'You say it like it's that easy.'*

She met his gaze, unwavering. *'It's the only way.'*

The wind howled between them. The unsaid stretched long and heavy.

After that day, Vidhan started avoiding her even more.

At work, he kept conversations short. If she walked into the cafeteria, he walked out. If she texted him something casual, he responded hours later with nothing more than a ‘hmm’ or ‘okay.’

One evening, she found him with Mohit and Himadri in the break room.

‘You’re no fun these days, man,’ Mohit nudged him. *‘What’s up with you?’*

Vidhan forced a smirk. *‘Work, dude. What else?’*

Mohit chuckled. *‘Work? Or is someone distracting you?’* His eyes flicked, just for a second, towards Vidhi.

Before she could even process it, Vidhan’s expression changed. The air around him tensed like a drawn bowstring.

He put down his coffee with a loud clank. *‘Careful what you say, Mohit,’* he said, voice low. *‘I don’t entertain bullshit.’*

Venkat held up his hands. *‘Whoa. It was a joke, man.’*

Vidhan didn’t respond. He just turned and walked out.

Vidhi sat there, her stomach knotting.

Something was going to break soon.

‘What’s wrong with the fella. I know some girl from IT likes him hence I teased,’ Mohit stomped away angrily.

That night, Vidhan was browsing through his phone after dinner when the door clicked open. It was Dharaa in a sheer nightgown; her silhouette bathed in the soft light from the hallway. His eyes involuntarily lifted to meet hers. For a brief moment, he clutched his phone tighter, the grip firming as he tried to look away—but in vain.

She walked in slowly, each step measured, almost purposeful. The nightgown clung to her body, a delicate fabric that seemed to

shimmer in the dim light, barely concealing the curves he had known so intimately before. Seduction hung in the air as she approached him, tip toed.

Vidhan shifted uncomfortably, his heart racing as he couldn't escape the heat radiating from her presence. Dharaa paused near the edge of the bed; her eyes fixed on him with a look that was both inviting and expectant.

'Who's gonna be my daddy tonight...' she murmured, toying with her lower lip, her voice a slow drawl of mischief. *'I wanna be your bad gurl...'*

He swallowed hard, his throat dry, his mind torn between desire and the weight of guilt (depriving her of intimacy) that seemed to grow heavier with each passing second. Dharaa was close now. Her voice dripped like honey laced with fire.

She bent toward him, the fabric of her robe slipped slightly, revealing the curve of her cleavage as she saddled herself closer to him.

Vidhan's pulse quickened. A soft moan escaped his breath as tension started building up. Weeks without intimacy, weeks without giving in to the pull of his body—he couldn't ignore it any longer. The weight of his desire, of his urgency for release, surged to the surface. He felt his breath catch. She moved closer, her fingers tracing a path down his chest, sliding further below the abdomen, a teasing touch that made his blood run hot. He could feel an aching throb under his sweatpants. His hand reached for her instinctively, pulling her in as his lips crashed against hers, needy, urgent.

Her body pressed into his, Dharaa's hands moved with a playful confidence, slowly removing the layers between them. She was patient but insistent, and Vidhan found himself following her lead.

He kissed her deeper, his hands sliding along her back, pulling her against him. Her breath quickened as his lips trailed to her neck, with desire. Every inch of her felt like fire, her skin soft, her

scent intoxicating. He had been starving for this, for quite some time now. His body responded without hesitation, the familiar rhythm of their union drawing him further into the moment, moaning.

But just as their bodies began to move together, grinding, the heat of the moment almost reaching its peak, a thought—a face—flashed in his mind.

Sakhi.

He pulled back with a jolt, instinctively pushing Dharaa away.

His breath hitched, his movements faltering as remorse slammed into him like a tidal wave. He pulled back, eyes closed, his body tense as he fought to regain control.

Drawing lines — that moment, that simple request, suddenly overpowered the sensations he was experiencing. The warmth of Dharaa's body, the intensity of the act—it all felt wrong.

But Dharaa was still there, puzzled, her breath shallow as the desire that had built up was left hanging, unfulfilled.

Vidhan's chest rose and fell rapidly as he clutched the bedsheet, his moans turning to soft grunts as he tried to restrain himself, but the urgency, the need, the overwhelming physical pull, were too much. He could feel the sweat forming on his forehead, his body betraying him as he clenched his jaw, trying to withhold himself. He couldn't do this. Not like this. Not with Vidhi's face in his mind.

His heart pounded, guilt clawing at his chest. His body ached for release, but his conscience held him back. What he shared with Vidhi was too pure—too rooted in respect. Her face flashing in that moment felt wrong—like a violation, of not only Dharaa but the sanctity he associated with Vidhi. And that thought alone was enough to stop him cold.

'...Sorry... *I can't*,' he breathed, barely audible, trying to steady his thoughts. His hands trembled as he touched Dharaa's face, then kissed her forehead.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered, thick with guilt, gently pulling away.

Still panting, Dharaa frowned—but he offered no explanation. Mumbling something about shoulder pain, he grabbed his shirt, hands shaking as he buttoned up, and stepped out to the balcony for a cigarette.

The moment hung unfinished, incomplete, and as Vidhan stood in the balcony, his breath uneven, he couldn't escape the feeling of having let both women down. He needed to purge this—the sickening self-disgust curling at the edge of his conscience. He wasn't sure how, but he equally needed to draw lines and set boundaries to ease his heart's ache.

The next morning, she saw him by the coffee machine, looking exhausted, dark circles under his eyes. He tried ignoring her, not knowing how to look at her with those guilty eyes.

'Enough!'

She walked up to him, set her cup down, and said, *'Cafe. Today. After work.'*

He blinked, caught off guard. *'What?'*

'You heard me, Setu.'

The café was called *Amber Leaves*, tucked away in the quiet of the Whitefield Lane—one of those hidden gems you'd never find unless someone led you there. Vidhi walked in first and chose a corner table beside a tall French window overlooking a cobbled path lined with gently swaying gulmohur trees. The glass was slightly fogged, kissed by the soft mist of evening. Though it hadn't rained, the air held the hush of an unfallen drizzle—cloud-laced, still, and rich with that earthy petrichor that made time feel suspended.

The place was nearly empty—just two college kids hunched over their laptops, and an old man sipping tea by the window. It was the kind of space where emotions could drift quietly between pauses, uninterrupted.

Vidhi ordered their usual—two cappuccinos. Vidhan didn't even look at the menu.

For a long moment, neither spoke.

Vidhi watched as he stared at the table, fingers interlocked tightly, his foot tapping restlessly against the floor. He was holding something back, she could tell.

'Setu,' she said finally, softly.

His eyes flickered to hers, then away. The cappuccinos arrived, the foam forming tiny swirls, but neither of them reached for their cups.

Vidhan exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face. *'Why did you bring me here?'* His voice was rough, tired.

'Because I needed to talk to you without the concerns of that office around us.'

'Talk?' he let out a short, bitter laugh. *'Or remind me of everything I shouldn't be feeling?'*

Vidhi swallowed, fingers curling around her cup, seeking warmth.

'Vidhi—' he started, but she shook her head.

'Sakhi.'

Vidhan's jaw clenched.

'Call me that, Setu. Or have you taken that away too?'

He looked down at his cup, the steam curling in the dim café light. For a moment, he said nothing.

Then, quietly, *'You drew the line, Sakhi. I'm just following it.'*

'Yes, I did. But not like this.' Vidhi's shoulder jerked, hand suspended mid air.

Vidhan gave a small, bitter chuckle. *'Then how? How else do you want me to do it, Sakhi? Should I pretend nothing changed? Should I stand next to you and act like I don't feel what I feel? That I don't care the way I do? That I don't... ache?'*

Vidhi swallowed. ‘Setu—’

‘No, Sakhi. Let me say it.’ His voice was hoarse, raw. ‘You asked me to step back. So, I did. But you never said how to stop feeling. Tell me, Sakhi. Tell me how.’

A lump rose in Vidhi’s throat.

Vidhan looked at her then, his eyes dark with everything he had held back. *‘You think this is easy for me? You think I don’t fight it every single day? I go home to a wonderful wife, a life I chose, a life I love. And yet, there are moments—damn these moments—when I catch myself looking for you. Wanting to tell you things only you would understand. Feeling drawn to you in ways I don’t even know existed.’*

Vidhi’s was listening patiently.

Vidhan ran a hand through his hair, his frustration evident. *‘And so, I did the only thing I could. I stepped away. Because the closer I am to you, Sakhi, the challenging it gets. And that’s not fair to you, to me... to them.’*

Silence stretched between them, thick with words unsaid, emotions unacknowledged.

Finally, Vidhi whispered, *‘I never wanted to lose you, Setu.’*

Vidhan closed his eyes briefly, as if the words physically hurt.

‘And I never wanted to leave.’

For a moment, neither of them moved.

It had grown dark outside, with the world moving as it always did. But for them, here in this quiet space, time had frozen—locked in a battle between longing and restraint, between what was right and what was real.

And neither of them knew how to move forward from here.

‘I needed to know what’s going on in your head, Setu. You’ve been shutting me out. Ignoring me like I don’t exist. It hurts.’ She finally admitted.

Vidhan let out a breath, looking up at her then—his gaze heavy with unspoken words.

‘And what do you think it does to me, Sakhi?’ he whispered.

Vidhi stilled.

Vidhan pressed his palms against his temples, shaking his head slightly. Then, suddenly, he let out a hollow chuckle, his palm pressing his eyes in frustration.

‘You don’t get it, do you?’ His voice was laced with pain. *‘I’m fighting every damn day, Sakhi. Fighting this... this pull toward you. Fighting the way my heart twists every time I see you. Fighting the urge to—’* He broke off, breathing heavily.

Vidhi’s heart pounded. *‘Setu...’*

‘No.’ He shook his head, eyes glistening, a storm raging inside them. *‘You wanted honesty? Then here it is. I am drowning, Sakhi. Drowning in something I don’t know how to control. All it takes is one moment with you to shake my resolve. And I hate myself for it. I can’t find the right words to describe what I feel for you, Sakhi. No, it’s not just attraction, and it’s certainly not romantic endeavour. It’s something far deeper, something beyond both of those. Yes, I feel for you and....’* His voice broke on the last words.

Vidhi had never seen him like this. Not Vidhanshu Sindhu Setu—the man who always carried himself with effortless charm, who made work look easy, who never let his emotions slip. But now, here he was, his hands clenched into fists, his body taut with frustration. And then, as if everything inside him shattered at once—he broke.

