

FROM THE AUTHOR OF **I STILL THINK ABOUT YOU**

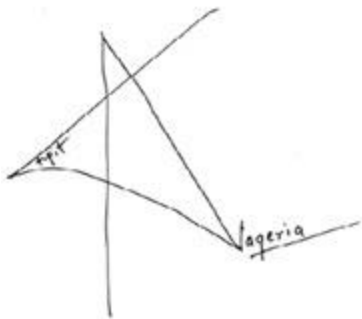
ARPIT VAGERIA 



**YOU ARE MY
REASON
TO SMILE**

YOU ARE MY
REASON
TO SMILE

Lots
of
love.
Happy Reading



By the same author

I Still Think About You

Aamir and Dhruv are not just brothers; they are the beginning and end of their family. Aamir and Anvi are paving their way forward together, even as Dhruv feels smothered in his relationship with Vartika and meets Sachi, who reads his heart and soothes his soul.

The monotony of life is broken with a phone call that throws Aamir and Dhruv in a vortex of pain, loss and guilt.

I Still Think About You is a story of love, brotherhood, passion, dedication, pain, and the depths to which a heart can go to win back lost love.

YOU ARE MY
REASON
TO SMILE
ARPIT VAGERIA



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Printed and bound in India

This story is for my love.

If it weren't for her, this story wouldn't be.

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And lastly to myself, for being able to complete this wonderful new book...

You are My Reason

To Smile.



16 January 2012

In life, many a time you fall short of words when you find yourself struggling between choice and necessity. At times, you listen to your instincts and at times you listen to your heart, but one thing that remains as real as oxygen in this world is the world full of smiles that you imagine for yourself.

A world that inspires you to live, a life that inspires you to love, and a love that strengthens your life in this world.



Minutes ticked by, long minutes, infinite minutes. After waiting for a while, Ranbir decided to take the stairs down and not wait for the elevator to make that urgent call. He quickly ran down the stairs. His eyes were tearing and he tried hiding it the best he could.

For Ranbir, the sensation was a strange one. The last time he had cried like that was when he had been dating Adah for the first time after she accepted his proposal.

All at once, he brought his hand to his eyes to stifle the tears.

It was well after dark when Ranbir reached the ground floor of Solitaire Corporate Park. He grew quiet. He tried calming down his heartbeats and considered how best to communicate what he meant to say.

He had called Adah a couple of weeks ago. What ensued was a very upsetting conversation between the two and they both gave each other a whole lot of crap for not understanding the other. As he stood there he decided to call her, then hesitated and disconnected the call. He called her again nervously. He kept his phone in front of his eyes. There was no response from the other end before the screen finally turned green and the call duration timer started.

There was no reason for Ranbir not to feel anxious and excited both at the same time.

“Hello,” she said.

“How are you, Adah?” he said, but she couldn’t hear what he was saying; his words were lost in the muffled roar of a bike’s engine.

“Hello?” she repeated.

Ranbir quickly ran further away and sat on a car. “How are you, Adah?”

“Come to the point directly,” she said nonchalantly.

“I want to tell you something,” he said and smiled nervously. He bit his lips and looked around to see if there was anyone.

“I listened to a lot of shit a few days back, Ranbir. Why call me now?”

Ranbir remained quiet and waited for Adah to continue.

“Tell me, what’s so special today?” she added as she calmed down a bit.

“Well, today is special because I think I just found a good job,” he said in a single breath. He looked much more alive than he had in the past few days.

Silence.

They both stayed that way for a long time. Ranbir checked his phone.

“Adah? Are you there?”

“You sly dog,” she said and laughed out loud in happiness. And suddenly, all the emotions she’d suppressed since she’d heard the news overwhelmed her all at once. His face lit up as soon as he heard her laugh after so many days.

“With you sounding so happy after our argument that day, I wouldn’t mind being called a dog, pig or any other animal in the world. Everything sounds romantic to me right now.” He grinned.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. Anything,” Ranbir said eagerly.

“There’s no one in my flat and I think we just managed to bring an end to our cold war with this amazing bit of news. Wouldn’t you like to come over and make up for our lost time? I am sitting in my hot pants and they’re extremely short.”

Ranbir laughed, feeling his nervousness disperse. “It’s one of those things that I never seem to have enough of anyway. I have lived a miserable life without you in the last few days.”

“You talk too much.”

“I have to. I’ve got someone to impress tonight. It’s been two months since we met anyway.”

Adah chuckled. “That’s good to hear. Come soon. Bye.”

He was thrilled by the time she hung up the phone.

Rather, Ranbir felt ecstatic, realizing with sudden clarity how much he had missed talking to her. And without saying another word, he started his bike with a sidelong glance in the mirror. There was this smile hiding his happy tears that finally welled up in his eyes. He was no longer a loser with a broken heart; he was the boy who never stopped trying. He had won against himself today.



27 November 2011

There was a lull in the conversation as Ranbir broke the news of him leaving his job.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?” he said almost tentatively.

“It depends on the question, Ranbir,” she answered, trying her best to hide her anger.

“You don’t need to be rude, Adah. I’m simply speaking the truth and discussing my future plans.”

“Look, I’m doing my best, okay?”

“Oh,” Ranbir said, cocking an eyebrow in anger, “I see. Sorry. I was just hallucinating your anger here,” he added but he knew he had it coming after he had hidden the news for almost a month from her.

“That doesn’t bother me – you wanting to be a writer.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re trying to ride me and my life your way?” Ranbir said.

“Considering the way you’ve been riding your own life lately, your mind has got some gas and that badly needs a support system to get the unnecessary air out of your thoughts to get you back to normalcy. Be glad of my minimal gesture,” she smirked and said.

Ranbir glanced away in anger toward the balcony again, pretending to look at the chirping birds outside. “What’s your stand when I am jobless and still deeply in love with you?”

“What do you mean?” she asked curiously.

“I mean I am trying my best to get some work of my choice. But I can’t give you any commitment about when I’ll actually get it.”

“Why would you like to do that in the first place, Ranbir? And secondly, if you’ve decided to do that, then you really wouldn’t want to know my opinion.”

“Who leaves a well paying job like that?” she murmured to herself.

“Because my passion is something else and what I was doing has nothing to do with it.”

“Passion has little to do with reality, Ranbir, and your novel is anyway getting published next year. You’re following your heart there, but you can’t ignore the fact that writing doesn’t pay one much in our country. Instead of moping around uselessly for days, you need to get back to your job and that’s final.”

“How can you not care about my choice of career, Adah?” He frowned, unable to understand why she was reacting like that.

“I don’t know. Maybe because you aren’t caring enough about our relationship,” she said and shrugged.

“By that logic, no jobless person has the right to be in a relationship. It’s like you get jobless and here we kick your ass.”

“Oh, heavens, no,” she said quickly. “Not now. I mean, I will throw the first thing which comes in my hand at your head if you don’t stop your illogical arguments. I am in no mood. And you know what, I am leaving right now because I’ve a job unlike you and I am not taking your calls till you get a real job for yourself again. You just spoiled my birthday; thanks for the gift.”

“Leave. You’re well satisfied with yourself. Someone else’s dream and happiness doesn’t matter to you. Go ahead and do whatever you want. Remember, I won’t call you this time. Burn down with your ego, you richest of rich girls.”

She didn’t respond. The words had startled both of them. It wasn’t the response he’d expected, and Ranbir felt himself stiffen slightly, thinking he had been a little too rude. He thought he could’ve ended the conversation in a better way, and he could have said a couple of sentences that meant nothing just to calm her down. But as she left, he said nothing. Adah just wrote something on a piece of paper and left it next to his television.

‘You said tonight was the night you were going to make it special; well it was a shocker for me, Mr Ranbir. Thanks for ruining my birthday night.’

Ranbir read it and a tear escaped his eye.

It took her only a minute to walk down four floors as he numbly kept watching her till she disappeared from his sight.

A little while later, he went back to his own room and destroyed the beautiful collage he had made for Adah. It had taken him ten days and had about ten different and special pictures of the two of them. He knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep so he wrote something with shaking hands in anger for the next couple of minutes before he tore it in disgust and frustration – a practice he followed to express his anger. He went back to his bed and switched off the lights in disappointment.



16 January 2012

Morning

Ranbir had relived the events of the fight with Adah over a hundred times, memories of which were rather unpleasant. Moreover, the kind of attachment he had with Adah and his vulnerability in the relationship always made him a cry baby. Ranbir had heard about stories of Adah's parents splitting up and getting back for their personal reasons. He was afraid of getting into a similar situation.

Adah wanted Ranbir to settle down and move forward in his career; Ranbir wanted to accomplish his dream. This difference in opinion between the two had ended with Ranbir sacrificing his dream of opting writing as a full time career.

Early morning in the darkness of his bedroom, with a raging headache, Ranbir pulled an extra pillow over his head, but it still wasn't thick enough to block out the loud music.

He threw his pillow and blanket, and a moment later, banging his door hard, he entered Lakshya's room. He was dancing to the tunes and getting ready to go to his office. His room was fragrant with his Giorgio Armani perfume which calmed his anger a bit.

"If you have a headache next time, don't expect me to behave sanely," Ranbir threatened with a ginger pointing at Lakshya.

"Fine," he said. "We'll have it your way." Lakshya didn't seem to care.

As soon as Lakshya replied, Ranbir decided it was time for a verbal war.

"What's your problem, Lakshya? I have a severe headache and you're dancing your ass off on EDM. Are you fucking out of your mind or what?"

“Well, didn’t I pay the rent this month?”

“That doesn’t mean you’ll do whatever you want in the flat.”

“Of course not, but I can...in my part of the flat. Right?”

Lakshya looked smug. Ranbir looked up at him and said nothing for a few seconds. The previous night’s drinks had left him groggy and lethargic with an acidic taste in his mouth, and he wasn’t in the mood for Lakshya’s superior attitude.

“You know what, don’t give me that. You woke me up so early in the morning knowing fully well I was completely sloshed last night. And it’s not like you don’t know what’s going on with me, so you please get over it.”

Lakshya snorted the cocaine and said calmly, “It’s practically impossible to look at you and feel like even helping you. You’ve been behaving like an idiot ever since you left your job.”

“So that’s what all the noise is about? I am going to have to get used to this then, I guess.” He raised his eyebrows and asked, staring into Lakshya’s red eyes.

“Well, yes. I’m mad at you for behaving like a loser. A month ago, you used to have a schedule and a life too. You seem to be in hibernation now. I understand that you want to get some writing job and you’re trying hard. But when things don’t work out, keep the plans on hold and move on. You’re just twenty–three.”

“That’s it? You got me out of bed for this? Now you also blame me after Adah. I’m going back to bed. My head really hurts – not that you care.”

“Don’t give me that shit. Every day, I put on this loud music so that you get up and spend the day in a better way, rather than just laze around. I don’t even know if you remember, but last night, you cried out loud and cursed almost everyone during our house party. You puked on Trisha too, but that’s still okay. She’s used to it. The thing, is I can’t see you getting to a place

from where there's no comeback, Ranbir," he said it with intense emotion and the words just flooded out.

Ranbir stood there for another minute, without uttering a word. He had finally heard someone else echo the things that he had known all along. Even now, not a day went by when he didn't wish he could turn back the clock and change what happened.

"It feels empty here without you, Ranbir," he said. "Kind of like someone has removed the soul out of this flat or something."

In just a few words, he had explained the very thing nobody else could have. Neither of his friends had ever before awakened him with this terrible realization that he'd forgotten the sound of his own personality.

Ranbir watched Lakshya going out.

He went into the kitchen, drank a glass of water and noticed a small burn, just below his ring finger on the right hand that had healed a couple of weeks back. He had pressed a cigarette into his hand after Adah didn't respond to his calls.

In case you're bored of your unemployment and want to apply for this marketing manager job, reach the place between 12-5

p.m. Meet Vrinda. Give my reference. address: B-301, Solitaire Corporate Park. andheri.

Lakshya messaged him.

Finally a smile flicked across Ranbir's face. The air had cooled slightly. A breeze had blown through his sea facing flat.

He was touched by Lakshya's worry for him and to witness such unconditional support in the face of difficulties.

He took a small step backward to see the time on the wall clock. It was eleven. He put the music on again as he walked towards his bedroom, took

his bathing towel out and moved into the bathroom to start afresh after nearly two months.



16 January 2012

Evening

The evening was alive with the sounds of chirping birds and the rustling of leaves. The moon had risen and in the milky light, Ranbir was waiting at the open terrace balcony of the company after three rounds of long interviews. He was called inside for one last time.

“Hi, Ranbir. Please be seated,” Vrinda signalled to him to sit down.

“Thanks,” he said as he observed every small detail of the huge office of the HR head.

“We’ve asked you everything that we wanted to know about you. I think we’ve got a position of an assistant manager (Marketing+Sales) for you. What’s your salary expectation?”

“I would like to go with the industry standards of paying an year–old experienced guy.”

“Yes, but you come from a very different background and industry. So you’re as good as a fresher for us.”

He nodded in understanding.

“We can pay you a sum package of four–and–a–half lakhs per year. But you get the opportunity of earning huge incentives and your field expenses remain exclusive,” she said, chewing gum, and raised her eyebrows as if warning him to take a quick decision.

He knew the first time he had entered the office that he’d not get the desired package, but it was always better to earn something, rather than nothing.

But deep within him, he was feeling ecstatic and happily surprised.

“You’re just twenty–three years young; you can make an amazing career out of this opportunity. Plus, you get your weekends off here. Do you need some time to think?”

“No. I’d like to join, Vrinda. Thanks for the opportunity.”

“Great. Welcome aboard then. Report at 9:30 a.m. tomorrow and we’ll take things from there.”

He nodded back smilingly and left the room. He looked over the window. In the milky light of the moon, the trees were growing silver. The sky was full of stars and he stared at them, smiling emotionally. He thought about Adah and his struggle to get a job in the last two months as he waited for the elevators to come up. He decided to call her up as soon as he reached the ground floor.



Ranbir had grown up in Indore with his family, but he shifted to Mumbai some years back in search of a career. Ranbir had always been a confused kid, and after picking up a couple of jobs with different companies, which didn’t excite him, he, like many youngsters, decided to follow his dreams after a publisher decided to publish his novel. He thought about being a celebrated author, writing film scripts and he started imagining it as one of the possibilities in life. The first time he told Adah about him writing a novel on their relationship, she got pleasantly surprised and became emotional after reading the first few chapters. If there was anything he was waiting for, it was to hold the copy of the book in his hands.

A year ago, he’d thrown a party the same way when he completed his novel and signed a contract with a publisher who seemed excited to publish him that October.

Ranbir stood by the window, watching Lakshya leave with his friends after a house party for Ranbir’s new job. Ranbir was smiling to himself, thinking

what a wonderful time they all had shared. He often felt that too many people lived their lives pretending, and losing themselves in the process. Lakshya, he felt certain, would never be one of them.

It had been a busy first month at office for Ranbir and he couldn't meet Adah at all. They'd chat for a couple of minutes

every hour or so about nothing important and then they'd get busy with their respective work. There had been countless times since his job when he wanted to meet her, but couldn't. The evening had already been more memorable than any evening in a long time, so he decided to make it even better.

He smiled again, and then turned away pocketing his keys. He made his way down the steps in the slanting moonlight, toward his bike with some plans in his head.

Now this was a weekend, Ranbir thought to himself. He put his jacket on and raced his bike. Staring at his own face in the mirror that Saturday night, he still found it hard to believe that he had got his smile back once again. He reached Adah's flat in ten minutes and called her up.

"Hey gorgeous! What are you doing?"

"Ranbir, I am sleeping like any human at this hour. What happened?" Adah said, struggling to open her eyes.

"Can you come down right now?"

"Down? You mean you're here at my apartment?"

"Yes. Would you mind?" Ranbir sounded excited.

"Well, yes. But I'll still come down to find out what you're up to."

"I missed you so much, Adah." He hugged her and kissed her forehead. She was looking way too beautiful in her pyjamas.

"Yeah, yeah, I missed you too. But why did you come so late?"

“I think we need to take a break from our regular boring schedules and go to Lonavla,” he said. “We’ll have fun.”

He knew it wasn’t much of a plan, but it was all he could come up with.

“No way,” she said. “I won’t go that far. No reason to travel so much, plus, I’m very tired already. I’ve to get up early in the morning and pack. I’m shifting into a new flat.”

“Come on, don’t say that. We haven’t spent much time together lately anyway. I really want to be with you tonight.”

“Me too,” she said. “But I’ll be glad to go there some other time.” She wrinkled her nose in disagreement.

For a moment, neither of them said anything, and Ranbir nodded.

“Say something,” Adah coaxed, knowing Ranbir was disappointed.

“Good night,” he said in a sad voice.

“Now don’t make that puppy face, you know that works well with me.” She crossed her arms and kissed him on his cheeks as she sat back on his bike. “Let’s go.”

He laughed and said. “I’m glad you agreed. Thanks.”

“I had to. I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said and felt rather pleased with himself. He knew that she had something inside her – something impossibly rare, something he’d looked for in the past but had never found in anyone else.

And for the most part, they talked about everything and their good mood went on. He slowed down his bike in the jungles of Khopoli and tried taking his mobile out. He had felt it vibrating and wondered who had been calling him so late.

“This isn’t the right place to check your mobile, Ranbir. I am scared.” She looked around, scared of the dark.

The phone, he realized, hadn’t rung at all. And there were no lights visible for kilometres ahead too.

“In that case, I’ll be glad to stay here for some time.”

They stood together as they took a break from the long ride without speaking, until Ranbir finally took a small step forward. She was dressed in her pyjamas, her hair a tangled mess, but she still looked absolutely perfect.

This time, she expected the kiss and wanted him to initiate it. She couldn’t deny herself the joy of standing so close to him there.

He tilted her head slightly, drawing her beautiful lips closer to his. He could see the surprise in her eyes when he kissed her lips gently and then he sucked her lower lip.

It wasn’t more than just a kiss, really, but all they could do was stare at each other afterward, thinking how wonderful the moment had been.

He pulled himself back and turned to start his bike. Her blood was boiling, and she came running towards him.

“That’s not fair, that’s so not fair,” she murmured against his mouth.

“Are you not scared of the darkness anymore?” He gazed at her intently.

“Not anymore, would you fucking stop interrogating me now?” she said and he gently slid his jacket as well as hers off. As he touched her cheek, Adah closed her eyes. She knew intuitively the meaning of his touch – the words he had spoken by sliding her jacket off on one of the coldest nights.

They lay together just behind the wood logs on a beautiful stretch of grass, their bodies entwined in passion, her own soft whimpers as they became one. His tongue and lips were touching every part of her beautiful naked body. He put his arms around her and hauled her against his body,

squeezing her tightly. He went down further on her to run his tongue over her.

He threw off his pants, passion and blood pumping through their bodies. As he moved his body closer, she closed her eyes, giving herself to him without any reservations, knowing that it was what they both needed and wanted.

His strong biceps weren't letting her move; she tugged at his hair and moaned.

They had needed each other very badly after a busy month, and without taking their eyes off each other, they tried to quieten their loud breathing until their moment of final freeze.

After a long intercourse, he kissed her between her breasts and said, "You're so sweet and perfect, Adah. I love you."

She put one arm around his chest feeling all his love.

They lay together in that position before they finally got up to continue their journey to Lonavla. After some amazing food at Lion Point, Lonavla at three in the morning, they began the journey back. Neither said anything on their way back as they were still lost in those beautiful moments they had shared and memories they had created.



Summer rose in full fury in the first week of April, the temperature creeping past forty degree Celsius already. Toward the end of the month, the heat became unbearable.

May opened with an unseasonal cold front, something that hadn't happened in the past decade. A week later, another heat wave arrived and made it unbearably hot and humid for even the people of Mumbai.

Throughout the summer, Ranbir and Adah's relationship remained healthy as they spent quality time together. Settled into a routine, they tried to have their lunch together. Ranbir's office started at ten in the morning and would finish by seven in the evening. Because he was in the marketing section and he was mostly out for meetings with several people, he continued to shuttle between his meetings and Adah's office whenever he could.

During those four months, Ranbir dropped and picked Adah to and from her office. He himself was busy trying to complete his book before the given deadline. Adah had, meanwhile, shifted into a new flat and became close friends with her flat-mates Vijayashri aka VJ and Rishibha. VJ was a fashion designing graduate and Rishibha, a US-returned single woman who was a marketing head in a start-up.

Ranbir also blossomed in his career as he finished his probation period. Gaining confidence in his work, he was promoted to the position of a team leader within a few months.

But as idyllic as everything seemed, Ranbir sensed an undercurrent of restlessness in their relationship he couldn't exactly pen down. It scared him sometimes, and that made him vaguely uncomfortable. But then he would hold her and caress her as usual and ask her if there was anything that was bothering her, and she would ask him to use his imagination in his novels, not in the relationship. Because everything between them was just perfect and that she loved him a lot.

Towards the end of summer, his responsibility in the company increased and he couldn't take Saturdays off anymore, which upset their plans at times.

It was an evening in June and Ranbir was standing in Adah's balcony, nodding thoughtfully, doing his best to look and act presentable. He was wearing a tuxedo for the very first time in his life and looked sharp and debonair.

“You don't mind doing all this for me, do you, Ranbir?”

The truth was Ranbir was just twenty–three years old, and came from a middle class background. It surely broke his heart when twenty grand got debited from his account when he purchased his Blackberry tuxedo for just a single occasion.

“I told you I would do anything to see that beautiful smile on your face,” he said and kissed her forehead.

“That means a lot to me, and you’re looking very impressive. I’m sure Mumma and Papa will like you,” she said and remembered what her mother had told her once: ‘Judge a man by the clothes he wears and not by his sweet talk, because that’s one thing which they’re already good at.’

He loved the way she smiled and she loved the way he stared at her for one long minute – she just loved everything about him that day. Sometimes she also found herself dreaming of their dream house which would be located at a beach. She liked to think that they’d be the richest people around and have all possible luxuries in life. She could only hope that Ranbir dreamt about the same things.

“You seem nervous,” Adah commented, studying Ranbir’s reflection in the mirror. He was standing behind her in her room as she put finishing touches to her make–up.

“I am nervous.”

“But it’s only dinner with Mumma and Papa. There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

Holding up two different coloured tie bows, he debated between the black and blue before he finally picked up black.

“For you, maybe. You already know them; after all, they’re your parents. I only met them once, a couple of years back, when we picked them from the airport and didn’t talk all that long. What if I don’t make the best of impressions?”

“Don’t worry; I have hardly met them in the last few years myself. They’re too busy with their lives anyway.” Adah hugged him. “I am sure they’ll love you.”

“But what if I make a bad impression?”

“They won’t care. They know me well; it’s my decision at the end of day, and not theirs.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be so nerve-wrecking if you’d taken me to meet them sooner. You’ve waited an enormously long time to take me to your parent’s dinner table.

“Don’t blame me. They were here in December, and all the time, you were sitting unemployed with your unshaved face and long hair. I couldn’t risk my future by making you meet them then.”

“So, you’re still embarrassed about it or have you got over it?” he asked seriously.

“Don’t be absurd. Trust me on this...my intentions were purely selfish as I always want you to be your best in front of them.”

“Is this something I’m going to have to worry about forever and have to go by unsigned terms and conditions that you set for me?”

She sighed. “Well, it should be the first and the last time. I’ve almost impressed them by talking a lot about you already in the last few years and they aren’t ignorant enough to not have noticed that. But I am telling you, we’ll have such an amazing time in the future.”

“You’re changing the topic, Adah.”

“I know, Ranbir. But why don’t you understand...I love you so much and want you to feel comfortable and confident. We have to leave in the next five minutes.”

None of them spoke for the next few seconds.

“You look fantastic too, Adah. I wish I could kiss you right now and smear your make-up all over your pretty face.” He smiled and winked at her.

“Glad you’re smiling. Thank you and we’ll have all the time in the world to do that after the dinner.”

“Sounds great,” he said, and a moment later, they took the elevators down, wondering if everything was going to be alright. Pausing for a moment, he purchased a lovely bouquet for her parents. Adah gave him a look of satisfaction and they got into Lakshya’s Volkswagen Polo he had borrowed for a day.



As the evening slowly wound down, Adah found herself holding Ranbir’s gaze a little longer than usual. It surprised her. But then, she’d always known that, even before she’d started dating Ranbir, that he loved her more than she did. He would always go that extra mile to make her happy and she was glad to have him.

One hour later, Ranbir and Adah were walking toward the main door of Taj Lands End, Bandra after giving their car keys for valet parking. Adah’s parents were sitting at the outdoor table, watching both of them coming in. Her father looked like a venomous snake that’d bite Ranbir and kill him.

“Hey, you guys,” he said. “Glad you could make it.”

Adah bear hugged her parents and introduced Ranbir.

“You have met, Ranbir, right?” she said.

“At the airport,” her father said easily. “But that was a couple of years back, and besides, we met a lot of people that day. How are you doing, Ranbir?”

“Good, thanks. How are you guys doing?” he said, still feeling a little nervous.

“Well, we’re doing well, Ranbir. I am pleased to meet you,” Adah’s mother said and turned towards the restaurant. “Shall we?”

“Yes, sure,” he said and realized that he still hadn’t handed over the bouquet. Adah signalled him to do that.

“This is for you,” he said and handed it over to Adah’s mother.

She smiled and accepted it. “Thanks, Ranbir. That’s so nice of you.”

They went into the restaurant and made themselves comfortable at a sea view table. Adah sat shyly by her mother’s side. Her mother leaned towards her and kissed her forehead.

They talked about their family and other things for five long minutes before the waiter served them wine. All this while, Ranbir kept smiling.

“All right, Ranbir. Your turn?”

“And here it comes, the inquisitions,” he said and everybody chuckled.

