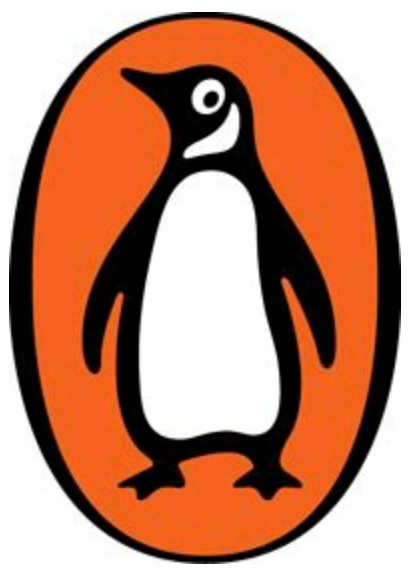


IS IT POSSIBLE TO LIVE
WITHOUT A PAST?

**RIGHT
HERE
RIGHT
NOW
NIKITA
SINGH**

INKED



Nikita Singh

right here right now



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Thank you!

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RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW

Nikita Singh is the bestselling author of six novels, including *Love@Facebook*, *Accidentally in Love* and *The Promise*. She has co-authored two books with Durjoy Datta, titled *If It's Not Forever ...* and *Someone Like You*. She has also contributed to the books in The Backbenchers series. She was born in Patna and grew up in Indore, from where she graduated in pharmacy. She is currently based in New Delhi, where she works as a publishing manager at a leading publishing house. Nikita received a Live India Young Achievers Award in 2013.

With a library stocked with over 12,000 books, she is a voracious reader and adores her collection of fantasy novels. She is a cricket enthusiast and enjoys a good cardio workout.

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Prologue

I try to open my eyes, but it feels like my eyelids are stuck to my eyeballs in an alarmingly permanent fashion. My eyes feel heavy and swollen and I don't know if it's because I've slept too little or too much. I strain to remember what happened last night and what time I went to sleep, but I'm blank.

I can hear beeping on my right and the hushed voices of people talking from far away. I am lying on my back on a bed that isn't too soft but still comfortable, a quilt wrapped around me, in a place that smells very sterile. *Where am I?* I try to raise my hand to rub my eyes, but somehow the simple task seems unmanageable. My hand simply won't move, just like my eyelids. I attempt to wiggle my toes, and surprise, surprise—I can't.

I'm a little annoyed now. I force myself to move, but not one part of my body responds. I try to sigh, but find myself incapable of doing that either. After fighting for about five more minutes, I give up. It's no use. All I can do is breathe in and breathe out, and even that feels assisted—I can feel something tied around my face, forcing oxygen into me. And suddenly it all adds up.

I'm in a hospital.

I have put together everything I can hear, smell and feel around me and it's the only conclusion that fits, but I have no clue how I got here. All I can remember is ... nothing. I feel a constant nagging sensation in my head as I try to remember how I got here, as I try to make sense of things, but it only adds to my frustration. I start to panic. I feel like I am trapped in a cage, tied down with thick iron chains wrapped around my limbs so tightly that I can barely even breathe. And there is nothing I can do to force my way out.

After a while, I find myself drifting away into comparative calmness. The beeping seems to fade away as does my will to fight. It does not smell like disinfectants and antiseptics anymore. And I can move my muscles again.

Slowly, I glide into a different world, where I am with a group of people whose faces are blurred, but they all seem to belong to the same age group—sixteen or seventeen, like me. There are loud noises around me, but I can't figure out what is being said. We are a bunch of people, sitting on the edge of what seems to be a cliff, underneath which there's a vast body of water. I am laughing very loudly, and there's a guy sitting next to me, with his arms around me, whispering something into my ear. I giggle and hit him playfully.

Everybody around us, who I figure must be our friends, starts hooting and that makes me blush. The guy who was making me giggle now pulls me towards himself with my silk scarf and I look up at him. He has grey eyes, a straight nose and his lips are lifted up in a warm smile. I meet him halfway, and our lips touch. The hooting around us gets louder, and we keep kissing passionately. I wrap my arms around him happily and smile.

And then my foot slips and I fall off the cliff.



ONE

2 APRIL 2013

I hear my own screams piercing the air as I sit up on the bed with a jolt. Some kind of a mask slips down my face and I find myself struggling to breathe, as if I just ran a mile. I look around, to find myself sitting in what looks like a hospital bed. There is some medical equipment in the right corner of the room and the monitor displays something I do not understand. Right in front of me is a closed cupboard, above which a TV is hanging from the wall. To my left there are double doors which, as I look, are suddenly pushed open and a strange mix of people rush in. All of them have a panicked look.

And because they look so panicked, I imagine something terrible has happened. ‘What? What is it? What happened?’ I ask frantically.

Nobody seems to pay attention to a word I said. There are five other people in the room and all of them are walking towards me looking intently at me, but no one listens to what I’m saying. It’s like I’m the centre of attention—but nobody is paying attention.

I panic even more. ‘WHAT IS WRONG?’ I shout again, imagining an earthquake or a fire.

There’s a short, middle-aged lady wearing a blue cotton saree, a lean, slightly balding man right next to her, who somehow looks like he is her husband, a fat woman in a nurse uniform with the word ‘Anita’ on her badge, another much thinner nurse with ‘Priya’ on her badge and a tall doctor who doesn’t have a badge.

‘Kalindi! You are okay! Thank God ... you are ... back ...’ the lady in the blue saree is suddenly looking warmly into my face and hugging me, tears flowing down her cheeks.

‘Umm ...’ I don’t know what to say.

I look around to see the doctor coming towards me, looking at me suspiciously, as if I’m some bomb about to explode or something. He reads something on the monitor and peers intently into my eyes. ‘How are you feeling?’

Before I can think of a response to that, the nurses come up on either side and the slightly balding kind man is holding my hand and asking, ‘Kalindi, are you okay? Does it hurt?’

‘Please say something, Kalindi,’ the doctor without a badge says and I see five pairs of concerned eyes peering at me, waiting for a response.

I think my name is Kalindi.

‘I ... I can’t breathe—’ is all I can say before the nurse called Priya shoves an oxygen mask on my face and the nurse called Anita pushes me back on the bed to make me lie down.

‘Just try to calm down. Now, breathe into the mask and slowly breathe out. It’s going to be okay,’ the doctor says and starts checking my vitals. I breathe as he instructed and he starts asking me some questions. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Umm ... confused?’

‘Understandable. Where does it hurt?’

‘My head ... and this arm ...’ I point to my right arm and the lady in the blue saree, who had been holding my right hand all this while suddenly lets go in alarm.

‘Do you know how you got here?’

I think hard, but the only memory that comes to me is of me falling down some stairs or something in my dream and waking up with a jerk to see these five people rushing to me as if there were a fire or an earthquake. I figure there was no fire or earthquake after all. It was just me. I shake my head.