Vidhan let out a shaky breath, his shoulders trembling slightly as he looked away, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Vidhi felt his ache in her heart.

A man’s tears weren’t like a woman’s. They weren’t soft, nor were they meant to be shared. When someone like Vidhan allowed himself to break, it meant he’d kept it all bottled up for far too

long, and the floodgates finally opened before the woman who truly mattered.

Vidhi mattered.

He clenched his jaw, trying to hold himself together, but then—his fist came down on the table with a thud. Not loud enough to attract attention, but enough for Vidhi to feel the weight of his anguish.

‘Why, Sakhi?’ His voice was barely a whisper. ‘Why did this happen to us?’

Vidhi’s breathed a sigh.

She wanted to reach across the table, to hold his hand, to offer some kind of comfort—but she couldn’t. She *shouldn’t*.

And yet, in that moment, nothing in the world felt more right than wrapping herself around his pain, holding him together when he was coming undone.

But she didn’t.

Because she knew if she did, there would be no turning back.

Vidhan inhaled deeply, blinking rapidly, forcing himself to regain composure. He wiped a hand over his face, exhaling slowly. ‘I need to go.’ His voice was strained, controlled. ‘Before I do something I’ll regret.’

The café lights had turned dim and the stereo buzzed ‘*Haaye andar andar se toota main.....Tere ishq mein k̄hud hi se rootha, main.....*’

He stood up abruptly, tossing a few bills onto the table, his movements stiff, controlled. But as he turned to leave, he hesitated for just a second—just enough for her to see the battle in his eyes.

Then, without another word, he walked out into the rain.

Vidhi sat there, unmoving, staring at the empty seat in front of her. The cappuccinos had gone cold, untouched. The faint hum of the café, the rain drumming against the glass window, the distant laughter of the college kids—everything blurred into the

background as her mind stayed frozen in the storm Vidhan had left behind.

She traced a slow finger over the rim of her cup, her thoughts unravelling beyond the moment, beyond the present, stretching back to where it had all begun.

Vidhan's words still lingered in the air. *'I am drowning, Sakhi.'*

She exhaled shakily, leaning back against the wooden booth. *And what about me, Setu?* she wanted to whisper into the void. *Do you think I am untouched by this chaos?*

For four years, she had been devoid of romantic affection, her heart a barren land, longing for the monsoon of love, warmth, companionship. She had searched for it in Namit, had begged for it in a thousand different ways, only to return empty-handed. She had tried—tried to build a bridge, to meet him halfway, to make a home out of a house. But Namit never met her there. He remained distant, disconnected, as if love was merely an obligation, not an emotion to be felt and nurtured.

And now, here she was—at a crossroad she had never thought she would stand at.

On one side was the life she had chosen—the one she had been trying to make work. The one where she was Namit's wife, bound by vows, by expectations, by a future she had promised to uphold.

And on the other side was something that wasn't supposed to happen.

The source of fulfilment of her feminine desires.

Her Setu.

A man who wasn't hers to love. A man who had his own life, his own world. And yet, in the strangest, most unusual way, he had become the one who saw her, the one who made her feel like she *existed*, the one who loved her in the most unexpected ways.

And now, he had pulled away, slamming his fist against the table not just in frustration, but in an attempt to push her out of his mind, his heart.

Her heart ached as she thought of the tears in his eyes, the way his voice had broken.

Men like Vidhan didn't cry easily.

And yet, tonight, he had.

She closed her eyes, rubbing her temples. *Where do we go from here, Setu?*

She wasn't naïve. She knew the social construct and obligations. She knew what morality dictated. She knew what she shouldn't do, but nothing about what she should do with the storm of feelings swirling inside them.

Vidhi inhaled deeply, then finally pushed herself up from the booth. She picked up the bill he had left, folded it neatly, and placed her own money on the table instead.

If there was one thing she knew, it was that she needed clarity. And for that, she needed to talk to the one person she had been avoiding—herself.

Tonight, she would go home. She would sit with her thoughts, allow them to whisper their truth to her.

And tomorrow?

Tomorrow, she would decide which road to take.

The drive home was quiet. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, the city glistening under the streetlights, washed clean of its dust and noise. But inside her, the storm still raged on. Her playlist softly played '*Kitni akeeli, kitni tanha si lagi unse mil ke mai aaj....*'

Vidhi let herself into the apartment, kicking off her heels and tossing her bag onto the couch. She walked to the bedroom, pausing for a second at the neatly made bed. She sat on the edge of it, running her fingers over the soft duvet, her mind replaying the evening.

Vidhan's clenched jaw. His trembling voice. The way his eyes had glistened when he had whispered, *'I don't want to be this man, Sakhi. I don't want to cross lines, I shouldn't.'*

She had seen it—the war inside him.

The way he pulled away, not because he wanted to, but because he had to.

And yet, the ache in her heart refused to subside.

Vidhi lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Her fingers unconsciously traced her wrist, where Vidhan had once held her—not in possession, but in reassurance. *I am here. I see you.*

But now, he was gone. And she... she was left stranded between right and real.

The next morning Vidhi woke up to find Namit scribbling something in his diary. Her mind was elsewhere to even ask what he was doing up so early. While she left for office on time, yet another note in Namit's diary died a suffocating death, struggling to reach the right eyes.

'Ondu dina, neenu tilkolitiya — nanna preetiya bhaasheya.

Aaga naanu kaliyuttene — ninna hrudayada prema bhaasheya.

Aa tanaka, irali madhyadalli — swalpa nireekshe, swalpa prayatna.

Hrudaya haadadanthe — nanna preetiya ninna munde mugiyali anta.'

(One day, you'll know — the language my love speaks.

That day, I'll learn — the tongue your heart seeks.

Till then, let there be — a little waiting, a little try,

Like a song from the soul — let my love reach you by and by)

Namit's Amma was from Karnataka, and he had completed his education in Bangalore itself. As a result, he always felt a closer connection to Kannada, expressing his deepest feelings in the language.

Vidhi was oblivious to all of these fighting a different hurricane in her office.

The office had its usual buzz —Venkat discussing cricket, Himadri complaining about deadlines, Ira Madam walking around with her no-nonsense efficiency. It was familiar, grounding.

In the evening, she found him by the vending machine, his fingers drumming on the counter as he waited for his coffee. He hadn't looked at her all day, hadn't even acknowledged her presence. And it stung.

But she wasn't going to let this silence stretch any longer.

She stepped beside him, leaning against the counter, her voice light but firm. *'If you keep ignoring me like this, Setu, people will start thinking we had a lovers' spat.'*

Vidhan stiffened for a second before letting out a sharp exhale. He picked up his coffee but didn't turn to face her. *'Sakhi, please—'*

'No. You don't get to do this,' she cut him off, her tone steady. *'Not when we both know what this is.'*

He turned now; his eyes weary, conflicted. *'And what is this, Sakhi?'*

She smiled, a small, wistful smile. *'Something more than friendship and less than love. Or maybe love in a way neither of us can define. But whatever it is, we need to stop fighting it and just... let it be. There is nothing romantic about this feeling then why are we escaping it and trying to justify. Whatever it is, it's beautiful in its own way Setu and I wouldn't have it any different. You are my bestest of friend. I need not say anything more.'*

Vidhan looked away, rubbing a hand over his face. *'You make it sound so simple.'*

'Because it is. The moment we try to name it, define it, we'll ruin it. We'll make it.... something it's not.'

'And what if it already is?'

Vidhi held his gaze. *‘No. It’s only dangerous if we let it become something else. But if we keep it right where it is—pure, untouched—it doesn’t have to be wrong.’*

Vidhan exhaled, his shoulders relaxing slightly.

‘You mean...’ he hesitated, searching for words.

‘I mean we stop resisting what we are to each other and just accept it for what it is.’

He let out a small, breathy chuckle, shaking his head. *‘You always did have a way with words, Saḳhi.’*

She grinned. *‘And you always overthink.’*

For the first time in weeks, his eyes held warmth. The tension in his jaw eased, the tightness in his posture softened. He took a sip of his coffee and smirked.

‘So, what now? You expect me to just go back to normal?’

‘Not expect. I’ll make sure you do,’ she said, nudging his arm playfully. *‘Come on, let’s get back. And don’t sit away from me like some broody poet. Sit beside me, where you belong.’*

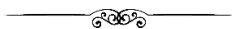
Vidhan chuckled, shaking his head. *‘You really don’t let a man sulk in peace, do you?’*

‘Not when it’s my Setu.’, she winked.

He sighed, but there was no heaviness this time. Just the ease of surrendering to something unspoken, something sacred.

And just like that, the weight between them lifted, leaving only what had always been—an unshakeable bond that neither had the courage nor need to name anymore.

Sakhi – Setu; Of Friendship and Beyond



Vidhan's attraction to Vidhi wasn't instant; it built up over time, layer by layer, like an unfinished melody that kept playing in the background of his mind.

Vidhan had always lived by logic, by lines that made sense. But Vidhi... Vidhi was poetry. The kind that didn't rhyme or rush to reveal itself. She simply existed—quiet, composed, untouched by the noise of the world. And that's what unsettled him.

She never tried to be seen. Yet, he saw her.

At first, she was just a name people spoke of—*sweet but quiet, elegant yet distant*. He hadn't thought much of it. Until he did.

It was in the way she moved, like a verse waiting to be read slowly. The way she listened—really listened—like she was gathering every syllable of a soul. Or how she'd drift off mid-sentence, gaze lost, as if she was living in a stanza the rest of them couldn't hear.

He remembered the rain that day. While the world rushed for cover, Vidhi simply stood still—hand outstretched, feeling the rain like it was speaking to her. Not dramatic. Just... present. And that image clung to him like the last line of a haunting poem.

He told himself it was just intrigue. Curiosity. A passing fascination.

Until he saw her laugh.

Not the polite smile she gave the world—but a real, unguarded laugh that lit up her entire face. And in that moment, she wasn't just someone he noticed. She was someone he *felt*.

He didn't know when she stopped being a quiet presence and became the thought behind his silences. But by then, it was already too late.

Because Vidhi wasn't a woman you fell for. She was a poem you returned to—again and again—trying to understand, and hoping she'd let you in.

October 2019

The office was winding down for the day. The low hum of the AC mixed with the quiet tapping of laptops and the occasional scrape of a chair being pushed back. Setu sat in the corner seat, jotting something with his usual precision. Venkat was lazily sipping from a steel tumbler of coffee. Vidhi, a few desks away, was flipping through a document, half-listening to Gaurang's rant about email etiquette.