“Okay, we know about your job as Adah has told us about it already. But I’d just love to know a little more about you, other than the fact that you’re writing a novel too.”

“I mean, that might be everything that I have to say about myself.”

“What are your future plans? When are you doing your post graduation?”

“Uh, I’m not going to college again.” Ranbir was confident when he said that, because he might not have known what he wanted to do, but he was sure of what he didn’t want to do.

“Oh,” Adah’s mother said. “Don’t you feel you need it?”

“No, I’m not saying that. I mean I appeared for the CAT exam,” he said.

“No, I wouldn’t let that discourage you. I mean not everybody can clear that exam. It’s pretty tough to crack,” her father interrupted thinking that he’d

failed the CAT.

“Well, I got a 99.3 percentile,” he said shyly, not meaning to sound too arrogant.

“That’s an amazing score, Ranbir. You could get into IIMs with that score,” her mother said clearly surprised.

“Maybe. But I like writing fiction novels and my family supports me.”

“Wow. And there’s nothing wrong with that,” Adah’s father said.

“Yes. I don’t need much – enough food, my family, my friends and a nice girl to come home to.”

“It’s quite a modern day romantic thing, Ranbir. Can I just give you a piece of advice?”

“Oh no, Papa,” Adah interrupted.

He ignored her and went on anyway. “I am speaking as someone who’s been working for over three decades now,” he added and Ranbir smiled back.

“Sure,” Ranbir said.

“Having a passion for something is wonderful, but it’s not all you need. You also need things like a flat for yourself in Mumbai, a luxurious car, a good lifestyle and status in society, which you can’t get by just writing novels,” he said.

Ranbir tapped his lap with his fingers in uneasiness and disagreement.

“I get that. I’m sure I’ll have all those things one day, but I do think that passion comes first. You know? If that goes well, you feel happiest and at the end of the day what’s more important than that?”

Her father smirked in disagreement.

“You know, I’ve seen it first-hand. I know what it’s like when you achieve your dream, and I also know what it feels like when you don’t. So I’d prefer to pursue my dream first,” Ranbir said thoughtfully.

“So you’ve pursued your dreams before?” Adah’s father asked.

“No no,” he smiled. “But my friends have. One dreamt of becoming a pilot, another a news anchor, etc., and it made sense. I know what I have chosen for myself is not an easy path, and it’s not a short one either, but that’s what I want to do. Achieve my dream. The kind that you fight for, that you always put first. That makes you want to be good and do better always. And that’s not with every small dream that I have, but for ‘the dream’ that I have. And when I fulfil that, that’s everything I need in my life. I am sure those who are close to me will understand me.”

“Big dreams and no plans, sounds great,” her father says sarcastically.

“Maybe, I should’ve said I was going to IIM this season,” Ranbir replied sarcastically.

“Well, you really should’ve.”

“He’s just saying that because you put him on the spot. Now leave the poor kid alone,” Adah’s mother intervened to ease out the tension.

There was silence for the next few seconds before Adah’s mother spoke. “I hope you fulfil that dream, Ranbir.”

“Thank you. I mean, Uncle too did it, and made a huge empire on his own. I hope I can do something useful with my dream too.”

“To dreams!” Adah raised her wine glass for a toast, so as to divert her father and Ranbir.

They all replied in unison and clinked their glasses. “To dreams.”

They finished their food in the next fifteen minutes over light discussions about Adah’s childhood and the pranks she played. Ranbir made them laugh

on his office stories. He did this on purpose to let the evening end on a happy note.

They bid goodbye to her parents after finally dropping them at the airport and on their drive back home, the conversation between him and Adah's father repeated dozens of times in their minds. Yet now, for the first time after months, there was an air of tension in the car with a reason that couldn't be easily explained by either of them. But it was there, and it had kept them so quiet. They reached his flat without uttering a single word. They entered his flat and he didn't feel like talking to her. Adah didn't, either. He'd been strangely distant, and that only turned her mood off. What was supposed to have been a casual, friendly dinner with her parents, Ranbir knew with certainty had become something far more serious than that.

Adah wondered why the things Ranbir hadn't discussed suddenly seemed more important and she found a need to discuss them. She drew a deep breath and said, "Ranbir, why aren't you talking?"

"I don't want to. There's nothing to talk about."

"Oh come on, don't be so smug. And you know well that you weren't really yourself tonight."

"Oh really, you realized that after the long discussion with your father? And by the way, it was supposed to be a casual dinner. Right?" His eyes widened a little.

"Ranbir. Even though he asked you something about your future plans, you could've handled it in a better way. Don't you think you were a little too rude to my father tonight?"

She saw the anger in his eyes.

"Are you out of your mind, or are just being a partial and blind daughter?" he asked.

“No, Ranbir. I am neither partial, nor out of my mind. I am telling you this because I saw you getting impatient and I heard your replies to his questions.”

Shaking his head, he exhaled a sharp breath. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Why?”

“Adah, you probably haven’t seen your father interrogating me with his questions and logic that seems right only to him.”

“There’s nothing wrong in that. He’s just concerned about me, and I just don’t like anyone talking like that about my father.”

“Now you know why I wasn’t willing to talk about it.”

“You’re just too well-satisfied with yourself, Ranbir. You’d never admit that you too can be wrong at times. And my father wasn’t wrong. Writing doesn’t pay much and it never will.”

“Who are you to tell me if I am wrong or not, when you too get partial while talking about your father’s behaviour? How well do you really know me? Aren’t my dreams worth anything? And where, most importantly, are we going from here when you can’t even support me in front of your father?”

Once again silence descended. A deadlier one this time. He knew she would have answers to none of the questions, but being a highly egoistic person, she wouldn’t accept his side of the argument either. Ranbir went into his room to change and came out in pyjamas within a few minutes. He noticed that Adah wasn’t there. She had gotten into a cab when he peeped down from his window. As his gaze fell back into his room, he saw a frame with their picture and realized how much he loved her. The last couples of hours were somehow going to mark his life forever and not for the best of reasons.



The smoke from the previous night's incident was still rising within him, and in times like these, he always kept his mind busy with ridiculous thoughts. He always crossed that thin line where he almost forgot that Adah was a part of his life and not his entire life. He sometimes thought that his feelings and ego had been buried for far too long – the ego that Adah never faced and feelings that were just meant for Adah.

The next week, one morning while Ranbir was drinking coffee, Lakshya came into his room.

“Hey, I’m glad you’re up,” Lakshya said.

When Ranbir said nothing, he moved closer and patted him on his shoulder. “What are you thinking about?” Lakshya smiled and asked. Their eyes met only briefly before Lakshya glanced away.

For a brief flickering instant, it almost seemed to Lakshya that Ranbir would break down at any moment, but thankfully, he didn’t.

“It’s a beautiful morning, isn’t it?” Lakshya said.

“Yes, it is.”

“Then why can’t you have a smiling face to compliment it. You know, no matter what’s happening in your life, I want you to get over certain things and feel happy.”

“And how do I do that?”

“Get busy, hang out with me and I’ll introduce you to some of my good female friends.”

“There’s no need for any of this, Lakshya. Thank you.”

“I don’t know why you have to keep everything in your life aside and give Adah a priority.”

“I do. I know exactly why I do that. I am an emotional fool and she knows it very well to use it against me,” Ranbir said in a hushed tone.

“But if you continue down this road, you’ll regret it, Ranbir. You understand?” Lakshya said, concerned.

“So what do I do? Keep a fake smiling face and act as if it doesn’t bother me?”

“Don’t get mad at me . Believe me, when I come to you every morning and try to make you smile, I know how this makes you feel, because I felt the same way sometime back and you made me feel alive then.”

“I’d never be able to tell you how much I appreciate everything that you do, Lakshya. But you should also know that we’re not the same people and my relationship was much sincere than yours. For me, it’s not easy. I’ve loved her so much...she’s important to me. I shouldn’t have been rude to her.”

“You’re not important to her, Ranbir.”

“Don’t say that,” Ranbir looked hurt.

“But it’s true, isn’t it? You’re just blaming yourself for none of your fault this time. You have given her everything – your time, your love and gave up on your ego, which I wouldn’t have wanted you to. She doesn’t deserve you.”

Ranbir stayed silent for some more time. He let his words penetrate before saying anything.

“You’re right,” he admitted. “But you’re wrong if you think I will get over this. That’s not easy for me. The more I try to not think about her, the more I think about the beautiful time we spent together. Trust me, I’ve never been in love like this with anyone before, not real love anyway. I don’t know what else I can tell you, other than that I can’t imagine spending the rest of my life without Adah.”

He ran a hand through his hair, irritated.

“It just might make you think that I’ve gone nuts. But I’ve never been more serious about anything else,” Ranbir added, in a last attempt to make

Lakshya understand what Adah meant to him.

For a long moment, neither of them said anything. Ranbir's mind was whirling and he badly wanted to go back to Adah and apologize.

“I like you brother. I really do. Things will get better. If you feel worried about anything, you know I am just an abuse away from you and I'll come with sexy chicks,” he said smilingly.

“Of course,” Ranbir smiled back and hugged him before Lakshya walked away. Ranbir stood there in discomfort. He'd been in this situation before and he had to choose between self-respect and his love. He had always settled down for the latter.

Ranbir had called her many times the past week, but she wouldn't respond. Growing in this relationship, she had always tried to create some rules, and made Ranbir follow them. Despite the beautiful day outside, he couldn't escape the truth that he was not happy. What he really had to do is to go back to Adah and apologize for his behaviour that evening without putting much mind into it, for Adah would never admit her mistake and call him.



The parking lot at Solitaire Corporate was mostly full as he arrived late in office. Ranbir parked his bike on one side and checked his watch; he was already forty-five minutes late.

Not waiting for the elevators to come down, he dashed up to his office on the third floor. Breathing rapidly, he could feel his adrenaline surge, though this time the surges made his hands tremble out of nervousness as he was very late for a review meeting.

A few minutes later, he reached his cubicle, only to notice that the meeting had already started. He made his way down to the conference room where ten employees, including his zonal and regional head, were sitting.

He took a seat and waited for his regional head Rajiv to speak. But he just gave him an unwelcoming look and continued to grill his colleague Milind. With his head down, Milind continued feeling guilty about his performance which wasn't even fifty percent of the target allotted.

Ranbir wanted to sleep; he needed to sleep, but despite his exhaustion, he knew a nap would cost him his job on that day as he had not been an example of success in the past month – his performances were more like nightmares.

He saw Rajiv reaching his performance chart just after Milind promised him ten times to over achieve his target in the most orthodox way by saying – “I'll increase my prospects and

acquire a new market to make sure that I don't disappoint you this time sir.”

Ranbir felt his sweaty hand suddenly slipping from his table.

“I'm sorry. I know I'm a little late, but the traffic's been impossible this morning, Rajiv,” Ranbir said as Rajiv looked at him in pure horror.

“Ranbir, let me just get to your performance in the last month first and then we'll be good to discuss if facing traffic in Mumbai is that unusual,” Rajiv said sarcastically.

A moment later, with the CRM opened right in front of everyone on a six foot long screen Rajiv asked. “Where are we going, by the way? Is it because you're too over confident of performing well all the time or you've decided to give our patience a test? May be you should've made your motive a little more clear.”

Ranbir looked up and said. “Rajiv, I agree that last month was a bad month, but it was a market trend for every competitor—”

“Oh shut up, Ranbir.” Rajiv interrupted. “I don't expect you to start with this line. You never said the line about market trend when you were

churning out incentives. You almost took every appreciation we threw your way.”

Sometimes he absolutely hated Rajiv for shouting too loud during meetings and insulting the employees intentionally. It looked almost scripted at times.

In one sequence after another, he watched helplessly as everything went wrong and he could do nothing to stop it.

After ten minutes of the most destructive review, Rajiv concluded the meeting as he said, “I don’t want anyone of you to whine about how hard it is to achieve your targets at the end of next quarter end. Remember you’re paid for that very job and not for your joy of sitting in an air conditioned office. Get your asses out and work for saving your job. You can understand that,

right?”

Everyone apart from Ranbir chorused, “Right.”

You don’t agree, Ranbir? Traffic in your mind too?” Rajiv asked rudely.

“No, Rajiv. I agree to what you said and I won’t screw up this time,” Ranbir said but it was very hard for him to set aside his ego and reply like every puppet in the conference room.

After a long while, when Rajiv had personally insulted everyone there, he left the room. The colleagues huddled in a group to bitch about Rajiv and Ranbir overheard Milind saying to Shashank, “ I agree that our team overall has touched a new low but that doesn’t mean he can call me ‘retarded’. I am probably the most educated person out here.”

“That’s still better than being called as hunchback, Milind. That says a lot about what he thinks of me,” Shashank replied.

“I’m anyway leaving this company ya. No point in playing with my career. I’ll go to Dubai and settle there. My boyfriend is anyway getting me a job there. At least romance will be back in my life and I don’t have to see this

lizard-faced boss every morning,” Urmi said to Priya who replied with the most formal smile.

Ranbir glanced around to see how everyone was frustrated and he thought he needed to talk to Adah that very evening to mend things between them. He’d have to take the first step. He didn’t understand his decision, not really. All he knew was that he needed to talk to her and burn his self-respect once again.



In the darkness of that evening, Ranbir reached Adah’s apartment building and parked his bike some metres away. There was beauty in the random silence of that street which was very unusual in Mumbai, but that didn’t stop Ranbir from feeling nervous. He was living a life with rigid rules set by Adah; they were neither discussed, nor ever told, but were still there.

There was something happening just below Adah’s apartment, something he couldn’t make out from a distance. He could see Adah. There was a guy who helped her to open the door of the car. He hugged Adah for a few seconds and she looked quite happy. They were laughing out loud and talked for a few minutes before he hugged her again and she waved him goodbye.

Ranbir walked towards Adah as normally as he could. Ranbir called out her name and walked up to her. Adah looked puzzled and tried to mask her shock.

“Adah, How are you?”

“I was good till sometime back, if you know what I mean, Ranbir,” Adah said, almost avoiding eye contact with him.

Ranbir nodded and felt embarrassed for some reason. He took out the perfume he had bought for her and offered it to her.

“I don’t want you to do this for me. I reckon everything is over between us after that day, Ranbir.”

“I’m sorry about that, Adah. I was wrong to be rude to you and your parents. I wasn’t fair to you and family.”

“Ranbir, I don’t need you in my life anymore. I don’t want any more trouble and it’s not worth my time. I pity myself that I ever got into a relationship with you,” she said, her voice getting a little too loud.

“Please don’t say that, Adah. I’m scared out of my wits to hear that. I promise I won’t ever behave like that again.”

“I’m assuming that you’re here because you’ve satisfied your ego and now that you’ve nobody to go to, you’ve come back to me. But you know what? Go back, because no matter what, you’ll always remain the same,” Adah said almost venomously.

Ranbir said while crying his lungs out, “Adah, I am bad, I’ve never been fair to you and I know that. I’ve been one egoistic bastard who’d always hurt you in some or the other way. But if I need to tell you something, you give me forever and for that I am eternally grateful. I love you so much, Adah that I would do anything in this world to see you back in my life. I swear on our love, I’ll never be the shit pot again and be everything that you want me to be. This separation is eating me up.”

She didn’t answer right away, but when he glanced at her, his eyes registered nothing but guilt and regret.

Neither of them said anything for the next few minutes and it took a moment for Ranbir to realize that the possibility of them being together was still there.

Surprisingly, she walked towards him and hugged him. “Why do you spoil things always? You know how much I love you and you do this to me,” she said patting his shoulder and trying to console him.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I did to you,” he repeated earnestly and his breath got caught in his throat.

Adah hugged him back with all her strength. Ranbir’s tears were still falling onto her neck and she could hear his heartbeats very clearly.

The simple drift of this conversation was so soothing that everything came back on track within the next few minutes. At last, Ranbir asked her about the guy who had dropped her back home. She laughed and said, “He’s just a colleague who lives a couple of kilometres away. I suppose you took it in a wrong way, Ranbir.” She winked at him.

“No, I was just a little curious. Nothing else.” He smiled.

Adah laughed back and the moment seemed to be working between the two. They gradually began to talk more in the society compound. She laughed at Ranbir’s hilarious re-enactment of that day’s review meeting and how badly he had fucked it up.

Ranbir held her hand, watching her face until she kissed him. The fact that Adah had won this battle of emotions over him was the last thing he remembered before he waved her goodbye.



Month by month, visit by visit, their relationship grew stronger. As usual, Ranbir did his best to keep her happy always by coming directly from office in the evening and taking her to different parts of Mumbai for late evening walks. He cancelled his own plans with his friends and when they fought about it, he never bothered to explain the situation. No matter how difficult or hard it was to meet Adah’s expectations, he always excelled at it.

After a beautiful Saturday spent with Adah, he put on some soft music, printed some beautiful pictures, pasted them on the wall and then sat down to complete his novel’s final edits. He closed his eyes and imagined an alternative scene for his last chapter. He took his dreams sheet out and got engrossed in writing the last scene of his first novel. He had his own way of

writing, which took him more time, but he was content to have reached that point after so many sleepless nights.

Lakshya saw him working on his novel from a distance and decided to not disturb him.

The same melodies of Enrique Iglesias and Bryan Adams played on loop. He looked satisfied and dissatisfied at times, writing down his own story over a couple of years. Yet, as much as he wanted to deny it, he knew he had done an excellent job by attempting his first novel and there was something inside him that longed to celebrate his effort.

He looked out of the window and it was raining. On other days like this, he'd ask Lakshya for his car and would go out on a long drive with Adah, but that night he wanted to finish his novel.

Ranbir flipped to the very first page. Across the top was the chapter title. Beneath that, toward the middle of the page and continuing on to the back, was Adah's description during their very first meeting and how beautiful she looked. Then he kept on turning pages and checking his seventy thousand word manuscript for one last time. He grasped how difficult it had been for him. He remembered a senior author saying, "You need the patience of a saint to finish a novel."

Then he remembered what another author had told him, "You can't write a novel, don't even try to write one as you've very ordinary language, vocabulary and a pathetic storyline."

Ranbir thought, "One day after publishing my novel, I'm going to give a copy to him. I want him to read it, so that he knows I am not all that bad."

Criticism like that kept his dream alive and he was glad that he didn't give up before completing his story.

After spending hours on it that night, he reached to the final page of the story . After much deliberation on what the last line should be, he wrote:

“We’ve come a long way after our many break-ups with each other; we have our hopes for a tomorrow, a better tomorrow.”

That night at almost four, lying under the sheet, it was difficult convincing himself that he’d completed his final draft and sent it to the publishers within the given deadline. He found himself praying for his story and hoping to see it published in the coming month. He closed his eyes for the night. His life was going to change in four weeks and he was elated. He had never slept so peacefully in the past few months.

It was real and the dream was coming true for Ranbir.



It was a hot and steamy day – the kind that saps one’s energy out. Ranbir took a shower, stood with a towel wrapped around him and looked at how his biceps had shaped up nicely. Lakshya had said they were going to meet some of their friends and he finally dressed up without arguing much with him as Adah had gone to her hometown to meet her cousins. Knowing that, Ranbir had no other excuses left to not go out with Lakshya.

“I wondered if I’d ever get a chance to spend time with you. We should thank Adah for giving two old friends some space,” Lakshya said once they were inside his car.

“She’ll claim ownership someday and your friends have to seek permission for taking you out for a while,” Lakshya continued as he lit up a cigarette and signalled to Ranbir if he wanted one.

“No. That’s okay. It’s more fun watching you have it.”

“She’s really thought you through this, hasn’t she? You were one hell of a smoker otherwise,” he grinned and said.

“Not really. I decided to quit smoking; it makes one impotent anyway. Not a proud thing to declare,” Ranbir said and blinked at his own honesty.

“Well, in that case, I’ll let you have another baby and I’ll adopt one from you. Wait wait. No, that kid will have a lot of Adah too which I don’t want. I’d adopt one from somewhere else.”

“Adah isn’t that bad. I don’t know why you hate her so much.”

“No. I am not saying that she’s bad. She’s just a little too dominating, cruel, egoistic, over-pampered, demanding, and dictatorial. Who would want kids like that till the time I don’t have a readymade son-in-law like you?”

Ranbir grinned and said, “At least pretend like you care for my relationship sometimes.”

“I care for you and that’s why I don’t care about your relationship and Adah. We’ve spent about five years together and I bet I know you better than you know yourself. You’re just an easy target for her.”

“Lakshya, if you keep acting the way you’ve been acting all night, I might as well say goodbye right now and go back.”

“So I should act like I don’t care?”

“Yes, that’s perhaps better.”

“How do I do that?”

“Be quiet.”

With that, Lakshya parked his car on a perfectly silent street, neither of them feeling the urge to speak. Lakshya messaged someone and within a couple of minutes his girlfriend, Trisha came down in her shorts, hugged and kissed Lakshya. Trisha was probably the hottest girlfriend Lakshya ever had. She was madly in love with Lakshya for who he was and never complained a bit about anything.

In the end, she smiled and handed over a gift wrapped packet to Ranbir.

“What’s in it?” Ranbir asked.

“Is it really too hard to guess?”

“Don’t tell me it’s the only thing I’ve been waiting for, Trisha.”

“You know what they say, great minds think alike.”

He snatched the gift from Trisha and started unwrapping the gift with sudden excitement and hunger in his eyes.

His hands were shivering out of excitement, and Lakshya, standing there, could only imagine the feeling. That was real love.

As he opened it, he saw his book *What holds You On* with a light blue cover page and found his name written on it. He opened the book with trembling hands and the most innocent smile on his face. He smelled the book, read some lines and tears started rolling down his eyes.

Lakshya pulled him out of the car and hugged him; Ranbir hugged him back even tighter with the book still in his hand.

“You did it, Ranbir. You fucking nailed it. You have your dreams in your hand right now and nothing in this world could make me any happier,” Lakshya said as he tried his best to control his tears.

“I love you guys. Both of you,” Ranbir said earnestly. He struggled with the words, but still continued. “I don’t know if I would be any happier in my life. But you guys chose the right thing and the right moment to surprise me by getting me my own book even before I got it.”

“We pre-ordered it and requested them the first delivery. They agreed to.” Trisha was beaming to see me and Lakshya so happy.

“I love you brother, for all these small surprises that you bring in my life.”

“Anytime brother, I like the fact that when you say something, I know that you really mean it,” Lakshya said and patted his shoulder.

He called up Adah to share his happiness, but she disconnected the call. But to him, that night seemed to have marked the beginning of his life as an

author. It was also the first time he'd ever had a moment in which Adah wasn't around and he wasn't missing her too.

It was perfectly his moment. He was smiling continuously as he was checking the acknowledgement in which he had thanked everyone. Lakshya and Trisha were enjoying the moment too, neither of them feeling any urge to speak.

And then Ranbir started wondering how it'd be like to have his readers mailing him about their feedback on his novel and people appreciating his work. He was totally in love with that feeling and he had never been more excited about anything else in his entire life.

He stopped staring at his book and went quiet. He had never been in love with his work; it was just because of money. But this was his real love, the one for which he'd dedicated his last two years.

“I don't know what else I can tell you, other than that I want to get high on happiness tonight. I know that sounds crazy but let's get drunk and talk all night for there's a beautiful weekend ahead and we don't have Adah in town to upset our plans too.”

For a long moment, Trisha and Lakshya could not believe what Ranbir had just said and broke into the wildest of laughter, knowing that Ranbir was truly happy and back in celebration mode.

The boys got into the car to go back home for an eventful night ahead.



Later that night, sitting in the living room, he flipped through the pages of his novel, commenting every now and then about how much he had loved writing it. Each page was filled with Ranbir's love for Adah, his memories, and his observations about their relationship.

They were already quite high on alcohol with Trisha resting on Lakshya's shoulder and caressing his hair occasionally. Ranbir always missed sharing

that bond with Adah. With Adah, it was more of a strict love relationship than casual play outs.

“May I?” Lakshya asked, motioning to the novel as he took the book and flipped back to the acknowledgement page. Across the top was written a line.

‘Thank you Adah for coming into my life and for your undying belief in me. You make my life beautiful.’

Lakshya nodded and read every word of the acknowledgement first, that included his name too, and then a page of the prologue. He looked up as he finished reading them.

“I don’t know what I can tell you, other than that if I was a girl I would’ve done anything to spend rest of my life with you. You’re one crazy lover and it’s high time Adah understands this as well.”

“Lakshya is right. Anybody can fall in love with you. Of course you love writing, but then you’ve done something that’s never happened in Adah’s life before – you’ve dedicated

two hundred and sixty pages to her. This is something which doesn’t happen with everyone. It never happened with me. But if Adah keeps on being your teacher, she might let you slip away. Because soon people will start loving your work and that can change the equation for her,” Trisha said and Lakshya nodded in agreement.

For a long moment, neither of them said anything, before Trisha spoke again,

“I mean, I like her. It’s just that I like you much more and if I have to choose one person between you and Adah who’s hanging above a deep valley, I’d definitely save you first and then only I’ll kick her,” she said and all of them guffawed. The spell was broken with the ping of a Facebook chat box that popped up on Ranbir’s laptop on which songs had been playing till now.

Hey. are you the same Ranbir who wrote What Holds You On ?

That line was enough for him to understand that this message was from his first reader. Though the name wasn't her real one for sure.

R – hi, Stone heart. Yes, you're chatting with the right person.

Sh – I can't believe I am chatting with the author I like the most these days.

R – Lol. These days? My novel was released just some hours back. It 's not even a day till now.

Sh –Duh. You're mean. Making fun of your reader. Bad.

R – Lol. Sorry. I didn't mean that and you'd be happy to know that you're my first ever reader.

Sh – That makes my day. You'll remember me now. I am too pretty to be forgotten anyway.