‘Alright.’ The doctor exchanges a look with the others in the room and turns to me. I notice everybody watching me even more seriously. ‘You were in an accident and suffered a moderate level of traumatic brain injury. You were brought here in good time and we operated immediately, but there was a lot of swelling, and you slipped into a coma. Now that you’ve come out of it, this kind of confusion is completely understandable, even expected.’

I wrinkle my brows and try to absorb all the information. Everybody is still staring at me like I’m some kind of zoo animal, so I reckon I need to say something. I clear my throat and ask the first thing that comes to my mind. ‘So ... when did this accident happen?’

Anita checks the file attached to my bed. ‘Nineteen days ago. The night of 15 March. Today is 2 April.’

I nod. I wonder if it would be the right time to ask which year it is, but before I reach a decision, the doctor asks me the question himself, ‘You do know which year this is, right?’

‘I ... uh, 2013?’ I say instinctively.

‘Great! And you still don’t remember how the accident happened?’

‘No.’

‘Okay. So, what is the last thing you remember?’ The doctor starts looking optimistic.

‘I was in this bed, sleeping, I guess. And then I got up.’

‘No, I mean before you got here. What is the last thing you remember from before the accident?’

‘Not much ...’ I reply vaguely.

‘Just try and pinpoint an incident, or a frame of time,’ the doctor insists.

‘You had appeared for your last subject ... your final exams had ended ...’ The lady in the blue saree says and I turn to look at her. She has a very gentle face, which is marred with tension. I hate to think that worrying about me might have caused the dark circles underneath her eyes. I feel touched. I like her.

‘You went out with your friends to celebrate at night ...’ The man, who I bet is this lady’s husband, says. ‘And then we got a call about the accident ...’

I just gape at everybody. It’s kind of embarrassing. It mustn’t be too difficult a question to answer. And now they are all waiting for me to say something, and I can’t think of one goddamn event that happened in my life before this accident thing. I push my brain to gather all the information it has stored and feel my face crumple in concentration. This is frustrating.

‘Kalindi, please don’t cry ...’ The kind lady, who is probably related to me, says.

‘It’s okay. Relax,’ the doctor says.

I shake my head in aggravation and anguish. ‘I don’t ... I don’t remember much ...’

‘That’s alright. Don’t strain yourself. Just try to think of the last thing you do remember and don’t worry about what you don’t. This happens. It’ll come back to you in a little while.’

‘But ... but I don’t ... I really don’t ... What’s wrong with me?’

‘We’ll figure it out. You’ll eventually recall whatever you don’t. For now, we need to concentrate on what you do remember, so that we can piece everything together. So tell me. What do you remember?’

‘Nothing.’

So, as soon as I’d said ‘nothing’ the atmosphere in the room got a lot more intense, which made me even more nervous than I already was. The doctor asked the nurses to allow me some space and not to crowd around me, so they left the room after checking that everything was in place. Then he identified himself as Dr Sahani and asked to speak with the man on my left in private.

As the men excused themselves from the room, I became aware of being alone with the lady in the blue saree, with a gentle but tired face and dark circles, who I thought was probably related to me.

I looked at her to find her staring at me. She was sitting on my bed and studying my face. I felt the need to break the tension and lighten the atmosphere, so I smiled at her and said, ‘Hi!’

She held my hand again and squeezed it tightly, but said nothing.

‘So ... you must be my mum?’ I asked. Which made her burst into tears. In hindsight, I do realize that it was kind of insensitive of me to ask, but, well, I had to know.

Now, she’s sitting holding my hand, not crying anymore, thankfully. She’s my mum, and she looks really drained and I don’t like that, especially knowing that I am the reason for her distress, what with getting into some unknown major accident, suffering a severe brain injury and staying in a coma for nineteen days. If all that was not enough, now I wake up and don’t even remember her. What kind of an inconsiderate jerk does that? I feel like a real douchebag.

‘Please don’t cry ... Mum,’ I mumble.

She immediately wipes her tears off and puts on a brave face. She looks a little scared. Not generally scared, but scared *of* me. *By* me. I frown.

‘Umm, so ... I guess my memory will be back soon?’ I ask. I’m getting really agitated now, because she hasn’t said a word since we were left alone.

‘Your father ... he’s talking to Dr Sahani ...’ she bites her lip. I figure the man I assumed was her husband really is her husband and therefore also my dad.

I like them. I like Mum’s blue cotton saree, the way she looks into my face with concern and a strange mixture of happiness and worry (happy, probably because I’m finally back, but worried because I’m not *really* back). I like Dad’s kind face, his thinning hair and ... well, I don’t know him very well so I guess I can’t get into details, but I just feel drawn to like him. They both look too haggard, which is obviously my fault and I feel guilty again. But that also means that they were (and still are) distressed because of my condition, which means that they are good parents and I’m probably very loved and adored.

Which makes me wonder, ‘Do I have any siblings?’

‘No,’ Mum says, ‘you’re all we have,’ and looks like she is on the verge of breaking down again.

Great. I keep making her sad. But how am I supposed to find out anything without asking? I should probably just shut up for a while and let her talk instead. ‘I ... I’m making you cry a lot. So, umm ...’

‘No, no, it’s not you. It’s just that all this while you were unconscious ... we were so scared ...’

‘Yeah, but now I’m back!’ I try to cheer her up. ‘At least physically. And like the doctor says, I’ll remember everything soon enough, so no need for tears!’

She smiles warmly at me and seeing her happy, I light up from within. I really must be her daughter, to experience this kind of a reaction to just one smile.

‘So, till I remember stuff by myself, why don’t you tell me about me?’

‘Okay,’ Mum starts. ‘Where do I start?’

‘I know nothing except my name, which I gather is Kalindi. So, you can start pretty much wherever you want!’

‘Hmm, so your name is Kalindi Mishra. We live in Delhi. You are seventeen years old, and you just passed XI grade, or at least we hope you did. You finished your final exams on the same day you ...’

‘Right. I got that. Dad said I went to celebrate with my friends and then the accident happened,’ I complete her sentence. ‘Am I a good student?’

‘Absolutely. You scored really well in your Class X boards last year.’

‘So, am I a nerd then?’

‘What? NO!’ Mum laughs and I get curious.

‘What’s funny?’

‘You’re a good student, but you’re one of the “cool kids” in your school. You’d hate to be called a nerd. You and your friends are the exact opposite of that.’

‘I clearly have friends,’ I point to the huge bouquets of flowers, balloons and baskets of fruits and chocolates covering one side of the room.

‘Yes, you do. You’re very popular in school.’

‘Tell me about my friends. Do you like them?’

‘You like them, and they like you, so I like them,’ she smiles again. ‘They’ve been dropping by every day to check up on your condition.’

‘That sounds nice.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Do I have a hobby or something?’

A strange expression comes over Mum’s face before she says, ‘If you could only hear yourself asking these questions. I mean, if only you-before-the-accident could hear the present-you.’