Bored, Gaurang picked up his phone and tapped open Facebook. *'Saar, I sent you a friend request on Facebook,'* Gaurav announced as he leaned back in his chair with a mischievous grin.

Setu looked up from his laptop, mildly amused. *'Yeah? Why this sudden affection?'*

'Bro, your profile's a hidden treasure. These stunning mountain pictures.' Gaurav held up his phone. *'You were, what, auditioning for a Discovery Channel documentary? And Venkat's in almost every shot!'*

Vidhi, seated a few desks away, turned her head, curious.

Gaurav kept scrolling, zooming in. *'Damn. You guys look like different people. Full rugged, tanned, adventure-junkie vibe.'*

Setu smiled faintly and pushed back his chair. *'Chai's calling. You want anything?'*

'Naah,' Gaurav waved him off.

Setu left without another word.

The lightness that had hung in the air settled strangely. Vidhi sensed it. She looked at Venkat, her voice softening.

'What happened?'

Venkat closed his laptop slowly, his earlier grin replaced with something quieter.

'He doesn't talk about it much anymore... but it ended badly.'

Gaurang, suddenly serious, asked, 'What do you mean?'

Ira ma'am joined in too.

Venkat leaned back, eyes distant now.

'Setu and I were roommates in the hostel; we used to plan all these crazy trips together.'

We had this gang of trekkers. Back then, it was the seven of us. Setu, me, Arjun, Karthik, Raghav, Vighnesh, and Samar. We went on this unforgettable Brahmatal trek — you know, Chamoli district in Uttarakhand? It was supposed to be the trip of a lifetime, but it changed so much for us, for a lifetime. We were hit by an avalanche.'

Silence.

We were lucky, we survived. But we lost two of our close friends, including Setu's best friend Sammy.

Setu sank into depression after losing Sammy — Samar. They were supposed to head to Dehradun in a week or so for Samar's wedding.'

Venkat's words hit Vidhi like a thunderbolt.

Her fingers froze above her keyboard.

She felt paralyzed... flabbergasted... aghast.

A moment ago, she was immersed in lines of code and coffee rings, barely listening to the casual chatter behind her. But now—she wasn't just hearing words. She was *feeling* them.

Mountain... trek.....Niti.....avalanche.... Samar... wedding.... She sat there—eyes fixed on the flickering cursor on her screen—connecting the dots in moments of suspended disbelief.

She didn't speak. Didn't move. But inside, something had cracked open—softly, quietly. Like fresh snow yielding beneath a single, unsteady step. The memory of the fateful day flashed before her eyes.

There was a sudden stillness in the room, as if Venkat's words had pulled a thread loose in the fabric of the ordinary. No one said anything for a few moments.

And then, quietly, people began to pack up.

But Vidhi remained seated.

Her fingers still hovered above the keyboard, unmoving. She wasn't ready to leave — not yet.

She was still calculating something in her mind, but not numbers. Names.

Neeti..... Vidhan.....Setu..... Samar.

The names looped like a riddle in her thoughts — until they didn't. Until the connections began to form like pieces of a long-lost puzzle.

And then—clarity.

Vidhi's heart sank.

Her breath caught.

Neeti... the name Samar used to mention in passing, with warmth in his voice. His *best friend*. The one who 'got him' without words, the one who always sided with him when the group split into debates and drama.

Neeti — whose real name, Samar had chuckled once, was something related to *Law* and *policy*.... *Vidhaan*.....that's what he had said.

'We turned Vidhan into Neeti. Don't ask how — long story, long friendships.' Yes, that's what he had said.

Vidhaan....Setu.....was Niti....her Samar's best friend.

Everything was too overwhelming for her to respond.

The numbers on her screen blurred. Her breathing grew shallow. The hum of the office faded into a distant drone. Venkat's voice, the lights above, the clatter of keyboards — all dissolved into static.

She got up.

On instinct more than will.

Her eyes turned to where Setu had been seated. Empty. He hadn't returned since that moment. The chair still gently swivelling, like a trace of his absence.

Someone mentioned he'd stepped out to the smoke zone.

She walked — almost floated — across the corridor, past the vending machine and the half-lit passageway that led to the open-air corner at the back of the building. The door creaked slightly as she pushed it open.

There he stood.

Leaning against the wall. Taking a long, steady drag of a cigarette, the smoke curling around him like a veil. His eyes were half-closed, his expression incomprehensible — but beneath that stillness was someone holding something back. Something massive.

Vidhi stepped forward.

Her voice came out like a tremor. Almost unsure, almost too fragile to exist.

'Niti.'

He turned.

His brows furrowed, eyes narrowing in surprise. The cigarette slipped between his fingers, forgotten, as he caught sight of her face.

The tremble in her lips.

The unshed tears glistening in the corners of her eyes, threatening to spill — not out of weakness, but memory. Deep. Shared.

‘*Sakhi....!*’ he asked, his voice low, concerned, trying to bridge the sudden, incomprehensible chasm between them, a thousand questions striking in like lightning.

But before he could process more, before he could blink back the thousand questions suddenly blooming in his chest—

She whispered, breaking.

‘*Abby.*’

The word fell between them like a sacred thread. A code. A memory. A name.

His eyes widened. He stepped back in disbelief, still trying to comprehend.

‘Able’ — Samar’s friends’ codeword for her. The name only those closest to him knew.

It was their gang’s way of calling Vidhatri Samarth, Samar’s fiancée.

And now, here she stood. In front of **Setu**.

In front of **Neeti**.

And everything in the world came undone.

The cigarette burnt out between his fingers. He didn’t even feel it.

All he saw was her.

And all she saw was the last living thread that still held Samar close.

The word hung in the air between them.

‘*Abby.*’

Setu froze.

Something inside him cracked. Not visibly. But deeply. The kind of break that doesn’t make a sound, yet thunders through every bone in the body.

Vidhi didn’t say another word.

She didn’t need to.

Her eyes—brimming, trembling—held enough. A dam breaking, but not all at once. Her lips quivered, as if words might come, but none did. None could.

He didn't ask how she knew.

Didn't ask who she was.

He just stood there sensing it all.

Two people—bound not by time or choice, but by the same storm that had swallowed someone they both called home.

She took a step forward. And then—

She crumbled.

Her hand flew to her mouth as a sob escaped, raw and sudden. The tears that had waited patiently behind her composure now burst free, collapsing into a wail. Guttural. Shaking. Shattering.

Setu instinctively reached forward — not to hold her, not to comfort, but just... to be there.

To witness it.

Because that's what they both had been denied — someone to witness the weight of their loss. Someone who'd understand without explanation.

He stood still, close but not touching, his own eyes filling fast.

And then he, too, broke.

Quietly.

A single tear.

Then another.

No sound from him. No breath even.

Just eyes that had held back too long. A heart that had sealed off everything. Opening, bleeding.

For Samar.

For Sammy.

For the wedding that never happened.

For the mountain that swallowed everything.

And for the bond that now, finally, surfaced in the silence between 'Neeti' and 'Abby'.

After the wave of tears and wailing passed — there was nothing.

No questions.

No consoling words.

Just... silence.

The kind that wraps two people who were strangers until grief made them siblings in sorrow.

Setu turned his head upward, staring at the blank sky.

Vidhi wiped her face, breath shaky, and leaned against the wall beside him.

For now, that was enough.

For now, the silence said it all.

And now it had been quite some weeks when Vidhan noticed something off with Vidhi again. She smiled, but didn't look happy. She laughed, but it always felt rehearsed. And the silences... they stretched longer.

He let it be at first thinking it was the hangover of their previous misunderstandings and chaos in their relationship. And He knew Vidhi well enough to understand she wasn't the kind to open up easily. But three weeks? That was too long.

That evening, when most of the office staff had left, he found her sitting in the office pantry, in the secluded corner, her tea untouched, eyes fixed on something only she could see. She was lost, distant, a million miles away from everything around her.

He pulled up a chair beside her and leaned forward.

'Enu Aiytu Sakhi?' (What happened Sakhi?)

'How long will you keep running?'

Vidhi blinked, as if startled out of a trance. *'Kya?'*

Vidhan tilted his head, studying her. *'You're doing it again.'*

'Doing what?' She tried to sound casual, but he caught the edge in her voice.

'Pretending you're fine when you're not.'

She sighed, shaking her head. *'Setu, I'm just tired. That's all.'*

'Tired of what?'

'Work, life... just, everything.' She forced a small smile. *'Don't overthink it.'*

Vidhan narrowed his eyes. *'Sakhi, I know you. If this was just about work, you would have been ranting about it by now. But you're not saying anything. You're just... withdrawing.'*

Vidhi looked away, her fingers gripping the edge of the table.

'Vidhi,' he said softly. *'Please. Talk to me.'*

She swallowed, trying to steady herself. *'It's nothing, Setu.'*

'It's not nothing. Three weeks, Vidhi. Three weeks you've been like this. Ever since you went on that weeklong leave of yours. I didn't push, but I can't ignore it anymore. Tell me what's wrong.'

She let out a hollow laugh. *'Three weeks, huh? You've been keeping track?'*

'Of course, I have. When my Sakhi turns into a ghost of herself, how can I not?'

Vidhi felt her throat tighten. She didn't want to break, not here, not now.

'Setu... chhodo na.'

'No. Not this time.' His voice was firm but gentle. *'You always listen to my nonsense. You've pulled me out of my darkest moments. Why won't you let me do the same for you?'*

She stared at him for a long moment, something unsettling inside her.

‘Vidhi,’ he pressed again, softer this time. ‘*What happened?*’

She inhaled sharply, her fingers trembling slightly as she toyed with the rim of her cup.

‘*I was pregnant, Setu.*’

Silence.

Vidhan didn’t move, didn’t even blink.

‘*Was?*’ His voice was barely above a whisper.

She nodded, her eyes suddenly burning. ‘*Three months.*’ Her voice cracked. ‘*And then... it was over.*’

Vidhan shut his eyes for a moment, as if bracing himself against the weight of her words. When he opened them, his expression was unreadable, but his grip on the table had tightened.

‘*Vidhi... I... why didn’t you tell me?*’

‘*No one knew, except my parents.*’ She let out a bitter laugh. ‘*And Namit, of course.*’

Vidhan exhaled, his fingers loosely interlocking as he listened. ‘*And he...?*’

‘*He was happy. We both were.*’ Her voice was quiet. ‘*I thought—no, I hoped—that with the baby, things would change. That maybe... maybe he’d finally see me.*’

Vidhan said nothing. He simply nodded, urging her to continue.