That made Ranbir stalk her profile and she looked effortlessly beautiful and rich. The kind of looks that a princess has.

Sh – Btw, do you even know my name?

R – Yes, Stone is your name and heart is your surname.

Sh – That's not the real one. My real name is Pihu Sharma.

R – Of course I knew it was not your real name.

Sh – You sound quite like me. Where were you till now?

R – I was kind of hogging for twenty–three years of my life, Now that I've decided to take a break , look who I found – Pihu Sharma.

P – That's not funny. Well, jokes apart, you're a brilliant author and you write amazingly well. I wish to read more from you in the near future and I

should sleep now else I'll get dark circles and no one will marry this poor girl.

R – haha. Sure, go to sleep. Btw last question? What do you do?

P – It was your first question though. I completed my graduation in mass communication from ahmedabad and have I just joined my dad in his business.

R – What kind of business ?

P – Well, you said last question. Seems like you' re becoming my fan too. Lol. Chemicals. We're into manufacturing of spirits.

R – Good to know that and yes you should sleep now, Pihu.

P – It was amazing talking to you, Mister author. Loved your book. Get me the character arnab. I love him. Good night.

R – he 's pretty much like me. Good night.

P – Then you're going to have a hard time with me. Beware.

R – Lol. I am speechless. You're too cute , Pihu. Good night. Take care. I am back to my celebrations and my drinks.

P – Breaks my heart to know that you're drinking without me. anyway. Final good bye. TTYL.

R – Good bye. Sometime we'll drink together .

He logged out and looked at Lakshya. He asked him who he had been chatting with and pestered Ranbir till Ranbir he admitted that it was a reader called Pihu Sharma.

He started hitting Ranbir and forced him to show her pictures on Facebook.

“For the first time I know why you became an author. You knew beautiful girls would become your fans.”

“Wait, I’ve done it for myself, and I can’t even describe how much that means to me, after all the shitty things I face in the corporate sector. So it’s not about girls at all,” Ranbir clarified.

Slowly, ever so subtly, Ranbir’s eyes began to travel to the chat window and Pihu’s pictures again. He was smiling within and worse, Lakshya and Trisha noticed it. They didn’t utter a single word and kept staring at Ranbir till he shut his laptop down and thanked both of them for the last time that night before he dozed off with a sea of thoughts in his mind.



It was Friday morning and it’d been a few days after his novel’s release. Ranbir was drinking his morning tea and watching people going for their morning jog.

He looked really happy after getting an enormous response to his novel in the starting week. While he was thinking about the subject of his second book, he turned at the sound of a Facebook pop-up.

He finished the last sip of his tea and smiled when he saw a chat from Stone heart.

P – Yes, Ranbir. I know you’ve been staring at all my pictures as I got about twenty likes from you in the last few days.

R – hey, Pihu. Not really. I mean, I just liked them casually.

P – Don’t be too defensive . I liked it. You can carry on liking all my pictures and I can show off to the world that my favourite author likes my pictures.

R – haha. I won’t mind doing that. You look pretty in all of them anyway.

P – You’re such a sweetheart. I would love to know how you sound like someday.

R – Oh yes. We haven't exchanged numbers till now.

P – Shameless. You made a pretty girl ask for your number.

R – Lol. Sorry. 8451829595

P – Calling you in some time. Take care. ;) :*

She logged out after that.

He watched her pictures once again and couldn't help thinking what it'd be like to sit and talk to her. Though he tried to pretend that he just liked her pictures and sweet talks and there was nothing serious into it, deep down he knew he has started expecting her chats or to put it more accurately, he had started expecting her call as well.

They were learning more about each other, obviously enjoying each other's company.

As the day wore on, he got ready for office when he suddenly received a call from an unknown number.

“Hi!”

“Hi!” Ranbir said in an artificial baritone voice.

“Am I speaking to Ranbir?”

“Yes, who's this?”

“Guess who?” a sweet voice chirped.

“Pihu?”

“Well, who's Pihu and what happened to your voice?”

“Who are you?” Ranbir asked, confused.

“Adah. Your girlfriend, remember?”

“Adah! You sound so different. What happened to your old number?”

“I just changed my number, and you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Well, she’s a reader and she asked for my number.”

“And you gave it?” Adah asked surprised.

“Yes, but there’s nothing else. Trust me,” Ranbir wasn’t sure what this could lead to.

“Well, I do trust you and I am back in Mumbai. I called you to know if you’d like to spend the day with me today.”

“I was just leaving for office, baby. Let’s catch up in the evening?”

“All right. I’ll call another friend of mine maybe. You’re an author now; you can keep shitting your busy schedules upon me now.”

He couldn’t fathom what to make of it. He also wanted to meet her; it had been a while. “You don’t need to do that. I’ll take an off from office.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very much. Anything for you.”

“See you then.”

He didn’t want to take an off, especially after the thrashing in the last meeting, but didn’t seem to have the guts to say ‘no’. It was an important day for him at office and Adah’s persistence forced him to bunk.

There were times in their relationship when Ranbir had to follow her instructions keeping her bad mood swings in mind so as to avoid further tensions between them. He remembered that Adah had never been like that when they had started off. She’d always understand Ranbir and would give him his space and vice versa.

But things just got worse with time. Their behaviour changed towards each other; they fought more than ever. Ranbir always complained that she wasn't the same Adah anymore. Adah complained that Ranbir was a little too clingy at times and was interfering. She also blamed him for not working hard and his highly impractical and dreamy nature. When at times, her phone was busy for long hours, Ranbir asked the obvious, to which she replied she too had a personal life and things would get difficult if both of them kept on interfering in each other's life.

She never laughed or joked much with Ranbir. It seemed that her discomfort stemmed more from Ranbir's choice of career, and the way she felt about Ranbir wasn't the same as it used to be. Through it all, Ranbir kept smiling and making her smile.

He was lost in these thoughts and didn't realise when he reached Adah's house. A moment later, he knocked on her door after walking up two floors. Adah opened the door and he hugged her. She smiled back but there was a quizzical expression on his face.

"How was your stay at home?"

"It was fine."

"How are your parents doing?"

"Oh, they are fine too. Come on in!"

He walked in and asked hesitantly, "Did you discuss anything about me?"

"Not really. But I'm sure they liked you."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because if they didn't like you, they would've asked me to stay away from you."

Ranbir felt an unsaid tension between the two, but wasn't sure what the reason was. "I'm not too sure why your mood is off right now, but I'm very sure that you want to discuss something with me."

She looked at him in silence for a couple of seconds before saying, “Ranbir, it’s been just about a week that your novel has been released, and my friends have made my life miserable by asking if everything that happens in your novel is true and if it has everything to do with us.”

“All right. But what’s the big deal? People know that we are in a relationship and these things will pop up.”

“Ranbir, you’ve made a devil out of me in that novel. You made me a girl who’s selfish, wanna be, and a bitch who doesn’t care about anyone.”

“But that’s not Adah, that’s Rizwaana the character. If people ask silly questions, you tell them it has very little to do with our personal lives and has a lot to do with fiction. Aarav and Rizwaana are just two beautiful characters in their own way. And yes, I never made Rizwaana a bitch; I can show you my readers’ mails who love her character.”

“Stop being a hypocrite to prove yourself right.”

“Adah, stop doing this to me. Please. There’s no point in discussing this. It’s not like I didn’t make you read my whole story. I had done that already. Twice.”

“Yes. But I didn’t know that it’d backfire like this. Plus, I never read your whole novel.”

He was shocked. “Why did you lie to me then?”

“I don’t like reading at all and you were forcing me to death to read it, so I had no other option left but to lie.”

“That says it all about how seriously you take me and my work.”

“All right then, you get the hell out of here and we’ll talk when you decide to talk sense,” Adah said irritated.

“Sure! And thank you for throwing me out like that in just fifteen minutes. You saved my day at office; it was anyway more important than you interrogating my novel.”

“It was not an interrogation,” Adah said in defense.

“But it was surely not happiness. If I would’ve written this for anyone else, they would’ve understood the worth of it. Writing a novel for your passion or for your love isn’t cakewalk. It takes much more than having a millionaire father.”

“Don’t you dare bring that in, Ranbir!”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. Bye Adah.”

Ranbir was reminded of what Lakshya had said. Even he started feeling that Adah did not value his emotions as much as she ought to. With tears flowing down his eyes, he left her flat, disappointment. He was standing at that point in his life where he should celebrate his success, but what was he doing? Crying for someone for whom he was everything at one point in his life. He took a break that day and didn’t go to his office. He missed some calls from his office and unknown numbers, but he did something that evening that he should’ve done much before. He talked to Pihu.

That night, after keeping his mobile away for three hours, he checked and found that there were three missed calls from an unknown number with a message that said:

Pihu here. You can stop ignoring that cute unknown number.

There was a sudden smile on his face; he called her up.

“Hello,” she said. Her voice sounded like that of a cute high school kid.

“I am so sorry to have missed your call, Pihu. My mood wasn’t really great and I had kept my mobile on silent mode.”

“And all this while I was thinking you were acting pricey.”

“Come on. Why would I possibly do that?”

“You’re an author now. You’ve got lots of girl stalking you. You can act pricey. If I was in your place, I would’ve acted like it was my day, only my

day. Everyone had to come to my feet and bow down to my greatness.”

Ranbir burst out in laughter. “You’re hilarious.”

“People generally call me cute, beautiful and sexy. But hilarious? Okay, I accept that too.”

“What’s your age, Pihu?”

“Are you already in love with me? You’ll ask my age, then my birth timings, and then location to do the match making. I’m not telling you my age. No.”

“Hold on, hold on. My mind doesn’t work so fast and I’ve no plans of getting into a relationship again.”

“Again? You broke up with your female protagonist?”

He didn’t speak for the next few seconds, so Pihu spoke again, “I am sorry if I am getting too personal. I was just asking.”

“No. Not at all. I don’t mind. And yes, I broke up with my girl sometime back. We weren’t compatible and she probably saw a robot in me that never worked for her.”

“Oh. That’s sad to hear.”

“No need to be sad. It’s perfectly fine. I’m over it.”

“If I have to believe half your novel, I don’t think you’ll ever be able to get over her.”

“It definitely takes time, but one needs to move on as life isn’t still over and there are many people who’re waiting to be loved.”

“Bang on. Now I feel I am talking to an author. You authors are so well versed with words that no matter how risky it is to fall for your words trusting them to be true, we do that helplessly.”

“I’d take that as a compliment.”

“It was meant to be one.”

“By the way, what about you? Are you in a relationship?”

“Yes, I am.”

For a second, Ranbir felt disheartened and no matter how much he tried hiding it, it was audible in his next line.”

“Well, you never told me that before.”

“Yes, because we’ve never spoken before and we’re talking for the very first time. Forgot that?”

“Oh no. Not really. I mean, I am happy for you. It’s just that something in my mind told me that you’re single. What’s his name?”

“Pluto”

“Sounds like a dog’s name,” Ranbir said and faked a laugh.

“It has to be a dog’s name because he is one.”

That made Ranbir smile and he felt a little better about their conversation again. “So you’re in a relationship with a cute dog?”

“Yes, because he’s much better than any human. A lot better than my ex definitely.”

“I agree. I do love dogs, and in fact, I am also looking out for a bitch to get into a serious relationship. Marriage kind of relationship,” Ranbir played along.

“You can marry Pluto’s ex. They separated over trust issues.”

“We’d be part of the family then.”

“Yes, but dare your wife flirt with my Pluto. He’s only my love and I am very possessive about him.”

“You’re crazy, Pihu. Talking to you is fun.”

“An author saying that reflects a lot about my talking competency. Not bad. You made my day.”

“You made mine too. It was a bad day for me, but talking to you has ended it on a happy note.”

“Thank you, Ranbir. That means a lot.”

“I think I should really sleep now. Already too late and I’ve to get up early as I re-start my working out at the gym tomorrow morning.”

“You’d look hotter with some more muscles on. I wouldn’t mind getting a six pack picture from you.”

“If only I could get there, I wouldn’t mind showing off,” Ranbir said.

“Excuses. Excuses. Man, I tell you! Good night now. Shoo off,” Pihu said lovingly.

“Good night.”

Ranbir didn’t disconnect the call and waited for her to do so.

“Are you waiting for ‘I Love you’?”

Ranbir burst into laughter. “No, I was just waiting for you to hang up.”

She laughed back and hung up finally.

As he moved towards his bed, he broke into the tiniest of smiles, finally feeling better about his life, his book and his new reader friend, Pihu.



November had arrived, bringing with it the chilly winter winds. There was a lot going on in Ranbir's life after his book launch. He had scheduled book release functions in a couple of cities where he would meet readers and talk to them about the book.

He was to take the weekend off at work to travel to cities and promote his book. His friends and family were quite excited and happy at this development. Not a single day passed when he didn't receive mails from his fans. That made him feel good about himself.

Adah too apologized for her rude behaviour and it took her less than a minute to convince Ranbir and bring him back. She also told him how much she had missed talking to him and that they should stop fighting now. That sudden change in Adah's behaviour was a sweet surprise. With ever so moody and unexpected Adah, this was the only unexpected change in the last some years that he enjoyed.

On the other hand, Ranbir and Pihu had started talking a lot with each other. They'd be glued to the phone for hours, waiting for each other's calls or messages.

Ranbir and Pihu were planning their first meeting. Pihu was to come to Mumbai for that. She had left Mumbai some years ago and had settled down with her family in Ahmedabad. Ranbir had already started planning the day. He was very excited about it.

Ranbir's company head had been changed and that brought a sudden and devastating change in his corporate lifestyle. Things weren't as calm as before. They had changed, and not for the better.

That day an urgent meeting had been called late evening and he had to cancel his dinner plans with Adah.

His boss was sitting in his cabin with a poker face and that silence around him had screwed up many people's happiness before. A lot has been said and done about his style of working; one thing that remained the same was that his attitude towards his employees was pathetic.

“Welcome everyone. I am so sorry to call you all at this hour, but believe me, it’ll not take more than two minutes.”

“Milind, Ranbir, Karan. Each one of you hasn’t had the best of the quarter in JAS. Top management has changed and they’ll not mind if I take any strict action against each one of you non-performers. You get that?”

Each one nodded nervously.

“Why the fuck are you quiet, you morons? When my boss talks to me, I reply...and you aren’t allowed to keep shut here.”

“We’ll achieve our targets this time, sir,” Ranbir replied.

“I’ll make sure that I achieve all my outstanding targets too,” Milind said.

“I already have a deal coming in within a week, sir. I’ll achieve my target well before time,” Karan chimed.

“Put all that on an email and report to me by the end of the month. If you don’t achieve it due to anything, believe me, I’ll go to any extent to spoil your life. You better work 24x7 now. Get that?”

“Yes sir!”

The three chorused.

“Fuck off now!”

They all walked down the corridor quietly. They picked up their bags without looking at each other and started walking towards the office exit. They waited for the elevators to come up and remained silent and disappointed.

The elevator came up, they got into it and looked at each other. As the doors closed, Ranbir made a poker face. Milind mimicked him and said the exact lines that he had said to the boss, and all of them burst into laughter.

“May he get insulted in front of thousands of employees and each of them get one chance to give him a free hit,” Milind said.

“Well. Whatever it is, we have to start looking out for job options now. We’ll not be able to survive here for too long.”

“That’s true. I have a family back home and it’s a worry for me. I’ll start applying soon.”

“Anyway, it’s been a tiring and a bad day. I need to go home and rest,” Karan replied.

“And I will get a hell lot of traffic on my way home,” Milind added.

They waved each other good bye, hugged each other and parted. After a tiring and sad day at office, they always ganged up for some time to talk their hearts out. In tough times like these at office, they all knew that they had each other to share their feelings. Sometimes that’s all they needed. Nothing more and nothing less.

Ranbir called up Lakshya to the nearby Tapri to discuss his job with him. Lakshya suggested him to stick around for some time before he started looking for another one. Remembering that he had plans to meet Adah, he called her up and found her call on waiting for quite a long time. He sent her a sorry message to cancel the evening plans and as expected, didn’t get a response.

As he was about to sleep, Pihu messaged him saying,

Someone seems to be too busy to even reply to my messages today.

That brought a smile to this face and he replied, I am so sorry. had a bad day and my boss fucked my happiness like never before. So I was quite busy getting myself screwed.

Oh man. That sounds horrible and you should rest. I shall call you tomorrow as there’s a surprise in store for you.

That would keep me awake tonight. I love surprises.

Lol. Good night.

After a bad day at work, a message from Pihu set the day for him and he slept with a happy smile on his face. Knowingly or unknowingly. Pihu has started to be an important part of his life now. A part that he liked the most those days.



It was five in the morning and like most people, he too was sleeping when his phone started to ring continuously. He woke up groggily. It was Adah. He suddenly became anxious wondering if everything was fine.

“Hey, are you okay,” Adah said hastily.

“Yes, I am okay.”

“What happened sweetheart? You called up so early?”

“Ranbir, my granny is in the hospital and is very serious. My parents called up urgently as she might not be able to survive the day.”

“Oh, I never knew about your granny though. You take care of yourself and the family.”

“Yes, we never discussed her. We aren’t very close to her. But yes, I have to go right now and I am feeling very bad about all this. I hope by some miracle she gets better and I can make up for all our lost time.”

“She surely will get better. Don’t lose hope. Do let me know if you need any help.”

“Yes, but please don’t call anyone and tell them about this.”

“Why would I do that?”

“No. It’s like not many people know about it, not even my flat-mates.”

“Okay. I understand”

“You don’t try calling me up too. I’ll call you whenever I get time.”

“Okay, I’ll wait for your call. Stay strong. Everything will be fine.”

“Yes. Thanks. Bye.”

“Bye.”

He had never felt this sensitive side of Adah. He felt bad for her. It mattered a lot to him and this news woke him up for the day. It showed a different side of Adah which was very emotional, caring and sweet. He knew prayers wouldn’t change the situation, still he hoped that for once the rules would change and her granny would get well miraculously.

I’ve never really seen you like this before and that makes it even worse . But yes, I love that side of yours and believe me, if you stay positive, everything with your granny will go just right and nothing will happen to her for she has such a cute and lovely granddaughter with her who loves her more than anything else in the world . Get granny back to health soon and call me up . I will wait to talk with you.

He messaged her and waited to get her reply, but she never did. Guess she had too much on her mind.



Three days later, Ranbir still waited for her response. She didn’t reply to his message and that kept him tensed for days and nights. He sent her a BBM message too, and even after reading his message, she didn’t reply.

After a lot of thought, he decided to check with her flat-mate VJ, who too had no idea about the situation and got as scared as him. She promised to call him back as soon as she got to know anything.

Ranbir tried contacting her other friends, but nobody could help. Many thoughts kept disturbing him before he got a call from her office colleague Nisha.

“Hi, Ranbir. Where’s Adah? She’s not picking up anyone’s call.”

“I know. Her granny isn’t well and she sounded really tensed when we spoke last, Nisha. Please handle the situation in office.”

“Ranbir, that’s not a cause of worry. Just that her mother called up on the office landline and I am shocked to know that her mother isn’t really aware about her whereabouts and wanted to know where she was.”

Ranbir was numb with shock and couldn’t speak for the next few seconds. He hung up with an assurance to call her back again as and when he got to know anything about her.

Ranbir left the office with no explanation howsoever and just put a mail to his boss:

‘I’ve to call it a day as I am suffering severe migraine pain and need to consult a doctor. You’re in a meeting, so i thought it wise to not disturb you.’

He had just reached downstairs when his boss started calling him again and again. He didn’t respond and instead kept calling Adah over and over. She didn’t respond. He tried calling her from different numbers, and she still didn’t respond. He lit up a cigarette and a cigarette packet in an hour sitting under a corner tree.

He thought of going to Baroda before he kick-started his bike and called her for one last time. He kept the mobile in his right hand as the bike started. That’s when he saw the call timer begin. He quickly turned off the bike’s ignition.

“Hello,” Adah said and that relaxed his nerves. It put a stop to the worst of his thoughts which had almost convinced him that she was either kidnapped, raped or even worse, dead.

“Where are you, Adah? Are you okay baby? Are you all right? Are you in any trouble?”

“I am all right, Ranbir. No need to panic and please stop asking me so many questions.”

“Adah, everyone in world is worried about you and you’re behaving as if nothing’s happened.”

“Yes, my choice. It shouldn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? Your mother calls up your office to check about your whereabouts. She doesn’t know you’re with your granny?”

“My granny died five years back, Ranbir.”

“Then what are you doing in Baroda?”

“I am not in Baroda.”

“Then where the hell are you?”

“I am in Bhopal.”

He heard the name and that gave him chills. None of them said anything for sometime before she herself told him.

“I am here to meet my ex, Rehaan. He’s getting married in two months and I wanted to meet him once before he got married.”

He was numb, wondering why couldn’t she have been honest with him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he said, tears of anger filling his eyes.

“As if you would’ve agreed to it, Ranbir.”

“I might have.”

“No you never would have agreed to something like this.”

“That still could’ve been better than your lying like this. You broke my trust and love for you today, Adah.”

“We’re not sleeping together here, Ranbir. Don’t behave like a mad man.”

“Then what made you go there?”

“There were certain things which needed to be cleared between me and Rehaan. I came here to sort those differences out for good.”

“Are they sorted or you still need more visits?”

“Do not irritate me like this; else this would be the last time we’re talking. I just have one more day with me, so please let me live my life for one last time. Don’t make me sick. We will talk when I’ll reach home tomorrow and please don’t come up with your sick face to my flat when I reach Mumbai.”

Ranbir was sitting under the tree and crying. The last two minutes of his life had shattered him into pieces and he was clueless about what had just happened. He possibly gave everything to Adah and this was supposed to be the last thing he expected out of his relationship. For him, the time had just started and he was feeling good about himself after his novel’s release. It was a time in his life when he was expecting just pleasant surprises and nothing else. What he had instead received was the worst shocker of his life.

He was feeling mentally weak as he started his bike and messaged Lakshya.

Please be at home in the next fifteen minutes, It’s very urgent and about my life. Don’t call. I need you the most right now.”

He messaged back: Will be there before you. Don’t worry.

Ranbir kept thinking about the events that had brought him there. He broke most traffic rules as his head was raging and he knew that some more time alone would give him a headache like never before. He felt he was losing himself to the situation, he knew deep within he was giving up and there

was no coming back from that. Because according to him, everything was lost. Even his novel gave him no happiness now.

He was ten minutes away from home and crying continuously. People in the traffic were watching him with sympathy and in amusement. He knew that if anybody could understand him right now, it was Lakshya. He wanted to bare his heart out to him. To tell Lakshya that he had been right all this while and he was wrong to take Adah's side always.

He was scared that Lakshya would scold at him for not following his advice earlier. He knew that Adah was never in love with him like he was, Lakshya had warned him several times too but he never paid any heed to him.

He felt the vibration of his phone in his pocket. It was a message from Adah.

Don't tell this to anyone if anyone calls you. It wouldn't give a good impression about our relationship.

Ranbir chose not to reply.

He got another message:

I am at the flat, waiting for you. Come soon brother.



Ranbir looked lost and defeated as he entered the flat. His eyes were blood red and it took Lakshya less than a minute to understand that it had something to do with Adah.

Ranbir threw his helmet down and jumped on the bed. When Lakshya tried to hug him, he signalled him to go away for a couple of minutes. He felt like he'd go mad and his head would burst into pieces. He couldn't speak for some time, but Lakshya waited patiently.

With a heavy heart, he started crying mournfully. He kept on crying and narrating what had happened to him, as Lakshya hugged him tightly. Ranbir broke down in front of him and knowing it was only Lakshya who wouldn't judge him for anything, he spoke his heart out.

He stopped crying and felt a little lighter. Lakshya got a cup of tea for him.

“Frankly, I am not surprised or shocked. I could see it coming. She never really loved you. I've seen people in love; they aren't like that at all. They don't put down conditions to be with each other. But also get that it's not only her fault, you're to be blamed equally, because you allowed her to treat you like this.”

“I regret why I ignored your advice earlier. Had I been a little more practical about our relationship, this bit of news wouldn't have shattered me like that.”

“Agree, but it's never too late. You're too young to cry over this. Plus, everyone gets into such situations sometime or other, but you have to move on!”

“Yes, but it's not easy for me.”

“It wasn't easy for me too, but I did it. You too surely can.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Everything that can divert your mind.”

“It's very difficult – everything reminds me of her. Every kind of music, and every street nearby, every message. We've built so many memories with each other that it's very difficult to forget them.”

“Well, you're a grown up and these are shitty things that you're talking about. Make new memories with someone else and get over this. There's just one option that you have. Move on!”

“You're right. Moving on, I just wish it was so easy.”

“It wouldn’t make any sense if you keep on repeating if it’s easy or difficult. Just know it for yourself that even if it’s the most difficult thing in the world, you’ve to do it.”

“Yes.”

Ranbir didn’t utter a single word as Lakshya shouted at him.

“Listen, we’ll make it simple for you. Good guys never get girls. See Deepika Padukone left Ranbir, and only after that he has reached where he is at the moment. Talk about Akshay Kumar, Salman Khan and many more. They all are artists and they needed a break up in life. You can be one such big thing. In fact, your name too is Ranbir and you’re no less good looking.”

This description made Ranbir smile and he replied. “Yes, you’re making it sound funny to me.”

“That indeed is funny; you’re a writer, a novelist. Take this as an inspiration, Write a second part of your story. Make it a fucking bestseller and thank Adah later for doing this to you.”

“You’re impossible,” Ranbir laughed through his tears.

“But I am not going to ditch you for another friend of mine.”

“Yes, I can live with that hope.”

“I wouldn’t mind that till the time you keep on speaking your heart out to me. You know how much I enjoy talking shitty things about Adah.”

He smiled back.