I nod, not knowing what to say to that. I’ll probably understand what she’s talking about once my memory comes back, so I guess I’ll just sit and wait for that. We look at each other, and she does not say anything either. It’s amazing how I am such a blank slate and she must have seventeen years of stories about me to tell, but we somehow still run out of things to say and our conversation dies out.

I stay silent, lest I say something that makes her cry again and she doesn’t say anything either, I don’t know why. Dad hasn’t yet returned with Dr Sahani, so I don’t know what to do. I finally motion

towards the TV and ask if something good is on.

‘You don’t watch TV,’ Mum says.

‘What? Why?’ I ask.

‘You watch American TV shows on your laptop and almost all movies in the theatre with your friends.’

‘And you let me?’

‘You’re kind of a rebel ...’ Mum says, her funny expression is back on. ‘You don’t really ask for our permission to do anything.’

‘Oh, I sound reasonably ... charming!’ I say and we laugh together.

She looks at the door and I follow her gaze to see Dad and Dr Sahani entering the room. I get nervous again.

‘Hi Dad,’ I mutter.

‘You remember?’ his face brightens up. ‘We just discussed amnesia in detail and planned out a way to help you through it, so that we can get your memory back. But I guess there’s no need for that any more, is there?’ He looks so relieved that I feel another pang of guilt. Gosh, why can’t I just remember stuff and get over it?

‘I ... don’t ...’ I stammer.

‘She doesn’t remember,’ Mum tells Dad. ‘She just knows what I told her now ...’

‘Oh,’ Dad says.

‘But that’s okay. I’ll remember everything pretty soon. So there’s nothing to worry about, right Doctor?’ I say, plastering a brave smile on my face and looking up at him.

But he’s not smiling.



TWO

‘Let’s talk this through.’ Dr Sahani pulls up a chair next to my bed. He’s smiling now, but I can tell he’s serious and the smile is a facade to try and put me at ease—which I’m not falling for.

‘What is wrong?’ I ask, my heartbeat rising.

‘I won’t use the word *wrong*. You have post-traumatic amnesia, which is not unusual, given the nature of your injuries.’

‘What happened? I mean the accident ... how did it happen?’

‘That’s one thing we aren’t sure of.’

‘What?’ I look around at all three of them. ‘Earlier, when you asked ... I thought you were asking me about it to check if I remembered. But even *you* don’t know?!’

‘We got a call from the hospital, telling us that you had been brought here,’ Mum says.

‘Who brought me here? Was I with my friends? Was anybody else hurt?’ I panic.

‘You weren’t with your friends. We asked all of them.’

‘Judging by the nature of your injuries, I’m inclined to say you were in an automobile accident,’ Dr Sahani supplies.

‘Okay. So I was in a car that crashed? Or a bike?’

Dr Sahani nods. ‘I’d say a car.’

‘Do I drive?’

Mum shakes her head. ‘Not that I know of, at least.’

‘Okay, so if I don’t drive, I must’ve been with somebody who does, right? A friend.’

‘We asked everybody ... all your friends,’ Mum says.

‘All we know ... you were hurt and found unconscious on the side of a street ... some passers-by noticed and brought you here ...’ Dad’s expression is pained as he says this.

‘OH MY GOD, WHAT HAPPENED TO ME?!’ I shout. I’m suddenly terrified. I shut my eyes tightly and try to remember. The only memory that comes to me is of falling down something and waking up here. And that very well could have been a dream.

‘Please try to relax, Kalindi. I’m sure there is a perfectly reasonable explanation to how this came about,’ Dr Sahani says.

‘But what if ...’ I don’t even want to think of the possibilities. I look at my parents anxiously and they stare back at me equally helplessly. God, what must they be going through?

‘Let’s concentrate on the present situation,’ Dr Sahani continues, trying to steer the conversation towards the medical issues at hand. Because, of course, he’s a doctor and not a detective. ‘As I told you earlier, you were brought here with moderate traumatic brain injury. You had severe swelling in the nerves of your brain and once we began operating, you slipped into a coma and we let you be. We wanted to wait till the swelling subsided and your systems calmed down to bring you out of it. But

after a few days, when we tried to bring you back from the coma, your systems did not respond. And today, as you know, nineteen days since the accident, you automatically came back to us.'

I processed the information. 'Was there a chance that I could have ... you know, stayed in a coma all my life?'

'We did not think it was likely, but yes, it was possible.'

I nod.

'And now it appears you have post-traumatic amnesia. At this point, we will need to conduct some tests and ask some questions to gauge the situation and find out how soon we can get your memory back. You have retrograde amnesia, which means you have lost your ability to recall memories before your head injury. But we also have to check for signs of anterograde amnesia, which means we need to find out if your brain is able to encode new memories. You do remember everything since you woke up, don't you?'

'What? Yes, yes I remember everything since I woke up here ... but, do you mean there is a chance ... *I won't*? As in, I don't remember anything from the past and now I won't be able to retain new memories either?' I ask in horror.

'We don't know anything yet, but we do need to explore all the possibilities. Post-traumatic amnesia can be retrograde, anterograde or mixed. You clearly have retrograde, but there might be chance of it being mixed too.'

'How do I ...? What ...?'

'I would advise you to not panic. Post-traumatic amnesia is often transient, and if that's the case, then it will pass and you will recover your memory soon.'

'What if it's not?' Mum asks.

'There might be a chance that this is permanent. It's too soon to be sure of anything just yet. We'll need to conduct tests throughout the week and estimate—'

I slump back into my bed. I can't take this anymore. I thought I was going to remember everything in, like an hour or so, and the doctor's talking about a lifetime of this clean slate situation, teamed with inability to make new memories, too! That sucks big time. I must have been a really bad person in my last life—or the first seventeen years of this life—to deserve this.

'What is wrong? Are you alright?' Mum is suddenly rubbing my arm and looking into my face with concern just as she'd been doing since ... as long as I remember.

'I ... can't. Can we do this later?' I ask the doctor, trying not to be impolite.

'Sure, of course. That is quite okay.'

'I'm sorry, I'm just ...'

'Don't worry about it. You rest and we will do this when you're up for it. This is clearly a lot to take in.'

'Thank you,' I smile up at him and he excuses himself.

There's silence in the room again, and as I punch my pillow into a more comfortable position, I voice my fear, 'What's going to happen now?'

'It will be okay,' Mum says soothingly.

'These will be a series of routine tests, and then we can take you home,' Dad says. 'Dr Sahani was

telling me about it before. But it's okay, we can talk about it later,' he finishes quickly, probably noticing my reaction.

'No, no. I want to know. Just promise not to use the scary language Dr Sahani was using?' I smile. The least I can do is try to be a good daughter to my parents for as long as I'm up and still remember them. Who knows, I might turn out to be a freak who forgets everything every hour or as soon as I sleep. I shudder at the thought.