‘*Then I slipped. It wasn’t even a bad fall, just a small misstep on the stairs. I felt fine at first, but later that night, I had cramps. The next scan was in two days... and that’s when we found out.*’

Vidhan didn’t speak, waiting for her to go on.

‘*The fetus wasn’t responding,*’ she whispered. ‘*There was no heartbeat, Setu.*’

Vidhan’s fingers curled slightly, but he kept his voice steady. ‘*And then?*’

'The doctors said since it was less than three months, we didn't need a full D&C procedure.' She swallowed. *'They gave me tablets instead. To... you know.'*

Vidhan closed his eyes briefly. He knew what she meant. He didn't need the details.

'It was on a Friday,' she continued. *'The whole day, I was just... there. Crying. In pain. Alone.'*

His head snapped up. *'Alone?'*

She laughed again, but it was hollow. *'I mean, Namit was home for a bit. He had a meeting, but he left late, made sure I was okay. I guess that was something.'*

Vidhan's expression didn't change. He only leaned in slightly, his voice calm. *'And then?'*

Vidhi took a deep breath. *'Then came the team dinner.'*

Vidhan didn't react immediately, letting the words settle between them.

'Haan, some team dinner with delegates. He texted me around 9, saying he'd be late.'

'And you were expecting him to be home?'

'Of course, Setu.' She smiled faintly, but there was no warmth in it. *'He knew I needed him. But that dinner... was more important.'*

Vidhan was silent for a long moment. Then, in the softest voice, he asked, *'What did you do?'*

Vidhi exhaled, staring down at her hands. *'Nothing. I just lay there. Thinking.'*

Vidhan nodded, absorbing it all. And then, slowly, he reached out and covered her hand with his.

'I'm sorry, Sakhi.' That was all he said. No questions, no advice, no reassurances. Just those simple words.

Vidhi finally looked up at Vidhan, her vision blurring. For a moment, she tried to hold it in—like she always did, like she had

been doing for months. But his eyes... they were too gentle, too understanding, too full of everything she had been aching for.

And just like that, something inside her broke.

A single sob escaped her lips, and before she could stop herself, the tears came. Slow at first, then faster—silent, shuddering, raw.

Vidhan didn't say a word. He didn't try to stop her, didn't tell her to be strong. He just moved closer, wrapping his arms around her in a firm, warm embrace.

Vidhi stiffened for half a second before giving in, burying her face against his shoulder, her whole body trembling. His hold tightened, steady and grounding, as if he was silently telling her, *I've got you.*

She clutched the fabric of his shirt, her sobs deepening. The months of loneliness, of silence, of trying to hold herself together—it all came undone in his arms.

Vidhan gently ran a hand over her back, his touch light, reassuring.

'*Sakhi,*' he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. *'I wish I could take this pain away.'*

Vidhi only cried harder.

They sat there for what felt like forever—her breaking, him holding. No words, no explanations. Just the weight of grief shared between them.

Vidhi Speaks



Torn in the combat of heart and mind, Vidhi preferred to embrace her solitude and cry in silence. She had so much to say..... to Namit..... She wouldn't have been on this threshold had she not been emotionally tormented in her own relationship with her husband.

She reached out for her diary and scribbled something to ease herself as the fountain of her eyes never ceased to soak her cheeks.

'Grief

I sit to write today. Write because I am tired of sulking. Every matter that my mind and body is made up of questions the truth of my relationship with him.

I am the bride his parents chose for him, would be a mother to his kids, but what am I to him?

Any instance that registers itself as a deponent to the soulfulness of me being anything beyond this is negligible.

I do remember my tormented journey as a young girl engaged to him. Confined to the premise of home and principles, I yet had to explore the blooming femininity within, and this by all standards was right in my objectivity, to soak in the verve of a chosen relationship within societal norms.

Where did I go wrong, I wonder, in upholding myself for the kind of love and liking a woman deserves? Was I ugly, unpleasant or unattractive? Did I not safeguard human understanding and compassion in empathising with his state of mind in the affairs of heart? Didn't I deserve a bit of respect and appreciation for having waited for my fiancée to get over his lover during our courtship period or rather marry her instead.

I remember his first ever call. Every syllable of his voice echoed sharply, pricking harsh rudeness. A couples' first call!

I had many such firsts and milestones coming my way, whose memory would last lifelong for the significance, and yet for all wrong reasons, with a needle's prick.

For every act he committed and those he didn't, I am sure he must have a 'convincing' and 'justified' (from his perspective) reason. Another instance of how unworthy and undesirable I was for him.

My heart aches as I type these down.

How conveniently the blame would be put on me for every act that I questioned or every right that I strived for, to be left unheeded. How could a man of such innocent countenance be so ruthless? I call ruthless because every possible attempt had been made to convey to him how my heart bled from his constant reluctance and indifference. But all in vain. Probably those feminine tears would be an ego boost to his manliness, and the tyranny would enhance to a higher degree.

I would go through multiple emotions and phases of worthlessness and self-loathing, lost my confidence to an extent, gave up on writing (he never bothered to read what I would write, and all for him) my verse were a garland to my unrequited love and later they helped me vent out. And there he would stand smiling at his abstract victory! A pleading woman washing his feet in tears.

It is utterly difficult for me to convince myself how one cannot get time to drop a text to his wife the very first day of their life together in a new city, when she's all alone away from the complacencies of her old ways of living. Leave everything apart, the question is, did he not once feel like checking on the girl back home. Or was she meant to merely feed his desires at night when his concern and care would surface, and eventually, when the newness subsides after each passing day, even this shall become a long-lost affair.

How could she not lure him almost every single time!

They say we are made of atoms. I wish it were only that. How simple life would be—measurable, predictable, precise. But no, man is not just matter. He is made of memories, stitched with longing, woven with wounds. He is made of emotions—that invisible fire that fuels his fiercest wars and his gentlest lullabies. Anger, love, desire, forgiveness—aren't these the true architects of history? The trembling hand reaching for warmth, the burning need to be seen, to be wanted! The desire to be desired—isn't that as primal as hunger? As breath?

And here I am—not unloved, perhaps, but untouched by wanting. I stand in a home, in a marriage, in a life—and still feel like a ghost haunting the threshold of someone's heart. When will my man desire me? Not just out of routine or convenience, but with that quiet urgency that makes silence speak. I crave for a moment when he looks at me and sees not a wife, but the woman he yearns for.

I grieve—not for what is lost, but for what never truly arrived.

I do not know how many chapters of such grief shall be penned in the story of my unrequited love!

A week later Vidhi stood by the window, the pale yellow of the bedside lamp casting soft shadows on her face. She didn't cry tonight. She didn't fumble for the right words. She just knew... It was time to speak.

She turned around slowly, her voice quiet, but clear—like a whisper that had waited too long.

'You know, Namit... I've kept this inside for a long time. Too long, maybe. But today, I need to say it all—without being interrupted, without being dismissed, without hearing 'even you have issues' as a way to silence mine.

Because yes—I have issues. I'm not perfect. But why is it that you only remember that when I talk about how I feel?

The truth is, I feel unloved. Emotionally abandoned in this relationship. And no, it's not about you being a bad person—it's about you being emotionally absent. You're here in this house, yes,

but you're not with me. There's no emotional intimacy, no connection. We live like flatmates with benefits. You touch me only when you want sex. You talk to me only when I start the conversation. You make plans only when I ask. You click pictures only when I insist. You never look at me and say, 'Let's do something just for us.' You never surprise me, never hold me just because you missed me, never text me during the day just to check in.

I've spent birthdays alone. Anniversaries unacknowledged. Five years, Namit—five. And not once did you take a day off for our anniversary. Not once did you plan something for us on your own. I make homes out of moments and you... you walk through them like they're rented spaces.

I don't need material things from you. I can buy my own gifts. I've been raised to be independent. But emotional connection? That I can't give myself. That's what I hoped to receive from you when I said yes to this marriage. That's what marriage is, isn't it? Not just providing, not just sharing a bed or a roof—but building a space of belonging.

And you know what else hurts? The moment I bring this up, you say, 'Even you don't understand me.' Maybe I don't, maybe I can't. But you don't even try to help me understand you. You throw my hurt back at me like a mirror and walk away. You are such an expert at the art of manipulation and gaslighting.

You say, 'Main aisa hi hoon.' But Namit, we can't use that line in a marriage. No one gets to say 'I'm like this, take it or leave it.' What if I said the same? That I was raised differently, that I can't adjust to your ways, that this is who I am. Where would that leave us? Marriage doesn't work like that. It needs work. It needs effort. From both sides.

You chose me. You brought me into this marriage. Then the onus of emotional responsibility falls on you too. You can't just exist next to me and expect me to feel fulfilled. I can't keep pouring from an

empty cup. I can't be the only one building this relationship while you stand watching.

You've never longed for my presence. My absence doesn't shake you. Even when I go away, you rarely check in, you never say you missed me. You never look at me like someone whose presence lights up your day. You never make me feel like I belong in your heart. I'm in your house, Namit. Not in your soul.

We never even communicate throughout the day or check on each other, until I initiate.

And that... that's what breaks me every single day.

I'm not asking for grand gestures. I'm asking for effort. For the small, consistent things that make a woman feel cherished. A message, a hug, a word. A small memory made together. A reason to smile without having to ask for it. Words matter to me. Touch matters to me. Like beauty and intelligence does to you. This is how we are wired.

I am falling into depression day by day, Namit. You make me feel worthless. Do you even have any idea I am on medication for depression. It has sprung from the constant emotional stress I've been carrying in this wedlock. From your silence, your withdrawal, your refusal to connect.

To the world, you're a gentleman. The perfect son. The ideal brother. People say, 'Oh, he's such a nice guy. What more do you want?' But no one knows how unfulfilling you are as a husband. No one sees how you deprive me of even the bare minimum. And I can't even explain this to anyone—not to them, and not to you.

Because you won't get it.

And I can't live like this. I can't just walk away either. But... yes... maybe I can end all this in one go.'

She turned away, leaving the room in dead silence.

Namit sat frozen, unsure of what had just happened. He waited a beat—two—until something inside him snapped.

There was a sound.

A thud. The door shut.

And then—nothing.

He jumped up, heart racing, and ran toward their bedroom. The door was locked from the inside.

‘Vidhi!’ he knocked hard. *‘Vidhi, open it! Open the damn door!’*

No response.