He got a message from his boss saying. That ’s so unprofessional of you to leave without speaking to me. You’ll have to face consequences for that.

Ranbir showed that message to Lakshya and explained how he had left office in the middle of the day. Lakshya noted his number down and started typing a message to Ranbir’s boss.

hi, this is Ranbir's doctor...an M.D. by profession with twenty years of experience, I just saw him reading your message, which made his migraine pain more severe. I'd like to take this matter for further investigation as no company forces you to work during severe medical conditions. get back to you when he 's feeling a little better. he'll let you know if he'll face the consequences or it's you who'll be facing them.

Within a minute, Ranbir got a message and mail saying,

Please take care of yourself and come back only when you feel better. I 'll take care of the work on your behalf. Get well soon and let me know if I can be of any help to you.

They talked for ten more minutes and Lakshya made him feel a little better about himself. Only he could have done it. Ranbir took some medicines for his headache and fell asleep as he was mentally and physically exhausted.

Lakshya walked towards his room, he thought about how this flat used to be a mad adda and how Adah had spoiled Ranbir's life. He missed the fun in the flat and he missed Ranbir.

If there was even one thing that Adah could have done to make Ranbir's life better, it would've been her not accepting Ranbir's proposal when she broke off with Rehaan some years back.

With what happened, Lakshya had managed to calm Ranbir down, but he surely knew that this break up would speak volumes in days to come and he'd have to make sure that Ranbir was less affected by it and that Adah realizes her mistake. Lakshya was worried, tensed, and a little sadder than Ranbir this time.



Ranbir was always scared of loneliness. Every time he patched up with Adah and ignored the fights between the two, he was scared of being alone. It was as if the urge for self-respect didn't exist at all, and as if

compatibility, hope and love were nothing more than theoretical possibilities between the two who probably had no future.

A day later, Ranbir woke up early in the morning. He was so tired and exhausted that he had slept for a whole day and a whole night. He woke up to check if there was any message from Adah, but in vain.

He got one message that read.

Need to talk to you about something regarding adah. I think you should know something. Please come and meet whenever you can.

Sender: Bitch VJ

04:00 a.m.

22/10/2012

He called her up immediately to know what it was about. She didn't answer and sent a message saying,

I can't talk to you as my other flat-mate is around. Please meet me tonight at eight if you can, I'll be back from my shoot then. adah will be back tomorrow morning. Take care. Please don't inform adah that I contacted you else it'll go all flat on my head.

all right, I'll be there, Ranbir replied.

He then saw five missed calls and a WhatsApp message from Pihu.

Looks like you're too busy with your fans already. What about your first ever cute fan? You forgot her? Not done. Called you five times and you didn't answer. I hope all is well.

He saw her display picture which looked super cute and her WhatsApp status said, 'Fall in love with an artist and he'll go beyond boundaries to keep you happy always.'

It was updated after she called him the previous night. Her message brought a smile to his face and for a second he assumed it was written for him. Maybe yes, maybe no.

I was a little unwell and that's why I slept throughout the day yesterday. But I am really sorry for not being able to reply to you. Ranbir sent a polite reply.

He got up and saw that Lakshya was still snoring away to glory. He made coffee and woke Lakshya up.

“Oh my god. Hit on my face if it's a dream.”

“Don't behave like I am your wife. I just got up early so thought of making some coffee.”

“A break up has changed you totally and you're back for good. If only you make coffee like this every morning, I so pray to god that you never ever get hooked up again in your life,” Lakshya joked.

“You speak shit like your face. Anyway, I am not in a mood to get into any relationship at this moment. I'd rather die single.”

His mobile was lying on the computer table and vibrated. They both saw the name on the display screen. Pihu.

“Well. You wouldn't die single till your cute female fans are alive.”

“Oh yes. I am not even out of a shitty relationship and you're getting me into another one.”

“No, you're willingly getting into it.”

“Come on. You've gone mad.”

“Come on, you should see that smile on your face when you saw her message.”

“You’ve gone mad. By the way, I wanted to show you something,” he said and showed him VJ’s message.

“This is amazing. You should go to that hot chick. She’ll get laid in the act of sympathizing with you.”

“I want to meet her to know about Adah and you’re asking me to get laid.”

“Why not? She’s so hot that if she sleeps with you even once, you’ll live all your life masturbating about that experience.”

“You’re impossible.”

“You ever saw her lower lip? It looks so delicious. I’ll give up on food for days to sleep once with her. Her big boobs, oh my god! That girl can take my life by just one move or expression. Her eyes, poisonous.”

“You can fantasize later on. What do you think? Why is she calling me?”

“Not really sure, I can’t really trust her, May be something that she wants to share with you and thinks that you should be aware of.”

“Yes. But why would she do that?”

“You’ll get to know about it once you meet her. But I insist. Meet her and listen to everything, but don’t trust her blindly. Keep recording your conversation.”

“Why record?”

“Just for safety, and for keeping it for our record.”

“Well, that makes sense.”

“I always make sense. Call me after you finish your meeting with her.”

Ranbir saw Lakshya picking up his bag and rushing towards the door.

“Yes, sure thing. But where are you going this early in the morning?”

“I have a beach work–out today. So yes, going to Juhu beach.”

“Wow. That sounds amazing.”

“Join my gym then, it’s one fun place to be.”

“I shall give it a thought.”

“Gone are the days when Ranbir used to do things and then think,” Lakshya smiled and said as he left Ranbir alone with his thoughts.

He got up and moved into his store room to find his old dumbbells which were lying in the corner with a layer of dust over them. He picked them up, cleared them all and started exercising in the open area.

He knew that he needed to come back to life and he should get busy with things he enjoyed the most. Picking up a ten kilo dumbbell, he realized he would’t be able to lift it for ten repetitions. He knew he was not as strong now as he once used to be. He picked up a five kilo pair instead in guilt.

He decided he had to be back in form.



Ranbir spent the whole day waiting for the night so that he could meet VJ and talk. He knew that he couldn’t trust her completely, but he also knew that the meeting would help him get some information. He never really trusted VJ and always disliked her because she was one bitch who flirted around and always influenced Adah. She was always of the opinion that Adah could get anyone in the world she wanted and that she had unnecessarily settled down for Ranbir.

There were moments in their relationship when Ranbir got upset with Adah for going out with VJ and her friends. The kind of friends who’d just look for an opportunity to sleep with different girls and try to win a girl over by showing off their money. Ranbir during a couple of occasions had faced incidents in which he got insulted, but he couldn’t really do much about it

as Adah asked him to not react. Adah never really respected him and his choices. At times, Adah made fun of him on the phone and Ranbir could hear the chuckles of different girls in the background.

After finishing his dinner, he messaged VJ.

I'll be there in ten minutes. Waiting for you. Just wait downstairs and call me, she replied. With many thoughts in his mind, he started his bike and

crossed through many known places where he and Adah had spent time together: a pastry shop, café and a garden where they had shared many morning jogging sessions. He knew that he'd

always be the one who'd have to adjust and compromise in this relationship, but he never knew that a day would come when she'd call the relationship off in such a manner.

He reached her flat and called VJ. She disconnected the call thinking he must be down already. VJ was wearing a casual yellow sleeveless tee with mini shorts. No matter how bitchy a person she was, she had a perfect sense of style.

“Let's get away from here.”

“But why?” Ranbir was confused.

“Because I don't want my flat-mates to know that I'm meeting you; they're going out in five minutes and they'll see us. It wouldn't be good if Adah hears of our meeting.”

“Then where do you want us to go?”

“We can go to Lokhandwala, the back road and talk,” she said and sat pillion on his bike.

Ranbir started his bike and saw her in the rear view mirror. She was smoking a cigarette and definitely attracting everyone's attention. She liked all that attention from people. She knew she looked hot. Ranbir on the other

hand was getting a little nervous about being spotted with her. That would surely raise some eyebrows.

An auto driver intentionally followed them for a long time before she threw last cigarette at his thighs, and he turned his auto around. Ranbir didn't utter a single word before they reached the Lokhandwala back road. It was deserted apart from a couple of buses parked at a distance.

“Park your bike here and let's take a walk,” VJ said. She started walking without waiting for Ranbir. Ranbir parked his bike in annoyance and fumed at her attitude.

He wanted to know everything that she had to say. They walked for some time and Ranbir asked the obvious after noticing that she was lighting up another cigarette.

“VJ, you can smoke them later. Would you please tell me why you have called me here?”

“Ranbir, a cigarette here wouldn't interrupt me from telling you things. Look, I know you don't think the best about me and you believe that I am the one who spoils it all between you and Adah always. Frankly, it doesn't really matter to me.”

“All right. But what's the issue here? Talk business and let me go.”

“Adah has been cheating on you for a long time, Ranbir.” She looked serious as she said this. “There have been times when she's taken my name to go out on dates, while you've always thought that it's been me who's been playing games with both of you.”

“Why are you telling me all this now?”

“It's because you think that I am a bitch, and I am not. And I think you're a little too impractical and serious about her and she's not. She's been in touch with her ex for about six months and whenever you call her up at midnight, she's speaking to him. Plus it's not the first time they're meeting

after their break up, though definitely the first time that you know of it,” she said.

Her words left Ranbir in pieces. He felt used and cheated after all that he had done for her.

Despite their continuous arguments and fights, he had never thought that Adah would cheat on him this way. If he would've done ten percent of what he has done for Adah, for any other girl in the world, she would've happily made him the only man of her life. He felt cheated about every moment they had made love, every moment they had kissed; he thought she must have faked it all. Her emotions, her expressions, her moans while making out and everything else; she had her ex in her mind all this while. She was one big liar.

VJ hesitantly reached towards him and hugged him without uttering a single word.

“Why didn't you tell me this before?” he said, almost forgetting that he hated this girl from the time they had first met and she was Adah's friend.

He kept on crying like a baby and VJ hugged him tighter.

“I did everything in this world for her. Dedicated my book to her to make her feel special. I have done every shit she asked me to do. I gave up on my ego, I got myself a tuxedo when I couldn't afford it. I did possibly everything that she ever asked me to do. She fucked my trust so much that I regret ever being with her. She has always been like that, not giving a damn about my emotions.”

“Ranbir, don't say anything that you'll regret later on.” She hugged him and said, trying to make him comfortable.

“She goes behind my back and has an affair for god knows how long, and I still can't say anything against her. I'll fucking go and get my head under a big truck to end my life here itself.”

He almost threw VJ aside and started running towards his bike to end his life. He was boiling with anger.

VJ started running to stop him, but he wasn't listening to her. VJ threw her heels at him so that he'd turn back or at least come and hit her back. But he didn't stop. She ran faster and as soon as she reached close to him, she slapped him hard. She held him tight by his hair and started kissing him passionately and aggressively. She kept on planting kisses on his lips and sucked them deep to take all his anger away.

With a heavy breath, she took her hands off him and after looking at him for a few seconds, she started walking off in the opposite direction without saying anything and hired a taxi back to Vile Parle. He was left alone with this thoughts. She didn't turn back even once and Ranbir stood there in shock, amazement and confusion.



For a long time, Ranbir felt frozen as he gulped some water before he started his bike again. Instead of going back to VJ, he decided to go home. He tried pretending to himself that nothing had happened or maybe, he thought, it was a fleeting fantasy or a romance of VJ's mind or maybe absolutely nothing.

He let that feeling sink in for a while.

Lakshya was right, he thought. VJ was extremely hot. Was it sex which would have followed if he decided to go back? Should he hate himself for what had just happened? What should he do?

He was in love with Adah and he hadn't meant it to happen, and he hoped Adah would understand when he explained this to her. But why would he ever tell Adah? Adah never thought of me while going back to her ex or while having an affair with god knows how many men? She didn't. Ever. Would it be right if he went to VJ? he thought as he tried convincing himself.

What would VJ say if he showed up at the door and asked her to spend some time with him. Knowing her, she'd probably say yes, he thought.

Ranbir thought what it would be like to hold VJ's perfectly shaped bums and with that he already started having sex with her in his mind.

Was there anything expectant in the way she kissed him, as if she really wanted him to spend some time with her? Why

would she return otherwise? She could've slapped me to get me back to the senses. Why the kiss?

It was strange. He hadn't really thought of his previous relationships in that light. He replayed the moment in his mind again and again, realizing that he wanted more of them from her. On the other hand, he shouldn't have let her kiss him, he thought with a burst of uncharacteristic anxiety. What could he do? Nothing. Nothing at all.

It started raining all of a sudden. The traffic came to a halt. Unable to go any further, Ranbir took a u-turn to VJ's flat again.

Honestly, he wanted to forget everything and go back to VJ's bedroom directly. Ranbir called up Lakshya and he didn't answer. Ranbir picked up his mobile as he wanted to call Adah, but didn't, as he thought it would further hurt his self-respect.

By the time he returned to VJ's flat, he saw her sitting in her balcony, holding a cup of coffee in her lap, rocking back and forth. The wind and the rain was making it impossible for him to see more from where he stood downstairs. Ranbir for a moment watched VJ in silence, trying not to feel nervous about anything.

Ranbir saw VJ picking up the phone to dial someone's number and his cell phone suddenly vibrated, He struggled hard to take the phone out in the rain. He parked his bike at a safe distance and took the cell phone out assuming it was VJ. But when he looked up, VJ was already speaking to someone on call and it was Pihu calling Ranbir. The call got disconnected and he saw there were four missed calls from Pihu.

Ranbir saw VJ put her phone away, so with trembling hands, he called her.

And VJ disconnected his call.

It was hard for Ranbir to digest the fact that someone who had just kissed him was ignoring him. Ranbir, whenever he got anxious, would keep on calling till the person responded. VJ was well aware of his habits, and on purpose, missed his next five calls. She finally picked it up when it got impossible for her to bear it.

Ranbir saw that she picked up the call.

“Hey, thanks for getting me back to my senses. I just...”

She hung up before he had a chance to finish his line. She left her mobile out in the open as she moved inside the flat, as if purposely avoiding his calls.

One disconnected phone call brought him back to senses and he felt guilty of even calling her. He started his bike and suddenly realized his phone was vibrating inside his pocket.

It started raining torrentially. He stopped his bike again and heard a serious and a very tensed voice, a far cry from the generally chirpy Pihu.



With his mind occupied, he didn't know how many calls and messages from Pihu he had missed, but there were enough to understand that Pihu wanted to talk about something really important. He waited for Pihu to speak and his mind began focusing on the possible conversations she might initiate. Still, she said nothing for quite long, but kept crying. With torrential rains in Mumbai as well as an unexpected thunder in Ranbir's life sometime back, he wasn't ready for another disaster.

“You made me wait for a long time, Ranbir. I had a lot to talk about,” Pihu cried.

“I am really sorry Pihu.” He paused. “I was driving and I just didn’t realize when you called,” he added and frowned.

“I thought you were the only one whom I could call at any time, but you failed me. Everyone fails me.”

It took him a moment for the words to register and he remained motionless as Pihu went on.

“Listen, I know there are a million things you’d rather do than talking to me, but I would expect you to answer my calls when I really need you.”

None of them spoke for the next few seconds. Ranbir looked at his cell phone to check if she was still on the line.

“Yes Pihu, I am always there, but right now, at this moment, I would like to know what has happened? What’s upsetting you so much?”

She let his question settle into silence.

“Pihu, I am really sorry, sweets. What happened to my sweetest buddy? Is there anyone who is bothering the prettiest girl on this planet?”

Her occasional sniffs were a sign that she was settling her nerves and listening to Ranbir.

“Or is she missing her favourite author? Trust me, he can fly some miles for you, but if he comes, he’s s going to give you one bear hug and might get a little naughty later.”

“Ranbir, you don’t mean that, right?”

“Of course, I mean it,” he said with clarity in his voice. The more he got to know her, the more he liked her, and when she said nothing, he started to think if he was in love with her.

“My dad isn’t letting me come to Mumbai.”

“Well, I didn’t know you had plans to come to Mumbai.”

“I wanted to surprise you and besides, you could have been a little more surprised and asked me the reason behind it,” she whimpered.

“Oh come on! The last thing I need in my life is not having you in Mumbai. I was a little shocked, pleasantly of course.”

“I want to get a job and live in Mumbai again.”

“Are you really willing to start over after leaving your own family business?”

“I’m willing to start over only if you’re certain you want me in Mumbai.”

“What sort of connection is that?”

“The sort of connection we seek in life.”

Ranbir smiled. He started thinking about her smile and he knew that though life wasn’t easy most of the times, she was the one who had made it interesting. He imagined her pictures, her flirtatious chats and thought how proud he would be to be seen with her. He thought that would be enough to get the interest in life back.

“I know it’s sudden, but I’ve been meaning to come back to Mumbai since the time I left it, but haven’t been so sure before. Do you mind if I come Mumbai and bother you often?”

“No, I don’t mind at all. Besides, I am getting very bored of this monotonous life. We can meet and have good times together.”

“It’s kind of a dream as of now but it’s nice,” she said in a disappointed voice. “Well...it’s hard to convince my dad. Especially now, as he thinks I am too accident prone. He thinks if something happens to me he’ll be left a lonely man,” she added.

“I must say if your mom is half as crazy as you, she would keep your dad busy.”

“Well... she could. Though she was crazier than me.”

“Why do I get the impression that you’re going to give me some bad news now?”

“Sort of. It’s already been two years now.”

It took him a while for that to sink in.

“You never told me that.”

“You never asked.”

“I see...I’m sorry.” He paused for a moment. Now, of course, it sounded ridiculous to him. Why hadn’t he ever noticed it before? She never talked about her mother.

“Don’t feel awkward, it’s not your fault.”

There was nothing he could say to make the conversation better. He could not tell her it was okay, because it wasn't. Ranbir had not lost anyone in his family and the mere mention of death scared him to no end. The mere thought that he'd never be able to hug them, how he would just stare at their empty closets, their old clothes which wouldn't be worn anymore, their videos to just experience that he once had them.

“You're wondering why I needed to talk to you.”

“Not really,” Ranbir said.

“I needed someone who would listen to me. Thanks for doing that. I like the way you express yourself and I love the things you did for your girlfriend. I love you as a person, Arnab.”

“Pihu, my name is Ranbir.”

“I am sorry; it's just that I relate you with the character that you created. Never mind. Ranbir or Arnab. You're one person for me. I know you're wondering how this could have happened, and how I've got so involved with you. It probably started when I started reading your novel and from the moment we first chatted. Ranbir, would you mind my interference in your life?”

Ranbir considered that for a long moment as Pihu had never sounded so upfront about a relationship before. Adah had just broken up with him for her ex, and the girl whom he hated the most had just kissed him and ignored him the very next second, and a person whom he had never met had spoken her heart out over the phone.

“This sounds great. Try coming to Mumbai,” he muttered.

“I can't tell you how many times I've had this conversation with my father before, who neither wants to come back to Mumbai, nor is ready to send me back.”

“Isn't he a little too adamant?”

“More than you can imagine. Anyway, I have to go downstairs before my dad comes in here. I don’t even know if I’ll be able to come to Mumbai, but I think it would’ve been easier if my mum was still alive,” she said and disconnected the call without even a formal goodbye.

He sighed as he dialled another number.

“Hello.”

“Hello. How are you, Mumma?”

“I am good, beta, what happened? You’re sounding a little worried,” Ranbir’s mother asked, concerned.

“No Mumma. Just called you to tell that no matter how busy I am or whether I hardly talk to you, just remember that I love you a lot and you need to take very good care of your health for your son.”

“Of course beta. I jog, I eat fruits, use olive oil and do everything that’s required to take good care of my health,” she said and sounded emotional.

“Would you please do me a favour?”

“Yes Ranbir?”

“Please ask Papa to do the same as well. I want my parents to be fit and healthy their entire life.”

He knew that his mother would start crying any moment and he wouldn’t be able to hold his tears back.

“See you soon, Mumma. Bye.”

A day with many emotional upheavals gave him much to think of everyone who mattered and as he started his bike to head back home, as much as he tried fighting the tears, he couldn’t stop them as they rolled down his cheeks.



This was her favourite time, something she had after a long while. Her life, she sometimes thought, resembled that of her mother's. She never got the love she wanted and never gave back the love her father deserved. Adah always wanted a relationship in which problems could be solved with a quick kiss or a hug that was as gentle to watch from a distance as it must have been for her to receive.

And miraculously, she was getting there with Rehaan, or so she thought.

In the train, the memories of the week Adah spent with her ex boyfriend Rehaan came back to her in bits and pieces. With her mind occupied, she didn't know how long they had separated from each other, but it surely was long enough for her to miss his presence in her life.

She got to think that maybe she could stay a little longer. Another week or so wasn't going to make much of a difference, and that way they could make their lost bond even stronger. But she decided against this as she thought that her absence from Mumbai might raise her parents' eyebrows again. She had told them she was out for an interview and she didn't want them to inform her colleagues of the same.

She couldn't believe that less than a week had passed since she had met Rehaan again.

He has still not changed, unlike Ranbir. He gave her time, respected her family and worked in one of the best companies

of the country. He didn't change jobs like Ranbir by giving an excuse of a dream. She knew that Ranbir's busy schedule, his dreams and ignorance had eaten their relationship. If she didn't break up then, part of her wondered if she ever could have. Spending more time with Ranbir was not going to make their relationship any better and when his time would come, he'd leave his job again for the sake of his dreams, she thought.

Rehaan, you've always been there with me when almost everyone gave up. You know how to make me happy. I don't know how good or bad my part in this relationship is, but I get the vibes like always that you love me still and that's everything I wanted to hear all these years.

She messaged Rehaan, but the message remained undelivered. She assumed that it was because of network problems.

It was almost twelve. There was a young couple who after lifting one big bag each just reached their seats. Last minute reservations could be a problem at times.

"I guess, this is it," he said and she smiled.

I think I was meant to be here, lying in your arms. To be with you for so many years. I've been missing something in my life, but I didn't know what it was. Now that I do, I am not letting it go so easily this time. We've been each other's support since childhood. You always pacified me when my parents fought for days and nights, and when my dad closed the door on my mom after she came drunk with one of her exes... You always told me that you were there with me when my father left me alone at home because he wanted to attend a party. Despite everything, you made me laugh, you always listened to me when no one else did. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made in a relationship and you always did that. I feel so good to be back. I also want to apologize for breaking the ties with you for someone else who always took me for granted and never had enough time for me.

She messaged him again, but it failed to be delivered again within a minute.

Adah saw the couple madly in love as the girl rested her cheek against the boy's. It was difficult to say if they were married, but they were surely in awe of each other. He kissed her hair and she started tickling him. He narrowed his eyes to tell her everyone was watching but she didn't seem to care.

That girl flashed a smile to Adah but she was too lost in her thoughts to respond.

Adah opened her purse and searched for something, she looked worried and uneasy.

“Can you please give me your cell for a minute? I am not able to find my phone.”

Adah realized the girl seemed a little hesitant.

“It’s okay if you’re not comfortable with it.”

“No, it’s not like that. Which phone is it?”

“iPhone. White colour.”

“It’s in your other hand.”

Adah looked and pressed her lips together in embarrassment. She started arranging her purse, as if trying to calm down.

“I am sorry, I am a little lost today. Pardon me for this,” she said

“Never mind, where are you coming from?” the girl asked.

“Bhopal,” she said and the girl began whispering to her boyfriend.

The view outside was soothing and she found herself thinking about Rehaan once again. She was attracted to him in a way like never before. When she had broken up with him, he never really created a scene and with care in his eyes he had told her, “If you ever think you’re missing something in your life and you don’t know what it is, come back to me and you’ll find your happiness again.”

She called up Rehaan, but the call couldn’t get connected. She realized how much she’d missed that feeling of desperately wanting to listen to the person who had always been there with her. She felt so good in his arms. He made her smile with his random jokes and how he almost took her away as he ran his hands over her body.

But where would it get from there with Ranbir? That was the part she still wasn't sure about. She couldn't predict how he would react once he met her or if he'd avoid her completely. They might not be compatible with each other for different priorities in life, but they had surely spent some years together and that wasn't easy to forget.

It was already four in the morning and she was just some miles away from Mumbai. Outside the window, it was raining and the night was still dark. She found herself thinking about many things she had never discussed and many things she might need to discuss.



The next evening, a day after meeting VJ, Ranbir was sitting alone in the living room, filling his first glass of scotch. With the windows covered, the room was dark and only a dim light was on. Even though he knew that Adah was back home, he felt no need of contacting her. He'd never been the drinker kind, but he really wanted to pour himself a couple of pegs that day.

Strangely, he had been feeling pretty good after having the conversation with Pihu and even during office, the day had nose-dived rapidly. They celebrated Rajiv's birthday and that excused him from having another fiery discussion with the young managers, at least for a day. Their team hadn't achieved even half of their targets, and sooner or later, an unpleasant meeting would be called.

Ranbir felt strong within and that was the first time he'd ever really hated someone. But such hate that made him feel numb wouldn't have been possible without an emotional bond. They had made all the promises and their commitment meant a marriage in the future. Even after their problems arose, Ranbir believed that like always, they'd fight it out this time as well. But the way Adah lied to him and went back to her ex made him feel almost insignificant in her life.

There was nothing he could do to even make him love her again. He was over her and she could be with whoever the fuck

she wanted to be with, and it would make no difference to him. Their lives were diverging and Adah's attitude towards him suddenly seemed cruelly unfair to Ranbir.

Lakshya joined him. Now, finally feeling the hit of the scotch, Ranbir found himself wishing that it was Pihu and not Lakshya with him. Ranbir messaged Pihu.

I am a couple of pegs down and I am already missing you.

Lakshya knew about everything that was going on. He wasn't only a close friend, but a saviour for Ranbir. There was a time when Ranbir helped him come out of a bad relationship and here he was doing the same when Ranbir needed him the most. As Ranbir told Lakshya about everything that happened the previous night, Lakshya expressed his disagreement with the way Ranbir was getting entangled in things and they had had quite a heated argument.