'They'll just check all your body functions and such, you know, to make sure that everything's fine,' Dad says. See, that's the difference. The doctor uses terms with an 'if' infliction, while Dad uses 'that' which is very reassuring in my situation of immense crisis.

'Right, I've been sleeping for about twenty days now!'

'And don't worry, you'll be okay. I'm sure this is just temporary.'

I nod. I've got good parents. It would be such a shame if I didn't remember much of the seventeen years we've spent together.

'Do you want to sleep for a while?' Mum asks.

A 'NO!' escapes me. 'I mean, like, I'm not sleepy.'

'Okay ...'

They share a suspicious look and I know they are wondering the reason behind my reaction, but I don't tell them. What if Mum starts to cry again, thinking I won't remember her when I wake up?

'Should I inform Ada that you're up and okay?' Mum asks.

'Ada is your friend,' Dad supplies.

'Umm ... but it's going to be so weird ... I don't really know her, so ...' I drift away.

'I'm sure she will understand. And the doctors always say the best way to jolt memories is to meet people from the lost time,' Dad says.

'In my case, "lost time" is seventeen years! I wonder how many people I'll have to meet.'

'Let's start here,' Mum smiles.

I nod. I'm actually a little excited about meeting my friends and seeing what they are like. Then later, when my memory comes back, we'll remember it and say, 'Remember that time when Kalindi didn't remember us for three whole days?' and laugh.

That should be fun.

'You should go home and rest for a while,' Mum suggests to Dad. 'I'll be here with her.'

'No, I'm alright. You go ahead, I'll stay here. You haven't eaten properly in weeks.'

They go on like this for a while, before I ask them both to go home and come back after resting. They obviously don't agree, but after a little persistence and playing my guilty card (I feel bad for being the reason for all your problems, I'll really feel better if you go home, eat something and get some rest) they finally agree to leave, promising me they'd come back in the evening, which is three hours away.

Meanwhile, I am to rest and get ready for the tests later in the day. The first thing they're going to do is try to get me to eat so they can remove the feeding tubes. I wonder if they'll let me have Maggi for dinner.

Which confuses me. I remember what Maggi is, and I know that I like it, but I don't remember even

one time I actually ate it. Hmm. I think about it for a while, before my eyes close. I force them open, because—not to be paranoid or anything—there actually is a possibility that I won't remember the things that have happened since I woke up if I go to sleep.

But I soon find out that a battle against sleep is one that is inevitably lost.

'Is everything okay?' the fat woman in a nurse's uniform with the badge on her chest saying 'Anita' asks. I think I should just call her Anita.

'I ... I think so.' I look around the room and frown.

She picks up my chart and goes through it. In the interim, I observe her. She must be in her mid, maybe late, thirties. Not very tall, not too short. Her hair is tied back into a tight bun and she has a bindi on her forehead. I think her weight suits her. It makes her look like somebody qualified to take care of sick people. Like somebody who'd lovingly look after her patients, not just because it's her job, but because she genuinely wants to help. I like her.

I've noticed that I've liked everybody I've met since I got up. 'I remember you!'

'That's great! Everything looks fine in your chart. Did you have a good nap?'

'Umm, yeah, I guess ... but not really,' I shrug.

By far, I seem to remember all that has happened since I came out of my coma. After Mum and Dad left and I fell asleep, I woke up in terror once again, because my subconscious kept nagging at me that I couldn't take the risk of sleeping, that I'd forget my parents again if I did and after a disturbed sleep filled with nightmares I no longer have any recollection of, I woke up. I calmed down when I found out that I had been sleeping for two hours and I still remembered my parents. Though I'm still scared that if I sleep tonight, I might forget everything by tomorrow morning.

But I decided to worry about that when the time came. Right now, I feel a little suffocated. And that's why I hit the red button next to my bed, which brought Anita to my room.

'Can we go out for a while?' I ask.

'Out?'

'I mean, is there like a lawn or something outside? Or even open corridors would do fine. I just need a little air.'

'I'll have to check with Dr Sahani first, but I think we can take you outside for a while,' Anita smiles at me.

'Great! I just—'

'What? She can't go outside!' the thinner nurse with 'Priya' on her badge says, making kind of a dramatic entry, if you ask me.

'Why can't I go outside?'

'Because you're a *patient*. And you have a room. These rooms are especially designed for patients to be in. For as long as you are in this hospital, this is where you're supposed to stay. Not out on the imaginary lawn!'

'Were you eavesdropping? How long have you been standing outside listening to our conversation?' I ask, looking at the young nurse and trying to understand what her problem is with me.

'Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't know that you guys were best friends and your conversation was

supposed to be private.'

'What is *wrong* with you?'

'Me? What is wrong with me?' Priya laughs. 'Look who's asking! I'm not the one on that bed, you are!'

'Why are you so angry?'

'Why are you so stupid?'

'ENOUGH!' Anita shouts over us and we shut up. 'Priya, you need to leave. Now.'

'Do I? I don't think so. I was assigned to—'

'OUT!'

Priya stares at Anita for a moment, then shrugs and leaves.

There's a brief silence in the room.

'What was *that* about?' I finally ask.

'Oh, she's a medical student, assigned sixty hours of nurse work as detention—three hours per day for twenty days. Isn't too happy about it. But she should've thought of that before, shouldn't she?'

Anita shakes her head.

'What did she do?'

'Stole her friend's assignment and passed it off as her own. Stupid, really, since it was a case study and every student was assigned a unique case.'

'Didn't she realize that?' I ask. Medical students are supposed to be really bright, right?

'You'd think she would've. But I don't think she even bothered to find out. On the date of submission, she just picked up her friend's assignment, changed the cover page and handed it over to Dr Sahani.'

'Dr Sahani teaches too?'

'Yes. This hospital is linked to a medical college, that's where he teaches,' Anita replies.

I nod. 'Can we go out now?'

She checks with the doctor and he grants us permission. A few nurses come to unplug the various instruments or whatever attached to me. I turn red in embarrassment at one point. I have been doing all of my private business right here, on this bed. It's not a pretty thought. When they are done, Anita holds my hands and makes me get up slowly. We do a few warm up exercises and loosen up some muscles.

'For now, we need to take the wheelchair. The physiotherapy department has been informed that you're up and somebody will come down in an hour to check on you. Let's not strain anything before that.'

'Okay,' I say. Going out on a wheelchair is better than not going out at all, isn't it? And well, I'm a little excited about the wheelchair thing, actually. I don't know for how long I'm going to get to use one, so why let this chance pass?

I sit down on the seat of the wheelchair and hold both the armrests. Anita tells me how to place my legs and I do as instructed.

'Ready?'

'Yes,' I reply, trying not to let my giddiness show. She'd think I'm some kind of a psycho. Even

more than she already does, that is, what with the blank slate condition and all.