‘VIDHI!’ he screamed, banging now. *‘Don’t you dare—Vidhi!’*

He rammed his shoulder against the door once. Twice. On the third try, it gave way.

She was standing on the bed, tying one end of her dupatta to the ceiling fan. The other was around her neck.

‘VIDHI!’ he screamed in dread, lunging forward, yanking the dupatta away just as she was about to tighten the knot.

He pulled her down with all his strength.

A sharp sob escaped her as she fell into his arms. Namit slapped her—once, not in anger, but panic. Then immediately held her tight, tighter than ever before.

They both collapsed to the floor.

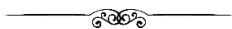
He was crying. She was sobbing, pushing him away, struggling to break free.

But he didn’t let go.

He held on.

And for the first time in a long, long time—they both broke down together.

Namit Speaks



The air inside the room was heavy, like something sacred had been shattered.

Vidhi lay crumpled on the bed, curled into herself, her sobs muffled by the pillow. Namit sat on the floor beside her, his back against the wall, staring at nothing. His breath came in short, uneven gasps. His knuckles were bruised from breaking the door.

For the first time in his life, Namit had seen death—not as an idea, not in movies, not in someone else's story. But as a decision, almost made. A noose almost tied. A life almost lost. *Her life.*

And he was the reason.

He whispered, barely audible.

‘Vidhi...’

She didn’t respond. Just kept sobbing quietly. As if her body had gone numb but the grief hadn’t.

His eyes welled up again. His throat tightened.

In that moment, Namit broke.

Not because he almost lost her—but because he finally saw *what he had done to her.*

He saw every silence, every moment he’d brushed her away, every time he had come home late and walked past her like she was furniture. Every time she’d stood there in a saree, a faint smile on her lips, and he hadn’t even noticed. Every meal she cooked, every subtle plea in her eyes, every effort to make their house a home.

He had failed to see it all.

He thought he was being a good husband. No shouting, no cheating, no abuse. He provided. He respected her family. He let her work. He never raised his voice.

But he *hadn't loved her*.

Not the way she needed. Not the way she deserved.

And deep down, Namit knew why.

Because no one ever taught him that *emotional availability* was part of manhood.

Namit wiped his eyes, then gently reached for her hand.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered, voice cracking.

'Vidhi... I don't know where to begin.

I know you think I'm heartless. Distant. Cold. You're right. I've been all that. And maybe worse.

But I wasn't always like this. I wasn't born like this.

I used to feel everything too much. That was the problem.

There was a time I chased people, sought friendships, planned surprises, tried to be the most interesting guy in the room. I wrote long texts. Waited for replies. Overthought every damn word. And when I didn't get the same energy back, I blamed myself.

Smriti... changed that part of me forever.

You know, people talk about heartbreak like it's some romantic tragedy. But what they don't talk about is how betrayal rots you from the inside. How being emotionally toyed with messes up your self-worth. After Smriti's deceit, I didn't just lose love—I lost the will to feel again. I buried myself in work. Routine. Discipline. Anything that didn't require emotional risk.

I never came back to normal after that. I just adapted. And in adapting, I turned into someone... hollow.

Smriti broke me, Vidhi.

It wasn't heartbreak. It was betrayal. She didn't just leave—she made me question my worth, my sense of reality, my ability to trust.

I thought I'd healed by burying myself in work. In systems. In silence.

But what I really did was numb myself. I taught myself to stop needing anyone so that I couldn't be hurt again. And in that numbness, I dragged you into a cold war you never signed up for. You became the collateral damage.

He paused for a second, wiped his face, and continued.

'You know what else? I believed effort was needed only when you had something to chase.

When I was in college, I made all the effort—for Smriti, for Gargi, for female friends who weren't mine. Because I had to win their attention, their time, their affection. I had to be likable. Present. Interesting.

But with you, Vidhi... you were already my wife.

I didn't have to win you.

And I thought, in some twisted, broken logic, that that meant I didn't have to try anymore.

I thought being a good husband was doing the groceries, fixing things around the house, never saying no if you asked for something, not interfering with your life. You wanted something—I got it for you. You asked for help—I gave it. I never said no. I thought that was love.

But it wasn't. It was the bare minimum.

I didn't realize that you didn't want a provider. You wanted a partner.

Someone who asked how your day was, without needing a reason.

Someone who clicked your pictures without you reminding him, just because you looked beautiful that day.

Someone who chose to be with you, not just lived beside you.'

He swallowed hard, voice barely steady.

'And maybe I thought all that was childish. Too much drama. I told myself I had grown up. Matured. Moved on from those little things that once defined love for me.

But now I see... those were never childish.

They were the very soul of love.

Vidhi... it's not that I didn't care. It's that I didn't know how to show it anymore. I was never taught. No one told me men should feel too. That they should express. Cry. Apologize. Ask for help.

I thought silence made me strong.

But it only made me... empty.

And you... you lived beside that emptiness. Slept next to it. Tried to love it.

And for that... for everything I've failed to be—I am so, so sorry.'

His voice cracked now.

'You're right. You were thrown into this marriage. And I was the one who was supposed to catch you. But I didn't. I let you fall through the gaps of my indifference.

You begged me to feel. To listen. To see you.

But I didn't... until today.

Until I saw you walking toward that fan, that stool... that end.

I've never known fear like that. Not even when I was rejected. Not even when Smriti left. That was loss.

This... this would've been destruction.

Vidhi, I won't pretend I can undo all the years I've made you feel unloved. I can't. But if you let me—if you still have one drop of hope left for us—then I promise I'll do the one thing I never did before.

I will try.

Not because I have to.

But because I want to.'

A faint sigh escapes him.

'You know... when women get married, everyone lines up to give them advice. 'Adjust.' 'Compromise.' 'Keep the family together.' 'This is your new home now.'

But when men get married?

There's silence. There's no roadmap. No lessons. No uncle or cousin telling us how to be a husband, how to show love, how to take care of a wife emotionally.

We're just expected to figure it out.

And while trying to navigate work, expectations, parents, and this strange new world—we forget that the woman beside us is not just adapting, but aching.

Romance took a back seat for me. Not because I didn't want it. But because I was busy surviving. I wish someone had taught me how to live inside a marriage.

I wish someone had told!

But the truth is... I've cared too much. I've just never known how to show it.

You say I'm withdrawn. You're right.

I didn't bounce back. I just... shut down.

Work became my safe zone. My escape. I convinced myself that as long as I was doing the right things—earning, providing, being present in the room—that was enough.

But I never arrived for you emotionally.

I was there, but not really there. And I'm sorry.

I trained myself to stop needing anyone. I buried all my longing, all my expressions, so deep, I couldn't even access them for you.

And you—pure, consistent, kind—you kept giving, while I kept retreating further into my shell.'

He leaned forward, voice low and desperate.

'I took you for granted. For five whole years.

And I realize now—love is not a trophy you place on a shelf and admire occasionally.

It's a plant.

You water it every day, or it withers.

You withered. And I didn't notice.

You begged. And I stayed quiet.

You broke. And I still didn't act.

Until tonight. Until I saw you trying to end the life, I forgot to make worth living.

I don't deserve you.

But I'm begging you...

Please give me a chance to earn you. Truly. To show you that I'm still capable of learning, of loving, of being what you always deserved.

Let me start again.

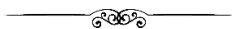
Let me make this right.

Please, Vidhi... don't give up on us.'

'Kuch ajeeb haalaat the dastan-e ishq,

Koi pyaar maangta raha, Koi maafi.'

Sandhi Setu- Building Bridges



2019

It was 9:12 AM and for once, no alarms were buzzing. No pressure cooker whistles, no laptop fan struggling to keep up with the chaos of office calls. Just a quiet house, the kind that only existed on holidays — where even time yawned and turned over to sleep a little more.

Vidhi stirred in bed, her arm brushing against the cool side of the mattress. Namit wasn't there.

Strange.

She sat up, squinting toward the kitchen. The light was on.

She padded out quietly, still in her cotton night suit. Her hair was a mess, her mind still foggy with sleep, and the heaviness from last night. There was not much of ache though. As she entered the open kitchen, she froze.

Namit was standing by the stove, brows furrowed, carefully flipping something in a pan.

Aloo tikki?

She watched him from the doorway, amused. *'Wait—when did you upgrade from instant noodles to actual food?'*

He turned, startled, and almost dropped the spatula. *'Shit. You scared me.'*

She folded her arms. *'What is this covert mission?'*

'I thought I'd make you breakfast.'

Vidhi raised an eyebrow. *'By burning aloo tikkis?'*

'They're not burnt. They're rustic.'

She laughed — a soft, surprised sound. He looked at her like he hadn't seen her laugh like that in a long time. Maybe he hadn't.

'You sit,' he said, waving her to the dining table. *'I'm already emotionally invested in this breakfast.'*

Minutes later, he served two slightly uneven but golden-brown tikkis with toast and ketchup arranged like smiley faces. She stared at the plate.

'I'm afraid to ask how many utensils died in the making of this,' she said.

'Let's not talk about that,' he replied, sitting across from her. *'Today's a no-negotiation holiday.'*

She took a bite. It was... edible. Surprisingly edible. Maybe even good.

'You added chaat masala,' she said.

'Chef's instinct.'

'Also, my bottle from the top shelf, second rack,' she pointed out.

'Still counts,' he grinned.

They ate in easy silence, toes brushing under the table, the kind of silence that didn't feel heavy anymore. Just peaceful. Like they were sharing air instead of tiptoeing around it.

After breakfast, Vidhi started gathering the plates, but Namit took them from her hands.

'You sit. I'll clean.'

She narrowed her eyes. *'Are you okay? Did you hit your head in the night?'* I thought it was just me trying to hang down the ceiling fan', she smirked.

He felt convulsions in his heart but shrugged instead. *'Maybe. Or maybe I just want to do something that doesn't come with a price tag or a punchline.'*

Vidhi didn't reply, but she stayed seated. That, in itself, was something new.

When he returned from the kitchen, he tossed her a rolled-up pair of socks.

'What's this?' she asked.

'We're going for a walk.'

'It's almost noon.'

'So? Holiday walk. You and me. Ice cream if you're nice.'

She shook her head, but a reluctant smile crept up. *'Fine. But I want two flavours.'*

'Deal. But no pineapple.'

'Who even eats pineapple ice cream?' she scoffed.

'Monsters.'

They left the house twenty minutes later, walking down the sunny lane with nothing but time, light banter, and the kind of gentle companionship that asks for nothing — only offers space.

No grand declarations.