"I'm sorry Ranbir. I shouldn't have told you what I felt."

"It's okay."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"For the fourth time, yes, I'm okay, Lakshya. Really."

"It's just that you look a little disinterested in having a drink with me."

"I'm a little tired. That's all."

"How are things in office?"

"I don't know. Rajiv is on his periods and he's soon going to fire some people."

"I am sure you won't be one of them," Lakshya said confidently.

“How can you be so sure about everything?”

“It’s because I know he’s educated enough to understand that you’re probably the best employee there at the moment and a competitor would easily grab you for thirty percent hike.”

Ranbir shrugged. “I don’t know and I wouldn’t even want to assume that. If he keeps me there, good enough and if he throws me out, I’ll see what I’ll do with my life then.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get another job if the worst happens.”

“But what if I don’t want it?”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know if I want to do this marketing thing.”

“Has Pihu thought you through this?”

“Why are you making her a part of the conversation?”

“Because I think she has influenced you.”

“What’s the problem with you? When I was dating Adah, you used to hate her, and now that someone likes me and I’m willing to start over with something new, you’re acting like an angry momma. You’re fucking gay or what?”

“You just spoiled the drink. Can I piss on you for the last line?” Lakshya said as he tried calming him down.

“Only if you want me to throw up on you?”

“People do these things to make it a little dirty, so why not? You get ready with your puke and I’m pulling my pants down to piss on you?” Lakshya said and started moving towards Ranbir.

“Fuck off. Go to hell. You filthy man!” Ranbir laughed and kicked Lakshya.

Ranbir's cell phone started ringing.

"Your Gujarati girl is calling you I guess."

"She's neither Gujarati, nor is she calling me. It's her message."

"Oh my god, then why such a long ringtone?"

"Because we chat at night and if I sleep while chatting, this long ringtone will wake me up."

"That sounds like deep shit love."

"No, not really. I enjoy my chats with her, but it's not love. No. Definitely not."

"I'm happy if it's not love," Lakshya took a deep breath as he said this.

Ranbir glanced to his side for a moment, then back at him.

"But what if it's love?"

"One year," he said, "and you'll fuck your life forever. You have my word on that."

Ranbir gave him a sad smile, and then looked furious. He wanted to say something but decided not to.

"I don't want you to get into that zone from where there's no coming back. Why don't you enjoy this phase? Your novel is out and you'll soon be doing book launches, away from Adah, away from your past and between your readers."

"Pihu is my reader."

"Trust me, she's more than that to you. As you said, she's in love with Arnab, your character. Maybe not you."

With a weak smile, he poured another peg for himself.

“Do you want scotch?” Ranbir said.

“No.”

“Lakshya, do you know why I enjoy scotch and not any other whiskey?”

“Why?”

“Because, I wait for things to get matured. My love for Adah was any other whiskey, may be the best of brands, but it could never made me feel what scotch does. Pihu too is some other whiskey right now and maybe, just maybe, our liking for each other might mature this little part of my life into scotch, a premium one. One kind that we treasure and not just that we let go with a slip of the hand.”

“You know why I like wine?” Lakshya counter questioned.

Ranbir didn't respond.

“I like it because it's an experience, one fine experience and once you've had it, you would like to recommend it to others.

The kind of experience we like to share with our loved ones and as amazing or worst the experience is, you can just suggest it to the people you care about, you can't enforce it.”

Ranbir still didn't respond.

“But as we both would agree, neither I nor you will be able to change our tastes, so we should just accept things the way they are. Cheers to that!”

“Cheers!”

“And by the way I never really hated Adah. I hated the way she treated you at times, but also agreed with certain things she did.”

Ranbir sipped his drink from one hand and picked up his mobile from other one. Pihu's message read:

Good news, I am coming to Mumbai sooner than you expect. Dad finally agreed.



The morning was beautiful, with blue skies and perfectly shaped white clouds neatly placed. A pigeon that had made her nest around the plant basket had hatched an egg. Adah saw how well she protected her eggs, which had turned into fluffy baby birds now. Adah passed on some food to the pigeon, and she passed it on with utmost care to her babies.

As Adah took a picture, she wondered if her mother too had cared for her during her childhood.

“Are you alright?” VJ entered her room and kissed Adah’s cheek as she was meeting her after almost a week.

“Uh–huh. Why?”

“Because you were sleeping the whole day yesterday. I tried waking you a couple of times, but you were completely out.”

“Yes, I had a busy and a tiring week.”

“Oh! For a while there, I thought you might be feeling sad leaving Rehaan.”

Adah gave her a sad smile, aching inside as she stared back at her.

“It always hurts to go away from someone who loves you. We promised to grow old together but I got carried away.” Adah took a deep breath as she said this and finally looked away towards the pigeon again.

“How was your time with him?”

“There’s a different kind of warmth and comfort I feel when he’s around me. And for the most part of my time there, I spent it in his arms.”

“You sound like a changed person completely.”

“I’ve heard that love changes people. I feel, the smell of our love remained with me – the smell of him, his sweat, his clothes and the feel of his beard is still fresh in my mind. It’s almost like he’s sitting next to me.”

“And what about the smell you got from Ranbir till a few days back? You loved him, didn’t you?”

“VJ, let’s not get into that.”

“I am not going into anything,” she answered defensively. “I just assumed you’re already over him. You used to love him a lot, you know.”

“With the weak smile that you’re giving, I get that you’re holding me responsible for this break up,” Adah said and she frowned slightly.

There were times when VJ used to play to perfection the part of a guilt-ridden friend and she always used to suggest that a little pity never hurt anyone, but now she was questioning Adah’s decision of leaving Ranbir and going back to Rehaan.

Adah’s tone made VJ stop and face her.

“Look, I’m sorry Adah. I was just worried about you as your love gets old after a while. But then again, I shouldn’t have snapped at you like this.”

Adah was quiet, and VJ looked at her concerned. “What’s going on, Adah? And please tell me the truth. I know you too well. Something happened, right?”

Adah squeezed VJ’s hand and VJ tried avoiding any eye contact with her.

Around them, their other flat-mates were trying their best to listen to this interesting conversation between the two. One of them stopped the music being playing on her laptop and pretended as if she was not being able to hear anything.

“Did Ranbir ask you anything about me?”

“Yes.”

“Is there any bright side to the conversation he had with you?” Adah asked.

VJ raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Well, has he moved on?” Adah asked and it wasn’t that serious yet, VJ told herself.

“I am not sure. He just asked if I know anything about you and Rehaan.”

“What did you say?”

“The same. I don’t know anything about it and I prefer staying out of your personal life,” VJ said matter of factly.

“Thanks VJ. I don’t plan to stay in touch with him as he’s never around when I need him. Ranbir always promised me that he’ll get serious about his work and our relationship, but nothing worked out.”

“After what he did to you, you definitely shouldn’t stay in touch,” VJ said.

Adah glanced sideways and remained silent.

“Don’t let Ranbir hurt you anymore, okay? You’ve moved on for the better and you need to keep reminding yourself that.” VJ said. “It’s good to see you in love again.” VJ murmured after a moment.

Adah reached for VJ’s hand again, and even though she didn’t say anything, she looked more relaxed than before.

“And you’ll keep moving on like this. One day you’ll look back and feel glad about the decision you took.”

Adah forced a smile, hoping that she was right.

“You trust me, right?” VJ asked.

Adah nodded almost imperceptibly and VJ touched Adah's hands gently. "I am always there with you and I wouldn't let anything bad happen to you."

Adah remained silent.

"If he calls you, just tell him that it's over," VJ advised.

"I will, but you know that he's stubborn and he won't listen."

"Does it really matter? Do you think Rehaan will be happy to know that you're still in touch with the person for whom you left him once?"

"Of course not," Adah said, while simultaneously thinking, what Ranbir would be doing and whether she should call him for one last time.

It was too much for Adah. Her life was no longer what it had once been. No longer was there laughter that she once shared with Ranbir, or the sound of her own happiness, or the willingness to wait for him when he got late in picking her up from office. It was all gone, gone in the thunder of time and dying hopes. Instead, her thoughts were just filled by the sounds of VJ who was her agony aunt. For some strange reason, she had developed the kind of trust for VJ – like how a daughter trusts her own mother or a sister trusts her own sister.

"Hey, by the way, my friends and I are heading out this evening for some clubbing, would you like to join us?" VJ offered.

"I would like to, but I have some office work I need to finish before I join office tomorrow."

"Need some help? I've got some extra time today and if we do it together, it won't take too long."

Adah hesitated and then looked up with a smile. "In that case, I'd love to go."



A lot had changed for Ranbir in a week – his equations with Adah, Lakshya and Pihu. Till some months back, he couldn't have imagined this sort of thing happening to him. Nor could he have imagined that he'd be conversing this way with any other girl than Adah. Even if he hadn't planned on falling in love with Pihu, he was definitely riding his wave of emotions towards her in some way, and no matter how much he tried to tell himself that Pihu was still not more than a virtual friend, he thought that she was worth the time and was certainly good company.

On Monday, Ranbir began the process of settling into his routine. Ranbir, like all the other employees, swiped his card as he entered the office that day. Everyone was looking tensed and employees were rushing in.

“You got his message?” Milind asked as he adjusted his tie.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Karan replied.

“It won't be so bad. I am sure Rajiv must have called this meeting because he has something urgent to discuss. I am excited,” a new joinee said bug-eyed.

“Would you please keep your mouth shut?” Karan glared.

Rajiv came in with a smug smile on his face. He gestured to everyone to go into the conference room.

“I bet you wish you didn't say that,” Ranbir said to new joinee.

Rajiv connected his laptop to the projector without uttering a single word and opened the CRM report of every employee sitting there. He opened a graph that compared the performance of all of them. No one dared to even look up at the graph.

Rajiv shook his head, trying to process the agenda of meeting. “Your story's getting confused, Milind,” he said.

Milind's eyebrows rose out of shock and fear.

“You described your strengths and achievements in your last company really well, but I haven’t really seen any of your capabilities mentioned in your resume till now. You tried fooling me then, or you’re fooling me right now?” Rajiv asked.

“Sorry?” Milind asked.

“You fooled me then, or you’re fooling me now?” he asked with a straight face.

“Rajiv, I am expecting a good deal very soon,” Milind replied in a shaky tone.

Rajiv looked away, and then slowly rose from the table. He picked up his glass of water and threw it away in no man’s land, and screamed at the top of his voice.

“Go and fuck yourself with your lines. You haven’t even changed your lines in the last six months, forget about the performance. You’re fucking pregnant or what? Expecting for the last six months? What do I say to my bosses? That this fucking pregnant employee is delivering shit, but he’s still hopeful of producing something worthy. You put your hand in your ass because I don’t care anymore.”

The last time anyone had heard someone screaming like that, it was Raghu Ram in the Roadies audition, and Karan had seen Rajiv watching Raghu’s videos, copying his style of anger.

Knowing Rajiv well, everyone was expecting something like this but he had always been a little too harsh on Milind. Rajiv’s wife had separated from him some years back and according to ex-employees there had been moments when he almost behaved like a mad person.

Milind’s father had suffered a series of strokes and was hospitalized. Milind was the only one with the earning hand in his family. He couldn’t afford to lose this job at all.

“There are ten people waiting outside, ready to accept half of your package to sit where you’re sitting or rather shitting right now, Milind.”

“I am sorry, Rajiv. I’ll definitely do something to prove my worth.”

“Too late already, you can resign by today EOD or you’ll receive a formal e-mail from HR.”

When Rajiv was finished, Milind already was trying to hide his tears and sat without moving. He folded his laptop carefully.

Rajiv kept his reviews on and he screwed almost everyone for the next fifteen minutes, but didn’t ask anyone else to resign, before he finally moved to Ranbir.

“Ranbir, tell me about your performance,” Rajiv said.

From his voice, Ranbir got the impression that Rajiv had wanted this conversation for a while. A kind of conversation that can give you ego satisfaction.

“Rajiv, this probably has been the worst ever quarter as per my performance standards and I just met sixty percent of the allotted targets,” Ranbir spoke the fact.

“59.2% Ranbir.”

“Yes, if we’re going to be that precise.”

“What do you think is the reason behind it? All of you said you’re going to over achieve your targets, but I can’t see it happening. Correct me if I am wrong.”

“Rajiv, I am sure that all of us tried our best, but we need to accept the fact that our competitors are way better than us in terms of offering product range, services or discounts. I think we need to take this message positively and make necessary changes in our products so that we perform better henceforth.”

Rajiv leaned back in his chair.

“Since when have you started drinking alcohol during office hours?” Rajiv gave a short laugh. “Or you’re on drugs or something? Tell me,” he added.

Milind kept looking down. He seemed to be worrying about his future already. If anyone actually needed this job, it was Milind. His occasional sniffs were getting louder and he failed in hiding his tears this time. Karan who was sitting next to him tried consoling him.

“Tell me!” Rajiv shouted again.

“No, I am neither on drugs nor having alcohol, Rajiv,” Ranbir said. “I suppose I am just speaking my heart out,” he added.

Ranbir could feel Rajiv’s uncertain gaze on him, even though he didn’t speak a single word.

“Oh... well... Thank you but no thank you, because it’s not your eight by ten bedroom in which I’ll listen to everything that you’ll tell me. Neither are you my girlfriend nor I am your boyfriend, Mister Ranbir, the author. Give me the reason why you couldn’t perform and achieve the allotted target. It never happened before you got busy with your novel.”

“Rajiv, my novel has nothing to do with my performance in the company and that’s something I don’t want to talk about as it’s my personal life.”

Ranbir saw a helpless Milind struggling to just sit there, looking helpless and forlorn.

“You don’t teach me the difference between personal and professional life, Ranbir. If your performance deteriorates like this, I’ll make sure that your novel writing and everything else goes for a toss.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me right, Ranbir.”

“You can’t discuss that with me, Rajiv. I request again please don’t get my novel and my personal life into this review meeting again.”

Rajiv’s eyebrows rose slightly. He screamed again. “Then why the hell are you not being able to achieve the targets?”

“Why are you asking me this question again and again when I already told you the reason? Why didn’t you approve the discounts when the clients asked for it? Why didn’t you join me in the meetings when the company’s CEO wanted to meet the national head and why did you ask all of us to focus only on revenues and not on servicing the clients?” Ranbir screamed back.

Rajiv threw another glass of water missing Ranbir’s head by an inch. With that, Milind burst into tears.

“You dare throw anything one more time, Mr Rajiv and I will make sure that you’re out of this company before Milind’s resignation because what you’re doing right now is definitely not a review meeting, but what the police call employee harassment.”

Karan drew nearer to Ranbir, pushing him to sit down. Rajiv stood numb with shock. Milind was still crying and Karan signalled him to hold on.

“Keep your filthy tongue tied, Rajiv. Not even a word from here. Not against me, not against anyone and definitely not throwing a glass again because from where I stand I can see at least three CCTV cameras recording everything that’s happening here. I don’t know what you’ll do from here, but I give you a choice. Save the job of this guy and he’ll not disappoint you in the next quarter, or I’ll float this video internally and externally. You’ll get infamous. In both cases, Milind should remain part of the company.”

Rajiv turned, shocked at Ranbir’s audacity. Instead of answering, Rajiv switched off his projector and folding his laptop, looked into Ranbir’s eyes with rage.

Struggling to contain his emotions, Rajiv, national head of the company, walked out with uncertainty. He had an image that he had successfully carried for many years. That surely crumbled that day, as his ego was tossed and beaten on the floor by a comparatively inexperienced employee in front of his staff.



Friday night brought the cold winds which were very unusual for this time of the year in Mumbai. In the morning, it had been quite hot and people were cursing Mumbai for its hot weather. But now, the same people aired their old sweaters and made their weekend plans in an unusually cold weather. Adah watched vehicle lights dribbling through the windows, making shadows on her wall. She always played with her shadow in her childhood, hoping that one day her shadow would leave her and she'd be independent. It was later she understood that no matter how much she tries to get rid of it, it'll always follow her.

Rehaan would be there in some days as promised, and she'd been thinking about it on and off all day. She knew that he'd break his marriage in sometime; she knew that Rehaan had been thinking about the same as well.

She called Rehaan.

“Hi, it's beautiful weather out here and I so wish that you were here with me,” she said.

“No need of flying all the way. You'll be here with me in some days anyway, right? You're keeping that promise, aren't you?” Adah said.

VJ signalled at her to make it a little fast.

“Hey, by the way, my friends and I are heading for clubbing in a while. I should get going and guess what, I am wearing a crop top with hot pants,” Adah said and smiled at something that Rehaan said.

“Shut up, hang up now. Love you and see you soon,” Adah said with a smile on her face.

“Oh my god, look at you blushing. What did he say?” VJ asked.

“He wants to see me in a bikini...like right now.”

“That sounds like something. You want to video chat with him?” VJ said and winked as she teased Adah.

“No, not now.”

“Well, you’re twenty-two, a hot babe with a perfect figure and when you wear a bikini, you should admit that you turn many men on. Forget men, see the babes staring at you tonight.” VJ winked at Adah and touched her glowing cheeks and neck.

“Kushal will be here before long and about tonight, though your hotness would just balance the temperature, still don’t forget to carry a jacket.”

VJ was wearing a designer one piece. It was classy and her legs were looking very beautiful. She wasn’t wearing any jewellery and her skin was glowing.

Through the window they saw Kushal’s car. VJ waved to him from her flat. They went down the stairs and VJ asked Adah, “Am I looking nice?”

“You’re looking as gorgeous as ever. Don’t worry, Kushal will fall head over heels for you”

“You think I care?” VJ smirked.

“Of course not.” Adah smiled and winked at her.

As Kushal opened the door for the girls, he said, “Hey...I am really sorry if I’m late.”

VJ smiled. “No Kushal, you’re very much on time.”

Kushal took a deep breath. “Then let me tell you one thing, You guys are looking gorgeous.”

“Thank you,” VJ said and smiled at Adah.

“Can you please take a look at the box next to you, VJ?”

VJ saw a neat wooden box placed next to her. She opened it and inside there were seven roses, a beautiful chocolate and a message that said – ‘Be mine forever.’

“That’s really sweet, Kushal. Very sweet. Thank you so much,” VJ said and hugged him from the co–driver’s seat.

“There are seven different roses for a week.”

“Why so?”

“It’s your birthday week and I can’t let the occasion go.”

“That’s sweet,” VJ said sincerely and kissed his cheek. Adah smiled in response.

“Adah, are you already feeling left out?” Kushal asked.

“No, not at all. I am just lost in my thoughts. Nothing else.”

“That Ranbir guy is so lucky, trust me .” Kushal said in good spirits.

“It’s not Ranbir. I’ll tell you about her later,” VJ said to a surprised Kushal.

“Sure,” Kushal said and drove off.

They stepped inside and took a quick glance around the place. It was beautiful – smaller than other pubs, but surprisingly comfy, and most of the furniture was made out of waste items and that looked new. There was a comfortable–looking couch framed in with pipes and wood which had a ‘Reserved’ sign on it. Kushal and VJ moved towards the couch. She knew that they’d be spending the next few hours sitting on the comfortable couch.

“This is a nice place you’ve brought us to,” Adah said.

VJ looked up. “Really. I like it.”

For many months, Adah thought that VJ was drawn to Kushal. It wasn’t just that he was handsome and interesting, but he was desirable as well... desirable, in his own way. Adah had met different types of people, but she always tried hooking up VJ and Kushal as she knew that the way he loved her was unconditional. He’d wait below the apartment for hours to pick her up and he would keep calling her just to listen to her voice once, even if her call was on wait.

VJ was once in a relationship with her professor and people say that they looked great together. But VJ avoided the topic of her break up and with that, Adah too stopped asking her about it.

“She’s single now, right?” Kushal asked VJ.

“Don’t read anything into this at the moment. She’s back with her ex and he’s out of town. She has been a little tense after she broke up with Ranbir, so being a good flat-mate, I invited her along.”

A minute later, Kushal walked over, holding three pints of beer.

Kushal looked at Adah who was busy chit chatting with Rehaan on the phone, “Why do I get this feeling that she might want to go back to Ranbir?”

“I have no idea, plus I don’t really want her to go back to him.”

“Just because you have the hots for someone, you can’t do that to her,” Kushal said.

“That doesn’t mean I’ll go to Ranbir. Plus he would never want to be with a girl like me, even if I promise to be on my best behaviour for the rest of my life,” VJ said dreamily.

“You do realize who you’re talking to, right? You can’t really hide anything from me,” Kushal said with a smile.

Waiters offered them tequila shots and after that, Adah got busy on the phone again. As the music stopped for a moment, VJ said, "I'm just saying that it won't happen, plus I never had any intention to be with Ranbir. Trust me, Adah just might lose her real self for that careless, directionless Ranbir."

Adah, in the meanwhile, kept entering and exiting the club as her parents and Rehaan called a couple of times. Adah's head was spinning and she looked uncomfortable.

Kushal eyed VJ over her beer. "VJ, I am sure there's more to this. Would you mind sharing it?"

VJ blinked. "You're reading too much into it," she said.

"It usually takes you a couple of beers to loosen up. What happened today?"

"Kushal, I am in love, and no matter how much I try explaining myself to people, they won't understand. And to be honest, it doesn't really affect me now. I have a secret of my own and I would like to keep it that way, as I don't want my long-buried truths to unravel."

"Easy for you to say that VJ. I've had my hopes before you said this," Kushal looked crestfallen.

"I know, but I always told you that you should move on," VJ said.

"But you never really meant it."

"Of course I meant it."

"You always call me whenever you need someone by your side, and when you had no friends to be with."

"It's just my way of showing you that you mean a lot to me... but just as a friend," Adah clarified.

“It would’ve been easier if you didn’t do this, because I thought you meant something more. Now I think you did it all on purpose just to drive your mad lovers crazy,” Kushal said.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because whenever I asked, you never even gave me a reason behind your break up with your professor.”

VJ remained silent and then said, “You’re misreading my statement completely.”

“You can go behind my back and have an affair for god knows how long with so many people and you believe that I would act sane.”

As the discussion between VJ and Kushal heated up, everyone else started talking in low murmurs.

“That’s a little strange to hear from someone who’s not my boyfriend.”

“Forget about boyfriend, I can’t even remember the last time you showed your concern for me.” Kushal said, hurt.

VJ drummed her fingers on the table impatiently. Adah recognized the tone of their conversation from a distance and decided to stay away from it.

They were interrupted by the waiter who advised Kushal to not to create a ruckus.

“What kind of mad person is Adah to ask you for relationship advice when she herself is drowning in the dirt. Both of you bitches and Ranbir must be having a threesome with no relationship goals.”

A strange, shuttered expression crossed VJ’s face, and Kushal immediately regretted saying that.

“I am sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” Kushal said.

VJ leaned forward and slapped him twice. The music stopped for a while and all eyes were focused on VJ and Kushal. “And I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have slapped you.”

Bouncers carried him and threw him out of the disc with absolutely no mercy, while Adah and VJ took a cab back home.

They both didn’t speak for a few minutes.

“I can’t remember the last time I slapped someone like that,” VJ said and Adah laughed.

“Wasn’t that rude to do that to him in front of so many people?”

VJ shrugged, “It would’ve really spoiled my mood had I waited for people to disperse on a Friday night so that I could slap him in private.”

Adah started laughing. “Why did you slap him?” Adah asked.

“He asked me a stupid question.”

“What?”

“Why did I break up with my ex?”

Nobody knew why VJ broke up with her ex. All Adah knew was that VJ had quit her job in Bangalore some years back after her break up. Adah wanted to ask her the same thing, but as VJ lowered her glance, avoiding any eye contact with Adah, Adah decided to not probe any further. But the question that lingered in her mind for the night was why VJ was shying away from a new relationship or romantic involvement.



With the winter approaching, the sun wasn’t at its best that Sunday morning. There were cold winds swaying, Mumbai looked happier. The airport looked beautiful as well. There were some people who were

struggling with their heavy luggage and there were cab drivers who were negotiating with passengers.

Pihu made it to Mumbai that Sunday a few minutes before it turned eight. Dressed in jeans and a sleeveless top with a stole around her neck, she looked very beautiful. She looked casual and elegant at the same time. There were many heads that turned to see Pihu. Her driver in Mumbai picked her up from the airport and was overwhelmed to see her after almost two years.

Noting the time, she figured out that Ranbir must be up already and decided to surprise him by reaching his apartment directly. There was a different charm on her face. She looked around to see if anything had changed in Mumbai and the driver tuned into the radio station where the radio jockey was playing *Ye hai Mumbai meri Jaan*.

Wondering about all the times she had spent there, she started remembering her old friends who were no longer in touch. For her, Mumbai was love. A love that gives you a feeling of forever.

She had left Mumbai some years back, and always wanted to come back and get settled there after marriage.

Finding a man with a sense of humour had been the one piece of advice her father had given her when he'd first begun to

talk about dating with her. After Pihu lost her mother, he decided to play her mum's part as well. Pihu believed that her search for that one right guy was over after she read Ranbir's first novel.

Stepping out from her car, she turned from side to side, pleased to find the building Ranbir had once mentioned in a conversation.

As she reached closer to his apartment, Pihu waved a hand at Ranbir, who was playing cricket with a group of friends. He spotted her across the field and his eyes widened in surprise. Her skin looked flawless. Pihu smiled and ran a hand through her hair, tucking it behind her ears.

For the next some seconds, everyone stopped playing cricket as the umpire declared strategic time out after Ranbir winked at him. The cricket field turned silent as all the boys on the field turned towards the unreal figure making her way towards them.

He smiled at Pihu and as she smiled back; he couldn't control his nerves. He walked towards her and hugged her, feeling the gentle curves of her body.