The wheels start rolling and I feel awesome. They should have wheelchair rides at Disneyland and fairs and such. This is really so much fun!

It doesn't last long though. We couldn't have moved more than thirty feet from my room when Anita stops to acknowledge some people dressed in white coats, obviously doctors. Then she introduces me to one of them, telling me he's my physiotherapist and he's going to see me now. And then she wheels me back to my room. So much for my awesome wheelchair ride and fresh air.

'Move your toes, one at a time.'

The physiotherapist has been making me move every part of my body one by one, and observing me carefully for the past hour. So far, everything's been normal except my right arm, which still hurts, but that is justifiable, since I'm told it suffered a hairline fracture when the mysterious accident occurred.

'Does it hurt?' Mum asks.

'Not at all!' I reply. I feel relieved that the physical examination is over with, and that all my body parts are in order. Now if we could just do something about the memory part ...

'That should be all,' the physiotherapist says, before getting up from his crouching position on the floor, where he'd been inspecting the movement of my legs.

'Yeah? So it's all good?' I ask.

'Seems so. We'll keep checking on you and would be running a few more tests this week, just to make sure. As far as I can tell, everything seems to be fine.'

'Thank you so much,'

Dad walks out with the doctor and they talk for a couple of minutes. From where I am, it looks like the doctor's doing a whole lot of talking and my dad, a whole lot of nodding.

'Did you get some sleep?' I ask Mum.

'Not sleep, but we did lie down for some time. There are so many things to think about ...'

'Mum, come *on!*' I exclaim. I really hoped she had slept. 'I have so many thoughts in my head too, but *I* slept!'

'That's because you're my brave girl,' she says proudly, which makes me feel good inside, but I'm not done scolding her yet.

'My being brave has nothing to do with you not sleeping. See, this is good! I'm up and I'm physically okay. There's nothing to worry about,' I try to cajole her.

'Okay, okay, I'll sleep tonight. I'll be right here on the couch so you can make sure I follow through on my promise,' she agrees.

'On the couch?' I point to the two-seater brown couch in the corner of the room, which is presently overflowing with what I can only assume to be bags of our clothes and stuff. It doesn't look comfortable at all. 'That's where you've been sleeping every night? For the last twenty days?' More guilt.

'We take turns—your father and I. It was his turn tonight but now that you're up, I don't want to be away from you.'

She is looking at me seriously, and her eyes are saying more than her words. I look away. I really

don't like her dark circles. I wish they would go away. My throat is a little constricted, and I don't know what to say.

Thankfully, Dad comes back and the atmosphere changes. We switch on the TV and watch *Chak De India!* which Mum tells me I've already seen, but I obviously don't have a clue. Dad gets dinner for Mum and himself from the hospital canteen downstairs. Mum unpacks the dinner she had cooked for me, after asking Dr Sahani what I am allowed to eat.

It's basically saltless and flavourless food, but it still tastes pretty darn good to me anyway.



THREE

3 APRIL 2013

‘I’ll be back to see you in a while; Anita will stay with you till then,’ Dr Sahani concludes and leaves. I breathe out in relief. That man scares me. I don’t know why I feel like my future completely depends on him, and he doesn’t seem to believe too staunchly in me getting better anytime soon. Maybe because everything he says is measured, like, ‘It seems okay, for now, but we can’t be sure, we have to keep an eye on it,’ as if there are things that could go wrong at every step.

But then I have my parents to make me believe that nothing will go wrong at any step and I will be fine and we can go home soon. Even now, Mum is sitting right next to me, rubbing my right arm (it hurts a little, but I don’t tell her that) and Dad is re-entering the room after seeing Dr Sahani off, a wide smile on his face.

‘I told you it would be fine,’ he says.

‘But they are still waiting for all kinds of reports to come out,’ I reply. I’ve looked at my chart—I’m supposed to see a neurologist, a psychiatrist (God knows why) and a trauma specialist or something later in the day. And we are waiting for my MRI, CT Scan, an X-ray of my arm and a few more tests—I don’t remember the names—to come out. Busy day.

The good thing is that, when I woke up this morning, I remembered every detail of everything that happened yesterday, especially the part where I asked Mum to come sleep with me on my bed and Dad insisted on staying so he slept on the couch. I made sure they both stopped fussing over me and actually got some sleep.

Anyway, apparently that means I’m showing no signs of anterograde amnesia (I remember the term, since it’s been said about forty-seven times since this morning), which means my brain is able to make new memories and transfer them from short-term store to long-term store.

Now all I have to do is try and remember everything from the past seventeen years, one month and seven days of my life. No biggie.

‘We brought some pictures,’ Dad says and pulls out a laptop from his overnight bag.

‘Oh, great!’ I say. Dr Sahani said it’ll help if I see pictures and videos from the past, meet people I know (or knew), visit places I used to, to remember. Even the smallest thing might be able to jolt my memory. I thought he looked a little more pessimistic than yesterday, and it bothered me, but, before I could ask, he left for an emergency surgery.

Mum is sitting with me on my bed, and Dad pulls a chair to my left and sits down too. We place the laptop on the breakfast table over my lap and Dad puts up an album on slideshow.

‘Gosh, who’s *that*?’ I exclaim. It’s a picture of a toddler sitting naked on what seems to be a kitchen floor, long curly hair all over her head, up to her shoulders and dripping in mango pulp or something. At least I hope that the yellow icky thing all over her face, neck, chest, tummy, arms, legs

and everywhere else is mango pulp. And it's not just the possible-mango pulp and nudity that's unpleasant. There is mucus coming out of her nose and entering her mouth and she is sitting on something that is yellow and icky but definitely not mango pulp. I make a gagging face. 'Shit, is that me? Tell me it's not me!'

'It's not you,' Mum says. 'It's your cousin Parul.'

'Thank God. My cousin Parul is in for a lot of teasing when we meet next, I guess!'

'She is only seven years old, so don't be too hard on her,' Dad says.

'Oh. I didn't realize ... I thought she must be my age by now, don't know why.'

'You do have a cousin your age. Two actually, Yogita and Bhavna. But you don't get along with them,' Mum tells me.

'Why is that?'

'We don't know. You used to be close when you were younger, but one day you just fell apart. I think something happened.'

'What happened?' I ask.

'None of you would tell us that, even when we asked several times.'

That's useful, I think to myself. How am I supposed to find anything out about myself when I kept secrets? I hope my friends have some answers for me when they come by later in the evening, as Mum told me they would.

Dad's phone starts ringing, and he picks it up. For some reason, Mum and I stop looking at the pictures and look at him instead, and try to understand who the call is from. As if I would know.

'Okay, I understand,' he is saying. 'Send the file to Dixit. Yes.'

'Who's Dixit?' I whisper to Mum.

'His colleague from work. Your father is a civil engineer.'

'What day is it?'

'Wednesday,' Mum says.

'Shouldn't he be at work then?'