No promises.

Just two people... walking side by side.

And slowly, day by day, week by week, the gestures continued — consciously, intentionally.

Like Namit leaving post-its on the fridge with things like *'Don't forget your water bottle, boss woman'* or *'I refilled your chocolate stash. Emergency survival kit.'*

Like Vidhi learning the exact way he liked his shirt collars ironed — and doing it without being asked, without fuss.

Like Namit waking up a little early just to hand her a cup of tea, hot and ready, when she stepped out of the shower.

Or Vidhi remembering to put a spoon of ghee in his daal — just the way his mother used to.

Tiny things. Quiet things.

The kind of love that doesn't knock loudly but builds a home with whispers.

Not perfect. Not poetic.

But real.

And this time, they both were showing up.

Not just for each other — but with each other.

A new dawn wasn't loud. It was slow. But it was there.

And this time, they didn't miss it.

It was a Tuesday afternoon that looked nothing like a Tuesday — the kind where the sun filtered through the curtains just right, and the city, for once, had paused its honking madness. The café was half-empty. A windchime tinkled at the corner.

Vidhi sipped her masala chai, fingers wrapped around the cup like it was her anchor, as she narrated yet another piece of her life to Setu, which she had been doing in bits and pieces ever since their bond strengthened.

There was an easy pause. A pause of weightless breathing.

Setu, across from her, was stirring his tea with measured ease. His presence was unhurried, like always — as if he existed in a different time zone than the world.

'I've been thinking...' Vidhi began, then paused.

Setu raised an eyebrow. *'That's always dangerous.'*

She smiled faintly. *'About that night. The way I... broke down. The things I said to Namit. And—'*

She swallowed the rest of the sentence, but Setu didn't rush her.

She looked down at her cup. *'I feel like I failed him. I threw everything on him like a storm. And then I... almost walked out of this life without giving it a real chance. It's like I wanted him to know my pain but didn't give him the space to share his.'*

Setu's fingers tapped softly against the ceramic cup. *'You were drowning, Sakhi. People scream when they're drowning. They don't always scream the right words.'*

She blinked hard. *'Still doesn't mean I was fair.'*

'No, you weren't,' he said gently. *'But fairness isn't the currency in pain. Survival is.'*

She went quiet.

Setu leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. *'You're not the same woman who stood on that ledge, Sakhi. That night broke something in both of you — but maybe it broke what needed breaking. The silence. The walls. The weight of pretending.'*

She met his eyes. *'I just... I'm trying now. We both are. But sometimes when he does something nice, I catch myself thinking— how could I have pushed him that far? And I feel guilty.'*

'That's because you're healing,' he said. *'Not pretending. Big difference.'*

Vidhi bit her lip. *'He made breakfast the other day.'*

Setu raised his brows. *'Was it edible?'*

'Surprisingly, yes,' she laughed softly. *'Aloo tikki and toast. Then we went for a walk. He's been doing it every Sunday since, despite my insisting.'*

'Hmm,' he nodded. *'You know what that is?'*

'What?'

'Love. Affection. Fondness.'

She snorted. *'That's a very low-bar definition of love, Setu.'*

'No, it's the real one,' he said. *'The only one that actually survives the messy bits. Love isn't just the 'I'd die for you' drama — it's the I'll learn how you like your toast reality. I will learn.'*

Vidhi let that sink in.

She looked out the window. A group of kids was chasing a balloon that had escaped onto the road. None of them cared about their shoes getting muddy. They were laughing.

‘So now what?’ she asked.

Setu smiled. *‘Now you live. One soft, mindful, imperfect day at a time.’*

She nodded. *‘That... I think I can do.’*

He raised his cup in a mock toast. *‘To not giving up. Even when it felt like the only option.’*

Vidhi clinked her cup gently against his.

And in that quiet little café, under the sleepy afternoon sun, she felt like spring returning to a place that thought it had forgotten how to bloom.

Vidhan tapped his fingers on the table, eyes narrowing as he studied Vidhi. She had gone quiet again, her remaining coffee untouched, fingers absentmindedly playing with the spoon. The café around them buzzed softly with conversation, but there was a stillness between them — a silence heavy with words unspoken.

‘Sakhi,’ he said, bringing her back to herself, *‘tell me something. When was the last time you did something for Namit? Not out of routine, but just... to make him feel special?’*

Vidhi scoffed, her eyes still fixed on the spirals forming in her cup. *‘You think I haven’t tried? I did everything, Setu. I made his favourite food, set up a cozy evening with candles and music, even got all dressed up... and you know what he did? He ate, scrolled through his phone, and went to sleep.’*

Vidhan winced. *‘Ouch.’*

‘Exactly.’, she laughed.

He leaned back, arms crossed, watching her for a few seconds before speaking again. *‘Okay, hear me out. What if... you stop doing things the way you think he should respond to and instead do things the way he actually notices?’*

Vidhi frowned. *'Meaning?'*

Vidhan smirked, stirring his coffee. *'Sakhi, from everything you've told me, Namit isn't a grand-gesture kind of guy. He's not going to notice the scented candles or the soft jazz playing in the background. But you know what he does notice? When you remember to pack his exact coffee blend for his office trips. When you silently refill his water bottle before bed. When you wake up at night just to pull the blanket over him.'*

Vidhi pursed her lips, considering it.

'You're making him sound like some clueless puppy who doesn't understand love,' she muttered.

Vidhan chuckled. *'Not clueless, Sakhi. Just... different. You're expecting poetry when his love language is in the unspoken things. What if you met him at his level?'*

She let out a breath, tired. *'But why should I always be the one to adjust? Why should I keep decoding his silence, bending myself to fit his way of expressing? Why can't he learn to see me too?'*

'You're not wrong,' he said gently. *'But sometimes, love isn't about who's adjusting more — it's about whether you both still want to try.'*

She blinked, the rawness in his words catching her off-guard.

Setu leaned forward, his voice lowering. *'You know, Sakhi, we often build these stories in our heads — romantic, expressive, cinematic. And when reality doesn't match that picture, we feel unloved. But love... love is rarely that loud. It's not always roses and violins. Sometimes, it's the silence in the room that feels warm. Sometimes it's a shared cup of chai in the middle of chaos.'*

'But I want the roses and violins sometimes,' she whispered.

'And you deserve them,' he replied. *'But ask yourself this — does Namit even know that? Or is he walking through this marriage assuming that his way is enough for both of you?'*

She blinked again, slower this time. *'I don't know. I never told him, I just hoped he'd sense it.'*

Vidhan smiled. *'We all do that. But men like Namit... they aren't mind-readers. They're not even good at guessing. You have to spell it out. Gently, kindly, and repeatedly. Like teaching a language.'*

'A language?' she said, half-smiling.

'Exactly. Your love language is gestures, words, effort. His might be acts of service or even just presence. You might be waiting for a 'You look beautiful,' while he thinks being physically around you is already enough proof.'

'And that's fair?'

'No,' he said honestly. *'But it's real. And until you both become translators for each other, you'll keep feeling like you're giving and getting nothing back.'*

Vidhi fell quiet, stirring her coffee now.

'Think of it this way,' Vidhan continued. *'You're trying to cross a river, and you keep waiting for him to build a bridge toward you. But what if his idea of a bridge is underwater stones? Maybe you can't see his efforts, but that doesn't mean they're not there. Maybe you're waiting for a suspension bridge and he's laying bricks, one quiet stone at a time.'*

She gave a soft laugh at that. *'Nice metaphor.'*

He grinned. *'I have my moments.'*

She looked out of the window. The sky was a soft grey, the kind that made you crave answers and comfort at the same time.

'Okay,' she said after a pause. *'So what do I do? Just stop everything I'm doing and start looking for his pebbles?'*

'No,' he said. *'Don't stop being you. Just... pivot a little. Start small. Speak his language and teach him yours.'*

'Like?'

'Next time, instead of setting up candles, maybe join him on the couch with a bowl of chips and watch that boring sci-fi series he loves. Ask him why he likes it. Or when he comes home tired, instead of waiting for him to notice your new dress, say, 'Hey, I dressed up for you today. Did you notice?' Don't make it a test. Make it an invitation.'

She nodded slowly.

'And tell him,' Vidhan added, 'how much those small things matter to you. How the jazz music, the candles, the dressing up — they're not just random acts. They're your love letters.'

'And if he still doesn't get it?'

'Then we revisit,' he said simply. 'But let's not judge the bridge till we've both tried crossing it. . Communication is the key, Sakhi. Communicate.... communicate.... communicate..... keep communicating till he gets it. A relation dies when we stop communicating. So, talk. Keep it alive. Talk with your words and eyes and gesture.... Communicate, and make sure he understands! You are not a bug that he needs to decode every time. You need to make yourself clear.'

She sighed again, but this time it wasn't frustration. It was something closer to relief — like someone had finally named the ache she hadn't been able to describe.

'You know,' she said softly, 'when we were newly married, I once wrote him a little note and hid it in his bag. It said, 'Have a great day, I love you.' He never mentioned it.'

'Did you ask him if he saw it?'

'No.'

'Maybe he smiled at it and didn't know he should say something. Maybe it melted something in him and he didn't have the words. Or maybe he missed it completely. The point is — you assumed the silence meant it didn't matter.'

She nodded, biting her lip.

'You've been waiting for a spark,' Vidhan said. 'But maybe the spark is hidden under ashes. You need to blow gently, not walk away.'

'You're surprisingly philosophical for someone who still hasn't returned his last girlfriend's hoodie,' Vidhi teased, the light returning to her voice. 'Does Dharaa know about her'

'Hey,' he said, mock offended, 'I'm growing. Also, it's a really comfy hoodie. I told Dharaa when we were dating. She hates that hoodie till date'

They both laughed, and the heaviness lifted a little.

'Sakhi,' he said finally, 'do you love him?'

She looked at him, honest and open. *'I do. But I feel like I'm standing alone in that love sometimes.'*

'Then let's find out if he's standing silently beside you — or walking away without realizing it.'

She gave a soft, slow nod.

'I'll try.'

'That's all we ever can do.'

And this time, when she lifted her coffee to take a sip, the bitterness didn't sting so much. Because somehow, the idea of speaking love in his language while still honouring her own... felt like the start of something healing.

Through Setu she was building her bridge to Namit.

The next morning, Vidhi found herself standing in front of her wardrobe, staring at the neatly arranged rows of sarees, kurtas, and comfortable home wear.

'You create the charm.'