They had never met before and the way they had chatted and talked, neither had done that with anyone else. He was surprised by her sudden visit to Mumbai. He didn't know what to make of her visit, and he wondered how he should start a conversation with her. It was a weird moment as they'd only seen each other's photographs and talked over the phone. Finally the silence was broken,

"I'm sorry I interrupted your game midway."

"No, not at all," he said quickly. There was something beautiful about the way they were looking at each other. It was wonderful. Ranbir drew a deep breath.

"What a beautiful surprise," he said as he moved closer and took her hand in his. Her hands were warm but soft. "So we've finally met."

"Yes, almost."

"That's great," he said feeling a little nervous.

"You look amazing when you sweat, Ranbir," Pihu said and this broke the formality barrier between the two.

"And you look gorgeous," he said and then stood in silence before her.

Pihu was drawn to Ranbir, she couldn't deny that. It had something to do with the way he talked and the way he had made her feel in the last few days. Pihu was perhaps searching for Arnab in him. It was a fact that they both lived different lives, but yet they had something in common that

brought them together. Pihu had never met someone like Ranbir before. Most people she'd known seemed to live their monotonous lives as if marking off goals in life's to-do list.

Pihu's experiences growing up had formed her choices of life and she didn't regret having Ranbir as one. She had come here all the way just to be with Ranbir.

Ranbir stared wordlessly at Pihu and tried to sort his jumbled emotions that had begun to surround his mind. He found it unable to not stare at her spotless beauty.

And yet, as she broke the staring games and asked him something, she knew the question didn't matter, as she already knew the answer. "I hope you're happy to see me here."

"I am amazed to see you here. How long are you here?" Ranbir asked.

"I'm glad you said that and I am here as long as you want me to be. That's my car in Mumbai and it's loaded with luggage."

"You have a tendency to surprise always. I'm so happy that you're finally here and I like the fact that you surprised me, it's beautiful, and for the most part, I think I already love your surprises."

As Pihu saw all the boys staring at both of them, she asked, "Would you like to go sit outside?"

He looked around and smiled, "Love to."

They sat down near the entrance of the society. Ranbir took a sip of his energy drink.

"I like the view from your society. It reminds me of my Ahmedabad bungalow."

Ranbir laughed, feeling more comfortable now. "It's not even a day since you left Ahmedabad and you're already missing it."

“No, I am not missing it. I am just missing the view. I so wished I had a bungalow with the exact view in Mumbai.”

“You make it sound like Mumbai is as affordable as Ahmedabad or Kolkata.”

Pihu grinned. “I love your sense of humour.”

“You’ll hear it more often.”

“Why don’t you shift with me into my flat?”

“Then I guess it’ll be one mad house.”

“I always dreamt of living in one such house with one such person and I hope you don’t mind joining me.”

“Are you serious?” He raised his eyebrows as he said this.

“Of course I am. We have a two bhk flat and you can have a room to yourself.”

“I love your spontaneity girl, you can make the hardest of things sound so easy.”

“So should I clear the other room and make it more boy–friendly already?”

“I wouldn’t be able to afford that. It’s a big flat in Powai and it would cost me a minimum of twenty grand per month, right?”

She nodded, and with a funny gesture she said. “O hello, that flat is empty since the last two years and giving us no benefits. You don’t need to pay anything for that.”

“That’s because you weren’t here, but now you’re back. You’re here to have fun.”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t learned to enjoy my life the way you do, Mr Author.”

“I think you’re right,” he said, moving towards her. “But if I were you, I wouldn’t have allowed a guy who’s an author, and extremely hot and happening into my flat,” he added and winked at her.

“Where did you learn to be so charming?” she blushed as she asked.

Before he could answer her question, his friend from the cricket team called him and he turned.

“You forgot your cell phone there, someone is calling you continuously,” his friend said.

“Thanks,” Ranbir said.

He unlocked his phone to see four missed calls from Adah. Ranbir raised his eyebrows at that, but said nothing.

“What happened? Who’s calling you?” Pihu asked.

“Unknown number, I’ll call back later.”

“Are you sure?” Pihu asked.

“Yes.”

Ranbir stayed silent, waiting for Pihu to continue.

“Anyway, I guess I should get going as I need to arrange the flat.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Would you mind joining me in the evening in my flat? I might need your help there.”

“I wouldn’t mind... I mean sure...,” he said uncertainly, wondering why Adah was calling him.

“Thanks,” she said.

Ranbir hugged her and Pihu squeezed him tightly against her, and then leaned toward his ear. “I’ll wait for you.”

Ranbir smiled but said nothing as Pihu left in her car. He struggled between his own thoughts, wondering if he should call Adah or not, knowing how much they had loved each other and how the last few days had somehow changed their life forever.

Lakshya watched all of it from a distance.



It was half past noon. It was one of those days when Ranbir and Lakshya were ignoring each other. Ranbir popped some bread into the toaster and poured himself a cup of tea – a cup that had Ranbir and Adah’s picture on it. Lakshya entered the kitchen and repeated the activity as he started spreading butter on his bread. They both saw each other and said nothing. Lakshya walked out from the kitchen and Ranbir placed himself on the sofa.

During the next few hours, Ranbir kept thinking why Adah had called him. A moment later, Ranbir picked up his phone and started checking their old conversations and smiled at how different things used to be. Occasionally, he would surprise her by taking chocolates for her late in the night. Though he wasn’t sure why she had called, he decided he should call her back.

He slowed his thoughts and after taking a moment to prepare himself, called her.

He wasn’t able to get through to Adah’s number and he hesitated calling her again. He deleted her number. That had happened a number of times earlier as well.

After a while, Ranbir fished out the car keys from Lakshya’s pocket and got into his car. From the balcony, Lakshya waved at him with a formal smile on his face. He knew everything that had happened after Pihu’s appearance,

but he purposely avoided the conversation. Ranbir nodded back and accelerated.

He reached Powai in a few minutes; it was cloudy outside and looked like it could rain any minute. Ranbir forgot to carry

an umbrella and he didn't find any parking space near Raheja Vihar. Not wanting to get wet by parking away at a distance, he stopped the car next to a 'No Parking' sign near the building, hoping it wouldn't get towed.

He switched off the engine and took a moment to prepare himself. He liked how he looked in the mirror. He got out and started towards Pihu's building. The watchman asked him the necessary details and gave him a naughty smile as he spotted the flower bouquet and gifts Ranbir was carrying.

Ranbir got into the elevator and for the next few seconds, kept thinking how he would initiate the conversation and where it would lead.

He reached the seventh floor. A neighbour next door was standing close to the lift and he looked at Ranbir in disgust, trying to figure out what took him so long in the lift. Ranbir ignored the stare, and when he reached C-705, he saw Rishabh Sharma written on the door. The door bell wasn't working, so he knocked, and then looked at himself again to ensure that he was looking his best.

When no one responded, he knocked again. He considered calling her, but he could not get through. He checked the address twice and confirmed that he was at the right place.

He was heading back, feeling disappointed when he heard a voice behind him as the door opened.

"Hi, I'm so sorry. I was having a bath after a long day," Pihu said apologetically. She was looking gorgeous in her red coloured robe. She adjusted her wet hair.

Ranbir's eyes widened and he got mesmerized by Pihu's beauty.

“Come on in!”

Ranbir handed over the bouquet and other gifts to Pihu. “Welcome to Mumbai,” he said.

“It’s so very pretty. Thank you so much Ranbir.” Pihu made a cutest face possible and that said it all.

A few seconds later, he walked into her apartment, observing the beautiful flat very closely. The living room had a neat red carpet, the sofa looked imported and lavish, and in that spacious room he also spotted young Pihu’s photograph with her family. A picture of her mother was hanging on the other side of the wall. He could see how Pihu would look twenty years later. She looked exactly like her mother.

“You have a beautiful house,” Ranbir said.

Pihu smiled. “I’ll join you in a few minutes, would that be okay?” she said and Ranbir nodded. He wondered if she knew he was watching her continuously through the door.

Ranbir got up and found many trophies and certificates hanging on the wall. He closely looked at them – dance competition, interstate dance competition and about ten more trophies for different kinds of dance performances.

The view was of a hillside from the balcony and he had never seen anything like that in Mumbai before. He explored her house and saw a beautiful kitchen with a dining space. Towards his left was a room that was locked. One thing was for sure, the flat had been done up tastefully. Everything was so neatly done that it looked like no one had ever left this flat.

As much as he wanted to deny it, her apartment had left him a bit shaky.

In the bedroom, Pihu picked up a hair brush and began to pull it through her silky hair. She wanted the night to be the turning point in the relationship, and she was excited. She knew that she had to tell Ranbir about her feelings and how much she was in love with the idea of being in a relationship with

him. He hadn't said anything about his girlfriend till now so she assumed he was single. Would he be willing to have a relationship with me? she thought.

Pihu finished her makeup and was done brushing her hair, but instead of heading out of the door, she sat on her bed and called Ranbir.

Ranbir made his way towards her room, and inside, the aroma of roses filled the air. As Ranbir finally reached her bedroom, Pihu gave her a smile – a smile which expressed more than just love. She was wearing jeans and a light pink tee that complimented her glowing fair skin, reminding him of Adah's beautiful skin. Pihu's eyes were more of a brown and less of grey.

Ranbir watched her from a distance, knowing that he needed to figure out exactly where Pihu fit into his world and how he felt about her.

To Ranbir, the aroma of roses seemed sensual, and thinking about how nice she looked, he noticed her stare. Liking the frankness of her stare, he continued.

“It smells great in here, Pihu,” Ranbir said.

“That's my favourite aroma; it fills me with a certain kind of positivity.”

In her room, she showed him her collection of perfumes, aromas, and different candles. Occasionally she would surprise him by taking his hand as she led him off to show him something that she liked a lot about her collection.

Her physical contact with him made it easier. He knew that Pihu liked him and he could see her effort and excitement when she showed him around her room. Ranbir smiled, unsure if he liked everything she offered, but he was pleased nonetheless.

“It looks really good,” Ranbir said looking at one of the perfume bottles she showed.

She looked at him. “You sure? You do't have to lie about this.”

“I am not lying. To be honest, it’s good to see you talking about the things you like.”

“Thank you. I wondered if I was boring you.”

“From what you’ve showed me so far, it is anything but boring.”

“I hope you don’t mind if I keep bothering you that way.”

“It’s no bother. I am enjoying this moment.”

“Now that we’ve broken the ice, I would like to ask you something,” she said as she looked at him. “Like I told you this morning, I’d be happy to help you with the accommodation. It’s a big flat and I’m sure you like it. Please come and join me here.”

“I already have an accommodation Pihu, and I can’t leave my flat mid year. Not possible.”

“It doesn’t sound too bad. I assume it’s just about a notice you need to serve. Nothing else.”

“It’s also about a friend with whom I have been living for so many years. Plus, I wouldn’t fit in such a lavish apartment.”

“You’re generalizing, don’t you think?”

“Probably, but I have my own reasons for that.”

“Come on! It’s such a fancy place. We can have a time of our own and there would be no one stopping us from doing anything. Sooner or later, you need to quit your day job as it doesn’t excite you in any way. You don’t have to pay rent like you do at your flat. You need to save a lot of money before you jump into a career of your choice.”

Ranbir stood still, and it seemed to him that Pihu had grown even prettier as she tried convincing him. He didn’t say anything for the next few seconds.

“You’re not going to start whining about pride, ego and brotherhood now, are you?” Pihu added.

“Pihu, trust me, it sounds as exciting to me as it does to you, but I don’t want to ruin the beautiful bond that my friend and I have.”

“I’m pretty sure that it would just get better. We’ll get to know each other better and, trust me, with the kind of person you are, you’ll adjust first and have fun later. Remember you shifting with Rishi some years back in Pune?” Pihu said fondly.

“That was my novel, Pihu. Real life’s different from it.”

Pihu nodded and spoke nothing for the next few seconds; she looked everywhere, but towards Ranbir.

“Why the glum face, Pihu?”

“Because I’m feeling kind of sad. I thought you would like the idea of staying with me and you’ll be like Arnab. You’re doing the opposite. I came all the way from Ahmedabad to know you better and to stay with you.”

Ranbir, for the most part, tried convincing himself more than anyone else.

“That makes me feel special, Pihu.”

“But my hopes seem to have died now.”

As Ranbir stood up, he started thinking about his relationship with Adah. They too progressed with a dreamlike intensity and when they parted ways, they’d hunger for even a single sight of each other, and when they were together, they wanted to spend every moment with each other. They met multiple times a day, talked over the phone for hours and they liked being in each other’s arms. He remembered how it had all started and he thought that’s how every relationship starts; with a dreamlike intensity, only to fail eventually. Sometimes in months and sometimes in years.

Though they’d met only a few hours back, Ranbir sensed that somehow Pihu already knew him better than most people did.

They spent the evening talking. For the most part, Pihu talked about her plans of joining a media firm soon and that night, Pihu and Ranbir toasted a glass of wine as a sort of celebration.

“Will you stay with me all night?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Very much.”

“I can’t stay tonight, but I promise that I’ll come again soon and we’ll have a good time again.”

“Come soon,” Pihu whispered in his ears and kissed his cheek as Ranbir was standing close to the main door.

It took Ranbir a moment to realize where he was. There was something different about their conversations. It wasn’t just the way Pihu showed interest in Ranbir, but rather the way they looked at each other. That spoke of how serious their relation was slowly becoming.

Ranbir, while coming out from the apartment noticed that Lakshya’s car wasn’t where he had left it. He got to know that it had been towed by the traffic police and he couldn’t get it before the next morning.

That, and the fact that Lakshya would need his car that night as it was Trisha’s birthday, left him breathless.



Later that night, Ranbir made his way up the steps. Inside, Lakshya was getting ready for his dinner date with Trisha, his girlfriend. Ranbir removed his shoes and quietly went inside his room. Lakshya followed Ranbir in his bedroom.

Ranbir looked quite unsettled. Lakshya sensed that Ranbir wanted to be alone with his thoughts. As he gazed around Ranbir’s room, he realized that

Ranbir had removed Adah's pictures, including one over the bed that he had liked the most.

Suddenly uneasy, Lakshya also spotted Ranbir lost in his own thoughts. Ranbir sat in the balcony and Lakshya found him staring at Pihu's pictures. Lakshya studied the way Ranbir looked at Pihu's pictures. Ranbir noticed him, but said nothing. He switched the browser window to avoid any discussion regarding Pihu. Finally, when the silence between them began to feel oppressive, Lakshya sat in front to face him.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Nothing much," Ranbir said, not meeting his eyes.

"You're kind of acting weird."

"Not really, just thinking about certain things," Ranbir murmured.

"How did your meeting with Pihu go?"

"Are you sure you want to know about her?" Ranbir said.

"I think I can manage to listen," Lakshya paused, took a cigarette out from his pocket and lit it. "Tell me before this cigarette finishes," Lakshya added.

"It feels great with her. She'll be around for quite some time, by the way."

"Good things coming, I suppose," Lakshya said with no expression on his face.

"I don't know," Ranbir said. "There might be good times."

"Good times like being in a relationship? Emotional attachments?"

"Like I said, I don't know. I'm not even sure how I would feel if she doesn't call me for two days." Ranbir said. "To tell you the truth, I want to move on. In fact, I've already almost moved on."

Lakshya furrowed his brow. “What about the relationship that you shared with Adah then?”

“I don’t know, but if I am the only one who cares about this relationship, why should I stick to it any longer?”

“Okay.” Lakshya paused and turned to look out. Ranbir saw him irritated. A moment later, as Lakshya almost finished his cigarette and was about to take a final puff, he gave Ranbir a quick stare.

“What was that?” Ranbir asked, staring back.

“You know what, I have been smoking for many years and I’ve met many smokers. We can smoke till almost the end, but the most important thing is to keep your lips safe from that last smoke you think is left in your cigarette. You’re burning, burning with a rage that calmed you down so you could take revenge. You’ll love it for some time but the most important thing is to keep your life safe from that last burning rage or smoke of revenge you think is left within you.”

Unaware, he’d spoken aloud Ranbir’s own inner thoughts, but Ranbir kept telling himself that Lakshya was doing it only to divert his mind.

“You want me to clap? Last time it was some example of a wine, this time it is that of a cigarette. Are you high on drugs?”

“Well, it’s a better company than to be with you.”

“You had a problem when I was in a relationship with Adah and now that I am on the verge of starting something new with Pihu, you’ve got problems with that as well.”

“I don’t have any problem. I am just warning you to keep your eyes on the road you’ve walked before. You might want to walk down the aisle with Pihu sometime and you shouldn’t feel disappointed with your decision then.”

Ranbir shook his head. “Well, I am not going to be here for long anyway, since I am planning to shift in with Pihu soon.”

“And you didn’t think it was important to mention that before?” Lakshya asked.

“No, I didn’t think so.”

Lakshya raised a sardonic eyebrow. “Why so?”

“Because the last time we discussed Pihu you weren’t really happy about where we were heading.”

“Not quite. We were just on two different pages.”

“I saw you weren’t happy this morning as well when Pihu surprised me.”

Continuing to disagree with Ranbir, Lakshya kept his stare steady into Ranbir’s eyes. “If you were any smarter, you probably would have known why I wasn’t so happy.”

“Good, because I’d rather just enjoy the time by being a fool than crying over my past.”

Lakshya waited to see if Ranbir would add anything else, but for once he seemed really serious, there had been cold vibes between the two from the time they discussed Pihu.

“Please do not act like a kid, there’s no need of moving out. I didn’t want to be rude, just don’t involve Pihu in your relationship goals is all I want to say.”

“You said something about relationships? Someone who knows nothing about it? Lakshya, you were never interested in any kind of relationship and the reason your ex dumped you is because you slept with her step sister, Trisha, who’s probably another fuck buddy.”

Ranbir had ruffled old pages. “Try not to touch my past, Ranbir. Not even a single word against Trisha or it could just get nasty.”

Ranbir stood up and in a single breath said many things he didn't mean and didn't say many a thing that he meant.

“Lakshya, just because you yourself couldn't get the love you desired in life, you're stopping me from doing that. You stopped me when I was with Adah and now you're doing the same when I am with Pihu. You were always a ladies' man, but you were a big failure at love. You could never keep your man part steady and that made you lose the girl who loved you the most. “

“It wasn't me who cheated; it was she who moved on with her new love interest.”

“If only you could keep your eyes on the road that you walked, you wouldn't have lost her to someone else.”

Lakshya felt a thrill; as if he were seated for a Sky Dive and he'll need to jump any moment without thinking what would happen next.

This conversation drifted them apart from each other. A brotherhood and a lovely bond had broken. It was something they both couldn't understand well and Ranbir seemed to be in no mood to resolve it.

Despite the best intentions, Lakshya was beginning to accept the reality of the differences between the two of them. He was afraid that there was a possibility of another heart break in Ranbir's life, a life that had Lakshya as an important part of it.

“I'm shifting tomorrow and I'll pay this month's rent. I'll have a word with the landlord regarding my deposit.”

Lakshya, however, was under no illusion and he knew that things would never be the same between the two after this discussion. Just that he never expected Ranbir to leave the flat like that. He felt a low sinking feeling inside him. A separation from his best buddy was imminent. A moment later, Ranbir came and said, “Here are your car keys and five thousand bucks. It got towed and got a little damaged from the front.”

Over the next few minutes, Lakshya kept thinking about how everything had suddenly changed and he had no wish to debate any further. For the first time, he felt powerless and sad. There was something in his inner voice that wanted Ranbir to refrain from starting a relationship with Pihu. He sensed he would tell him what he saw that day, but maybe it was not the right time. Maybe some days later, months later or maybe once he was ready to listen, but if only they stayed in touch.



Earlier that evening, six hours before Ranbir and Lakshya's verbal spat, Lakshya had walked down till CCD. After many days, the sun was beating down mercilessly and he was confused between ordering Ice tea or Café Frappe.

He heard a familiar voice and turned to see that it was Adah, accompanied by VJ. They were looking for someone and Lakshya's eyes travelled around to see if anyone had come to join them. There was no one. Lakshya took a safe seat and put on his cap to avoid interaction with any of them.

Adah was looking gorgeous in her white semi transparent top and blue shorts. VJ was looking like a bitch, but an extremely hot bitch. Lakshya wondered how lucky Ranbir was to have been kissed by her. Her strawberry red lips could give him a lust goal for his lifetime. While Adah seemed to be crazily waiting for someone, VJ looked quite disinterested.

Adah stood up and smiled. VJ too followed.

“I've heard so much about you!” VJ said.

Adah enveloped Rehaan in a hug. “I'm so glad that you could come, Rehaan! VJ has been wanting to meet you since a while, as you can see, she's so excited.”

VJ looked around if people were watching them, and thankfully didn't notice Lakshya.

“What will you have VJ? Rehaan and I will have litchi shake.”

“Nothing,” VJ said.

“I’ll get a litchi shake for you, you’ll love it,” Adah said and placed the order. Adah kept on talking about how they’d met and had known each other since childhood. A moment later, the waiter served them three litchi shakes.

Adah was laughing, clapping and shouting. She never looked this happy with Ranbir. People occasionally turned to look at her; VJ still looked a little disinterested.

“Why aren’t you having it, VJ?”

“I don’t feel like, baby.”

“It’s only water. Come on, that’s our favorite drink. Please have it.”

VJ nodded and glanced around the room, feeling the eyes of strangers on her.

Minutes later, VJ was listening to Adah as she kept recounting her childhood connections and memories. She talked about their first kiss, first make out session and the first time they broke up, and how Adah moved on with Ranbir that only caused her pain and nothing else.

VJ was sipping her litchi shake listlessly. She looked tired, and when Adah finished talking, VJ looked more alert and lively than before.

“Trust me, I could never be happy with Ranbir. Ask VJ,” Adah said.

“Yes, it was only you, Rehaan. She could never move on after your break up. Ranbir only gave her trouble and bad memories,” VJ seconded her.

Lakshya was sitting and hearing them speak. He was confused about what VJ was saying. More than anything else, he was worried about Adah and his face showed a mixture of sympathy and concern.

“Rehaan, I couldn’t tell you many things I wanted to, but it’s only you who could make me feel happiest. When there was no one in my life, you supported me, and I left you for Ranbir when you needed me the most. With time, I’ve grown used to your care, your love and your attention. It took you no time to come all the way to meet me when I told you that I am missing you.”

She fixed her eyes on Rehaan with a mournful expression and said, “Please don’t ever leave me for anyone else. Call off your wedding, forget your commitments. I love you the most and I know that you love me back. We’ll kiss like it’s our last kiss in the world. We’ll make love like we’re two bodies one soul and that too, for our entire life. Be selfish for once and be with me, forever, this time.”

Adah was wondering about all the possibilities but she wasn’t ready to hear a ‘no’.

“Please tell me, are you ready to be with me again?” Adah asked Rehaan.

Nobody said anything for the next few minutes.

A waiter reached their table to clear the empty litchi shake glasses and asked if anyone needed anything else. VJ said no, Adah said no and Adah asked Rehaan if he needed anything. But the waiter didn’t wait to hear anything after Adah said no and left.

“Why aren’t you saying anything, Rehaan?” Adah asked. He didn’t reply. Adah gestured to VJ and asked her to talk to Rehaan.

“Let’s go home and talk about it, Adah?” VJ said.

“How about having a discussion here itself?” Adah was insistent.

“Rehaan, you need to speak up. You can’t really stay quiet like this. She has left everything just to be with you,” VJ said.

“You know how it is, it’s not easy for me to end everything. I can’t call off my wedding so easily. My marriage is due in some months and I think I

can't really call it off so easily," Rehaan said.

"It goes back to the whole reason behind why I wanted to meet you. I wanted to understand if we could fix this somehow but I never expected you to sound so hopeless, Rehaan."

"You haven't talked to me in what seems like forever, Adah and you expect me to take a decision in a jiffy."

In the silence that followed, Lakshya could hear Adah sobbing.

"I am not asking you to take a decision in a jiffy. I am asking you to consider coming back into my life. I am too scared of losing anyone after Ranbir," Adah replied. "You've changed Rehaan."

"Nothing's changed. Can you imagine how it feels to know that you're getting married to a stranger in a couple of months, and now someone you loved wants to be back in your life? Do you think its easy?" Rehaan said.

"But at least now that person is willing to be back in your life, Rehaan. If you don't accept me now, you'll spoil many lives, including yours, your fiancée's and mine. Don't do that to me. I need you, the whole of you. You're not allowed to leave me."

Adah started sobbing even louder and people couldn't help but notice the drama.

Rehaan flinched at her words, feeling hurt. Lakshya then saw him moving away and getting into his car. Rehaan pulled away without looking back. At that moment, people stopped their conversations, the waiter switched off the television, and everyone turned their heads to Adah. VJ still looked disinterested as she moved out along with the sobbing Adah before disappearing from Lakshya's sight.

Lakshya was quiet. He seemed confused with what had happened. He wanted to go back and see it all, probably closer this time to, understand the expressions and this meeting. He moved out and on his way back home, he kept thinking about the person the girls they were talking to. What was it all

about? Why was Adah crying so much and why did VJ look so disinterested even after being her close friend?

He did not know the reason behind their weird reaction or the purpose behind their meeting; they could have done it at their place. Minutes later, he had come around the corner of his street and he'd been unable to find a reason behind their strange behaviour. He first thought of asking Adah directly and once the idea came to him, he found it stupid and dismissed it. Noting the time, he figured that Ranbir would be home in an hour or so. In his mind, images floated past and he started thinking of the possibilities and though none of them seemed exactly right, his own thoughts haunted him and he wished that whatever he had just thought doesn't get real in the wildest of his dreams. His thoughts replayed over and over without a break and he decided to share everything with Ranbir when he came back from Pihu's place that night.