'He should, but ...'

I get it. I'm the centre of my parents' universe, and I'm sick so they have to put their own lives on hold and care for me instead. That's just unfair. Dad should go to work; I'm fine. As soon as he hangs up, I'm going to insist that he goes to his workplace or whatever. But I think I'll check if Mum's a housewife at least (she looks like one) since I don't want to be left alone all day just yet.

Oh man. Am I going to hell or what?

'Dad, you should go,' I mouth to him.

He pulls up a finger, gesturing me to hold on. But I can't. 'Dad, you should go,' this time I say it aloud.

He just gets up from his chair and walks out of the room, resuming his conversation over the phone. Moments later, he comes back, his cell phone in his pocket.

'That was your office, right?' I ask.

'Yes it was,' he replies, sitting back on his chair. He turns to the laptop screen and says, 'That's you from when you were twelve.'

He's trying to distract me. As if that's going to work. 'Dad, don't change the subject. Why didn't you ... ugh, why am I wearing that hideous shade of lipstick? And why is my hair so ...?'

'It was for a theme party at one of your friend's place. Rock or metal or something ... some kind of music,' Mum tries to explain.

'Oh, then it makes sense. For a minute I thought that's how I dress for real!'

'Well ...'

'Well what?' I turn to Mum in horror. This is it, isn't it? I really am some kind of a freak—a dark maroon lipstick, black leather clothes and dirty knotty hair freak. I'm sure I'm on some kind of a really dangerous drug too. I guess that's how my 'accident' happened. Maybe it was a drug overdose. I freak out even more. 'TELL ME! You're not protecting me by keeping it from me!' I yell.

'I just wanted to say that your dressing sense ... is, um, different from this,' Mum replies. The scared look is back on her face.

'What do you mean *different*? *Bad* different?'

'No, no!' Dad interjects. 'Good different. Definitely better than *this*.' He glances at the picture and says, 'Yeah, this is just a costume. Don't worry too much!'

Oh thank God. I'm not some rock-chic-freak, which decreases the possibility of me being on drugs too. (The drug overdose reasoning didn't work too well anyway, since the doctor said it was an automobile accident. But then, it could've been something else drug-related, like for example, I could have been a drug dealer who got into trouble and, um, maybe somebody threw me out of a moving car or something. Makes sense in a way, you know.)

'And that's from last Diwali,' Dad points at the screen.

'Wow, Mum you look amazing!' I try not to feel guilty (YET AGAIN) as I look at her picture where she's wearing muted pink lipstick and her eyes are beautifully lined (minus the dark circles that she now has, because of ...) and her saree is a bright shade of green. 'And Dad, you look so nice in traditional clothes!' and he does in the white kurta-pyjamas he's wearing in the photo.

Both Mum and Dad are smiling as the next picture pops up.

'Again, awesome,' I say as the next few picture of my parents come up, all from last Diwali. Then there is a picture of me sitting at what must be my desk and I'm wearing a pair of shorts and a top and am immersed in my computer screen. 'When's this from? Isn't there a picture of me from Diwali too?'

'This is from Diwali,' Mum says.

'Oh, but I want to see what I was wearing! Isn't there a picture of me from a little later? When I was ...' and I don't feel the need to continue anymore. Of course. I didn't change at all. This is what I wore for Diwali. A pair of tiny blue shorts and a top that has 'I Heart NY' written on it.

'Have I even been to New York?'

'What?' Mum asks.

'Never mind. I already kind of know the answer.' I sigh. If I am somebody who doesn't even bother to change into something more festival-appropriate for Diwali, I must be somebody who wears an 'I love New York' top without ever having been to the city too.

I close the laptop and notice that my parents are looking at me expectantly.

I don't really know how to put everything that's been going on in my head into words, so I try to think for a while before opening my mouth. But then I still can't think of how to frame the words so I just end up blurting what comes out first, which is: 'Was I like a really mean person ...?'

'What? No! No, you were not!' Mum says, almost reflexively.

'Dad?' I turn to him. 'Please don't lie to me. I will find out anyway.'

'Kalindi, you were not mean. You were just ... probably going through a phase. All teenagers do.'

'What kind of a phase?'

I can see Mum glaring at him, but he tells me anyway, 'Umm, let's see ... disagreeing with everything we tell you, having shouting matches with your mother, wearing clothes that ... we don't approve of, staying out most of the time, hiding in your room when you are home, headphones plugged in your ears so that you don't have to listen to what we have to say ... basically shutting us out of your life and creating your own world.'

'Hmm ...' I think about it. So, I'm a troublesome teenager. That's not too bad, maybe even acceptable. Unless ... 'Do I do drugs?'

Mum and Dad exchange a look. Mum says, 'Not that we know of ...'

I nod.

'Do you?' she asks in a low voice.

'I don't know!' I exclaim. 'I hope not.' I look at Mum. 'Is there a reason why we fight so much ...?'

'I think ... it's because I used to be like you when I was younger. I was something of a rebel and I made a lot of wrong choices. I just don't want you making the same mistakes, so I might be a tad controlling ... which makes you feel suffocated,' Mum says.

It's a little early in the day to have such deep and profound conversations. It's actually a little early in my *life* ... which is technically two days old. I thought I'd figure these things out slowly, but maybe it is better this way.

Dad leans towards me and whispers in my ear, 'She has never accepted that before.'

I giggle. See? She hasn't accepted her part in it for seventeen years of my previous life and she has already confessed it on the second day of my new life. This 'accident' really must be some kind of a blessing in disguise. It'll bring the family close and when I get my memory back, I'll remember all of this and turn into a non-troublesome teenager.

'There is a part of your brain called the frontal lobe, which was injured during the accident,' Dad says.

'Okay ...' I say, not knowing how to respond.

'It is the part that controls a person's behavioural choices. Frontal lobe injury causes personality change ... dramatic changes in the behaviour of a person ...'

'And you know this how?'

'I asked Dr Sahani,' Dad says simply.

'You guys were *that* surprised by my behaviour? I must have been some kind of a monster!'

'Yeah, very scary,' Mum smiles.

'Okay, now I have two more questions, since we are into expressing feelings and sharing secrets and stuff,' I say.

‘What is it?’

‘Dad, why don’t you go to your office?’

‘I ... will. Once we take you home,’ Dad says, and I sense there’s more to the story. And I know exactly what that is.

‘You want to be with me when I’m like this, don’t you? Before I turn into a monster again.’ I fake an expression which is a mixture of anger and hurt.

‘I just ... let’s just say that I want to be with you?’ he suggests, looking unsure.

‘Well played,’ I laugh out. ‘Now, second question—Mum, when we have our shouting matches, do you ever win?’

‘It’s a fifty-fifty situation ...’ Mum begins.

‘Oh, come on! Don’t lie!’ She has been so sweet all this while that I can’t picture her yelling at me and getting me to do things her way.