Vidhan's words echoed in her mind. She exhaled sharply. *Fine. Let's see if this works.*

Instead of her usual simple outfit, she pulled out a deep blue chiffon saree—one Namit had once complimented

absentmindedly during their initial days. She draped it carefully, letting the fabric hug her in all the right ways. A small bindi, light kajal, and just a hint of perfume—nothing over the top, but enough to make her feel... different.

By the time Namit walked into the house that evening, exhausted and scrolling through his emails, Vidhi was standing by the dining table, setting down a plate. The soft clinking of bangles made him glance up.

For the first time in a long time, his eyes lingered.

Vidhi suppressed a smile. *At least he noticed.*

‘*You went somewhere today?*’ Namit asked, placing his laptop bag on the chair.

‘No,’ she said simply, turning to serve paneer butter masala in a bowl.

He didn’t say anything else, but as they sat for dinner, she could feel his gaze drifting toward her more than usual. His fingers brushed against hers when he reached for the salad, and this time, he didn’t pull away.

A small victory.

The next afternoon, Vidhi sat at her desk at work, chewing the end of her pen. She hadn’t flirted in *ages*. Could she even pull this off?

After much deliberation, she typed:

Vidhi: *Had lunch?*

Predictable. Boring. She deleted it.

Then she tried again.

Vidhi: *You won’t believe what happened today!*

A few seconds later, Namit’s reply popped up.

Namit: *What?*

Vidhi smirked.

Vidhi: *Someone was staring at me in the lift for a full minute.*

The typing bubble appeared instantly.

Namit: *What the—who?*

Vidhi chuckled to herself.

Vidhi: *My reflection in the mirror.*

A pause. Then—

Namit: *Very funny, Vidhi.*

She could see him rolling his eyes through the screen. But she also saw something else—the conversation wasn't dead.

Vidhi: *Hah! You should have seen your face.*

Another pause.

Namit: *Maybe I should come see yours in person.*

Vidhi blinked at the screen, warmth creeping into her cheeks.

That evening, when Vidhi got home, she didn't rush to tidy up or check Namit's dinner preferences.

She slipped off her sandals quietly, changed into a soft cotton kurta — not her fancy ones, just the cozy, real kind. Then she stood in front of the mirror, brushed her hair neatly, dabbed on a bit of lip balm, and smiled — not at herself, but at the thought of *showing up*.

Not performing.

Not proving.

Just being there. Gently. Honestly.

Namit was still working in the study, earphones on, typing something furiously.

Vidhi walked into the kitchen, rummaged through the fridge, and spotted the half block of paneer. She remembered him mentioning he was craving *something spicy but not too heavy*. She smiled to herself.

By the time Namit emerged, stretching and yawning, the living room smelled of fresh kasuri methi and garam masala. Vidhi was setting two plates on the floor mattress — soft lighting, casual vibe, music on low. No candles. No elaborate jazz.

Just him. Her. And paneer bhurji with soft parathas.

He looked surprised. *‘This smells... really good.’*

‘I had time,’ she shrugged, playfully tossing a napkin at him. *‘And the paneer was about to go bad.’*

Namit grinned, sinking to the floor. *‘You’re saving paneer now?’*

‘I’m saving everything these days,’ she said, quietly but without weight.

He gave a smile. It looked familiar and affectionate.

They ate. They talked. They didn’t dissect feelings or define relationship trajectories. But there was a warmth — like something invisible had loosened between them.

And from then on, Vidhi made little gestures — not out of obligation, but out of awareness.

She placed a sticky note in his laptop bag that read: *‘Deadline > Dinner. But remember to eat anyway. — Your unpaid life coach.’*

She swapped his harsh towel for the soft one he always reached for in hotels.

She moved the wi-fi router closer to the study, so his Zoom calls wouldn’t freeze.

She even downloaded that tech podcast he liked and began listening, just to ask thoughtful questions.

Not because she had to.

But because she *wanted* to understand his world the way he was beginning to understand hers.

Some nights, they didn't even talk much. They sat on opposite ends of the sofa — her with her book, him with his laptop — feet occasionally brushing under the blanket.

But there was a difference now.

They were no longer roommates playing pretend. They were learning to become partners — in their own quiet, clumsy way.

Love wasn't loud still.

But it was present.

And that, Vidhi thought, was more than enough for a new beginning.

And somewhere, in another quiet corner of the city, two souls—*Vidhaan and Dharaa*—found their way back to warmth beneath a shared blanket. There was no rush to reach for their clothes, no urgency to flee the moment. Just silence, skin, and a softness that needed no words. After days of drifting through chaos, it felt like Vidhaan had finally come home—not to a place, but to a feeling he'd nearly lost. Reality didn't demand much tonight. Just presence. And peace.

And to Vidhi Vidhan was the bridge, the quiet force that neither pushed nor pulled but simply stood strong when She needed a place to lean. He never positioned himself as a replacement for what she lacked in her relationship, nor did he let his own emotions cloud his intent. He was there to listen, to understand, and when needed, to challenge her perspective—not by invalidating her pain but by expanding her view of love, expectation, and reality.

His role was crucial—not as a hero swooping in to save her but as a reminder that healing comes from conversation, from seeing beyond one's own hurt. He helped her voice what she had buried, but more importantly, he helped her see Namit beyond his shortcomings.

Vidhan's presence was a testament to friendships that didn't demand but offer—spaces that allow one to pause, reflect, and, when ready,

take a step forward. His character wasn't about grand gestures; it was about quiet impact. And that's what made him unforgettable.

To Her, Vidhan was like the steady monsoon rain—never forceful, never demanding, just present, filling the silences she never realized needed filling. He was her Sethu, the bridge between what she felt and what she couldn't express, between her pain and the understanding she sought but never received.

He never imposed, never tried to fix her, and never dismissed her wounds as trivial. With him, she never felt the need to shrink or translate her emotions into something palatable. He had this way of letting her sit with her pain without drowning in it, gently nudging her toward clarity when she was lost in her own storm.

Vidhan was warmth in the cold spaces Namit left behind, but he wasn't a replacement—he was a mirror. He made her see not just what was missing in her marriage but also what could be if She and He learned to speak the same

No one would ever truly understand the bond they shared—no one but them.

Vidhan had never been a lover, yet someone she had looked at with the eyes of longing. He had walked beside her in the quiet, through the nights she had spent questioning her own worth, through the moments when she had felt like she was nothing more than a shadow in her own relationship.

Their bond was not one the world around could ever define. It was not love, not friendship in its simplest sense. It was something deeper—two souls who had met in the space between breaking and healing, holding each other upright when they had needed it the most.

A tear slipped down Vidhi's cheek, as these thoughts swayed in her mind. It wasn't from sadness. It was gratitude. She pressed her hands together in silent prayer, thanking the universe, thanking fate, thanking God for sending Vidhan into her life when she had needed him the most.

Not to save her.

But to remind her that she had always been capable of saving herself.

It was always more than friendship and less than love.

It was always Vidhi ka Vidhaan.

2020

Days turned into weeks. Namit recovered well from COVID, but those uncertain nights had left a mark on Vidhi's soul. She had done everything she could—prayers whispered into the dark, medicines given on time, quiet isolation maintained with trembling care, even desperate, tear-stained searches on ER helplines. In those moments of fear and fragility, a truth had quietly settled into her heart—he meant more to her than she had ever admitted, even to herself. She would have given anything to keep his breath anchored to this mortal world. And in that storm of helplessness, a revelation bloomed: despite everything—or perhaps because of it—she loved him the most. Not perfectly, not blindly, but deeply enough to go any length to stay beside him, even when he couldn't see it.

And then things started to align well with passing time.

And once again came Friday. That evening, Vidhi left a scented candle burning in their bedroom. A soft melody played on her phone, filling the air with something *different* from the usual silence. Namit walked in, his brows knitting together slightly at the change in atmosphere.

'*What's this?*' he asked, setting his phone down.

Vidhi shrugged. '*Just felt like it.*'

He didn't argue. Instead, he loosened his tie, his movements slower, more aware. Vidhi, who usually retreated to her side of the bed with a book, sat there, waiting.

When he lay down, she turned slightly, resting a hand lightly on his arm.

‘Vidhi’ he said softly.

‘Hmm?’

‘Tell me something... if ever I do some mistakes, will you forgive me.’

She opened his eyes, caught off guard.

‘Is something bothering you? Do you feel like talking things out’

‘There are so many things I want to tell you Vidhi which I couldn’t tell that day when you had decided to almost walk out of my life.’, Namit whispered.

Vidhi nodded. ‘So, let’s talk now. That day I was not in a frame of mind to hear or absorb your words. I want to hear your side of the story Namit. I want to understand you so that I can love you better.’

Namit smiled. He was eager too, to share his life stories with her, finally.

They completed their unfinished conversations.

Vidhi shifted slightly on the bed, resting her head against the headboard. The dim candlelight flickered, casting soft shadows across the room. Namit lay beside her, his arm bent under his head, eyes staring at the ceiling.

For a moment, there was silence—one that wasn’t uncomfortable, neither heavy with unsaid words.

‘You know, until last year I had never thought we’d be like this,’ Namit murmured.

Vidhi turned his head slightly. ‘Like what?’

‘Talking without the weight of judgement’

She smiled.

He turned onto his side, facing her now. ‘I was never the guy who imagined love stories or planned out a dream marriage. I thought... I thought things would just fall into place. That if we were good

people, if we did our duties, everything else would follow. But clearly, that's not how it works.' He chuckled.

Vidhi teased him with a smirk. *'You thought love was just... automatic?'*

He gave a half-smile. *'Something like that. I thought if I provided, if I made sure we had everything we needed, then that was enough.'*

Vidhi studied him, understanding settling in. *'And what about you?'*

'What about me?'

'What do you need in love?'

Namit blinked at her. No one had ever asked him that before. He exhaled, his voice lower now. *'I guess... I just need someone to stay. To not give up on me, even when I don't say the right things.'*

Vidhi's throat felt a lump.

'I'm not giving up on you, Namit. Never!' Her voice was barely above a whisper.

He looked at her then, searching her face for something.

'Then help me,' he said. *'Tell me what you need. Spell it out for me if you have to. I don't want to fail you, Vidhi. Never!'*

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close—as if anchoring her to the promise he was finally ready to keep. *'It took me time to heal from Smriti, Vidhi... but I'm here now. And I'll do everything it takes to make up for the time I lost—with all my heart.'*

She held his arm tighter. *'Can I ask you something?'*

He nodded, sitting beside her.

'You... you loved Smriti, didn't you?' Her voice was soft but unwavering.