There were moments when Pihu imagined Ranbir living with her and she knew for certain that whatever was happening was happening in the best of her interest. From the time she started talking to Ranbir, she wanted to be a part of Ranbir's life – a reasonable part. Like a part that remains forever with a person. As she was looking at herself in the mirror, she was smiling at herself. She often felt that too many people live their lives by constricting their own feelings and never express themselves only to regret later. Pihu felt certain she would never be one of those and would keep expressing herself with time.

Pihu made the short drive to Ranbir's flat the next afternoon and helped him pack his bags. It had taken them longer than she'd anticipated. Ranbir had taken quite a lot of things with him, but didn't take certain things which Lakshya, he knew, would still need. Pihu headed towards him and grabbed his hand. While she knew she loved Ranbir, she'd been touched that Ranbir had chosen to stay with her. She liked the feeling of closeness. Her dream was finally coming true; Ranbir would be with her 24x7. She admired how

Arnab loved Jahnvi and she expected Ranbir to recreate the story in real life.

The rest of the afternoon passed in packing and shifting. They had to make quite a few trips to and fro.

The hot day gradually turned into a windy evening as they reached Ranbir's flat for one final time. Dutifully, Ranbir asked

her if she needed tea or something. Pihu asked for green tea and as Ranbir went inside the kitchen, she followed him inside, trying not to stare at him. Ranbir was looking sexier in his quiet avatar. He had hardly spoken much since the afternoon.

Pihu smiled at Ranbir's obvious discomfiture. "You're feeling bad?" she asked.

"For what?" Ranbir said.

"Doing all this. Leaving the flat and your old buddy Lakshya. I know how it feels," Pihu added.

Ranbir poured some boiled water into a cup that had a picture of Adah and Ranbir on it. Pihu noticed it and her eyes went wide. "Who is she?"

Ranbir regretted taking out the cup. He had never told Pihu about his previous relationship. Maybe he never wanted to, but the cup with their photograph on it completely slipped his mind. Ranbir didn't make any eye contact and pretended to be busy with kitchen work.

"She's my ex."

"You never told me about her."

"I didn't tell you because she doesn't figure in my life anymore."

"Then why are you still sipping your coffee from this cup?"

“Because it’s a costly one – a thousand bucks and it makes no sense to throw it because we broke up.”

“When did you guys break up?” Pihu asked trying to look calm.

“It’s been three years,” he lied. “Almost,” he added.

Pihu put the cup to her lips and as she took her first sip, she dropped the coffee mug and it broke into many pieces.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to, but the cup was hot and the coffee was hotter. I burnt my fingers.”

“That’s okay. Happens. I didn’t realize that the water was so hot,” Ranbir said as he tried looking calm.

Ranbir started collecting the pieces before he threw them into the dustbin.

“Why aren’t you having a cup of green tea for yourself?”

“I don’t like it much.”

“You used to love it.”

“Who told you?”

“Arnab used to sip it every now and then, right?”

“Arnab, the character of my book loved it. Ranbir doesn’t like it.”

“Ranbir, I am sorry. I know I should’ve been more careful with the cup. At the end of the day, it is the memories that count.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry. It’s all over and it was just a cup after all. It was anyway a reminder of bad memories.”

“I’ll gift you another cup with our pictures printed on it. I am sure you’ll love it,” Pihu said and put her arms around him. He smiled.

“There’s nothing between you guys now, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you don’t miss her when you listen to slow romantic songs, you don’t read her old texts that makes you want to go back to her and you don’t miss her when you look into my eyes, right?”

Ranbir looked at her, and in the silence that he stood before her, he wondered what to say next.

“Pihu, that’s a wrong lesson that Bollywood teaches us and I am telling you honestly that if someone has been a part of your life, it takes a while for you to get over him or her. It’s like post injury, you don’t consciously think about it, but when you run, you always have that fear of the pain returning to the knee that you hurt before. So you slow down.”

“That sounds quite intelligent.”

“I got it from my flat mate, Lakshya. He’s much better than me at these things.”

“I’d like to meet him sometime then,” Pihu said.

Lakshya entered and stared wordlessly at Ranbir, trying to sort through the jumble of emotions that captured his heart and mind.

Pihu sighed. “Well, you have a long life, Lakshya. Ranbir just mentioned you. I am Pihu, Ranbir’s new flat mate,” she said with excitement.

“Oh you’re the one adopting him,” Lakshya said with a straight face.

“Do you really believe that sarcasm is the right tone for today?” Ranbir asked.

“It never gets out of fashion.” Lakshya said. Lakshya had lived a life with a different attitude, an attitude that had been appreciated by Ranbir earlier, but all that had changed after their argument the other day and the differences were mutual between the two. Not to forget, there were times

when they both agreed with each other despite the fights and appreciated each other's views.

“You want a medal for being the king of sarcasm?” Ranbir said while Pihu looked perplexed at the unexpected argument.

Lakshya found himself unable to turn away as he saw Ranbir's eyes raging with anger.

“By the way, I was just about to open a bottle of scotch. Would you like a glass Ranbir? I also wanted to talk to you about something,” Lakshya said as he carried a bottle of premium scotch Trisha had brought for him from Canada.

“We would've loved to clink some glasses, but unfortunately, the society's service lift is operational only till eight and we're already running quite late.”

“We decided to share this bottle's first drink together.”

“I'm not in a mood to drink anyway, but you can talk in front of Pihu. That's completely okay,” Ranbir said with mock seriousness.

“It's not exactly important; we'll speak later about this maybe,” Lakshya said as he kept holding the scotch bottle. “So you're finally shifting to some other place. You have a way of surprising me, don't you?”

“I don't know. Do I? Though I can say the same thing about you.”

Ranbir stared at him, feeling the crackle of tension between the two.

“I guess we're already very late and we should move,” Pihu whispered.

“Yes, we should leave now,” Ranbir said as he picked up the luggage.

Lakshya couldn't tell him about Adah and a half smile from Ranbir shattered his thoughts. Lakshya could sense the unease between the two and with that, he decided on a simple handshake as a parting gesture as a hug

looked uninvited. This situation was too awkward. Ranbir and Pihu made their way out of the door and they didn't turn back even once.

Lakshya could hear the little voice inside him warning him to stay away from Ranbir and his personal life. He felt as if he was not needed in his life anymore and probably their friendship had reached the end of a long journey, but another urge had taken hold of his thoughts and he knew it was pointless to deny it.

A moment later, Lakshya put back the bottle of scotch they had once decided to open together and he suddenly didn't wish to drink it anymore. He knew it shouldn't have ended like this and it was not easy to break the tension between the two. For the first time in a long time, he regretted speaking his heart out to Ranbir. Ranbir had already put the past behind him and there was something that he needed to know about Adah, about their relationship.

At the same time, he hoped that there would come a moment when Ranbir would listen to him and understand that he only wished the best for Ranbir. He started missing Ranbir already and as he hesitantly took a step into Ranbir's room, he saw that Ranbir had left behind a picture – a picture of Ranbir and Lakshya fitted on the wall. Thinking about how much Ranbir loved Adah, and how Pihu was dominating Ranbir, and how an argument had changed the relation between two friends, Lakshya knew that somehow the last few days in Ranbir's life were going to mark his life forever and that too, not for the best of reasons.



Starting a new innings with Pihu, Ranbir was trying his best to move on. It was still a struggle, but not nearly as bad as it once had been when Pihu wasn't around. He had known Pihu for a while, and realized that she'd never take him for granted in any way. His life, he realized, had taken a strange turn as he moved to Pihu's flat.

Though they both settled down in the flat, the next day itself, Ranbir took a week off from work. They talked a lot and spent quality time together. They cooked together and they decorated the flat together. Neither of them stepped out for work for seven days. Although he wanted to share the expenses, Pihu seldom allowed him to. Moving in with Pihu saved him a lot of money.

Pihu gave Ranbir the room that her mom and dad used to share previously. Ranbir always felt uneasy looking at Pihu's mother's five photographs on the wall, each one garlanded with a wreath, but when a room like that came for no cost in a place like Powai in Mumbai, only a fool would say no.

Curled up on the couch after dinner that Ranbir had made, Pihu opened the best of her wines and started talking about her family and how she missed her mother's food, arousing a mixture of love for her mother and anger on herself as she told Ranbir what an incredible woman her mother had been.

There were things she always kept to herself and when she poured herself and Ranbir the fourth glass each, her eyes were

half closed and it somehow comforted her in the dark. Ranbir's presence gave her immense relief.

They lay facing each other when Ranbir said something. "Would you mind sharing something about your mom? You always change the topic when I ask you about her sudden death."

She took a pause and after finishing the glass in one go, she poured herself another one. "I sometimes close my eyes and wish real hard that it is just a dream and I wish to wake up with my mother sitting by my side."

Too tired to say anything, Pihu continued slurring and talking for the next few minutes.

"What happened to your mother?"

Pihu heard the question that haunted her.

“I lost my mother because of my stupidity,” she said in a low voice.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because if I had acted sensibly that night, I could have avoided her death. My ignorance took her away. Like every night, we slept in different rooms and my father was out on a tour. I was talking to my boyfriend secretly. My parents would always check on me and see if I was talking with anyone late at night. That’s why I always kept the fan and AC on to muffle my voice.” Her words came out slurred.

“My mom called for me, I could hear her. But I was engrossed with my boyfriend and I told myself that it was nothing and my mom must be just checking if I was asleep or talking to someone,” she said as though she were trying to convince herself. Ranbir reached for her hand.

She finished her glass of wine and started sipping from Ranbir’s glass as well.

“My mother was a high blood pressure patient. She had slipped in the wet bathroom and hurt her head. It started bleeding and didn’t stop till she breathed her last,” Pihu said and Ranbir heard her exhale in an attempt to stop her tears.

She felt her throat constrict and she couldn’t believe that she had spoke her heart out.

“Not even my dad knows about it. It’s been eating me up and if I didn’t tell this to you today, a part of me knows that it would’ve been my hidden secret, my guilt,” she said, and drank more than she should have. It was sometime past 3:00 a.m. already. She could barely understand anything that was happening but somehow she managed to give a sad smile to Ranbir.

“You shouldn’t have kept it with you for so long; it was just an accident and you shouldn’t blame yourself for that,” Ranbir said. He had been holding his pee for long and now he decided to hold it for longer because of two reasons. One, Pihu was speaking her heart out and it would look rude to move and go away. Second, he was already scared by her mother’s pictures

all over the room. And now that he knew about the mystery of Pihu's mother's death, he decided to rather shit and piss in his pants than using that bathroom tonight. He suddenly missed Lakshya.

"The next morning, after I found out about her death, I got scared for I knew how much my father loved my mother. For a month or two I lived under a shadow of guilt and I got to thinking that maybe if I had just checked on her once that night, we could have been together," Pihu said and she looked lost. Ranbir was sitting wordlessly and thinking of what to say next that could make her feel better.

"Have you been drinking?" Pihu asked as she noticed an empty wine glass.

"Yes, I was," Ranbir said.

"Do you need anything else? A beer? Scotch? Anything?"

"No, I am fine," he replied and as Pihu exhaled, he could smell the booze.

"I shouldn't have kept you awake so long tonight; you've to go to office tomorrow."

"It's almost time to get up; it's better that I don't sleep now."

"You okay?" Pihu asked.

"Yes, I am okay," Ranbir replied.

"You sure?"

"No, not really sure," Ranbir said and Pihu sensed it was regarding his job.

"You're not happy with your job. Are you?"

"That's not a new thing."

"If you don't like it, you don't have to do it. You can get something better later. And to be honest, you're wasting your precious time here."

He nodded. Talking to her this way reminded him of his verbal encounter with Adah. How different the two were. He couldn't believe that someone was motivating him to not pursue his job.

“What about the expenses?”

“You don't need it till the time we're together. Look, you don't need to pay the rent, and imagine the time you'll get for yourself after leaving the job. We'll have so much fun together. It's badly needed, we need it. In the meanwhile, you can try getting a job of your choice. A writing job maybe.”

“It's not that simple, Pihu.” He shook his head. “I've been trying all day to figure out if I can get a job in a production house, and I'm still not sure if anyone will need me. Forget it, I don't even know what I am going to say if they call me for an interview.”

“I never saw my Arnab losing hope like that in the story,” Pihu said and as intense as the discussion has been, he didn't want to justify his personality difference from that of Arnab for the Nth time in front of Pihu, considering she had just had her low moment remembering her mother's death.

A few minutes later, he thought that maybe it was a golden opportunity for him to leave his job and concentrate on writing. He became confused, wondering if he should try his hand at television writing, short films writing or feature film writing. Somehow, he had lost interest in his job completely. He told himself that he was going to give it a shot and in the meanwhile, Pihu kept saying certain things that didn't matter much and he really didn't listen.

As he looked into Pihu's eyes, she looked sloshed and she put her hands on his hair, looked deep into his eyes and as she lifted her face to kiss him, she felt Ranbir melting away in thunder and she wondered if she'd ever get to spend such romantic moments with the person of her choice, her dreamlike guy, Ranbir. Pihu moved towards him and Ranbir hoped that she didn't exhale much and her mouth didn't stink of the fish she had eaten. As their lips met, Pihu unbuttoned his t-shirt. Ranbir remembered making love to Adah in the dark jungles of Khopoli and realized how wonderful they both had felt that night.

As Pihu kept kissing Ranbir passionately, Ranbir thought: When was the last time I gave an entire week's time to Adah? After a while, he stopped thinking as he couldn't even think of one such instance.

That night, Pihu snuggled in Ranbir's arms until she slept, snoring loudly.



The meeting didn't happen the way I probably imagined, or the way it was intended to. What happened at the café that evening was, quite simply, heartbreaking. I realize that I was always in love with you and just in a quest of selfish change and attention, I accidentally jumped into a wrong relationship. I've felt a sense of life with you and as I find myself back in time with you, I find myself the happiest.

I'm sorry that I left you when you probably needed me the most, I have never seen you making any friends and it was only me since childhood for you. Whenever my parents argued and fought scaring me, you always came to my help, no matter how busy you were. I know when my father and mother got busy with their lives, almost forgetting about their unwanted kid, their oops baby, I hoped that I'd never see them again, you told me that you'd come with me wherever I went. You kept your words when I went to boarding school. It just couldn't get any better.

When I got bored of studies, you gave me company; when I was in a bad mood, you made me smile; I loved listening to you, the way you talked and made me understand things that mattered. I remember turning the radio on and expecting a dedication for me on my birthdays.

In the fifteen years of our friendship, I find myself the closest to you and no one else. I'd been thinking since early morning that why you said what you said and did you really mean it when you said it

with a stare? Was it really you or someone else? You never talked to me like that before. No, I am not complaining, I am a little disappointed though. Rehaan, we were supposed to be together till eternity. You can't call it off like this. We've already put in fifteen years, and with a little more effort,

we'll be each other's forever. This world is changing colour almost every minute and I want to remain your favorite colour, favorite date and favorite person in this entire world.

I met Ranbir co-incidentally and remember falling in love with him within some minutes, but nothing could make me feel the way you made me feel years ago. You made me feel sensuous for the first time. You made me feel how it is to get kissed and you took my virginity. The way you touched me in the dark, the way you caressed my breasts and the way you made me feel in bed – it was pure, it was real. You weren't just a person but an entire hope of my life. When people badmouthed my parents and me, you always comforted me with your hug and made me believe that you'll stand by my side and never complain. You understood my mood swings when I first got my period, you gave me the strength when my friends left me alone because they didn't like my parents. You understood me when I moved from adolescence to youth and you understood me when I chose someone else over you in a relationship. It's a pity that I failed to understand the person who probably understood me the most.

You never mentioned that you'd marry anyone else apart from me; you always told me that if it was not me, it would not be anyone else and I appreciated you for that. So why have you changed now? Believe me, it's worse than I probably made it seem that day. You want me to apologize. I did that quite a few times and don't mind doing it all over again, but please come back.

What I think I most appreciated about you was the time you made me feel important. Ranbir was always busy, first in writing his novel, then with his depression, and later with his new job. We hardly met more than twenty times in the entire year, though we lived ten minutes away. I tried talking to him about his priorities in life, but he was too busy to even discuss that. I always wanted him to work to avoid depression, but he took it otherwise; he felt I didn't want him to pursue his dream. he answered my father back when my father was having a discussion with him. he thought I was protecting my father whereby I was not ready to risk our future because my father's ego got hurt. he thought I always tried to rule his life, but in reality, I was just too possessive about my part in his life. he thought that it was my

ego that was creating problems, but there were real issues that I never discussed which were creating problems. I didn't discuss them because I always had the fear of losing Ranbir after I fell out with my parents. I really loved him, more than I ever loved you, but now I realize that with him , there were only sacrifices, and with you, it was forever love.

I don't know for sure, though, since everything happened so fast that I couldn't get time to put my mind into this and as you always said, I'm more of a heart person and less of a mind person. I wish I could tell you how bad I felt, but I can't. Thanks to you and VJ to get me back to my senses. VJ supports my relationship with you, but she reckons that we shouldn't meet outside and we should meet at home. She probably wants us to have our private time, like we used to have before. She always refuses to accompany me whenever I plan something with you; perhaps she' s trying to give us the space we need.

Somehow , she too understands me and my world, and because of her, I don't miss my parents. I share everything with her and I trust her more than I trust myself. But yes, I trust her less than I trust you. I miss you already, you gave me so much my entire life, that I guess, in a way you 've spoiled me with a dreamlike love.

I love you Rehaan. Please don't take that away from me, and I'm extremely sorry for my behaviour, but please understand that the times were hard and you give me a hope. Your presence gives me a hope and it always will. I am so glad that I have been given this chance to know you, be with you and love you. Please don't give anyone else this right. You're mine and I find myself spending the rest of my life with only and only you. I hope you understand me after reading this letter.

Adah

Adah heaved a deep sigh after writing the letter. She read it twice before she clicked on the 'send' button and within some seconds it was sent. She immediately got an e-mail, not from Rehaan though.



Ranbir looked tired the next morning. He threw up early in the morning, and decided that he wouldn't drink anymore with her. He combed his hair perfectly and wore spectacles before going to office. He always did that when he had drunk too much so as to look neat and sober.

Pihu, he realized, was an alcoholic who hadn't stopped drinking the entire week. He had never imagined his girl would be one of those.

Pihu, he knew, had a way of forcing anyone to drink and people would just engage in a conversation with her. He had begun drinking quite a lot in the last week; more than he should have. The last one week had made him lazy as well. He had barely left the flat. A few minutes later, he reached office and he was the last one to do so.

It was Rajiv who stepped out of his cabin as soon as he saw him.

“How are you, Ranbir?” Rajiv said, approaching slowly and Ranbir had the flashback of their last meeting. He scanned his expressions quickly for any amount of sarcasm, he didn't find any.

“I'm good, Rajiv,” Ranbir replied precisely.

“Good, happy to see you,” Rajiv said and Ranbir looked surprised at his gesture. Ranbir though had more important things on this mind, and his thoughts centered primarily on

the previous night's conversation between him and Pihu, and a moment later between the two.

“Would you join me in my cabin, please?” Rajiv said and Ranbir thought what it could be regarding.

“C'mon,” Rajiv added.

“Is it time for a one on one review?” Ranbir asked as they entered Rajiv’s cabin. Office colleagues called it a prison where you could be sentenced to Rajiv’s idiocy and his ego. Ranbir always thought that someday he’d write a novel on his corporate life and make Rajiv a negative character who gets beaten up by his employees someday.

For a change, he wasn’t scared, neither of Rajiv nor of losing the job. He decided to not plead mercy if Rajiv asked him to leave the job. His mind began to click faster and he started guessing the things that Rajiv could say. He didn’t expect best of the things from a man who could do nothing but shout.

“You better head the regional department now,” he said finally and Ranbir looked at him confused. He paused for a minute , and waited to see if Rajiv had anything more to say. When he didn’t, Ranbir said, “Why?”

Ranbir didn’t know what to make of that, nor did he really understand the tone that Rajiv was using.

There was a long pause on the other end.

“Just take the responsibility as quickly as you can.”

“What’s up? Why are you making this sudden change in structure?” Ranbir wondered why on earth Rajiv was giving him a double promotion?

“Your suggestions, your approach and your trust in your team gave us unexpected results; you made me kind of believe that you’re made for a larger role. You showed your belief in Milind, who gave us a business of twelve lakhs this month, and when you were on leave, your client renewed a business of nineteen lakhs and marked me a mail that said your post sales services have no match in the market. You were right, servicing the client is equally important and most importantly, I realized that I was probably heading it all the wrong way. I now need someone reporting under me whose suggestions are useful and for the betterment of the company.”

Ranbir said nothing, but his eyes never left Rajiv.

“I know it’s not my style, but I would still like to say that this company can’t afford to lose a leader like you. I would like you to reconsider your decision of resigning.”

“But when did I tell you that I am planning to resign?”

“You never took a week off from work and I knew that when you entered the office today with a piece of paper in your hand, it was nothing else but a resignation letter,” Rajiv said. “You get to know these things when you are experienced, and yes, I’ll say nothing regarding your writing and I would love to read your book sometime.”

“It’s not an intellectual or informative kind of book that you would like.”

“What’s it about then?”

“A love story”

“Start from the beginning. This conversation is getting interesting,” Rajiv smiled, looked excited and winked at Ranbir.

“There’s not much to it, but it’s inspired from my own story and I wanted to publish it so I could gift it to my girlfriend as a token of my love.” Ranbir saw Rajiv looking impressed.

“You work from morning till evening, handle a boss like me and still get a time to write a novel? I appreciate it. I almost failed to recognize the talent not everyone has,” Rajiv said and Ranbir broke into the tiniest of smiles at this new side of Rajiv.

“Rajiv, this job doesn’t interest me. I really appreciate the offer you made, but I’d like to get a job in writing – a real job that pays me well.”

“Ranbir, you can’t deny the fact that you need money for a living. I am sure you have a rent to pay, expenses to make, and a girlfriend who will someday be your wife, and then you’ll need a place of your own. This job can give you that. Trust me.”

“I would like to do that with a writing job.”

“Why don’t you check your mail in five minutes and decide for yourself. Hold on to it till the time you don’t get a good writing job,” Rajiv said.

Ranbir smiled and as he closed the door behind him, he realized he had never felt so secure and comfortable in that office or with Rajiv before.

He opened his official e-mail and one mail caught his attention.

Ranbir saw the email and his eyes opened wide. Suddenly he started visualizing career opportunities in a job that had bored him till then. Sitting on his chair, he’d been absently smiling after looking at the offer letter.

And for a long time again, he simply stared at the screen.

Dear Ranbir,

Congratulations on getting promoted. As discussed, we are pleased to send you the offer. Details mentioned below:

Designation: Regional head

Level: Senior Deputy Manager

The salary break up is as given below:

Business Solutions Ltd - Compensation Details			
Name : Ranbir		Department: Online sales & branding	
Designation: Regional head		Pay Grade : Officer 1	
Sr.No	Salary Components	Salary (Per Annum)	Sal-ary (Per Month)
1	Basic	600000	50000
2	House Rent Allowance	300000	25000
3	Special Allowance	120000	10000
4	Transport Allowance	24000	2000
5	Conveyance Reimbursement	36000	3000
6	Medical Reimbursement	15000	1250
7	Telephone Reimbursement	18000	1500
8	Total A	11,13,000	92,750
9	Co. Contribution to PF	36000	3000
10	Gratuity	7215	601
11	Total B	43215	3601
12	Total Targeted Revenue	11,56,215	96351

Regards,

Rajiv

National head

Business Solutions ltd.



In the evening, Ranbir took Pihu out for dinner as the sun went down over the waves of Juhu Beach. Ranbir had been happy since he returned from work and it was his way of celebrating a day that had ended well.

A moment later, seated by the beach side, Ranbir finally couldn't hide his smile any longer. Pihu understood that there was something special. Ranbir didn't say anything, but kept rotating the spoon in his hand. There was something in the way Ranbir looked that day.

“Tell me about it and please start from the beginning,” Pihu said. Keeping the spoon aside, Ranbir leaned forward and started narrating everything from the moment he had entered the office till he got the e-mail from Rajiv. Pihu faked a smile and after thinking for a moment she said, “And your boss Rajiv must have got his lesson just right.”

Ranbir smiled back. “He is not all that bad.”

“Well, you never know, you could have experienced his worst if you hadn't resigned today.”

“I didn't resign today, Pihu,” Ranbir said.

As Pihu wiped her lips with a wet napkin, she added, “Are you serious?”

The waiter interrupted, and Pihu ordered some fish for herself. Ranbir ordered a sizzler.

Ranbir nodded with a smile. “They're paying me really well.”

“But that's not what your dream is about.”

“I agree, but as Rajiv said, I am going to continue with this job till the time I don't get anything better. Sounds like a fair deal to me.”

“Don't act like a hypocrite,” Pihu said with a grave expression on her face which Ranbir did not understand.

“Excuse me,” Ranbir said, raising his eyebrows.

“I expected you to leave this job, work on your second novel and spend time with me.”

“When did we decide that?”

“We’re having a wonderful time with each other and I expect to spend some quality time with you.”

“But what if I don’t feel the same way?”

Pihu looked at him with obvious anger in her eyes. She paused, composing her thoughts. “As intense as it has been, and how much I care about you, I guess you too should feel the same way.”

“Then what about all the things that I want from my life?”

“Don’t get there. You already know that it’s not the ideal life you would like to live.”

“Then how should my ideal life be?”

“I know for certain that we can have a life of our own in that flat. You don’t need a job. You just need to be there with me and you can keep writing novels your entire life.”

“Is that the price to be paid?”

The waiter served their food and Pihu started having her fish slowly. Ranbir no longer seemed interested in the sizzler.

“What do you mean? Why do you say that? It’s not a price, it’s just a thought.”