‘I just ... let’s just say that,’ Mum mimics Dad’s tone, ‘I can be very mean too, when I want to.’

I turn to Dad. ‘Is that true?’

‘Sadly, yes. I hardly get a chance to say a word in our house. It’s pretty much female dominated.’

We all laugh. We joke around like that for some time, before I force Dad to return to work immediately, promising that if I do get my memory back while he’s gone, I won’t turn into a monster. It’s a little bit fun to find out all about my own past life as if I haven’t been the one living it all this time. It’s like a personal adventure. Every sentence my parents say is a revelation.

The next chapter of my adventure is about to begin in a few hours. My friends! They are going to drop by in visiting hours (Mum and Dad have been exempted from following the visiting hours rule). After Dad leaves for work, I ask Mum to tell me all about my friends. I want to surprise them by knowing their names and how they look. Although, frankly, knowing how your friends look and what they’re called is the least that is expected of you, so it’s no big deal.

Still. If I go all, ‘So ... you must be my friends?’ on them, they might be hurt. They won’t start crying like Mum did, but why risk it? We turn on the laptop (which Dad forgot to take with him to work; Mum says he hasn’t gone to office since so long that he probably doesn’t remember the routine, which is just great—Mum now has to deal with two forgetful people) and start browsing through pictures again. Since it is Dad’s laptop, there aren’t many pictures of my friends. But there are lots of pictures of me and in some of them I am with my friends.

For the rest of the afternoon, I discover all about my friends (not ALL but, you know, everything that my mother knows and chooses to tell me) and try to memorize their faces and attributes. The nurse, Anita, comes in and announces that it’s time for me to take a nap, but I’m way too excited to go to sleep now! I have awesome friends, whom I’m going to meet for the very first time (in my new life, that is) in just about an hour. There’s no way I’m going to go to sleep!



FOUR

I'm sitting up on my bed, fairly excited. I wanted to go sit on the couch, because I don't feel too sick and sitting on the hospital bed in my hospital robe, with my legs up and covered under a quilt makes me feel like a patient, which is not how I want to feel when I meet my best friends in the entire world for the VERY FIRST TIME.

But Mum would have none of it. She said I'm not allowed to strain myself since the doctors are still figuring out the extent of my internal damage and we don't want to make anything worse. I tried to protest but then I had a glimpse of her shouting-matches-self and realized it's best to back off. Now that I'm not a troublesome rebel teenager, her shouting-matches-self scares me a bit.

I have memorized all the names and faces. And I have memorized who sent me which flowers and which boxes of chocolates. I have taken a shower (with Mum's help, much to my embarrassment) and put on some moisturizer and lip balm. Mum tied my hair back into a low pony tail and clipped the bangs that kept falling all over my eyes and annoyed me to death. I wonder how the old me dealt with all that hair. Mum said I used to love those bangs and highlights and got them against her will.

The intercom buzzes and Anita's voice speaks up, 'You have visitors. Two boys and two girls, who say they are your friends. Should I send them in?'

'Yes, please,' I reply nervously. Anita is just playing with me. She knows I've been expecting my friends. She was the one who re-bandaged my wounds because the old bandages looked dirty and I didn't want to look dirty when I met my best friends in the entire world for the VERY FIRST TIME.

I look at Mum for support and she smiles at me. Her smile seems to be saying 'It's okay! They are your friends! They already like you! You have nothing to be nervous about! Relax!' Or maybe her smile isn't saying all that, and I'm just remembering stuff she has said to me in the past couple of hours.

But here is the thing: in my past life, I used to hate my parents and love my friends. Now that I have had that frontal lobe injury thing Dad told me about, my personality has changed. Now I clearly love my parents, so what if I meet my friends and realize that I have started hating them? Or they hate me when they see I'm not really the same me. I'll have no friends. I have no memory of the past and won't have anybody with whom to make new memories in the future. My life sucks royally.

Also, I think my mum doesn't like my friends that much. She has told me whatever she knew about them, which isn't much, since I kept a lot of secrets and my parents weren't an active part of my life so they don't know much about my friends. I remember her response when I asked her if she liked my friends, which was: 'You like them, and they like you, so I like them.' Which is like something from mathematics: *hence proved*.

Before I can dwell on it any more, I hear footsteps approaching and I sit up straight. Seconds later, four people enter the room and I know exactly who they are.

Ada is the one with the long curly hair reaching her waist and the milky white clear skin. She is wearing very high heels with black leather leggings and a loose white sleeveless top with sequins around the neck, gathered at the waist by a thick green belt. The green of the belt matches the green of the large loops in her ears. She's probably a couple of inches shorter than me, but her heels more than make up for that. (Mum said she's been my closest friend since we were very tiny.)

Tisha is the one wearing a pink mini skirt that goes to mid-thigh, with a beige top that is tucked into her skirt and is basically transparent. Her pink bra shows through in a very obvious way. To match that, she's wearing very bright pink pumps and some of her short and spiky straight hair is pink too. (Mum said we've been friends only the last two years and she's a bit wild.)

Bharat is the one next to Ada, in a plain white tee that is hanging carefree out of his faded blue denims. He is very tall, at least four inches taller than Ada, even though Ada is wearing those killer heels. He has his hands inside his pockets and is looking at me with a smile on his face. (Mum said he has been my friend since we were very tiny too and that his mum is a close friend of hers.)

The fourth person is Sameer, whose hair is slightly wavy and who is wearing beige khaki pants with a black shirt, smartly tucked in, a black belt around his waist, and black shoes. What strikes me most about him are his square jawline and straight nose. It looks like his face has been carved in marble by an expert. He's holding a single red rose. (Mum said she thinks he's my boyfriend and now I suspect so too, although it's too awesome to be true.)

They all look like something taken straight out of a glossy fashion magazine, all the colours and styles co-ordinated too perfectly. It's like they are not school kids but runway models. For a minute I'm taken aback. The pictures I saw were from some time ago, maybe a year or more. My friends weren't dressed so impeccably then. It was less intimidating. My baby blue hospital robe lags so much behind in comparison.

'HEY!' they all scream in unison which cheers me up in a microsecond. That's more like it. Appropriately teenager-ish!

'Hi,' I barely murmur, suddenly a little shy.

'Oh my God, this is like, really insane,' Ada jumps to my bed and grabs my hand.

'Do you not remember *anything*? Like for real?' Tisha's eyes are wide and she's chewing gum loudly.

Before I have a chance to say anything, Bharat says, 'Don't you go pulling a stunt like that ever again!'

'You scared the hell out of us, dude!' Sameer joins in.

Okay. I feel a little crowded.

'So, now you can't even speak or what?' Tisha pokes my arm like I'm an alien and she doesn't know what to expect.

'I can ... I mean, I speak. I can speak,' I say. Now I'm even more nervous. I turn to Mum for support, but she is retreating from the room. 'Mum,' I whisper under my breath.