A shadow crossed Namit's face.

He looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. *'Yes. I did.'*

‘And you told her, right?’ she pressed. ‘You expressed it. You made her feel it.’

Namit’s fingers curled *‘yes I did.’*

‘And what about Gargi?’ she continued, her heart pounding. ‘Those letters... the ones you wrote to her, filled with emotions, with words so rich and deep. I read them, Namit. I saw the way you poured your heart out to her, to Smriti. So, tell me...’ She looked him straight in the eyes. *‘Why couldn’t you do that for me?’*

Namit blinked, as if she had struck something inside him. He opened his mouth, then closed it.

‘Was it because you never felt that way for me?’ Vidhi’s voice wavered.

He exhaled sharply, his expression unreadable. *‘Oh No..No no Vidhi. Don’t even think that..... it’s not like that. It’s just... different.’*

‘Different how?’ she demanded.

He ran a hand through her hair, as if his fingers could give her solace. *‘Because I knew I had you.’*

The words hung between them, thick with meaning.

‘You knew you had me?’ she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Namit looked pained. *‘With Smriti, with Gargi... there was always uncertainty, a need to hold on, to make them see me. I was also a young, chasing, not so mature individual. Gargi was infatuation of an adolescent mind and Smriti was never really mine. I had to fight for her attention, had to keep proving myself. As I adulated I realised it was desperation, not love. With you... I thought I had found home. That I didn’t have to prove anything anymore.’*

Vidhi, you know... in a man’s life—or anyone’s life, really—priorities keep shifting with age. As kids, it’s all about friends. In our teens, studies take over. Then in our early twenties, we chase love—those infatuations, those rushes of emotion... they seem like

everything. For me, that phase had Smriti and even Gargi in it. But it was more about the age than the person.'

He paused, gently placing his hand over hers, *'Then comes the late twenties and early thirties—career takes over. We're busy building something, proving ourselves. But eventually, as life settles, so do we. Responsibilities grow. Families happen. And somewhere along the way, we realise who really stays, who truly matters.'*

He looked into her eyes, softer now. *'And that's where you come in, Vidhi. Because as all these phases come and go, the one constant that holds it all together—the one person who becomes the centre of everything—is the wife. And that never changes. What I feel with you... it's not the chaos of youth. It's stability. It's peace. It's home. But with you, Vidhi... I thought you already knew. That I didn't have to say it. That you understood.'*

Vidhi let out a bitter chuckle. *'How was I supposed to understand something you never told me, Namit?'*

He looked down, silent.

She swallowed the lump in her throat.

He leaned forward, pulling her head to rest on his shoulder. *'I know I failed you, Vidhi, in many ways..... And I know I should have been there that night...when we lost our.... unborn.....'* His voice trailed off, thick with regret. *'I didn't know how to deal with the pain of loss and chose seclusion and in the process, I secluded you. I just... I don't know how to fix this.'*

For the first time, Vidhi saw something in his eyes that she hadn't seen before—a raw, unguarded honesty. And maybe, just maybe, that was a start.

A tear of closure ran down Vidhi's eyes.

A tear of closure ran down Namit's eyes.

Vidhi inhaled deeply, steadying herself. *'Namit... do you even know how much I craved to hear it from you? I needed you that night. I needed you on so many nights... and days. We wouldn't have fallen apart if only you had seen me—struggling—just to hear*

you say once... 'Vidhi, you matter to me.' Or even a simple 'I need you, Vidhi,' or 'I miss you' when you were at work. I wasn't asking for anything big. Just... small, little things.'

Namit rubbed his forehead, his jaw tightening. *'I know. I know, Vidhi. And I wish I had done things differently.'* He looked at her, his eyes tired, almost pleading. *'But it wasn't because I didn't love you.'*

'Then why?'

'Because I didn't know how to say it,' he admitted, his voice low. *'I thought... showing it through actions was enough. I made sure you were comfortable, I took care of things at home, I wanted you to have everything you needed—'*

'But Namit... I didn't need things. I needed you.' Her voice cracked, she let her tears fall freely to wash away all misunderstanding, all complaints, to feel free.

Namit's shoulders sagged as he exhaled, the weight of unspoken emotions pressing down on him. *'I never learned how to express love, Vidhi. Not the way you needed me to.'*

She frowned slightly, wiping her tears. *'What do you mean?'*

Namit shook his head, his voice thick with regret. *'I thought... packing your lunch, fixing things around the house, making sure you had everything you needed... I thought that showed my love. But I never realized that you needed to feel seen—to feel my presence—to uplift your feminine being. I didn't know how to nourish that part of you, to truly satiate your feminine energy. And when I finally did... I didn't know how to change what had settled between us'*

Vidhi's heart clenched. She had been so consumed by her own loneliness, her own longing, that she had never truly looked at *why* Namit was the way he was.

Namit sighed. *'*

'I didn't realise relationship is something you nurture every day.'

He swallowed hard. *'I see that now.'* He looked at her, his eyes soft. *'Vidhi, I know I've hurt you. I know I've been blind to so much. But I don't want to keep failing you. I don't want to be the reason you feel unloved.'*

I failed to realise that you became the collateral damage to my own unresolved emotional trauma'

There was a pause that seemed to stretch beyond infinity.

Her eyes searched his, looking for something deep, something she could hold on to.

'Let's start again,' he said, his voice almost a plea. *'Not as husband and wife bound by duty, but as two people who want to understand each other. Who want to learn each other's language of love.'*

Vidhi hesitated for a moment, then slowly reached for his hand.

'Yes,' she whispered. *'Let's try again.'*

Smilingly Vidhi got up slowly and went to the kitchen thoughtfully.

She stood by the counter, her fingers dusted with cocoa, the warmth of the oven still lingering in the air. Her first attempt at baking, a quiet gift to herself, to them. But before she could dwell on it, a familiar presence closed in around her.

Namit's arms wrapped around her from behind, his chin resting lightly on her shoulder. His touch was different tonight—not just familiar, but intentional, reverent. The rough graze of his stubble brushed against her skin as he nuzzled into the curve of her neck, breathing her in, pressing a lingering kiss just below her ear.

A slow shiver ran down her spine.

She closed her eyes, her breath hitching as his lips travelled lower, teasing, tasting, his hands gripping her waist firmly, drawing her back against him. Her pulse quickened, her senses heightening with every unhurried touch.

She turned in his arms, searching his face. There was no confessions or emphatic statements, no poetic promise—just the

quiet, steady presence she had longed for. The way his dark eyes softened as they held hers, the way his fingers traced delicate patterns on her back, the way his lips parted, as if he, too, was on the brink of something fragile and new.

Slowly, he lifted her, his strength effortless against her form. She clung to him, her legs wrapping around his waist, as his lips captured hers with an urgency that stole her breath.

He carried her to the couch, never breaking the kiss. His mouth was demanding yet tender, igniting her skin with each press of his lips. As he laid her down on the bed, his weight pressing into her, she arched into him, needing more, craving more.

Their breaths tangled, her fingers threading through his hair as he worshipped her skin with his lips, his tongue, his hands—slow, measured strokes that sent tremors through her. Every touch, every caress, spoke of all the nights they had missed, all the words he had never said.

A soft moan escaped her lips as he trailed kisses down her collarbone, over the swell of her breast, his fingers tracing the path his lips followed. His touch set fire to her skin, unravelling her, piece by piece, until she was gasping beneath him, lost in the rhythm of their bodies, the unspoken confessions whispered between each breath.

And when they reached the edge, when his name spilled from her lips in a broken sigh, he held her tighter, as if anchoring them both to this moment, to the second chance they were finally giving each other.

Later, wrapped in the quiet glow of the night, Vidhi pulled the sheet around her and stepped onto the balcony, the cool air caressing her flushed skin.

Namit followed, standing behind her, his arms circling her waist once more. He rested his chin on her shoulder, his breath warm against her cheek. She leaned into him, their fingers entwining over the railing.

The city lights flickered in the distance, the world stretching endlessly before them. But this time, she wasn't lost in it. She wasn't searching for something more.

She looked up at the horizon.

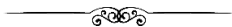
*In the silence of the night, when darkness sliced open the sky,
dripping*

*blood by blood the shades of black, she leaned against the railing of
the third-floor balcony, contended.*

Up in the heaven someone smiled.

The chocolate cake still lay on the table, untouched.

Epilogue



And if you ask, who was right?

Perhaps, all of them. In their own way.

Namit—structured, sincere, a man who followed every rule he knew. He gave what he understood love to be: stability, provision, presence.

But sometimes, love is not about what you give. It is about how you make someone feel in the absence of words.

Vidhi—yearning, faithful, resilient. She wasn't asking for grandeur. Just to be seen, to be cherished in the pauses between conversations, in the moments where silence grew louder than togetherness. She didn't want perfect. She wanted real.

And Setu—a mirror Vidhi never intended to look into. Not because he offered temptation, but because he offered reflection. In his presence, she remembered what it was to feel alive, to be wanted, to be *understood*. It wasn't about betrayal—it was about recognition.

This isn't a tale of black and white, of right or wrong. It is a mosaic of unmet needs, missed signals, and emotional timing that never quite aligned.

To every reader who found themselves in Vidhi's quiet ache, in Namit's unspoken intentions, or in Setu's unexpected empathy—

May you learn that love alone is not enough.

It must be expressed. It must be received. It must be felt, in ways only hearts can understand.

Because some endings are not about closure.

They are about awakening.

About finally seeing yourself clearly in the mirror of someone else's absence.

And when you do— You don't just end a chapter.

You begin again... with softer eyes, fuller hearts, and deeper grace.

Because sometimes, the bravest kind of love... is the one you give back to yourself.

This was never just Vidhi's story. It is the silent story of countless women who live in marriages where nothing is violent, yet everything wounds. Where love exists, but intimacy has died a quiet death. Where the woman smiles, serves, stays—but feels unseen, unfelt, untouched. Vidhi was fortunate—she found her *Setu*, a bridge back to herself, and perhaps to her cause. But many don't. They don't find their *Setus*. They must become their own bridge—see the unseen cracks, name their longing, and fight not against someone, but *for* something. Choose your cause wisely. If it's meant to be, love will return—not loud, but sure, like breath after drowning.

Remember- *A pinch of Salt is all a relationship needs.*

PS: If you feel any part of Vidhi's story is your story too, feel free to ping us at- vidhatri.samarth@gmail.com or nivedita.atlantis@gmail.com.

Let's be each other's *Setu*.