“And since when have you started taking decisions of my life on my behalf?” Ranbir was startled at this side of Pihu.

Pihu looked at him. “Ranbir... I....”

“I’ve been observing this for a while, Pihu.”

“I’m not taking you decisions, Ranbir. I would just like to live the love Arnab and Jahnvi lived, and trust me, the past one week has meant much more to me than you probably realize. You can head my father’s business in Mumbai later, along with writing novels, may be after a year or so. We have

enough money with us for a year at least. Look how much I care for your comfort and you're telling me that I am taking decisions on your behalf," Pihu said it so matter of factly that Ranbir wondered if he had heard it right.

"One year is a long time, and there's no surety of us being together till then. Can you honestly tell me that you'll feel the same way about all this a year from now?"

"Yes," she said. "I can."

"How can you be so sure?"

Pihu closed her eyes, and for a moment Ranbir thought that she'd start crying. The realization embarrassed him more than he'd imagined possible, and he felt the last ounce of his patience going away. He looked up in anger, then sideways, and then focused on Pihu again. With a stare, he sighed knowing that it was going all wrong. He started hating everything about her.

He couldn't say anything, but in a rush of an expressive anger, he knew that she could hear his thoughts and that was probably better than speaking them.

For a long moment, neither of them seemed to know what to say, nor did they finish their food until Pihu forced a smile. "This can't be happening. I never imagined my Arnab would fight with me like this."

She touched his face.

Even though Ranbir felt bad for Pihu the previous night after hearing her story, he knew everything would change if he allowed himself to give in to Pihu's feelings. He didn't want to lie and he was sure of that.

"My Arnab doesn't know that he'll live the life of a prince. My baby will make love to me tonight and everything will be fine." Ranbir's look expressed his anger and frustration. Pihu had probably failed to notice it and that frightened her.

“I am not Arnab. He’s just a character I created. There’s no Jahnvi; she’s also the character that I created. They don’t exist in real lives. Nobody loves each other so much. It’s a piece of fiction that I wrote. Arnab and Jahnvi are still together and I’m writing a sequel, but I and my girlfriend broke up a month back. And forget about making love, your mouth stinks of fish. It did last night when you kissed and it’s still stinking.”

“You said you broke up with her three years back and you didn’t want to break the cup because it was costly and your relationship with her meant nothing,” Pihu said.

“You broke that cup anyway.”

“It’s not about the cup, it’s about the lie. I am not sure if you’re still sleeping with your girl, or may be random girls for that matter.”

“You too never told me that you had a boyfriend with whom you used to chat while your mother was in bed.”

“Don’t cross your limit, Mr Ranbir,” she said. “And I never lied. I just didn’t tell you about it because you never asked.”

“And because your father didn’t ask you about your whereabouts when your mother died, you didn’t tell him that you were busy fingering yourself.”

Pihu stood up and slapped him. She was seething in rage, anger and guilt. She had never before understood the outcome of over possessiveness, before Ranbir spoke his heart out. They knew that everything would change as both of them had equally crossed their boundaries at the wrong time, wrong place and this embarrassment was going to decide the course of their lives forever.

Ranbir said nothing, but his eyes said a lot. Pihu knew that he wouldn’t talk to her any longer and an hour later, as quickly as he had brought his things from his previous flat, he took them out from Pihu’s flat again. Pihu didn’t say anything and saw Ranbir going out in a big cab, with all his bags, most of them he had not even unpacked.

Ranbir's mind was spinning and he wanted to run away somewhere. He was missing Lakshya and regretted what he had gotten himself into. Pihu called him and he didn't answer her call. Pihu felt sad after Ranbir left and all her dreams of being with her dream character, Arnab, and her favourite author, Ranbir got shattered. She knew that she'd never be able to love anyone else like she loved Ranbir, but she also understood that despite her best intentions, they couldn't stay together because they were not compatible.

That one slap on his face had broken all the hopes and dreams Pihu ever had from Ranbir. It was over now, for both of them. And as they thought about the incident in their individual spaces, they regretted their last dinner date, as it had given them nothing but a painful memory for a lifetime.



The streets were empty, and half the streetlights weren't working. Somewhere in the distance, there were people trying to hide under a roof. There wasn't an easy definition to what had happened between Pihu and Ranbir. He hadn't been her boyfriend as Ranbir never committed to a relationship, but they had shared a few moments, although against Ranbir's wish. They weren't normal friends, but they shared what was beyond the limits of just normal friends. Ranbir wondered if it was the right decision to leave Pihu.

What could Ranbir have learned by reading his own relationship with Pihu? The details and comparison of Ranbir's relationship with Adah, perhaps? Or his bond with Lakshya and how it had worsened? All of this was going on in his mind and nothing seemed to be in his favour.

That night, Pihu was alone. Ranbir was alone.

Ranbir wondered who he would be if he spent his entire life with Pihu. Perhaps he would marry her, and though he suspected she would be a good wife, he also wondered if he could be a good husband to her.

The cab stopped and Ranbir stood there for quite some time after paying the cabbie off. Ranbir didn't wait any longer before pressing the elevator's

button and reached the floor. He tried ringing the bell, but it wasn't working, so he knocked on the door.

It had been a long night for him, and as the door opened, the back of his throat tightened and he stood there wordlessly for some time. He could say a hundred things and get a thousand different replies, but he entered without even offering a simple greeting.

Trisha smiled and she knew what Ranbir was trying to ask.

"He's inside," Trisha said.

"Thanks," Ranbir said.

Ranbir looked at Lakshya through the door, wondering how Lakshya would react when he'd see him. Lakshya was trying to fold the bed sheet and he was putting away everything that was on the wall, including the picture of him and Ranbir. Ranbir smiled when he saw that. As Lakshya turned to the sound of breathing, he pulled up two chairs and sat forward

"You wanted to talk to me?" Lakshya asked Ranbir.

"Umm, yes," Ranbir mumbled.

Ranbir thought for a moment. He knew it was an awkward moment for them both.

"How are you?"

"I am good," Lakshya said and Ranbir came closer.

"You're packing your bags?" Ranbir said as he leaned forward to sit on the chair.

"Yes, I am moving in with Trisha and there's someone else moving into this place from day after tomorrow."

Ranbir debated Lakshya's answer, trying to understand the sudden decision.

“Why would you leave this place?”

“I need to move in with someone. I had to pay the rent for the entire place myself and I couldn’t afford it.”

“But I am back.”

“It doesn’t matter, you can speak with the owner directly and figure it out for yourself. And if that’s what you wanted to talk to me about, then I’ve things to do, so would you please excuse me?” Lakshya said.

“You can’t do that to me. I am sorry for that day and I regret my decision of leaving with Pihu. Please stay with me,” Ranbir almost pleaded.

“That’s the way it goes. You break the code of friendship, you stay alone. You yourself taught me that.”

“I can’t go back, Lakshya. I really need you.”

“I too needed you, Ranbir when you insulted me in front of that stranger.”

“I regret that. I said I am sorry.”

“You should have thought of that before.”

Ranbir panicked and he couldn’t hold his tears for any longer. He hesitated at first, but as Lakshya looked concerned, Ranbir hugged him. “Don’t do this. I’m sorry, if I stay alone here or anywhere, I’ll die for sure. I know that as sure as there is oxygen in the air.”

Trisha looked Lakshya’s eyes filling with tears. They stood facing each other, neither of them looking away. They shed tears of brotherhood, apology and hope.

“I needed to tell you something that day, Ranbir. It was very important and it was about Adah.”

“What?”

“I need a deal first. You have to promise me you’ll get her out of this mess. Just promise me because all this while we were wrong about Adah.”

As soon as Ranbir heard him, his heart began to race, and his hands clenched Lakshya’s hands unconsciously. Ranbir felt thirsty, he felt that it was something serious and he regretted not receiving Adah’s call earlier. His head was spinning and he expected nothing else but the worst.

“There isn’t any proof of what I’m saying, but it’s serious and I thought you should know it as it could change your perception about Adah, about her meeting with her ex boyfriend and VJ’s involvement in everything,” Lakshya lowered his voice as if confiding a secret. “Adah doesn’t have any ex boyfriend, she never had one and she never met anyone in Bhopal.”

Ranbir’s mouth remained open as he heard this and the tone that Lakshya used had suddenly made the air tense.

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s hallucinating someone’s presence. I saw her with VJ in a café that day and all the while she pretended as if she was talking to her ex boyfriend, Rehaan. VJ seemed to be aware of it. She looked excited at first when she imagined meeting her ex. She had a long discussion with him in which she discussed you, your relationship and how you were always busy with your life. Later, she started crying as she imagined he wasn’t ready to marry her as he was already engaged.”

Ranbir looked lost and he couldn’t forgive himself for ignoring Adah.

“And I reckon that it’s been happening since her childhood as she talked about many incidents. Ranbir, it wasn’t her ex she met in Bhopal and I doubt if she ever went to Bhopal. I am sure VJ lied about that person who dropped Adah saying he was her boyfriend; he probably was just an office colleague. Adah was hallucinating it all this while and she needs our help.”

When he finished, Ranbir wondered what Adah must have gone through and how he had ignored her many times. Adah always wanted him to have a job so that he could feel better for himself. She had made him meet her

parents. She had taken difficult steps when Ranbir was doing absolutely nothing, but she loved him with all her heart. Being away from him had made her hallucinate an entire new relationship.

Ranbir stood still without moving, thinking about how he had hurt Adah. Ranbir looked up in silence, his eyes filled with guilt and he heard the muted sounds of Adah's pain. How Adah must have stayed hearing the sound of mere hallucinations, he wondered. He felt ashamed of himself that he could never notice that about Adah. Thinking of Adah now, he thought how quiet Adah must have been all this while and the face that smiled after looking at him has cried unexplained tears that had a lot to do with Ranbir's ignorance.

And, through it all, she had said nothing, absolutely nothing.

Despite the fact that Adah was having hallucinations, Ranbir and Lakshya knew with sudden certainty that VJ had something to do with it. Trying and failing to stop his tears, Lakshya and Trisha hugged Ranbir. Ranbir needed to make things right with Adah and he just hoped that it wasn't too late to do so.



Later that night, while Adah was still waiting for Rehaan's reply, VJ followed her into her bedroom. For the past few months, they slept together as Adah always wanted to talk about Rehaan and only VJ listened to her. VJ put on her pink shorts and asked Adah to change as it was already late. Rehaan won't reply, she told Adah.

Over Adah's shoulder, VJ looked into Adah's e-mail inbox, There were about fifty e-mails from Mailer-Demon that said, 'delivery failed permanently because of non-existence of rehaan. adah@gmail.com .' VJ had the sense that Adah wanted to be alone with her thoughts and as she gazed around the bedroom, she realized that her room was filled with empty picture frames that Adah imagined had Rehaan's pictures in them.

All their flat-mates had left the flat because of Adah's madness. Only VJ stayed with her. Unfortunately, no one apart from VJ knew about the Depressive Psychosis she was going through.

VJ gave Adah her night wear and tried brushing her arms against her as she did so.

Adah looked pretty in blue shorts and white spaghetti top. As VJ looked at her, she looked lost and confused, not understanding what was happening. She looked skinnier than before, with a trim waist, long toned legs, and a great figure. VJ watched silently as Adah adjusted her bra. VJ dimmed the lights

as if she was pleased with what she saw and wanted to create a certain ambience.

Though a little unsettled as VJ pulled her close, Adah asked, "Will Rehaan never return to my life? Will he marry his fiancée? Why does everyone break my heart? I loved Ranbir, I loved Rehaan and they both hurt me.

"Are you okay baby?" VJ asked her and slowly started kissing Adah's neck as Adah kept crying and told VJ that many a times she had wanted to go back to Ranbir but VJ had stopped her from doing so.

"I called Ranbir a couple of days back and he didn't respond. I wanted to tell him that I never hated him, I always loved him and I feel the same love for Rehaan."

VJ explained to her that what happened with her was nothing else but mere attraction and she was made to love beautiful women like her own. All the while, Adah stared blatantly at her own self in the mirror, listening intently, and unabashed by VJ's kisses. Then she realized VJ was still holding her hand, so she gently slid her hand out of her grip as she looked at VJ. Her eyes were intense, but they softened at the slight and caring smile VJ gave. VJ was surprised at her desire to go back to Ranbir. She quickly tried making her understand and tried settling her.

“I would like to show you something I made for you outside, Adah. I would like to ask you about something that’s important and means a lot.”

Rubbing Adah’s shoulders, she felt the softness of her skin and started brushing her lips against her body parts as she switched off the lights. VJ thought that Adah was getting comfortable with her.

“What is it, VJ?”

“Before that, for a while, think that I am Ranbir and you’re Adah. Tell me about your favorite moment with him?”

“When we made love for the first time, and when he kissed me in the theatre. When we entwined our bodies and made love for infinite hours.”

“You need to forget those memories haunting you and for that you need to make new memories with someone new – someone beautiful. Just make a two–body one soul connection, better than before, more intense than before.”

“I’m feeling kind of weird.”

The doorbell rung. VJ left Adah for a while, opened the door and was surprised to see Lakshya and Ranbir standing outside. Following VJ, Adah entered the living room in her shorts and as soon as they saw a few candles around the place with Adah written with them, they understood the intentions VJ had.

“I believe you didn’t expect us right now, VJ.” Ranbir looked furious as he said this. VJ warned him to get out of the society or she’d call the police and report them for entering a girl’s flat late at night.

Ranbir went ahead and hugged Adah and she surprisingly smiled. She looked happy and as the grip of the hug tightened, Adah started sobbing and letting out all the emotions that had been pent up inside her.

“I’m sorry for misunderstanding you when you needed me the most, Adah. I was wrong. Always wrong to have doubted you and no matter how much I

tried, I failed in understanding you. I ignored you, I failed you. Please come back into my life, Adah.”

“I’m sorry, Ranbir. I love Rehaan and he’s always been there with me whenever I needed him, whenever I thought of him, and whenever you ignored me,” Adah sobbed.

“She’s already in a relationship with Rehaan and you can’t force her to come back,” VJ interfered.

“Adah, that’s just your hallucination; Rehaan doesn’t exist,” Ranbir said with all the love he could gather.

“What the fuck are you talking about? He very well exists and he loves me.”

“No Adah, for everything you’ve lost in your childhood – for losing your parents’ love, for losing me, and for having to live through that, you made an imaginary friend Rehaan who doesn’t exist.”

Adah looked perplexed and she cried. “You can’t take my love away from me. Rehaan exists and he’s right here in this room. He made this beautiful heart of candles with my name in it. If you say another word against him, he’ll take you outside and beat you to death.”

“Where’s he? We can’t see him,” Lakshya said. “Let VJ introduce us to Mr Rehaan.”

VJ seemed unsettled, confused, and under-confident.

Ranbir looked at Adah with love and said, “Adah, please understand. Presently, your mental state is similar to that depressed Hollywood actress who had been all over the news a while ago. She belongs from the beautiful mountains and had been falsely claiming to have had an affair with a well-renowned, established and Greek-god-like actor, who had many super hits on his name. And when he denied such unnecessary and unreal claims, she also tried defaming him. She hallucinated a relationship with someone who

is far better than her league in acting, just after they did a movie project together, and her assumptions were unreal. You know what I am saying?”

Adah stared at him, her eyes welling up. So he held her shoulders with both his hands and continued lovingly, “Here, you’re doing the same thing, Adah. You’re just hallucinating a relationship with Rehaan, who himself is an unreal identity and you need to understand that it’s as baseless as the previous case I just told you about. You’ve created some memories in your imagination and now you’re denying accepting that.

“You’re exchanging emails like she used to, you’re hallucinating his presence like she used to, and you’re doing nothing but living in a world of fools that has a darker side. What worries me the most is if you don’t stop living life her way, you might end up getting into trouble like her.

“Forget everything and see that your primary mail box right now is all filled up with delivery failure notifications. Tell me, can you prove that you ever heard back on mail from him?” Ranbir’s heart shrunk as he said that, knowing it was more than what she could bear. But he also knew that it had to be done this way to get her back to reality and her senses.

When he saw the blank expression on Adah’s face and VJ trying to come up with some other explanation, he quickly added, “Throw a ball at him and if he exists, he’ll catch it.”

How long had it been, Adah wondered, since she had missed Ranbir. She picked up a ball and stopped for a moment, as if knowing herself that the throw of the ball would end it all. She threw the ball with closed eyes; it bounced back after colliding with the wall at the other end. It took her just a moment to realize that VJ had been lying to her all this while, and the fact that she too could see Rehaan was a plain lie and nothing else.

More than anything, Adah struggled with her own thoughts; her world began to sink in. One thought after another started occupying her mind. She started fighting with her thoughts when she checked her phone number and after dialing it from Ranbir’s number, her own phone rung. She remembered how that young couple had reacted when she said she was returning from Bhopal. It was a train that didn’t stop at Bhopal. She kept on

waiting for Rehaan's reply and she got nothing but a bounced mail from Mailer Demon. She remembered the meetings in the café and the stares of the people around her. The phone conversations, Bhopal trip, e-mails – everything was just a hallucination.

It hurt Adah to find that she was in love with an image she had created whenever she had needed him. One by one, the incidents unfolded in her mind and she realised she had traded her real time love. Ranbir, for mere imagination, Rehaan. She had planned her life with Rehaan and a realization of it being just an illusion broke her. She knew that she was hallucinating but it was almost impossible for her to differentiate between the real world and her imagination. She had fallen in love with an idea of a person who gave her time and everything else that neither her parents nor Ranbir could give her. Her imagination grew with her age and she almost forgot when it became a part of her real world.

As fate would have it, she hugged Ranbir in need and wondered how her life would be like and would she ever be able to fix things and differentiate between hallucination and reality.

She never noticed that VJ was a lesbian and in love with her. That must have been the reason behind the fight between VJ and Kushal the other day and her break up with her ex boyfriend, the professor.

As she was willing to put the past behind her by moving on with Ranbir, she wondered if Ranbir still loved her the same way he had loved her before.



Adah had finished her story, and as soon she finished it, Ranbir offered her a water bottle. she gulped down half of the water in the bottle within a few seconds. She shifted in her chair, felt a bit relieved after sharing almost everything from her childhood in front of the psychiatrist. It had taken her three hours to express everything and there was a smile on her face. The

psychiatrist had made her sit in peace and she asked Ranbir to accompany her.

She was asked many questions that could form Rehaan's image. Adah settled in and it was a difficult but brilliant session with her.

"You've been brave, strong and very practical tonight," the psychiatrist said. "And that makes me talk to you like an adult now.

"Firstly, congrats that you both are together and the love I can see between you two is unmatched," he said. "You've always been distanced from your friends, family and Ranbir at different times for different reasons and that's normal in times like these. And as you said, when you felt ignored, unknowingly your thoughts gave birth to this imaginary friend of yours, Rehaan. We call this Depressive Psychosis in medical terminology and you don't need to get into the details. You're perfectly fine now and so as to avoid any recurrence in the future, I've prescribed certain medicines, but it would work the most when you both

curl up with each other in love. A better sex life could take all your hallucinations away."

He made it look easy, but Ranbir knew that it was his responsibility to make sure that nothing like that ever happened.

Ranbir tried shaking Adah free of all those bad memories by cracking jokes on their way back home and he gently told Adah about her kiss with VJ and the complicated week with his reader, Pihu but he assured Adah of loving her forever. It seems that Adah had missed out on a lot of things Ranbir was doing and it surprised her to know that he had got a double promotion.

As excited as she was, she kept asking Ranbir questions about this and that. He answered all of them happily. Their conversation went on and on. Adah could understand certain things, but a few others were still beyond her understanding. That was probably the beauty of their relationship. Looking back, they both were full of regret, and they yearned to get back to life's normalcy and their appetite of spending time with each other grew day by

day. One thing was certain – they were ready to start their second journey for love and they were more mature, more focused than before.

When they reached home, Ranbir got a call from a production house that offered him to write the script for a television show. His ears remained opened as he got to know about the salary they were offering for the episodic writing of a daily show for a youth channel.

And soon, he had to make his choice as to whether he would like to join the job as a story writer or he wanted to continue with his current company.

As soon as they both reached the flat, Lakshya opened the bottle of scotch he had promised to drink with Ranbir. Ranbir hugged Lakshya. Lakshya told him the truth about the packed bags the previous night. He was just planning to get the walls painted and neither he had any plans to leave the flat, nor was anyone moving in.

“Thank you for everything, Lakshya. You saved us big time,” Ranbir said.

Lakshya smiled as he thought about what a rip-roaring roller coaster of emotions it had been. He remembered everything, every minute detail about the past few days and he badly wanted to erase it from his life.

The stars were twinkling outside and the air was cold. Lakshya rose from his chair and as he took the jacket, he realized that the winter was close. He breathed deeply and turned back to see the happy faces of Ranbir and Adah. They had never looked this happy before. They looked very much in love with each other.



Ranbir,

As I am on my way back to Ahmedabad, I don't even know how life takes a U turn and takes you back to a place from where you always wanted to run away. I'm sorry that I over-reacted that day, but a part of me always knew that you were right about what you said that day. I am sorry that I didn't call

you, but I doubt if my call would mean anything at all. Though I didn't want to leave just like that, I had to express myself in some way or the other, so I thought what would be better than writing a letter to a writer – a letter that ends it and becomes a forever memory between the two of us.

For the first time, I knew with certainty that I was in love and I decided on it even before meeting you. And though we had been talking for months, it wasn't the same when we met. I remember that when I was in school, I was possessive of the things I owned and I never believed in the logics of 'sharing is caring'. From school through college, I honestly don't remember making any friends because of this habit of mine. I always believed in virtual friends rather than real time friends. I cried over people blocking me, not liking my pictures and ignoring me when I sent them a message, but a fight in the real world didn't really bother me much. Thanks for making me believe that life is what is happening outside. The virtual world is crazy but that's not the real world we live in and thanks for making me understand that

likes, comments and messages aren't more important than hugs, kisses and the real touch of a person.

I was so wrong to have behaved the way I did, I simply didn't want anyone to see you the way I had.

I always imagined how my name would look like with your surname in print; it looked well back then. I don't think falling in love with a character was a great idea as for months, I kept expecting you to behave like Arnab, your character. But I had to understand that deep down, I was fooling myself by claiming you to be the person that never really existed. Then, of all things, I started feeling possessive about you. I wasn't even acutely aware of what I was getting into. I began to think that there was something between us, little by little; I falsely started believing that you were mine and your past was well behind you. I guess what I was trying to find was a reason to be your smile. I wanted to be your happily-ever-after and if only I knew that falling in love with a character and falling in love with a real person were two different things, I would've tried falling for the person instead.

Had I known how things would follow, I wouldn't have stepped into this uncertainty. I deleted all the chats, your number and everything – not wanting to believe it ever took place.

And I think, however, that I was trying to hide the reason behind my mother's death from my dad because I didn't want him to hate his only daughter forever, but I think I wouldn't be able to live with this guilt forever now and no matter what the outcome will be, I have to speak my heart out.

I told myself that I would move on, move on for the better and I would wait and challenge myself before it got too late. Despite the brief time I spent with you, I loved you and I'm sorry for coming into your life uninvited. I am glad that in that one week, whether I've given you anything or not, you gave me that forever moment one spends a life with. Loving you was probably the best thing that happened to me and losing you was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. But I will move on, with no false expectations, and no hope of meeting you again because there are certain love stories that never reach their destination and that becomes an immortal story – the kind of story that people write novels about, filmmakers make films about, and ours is one such story. Ranbir, you are and you will always be my reason to smile.

Pihu

Epilogue



It's almost been a year since my novel was launched. It's time to start writing my next one, I guess.

I am an year older, an year wiser now. I've been living with adah now or should I say adah is living with me and Trisha is living with Lakshya. The best part is that we all live in the same two bhk flat. adah is working after a three month sabbatical. In the past few months, adah has also started giving time to her forgotten hobby – dancing. and trust me, the way she dances, I

get a little jealous with her moves. Not only because she dances well, but also because I can't.

Believe it or not, meeting Lakshya that day was the best thing I decided to do. He, in a way, brought my love back into my life. Though Lakshya and Adah still fight a lot, but when both of them are together, they won't let a person be. They've become the best of buddies and keep reminding and teasing me about VJ's kiss that night.

At last, after many years of being in a relationship with Adah, I've come to realize that it's not as important to be part of each other's happiness as it is to be part of each other's grief and hard times.

By the way, I have a team of my own and am still working as a senior manager. It was hard for Adah to accept my interest in

marketing, but things are different now, very different. One of them is Rajiv's smile. He smiles quite often now. Milind is on the verge of being promoted and Karan is still the show stopper in the office. Karan keeps mimicking Rajiv on his face and the kind of performer that he is, no one takes it in bad taste.

My novel has become a spectacular bestseller and the number of daily messages and fan mails has increased tenfold. About the job a production house offered me as an episodic writer, I'm doing it as a freelance writer.

Like earlier, I still enjoy talking to my readers, but every time I come across a message from a female fan, it reminds me of Pihu and it just leaves a smile on my face. We remained like those two strangers, who crossed each other in a journey, liked each other, but as they moved on, they never looked back again but created a memory that will always be treasured.

And if you're thinking about what happened to Pihu later, I didn't hear from her after the letter that she mailed me, and I didn't expect to.

But if you want, I can try and figure out her story for you and as I said, I am already looking for another story – a story that becomes your reason to smile once again.

About the author

Arpit Vageria is a bestselling author of two romance novels – I Still Think about You and Chockolate Sauce–Smooth. Dark. Sinful . Arpit also writes for the Indian television industry and has written stories and dialogues for many fiction and non–fiction television series and award functions.

Hailing from Indore, he currently lives in Mumbai. He enjoys road trips, singing, playing pranks and adventurous sports.

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