'I'll give you guys some time alone to catch up,' she simply smiles and leaves the room. I think she somehow missed the terrified expression on my face.

'Finally some privacy,' Tisha makes a face and mutters. I don't get it. Mum was here for about two

minutes after my friends came in; she was hardly imposing on us or anything. What surprises me even more is how she could speak about my mother like that right in front of me. This can only mean that I also used to bitch about my own mother with my friends before the accident. That fits with everything else I've heard about myself so far.

I decide I don't like Tisha. Her clothes are skimpy, she is loud and mean, she's disrespectful of my mother and well ... that's it for now. I'll figure it out as we go.

'How are you feeling?' Ada asks.

'Good. I mean healthwise. Mentally, I'm a little confused,' I respond in one crisp flow.

'You must be! I can only imagine,' Bharat says.

'But relax. We're here for you and we'll help you go through this,' Ada says.

'Just that ... do you honestly not remember anything or are you just fooling everybody?' Bharat winks.

'I hope you're not doing this as an excuse to dump me!' Sameer pipes in!

'So you *are* my boyfriend, then,' I state. He has come to sit on my right, which is my mum's spot, and it bothers me a little, since he's close enough to see an embarrassing blush creep up my face.

'You did *not* just say that!' Sameer makes a fake hurt expression and holds his chest as if what I said makes his heart ache.

To my intense dismay, I blush even harder.

'I didn't ... mean to ...' I stutter.

'I know! Chill, I was just kidding!'

If I get to wake up without my memory and have this guy as my boyfriend, I'd willingly do it over and over again.

'Oooh, this is fun!' Tisha rubs her palms together and sits on the foot of my bed, on the right. Bharat takes a seat next to her on the left. Now I'm surrounded. With Ada and Bharat on my left and Sameer and Tisha on the right, I feel like I can't even make a run for it if I panic.

'*Fun* isn't the word I'd use for my friend waking up all blank and forgetting all about me!' Bharat chides Tisha.

'Shut up! It *is* fun,' Tisha snaps and turns to me. 'Okay, so you remember like, *nothing*?'

I nod.

'Like *seriously*?'

I nod again.

'Do you know who I am?'

'Yes. Tisha. Mum showed me pictures.'

'Why do you keep saying *mum*? What are you, like, British or something? We call our moms, *mom*,' Tisha scolds.

'*Mom*? What are you, like American?' It escapes my mouth before I can help it. Everybody starts laughing and Tisha snorts out a forced laugh too.

'I see you have not lost everything, then. You still have your wickedness. It's *adorable*!' Tisha says and then announces she needs to go out for a bit because her IM isn't working, and she just *needs* to check her messages. The 'stupid hospital' doesn't have network or something.

‘The one thing I have failed to understand since the beginning of time is why we let her hang out with us,’ Bharat has a deep thinking expression on his face.

Ada hits him softly on his arm. ‘Don’t say that. She’s our friend.’

‘Guys, seriously?’ Sameer asks. ‘Is that what we’re going to talk about? Let’s not forget that we’re making our first impression on my girlfriend right now!’

‘Oh, of course, let me straighten my tie really quick!’ Bharat says and adjusts his invisible tie.

‘The first impression has already been made,’ I declare.

‘And? Do we pass?’

‘Well, let’s see. Apart from what my *mum* told me, which was that we’ve know each other since we were about two years old, I have also realized that you are kind of a joker,’ I make a face at Bharat.

‘Joker is the word you are going to use for my supremely impeccable and tasteful sense of humour? I’ve lost all reason to exist,’ he shakes his head.

‘You have me,’ Ada holds his hand in fake-sympathy.

‘I knew it!’ I exclaim, and all eyes turn to me. ‘I knew you guys were together!’

‘What? How?’

‘The way you were looking at him! And he at you! You guys are so in love!’ I feel triumphant and a bit proud of myself for being so instinctive.

‘So that’s how my mom got to know! It’s the weirdest thing ever. I’ve been so, *so* careful ever since the beginning, but somehow my mom *still* got to know! I’ve been seriously freaking out, trying to figure out how she knows!’ Ada sighs in relief.

‘I think they always know,’ I turn to Sameer. ‘My mum told me that she thinks you are my boyfriend.’

‘It’s different in our case. She doesn’t know instinctively; she knows because she caught us kissing once,’ Sameer laughs.

‘Oh.’ So we have kissed. What else have we done? How long have we been dating? There is so much I need to know. ‘When?’

‘About two months ago, I think.’

‘Was she mad?’

‘Of course she was. But not as much as you were,’ Sameer chuckles.

‘What? *I* was mad? Why?’ I’m puzzled again.

‘Because she entered your room without knocking. She said she didn’t know you were home and she came just to pick up your clothes for laundry, but man, did you yell or what!’

I’m not really surprised. Maybe I was a total bitch back then. Maybe I was like Tisha.

‘Anyway, so let’s get you up to speed real quick!’ Ada says. ‘I’m Ada, your oldest friend—’

‘Actually, I’m your oldest friend,’ Bharat intervenes.

‘You *knew* Bharat before me, but you were *not* friends. You became friends with *me* first, when you both joined kindergarten, then later, *we* became friends with Bharat,’ Ada explains, I don’t really know why. ‘So technically, I’m your oldest friend.’

‘Agree to disagree,’ Bharat makes a peace sign.

‘Okay,’ is all I say.

Ada continues, ‘I’m your oldest friend. Then Bharat. Bharat and I are dating. Which can be easy for you to remember if you think of A and B together. You know, for Ada and Bharat.’

‘I don’t ... think I need the A and B logic to remember that!’

‘Oh, sorry. I’m a little confused about your ... situation too,’ Ada looks apologetic.

‘It’s okay! I just don’t remember the past, but I’m good for new memories. I remember everything after the accident,’ I explain.

‘And what about your ...’ Bharat looks uncomfortable for the first time since he entered this room.

‘Old memories? They will come back with time, the doctor says they can come back slowly over time, or maybe even all at once suddenly,’

‘Like in the Hindi movies? You see one thing and it jolts all your lost memories back, like BOOM!’

‘I guess, maybe ...’

‘COOL,’ Bharat nods in approval.

We all laugh, before Ada continues, ‘Back to the catching up: we’ve known Sameer and Kapil since the sixth, when they joined our school. And Tisha joined in the tenth.’

‘Kapil?’

‘Oh, he’s not here. Tisha and he broke up a few weeks ago, so he doesn’t hang out with us when she is around.’

‘I think he sent a bouquet. The yellow tulips one on the left,’ I point to the arrangement of flowers.

‘Wow, it’s so pretty!’ Ada exclaims.

‘What is pretty?’ Tisha asks from the door.

‘The roses Sameer sent Kalindi,’ Ada says swiftly. Wow. She didn’t miss a beat telling that lie. I wonder if I’m such a fluent liar too.

‘Oh, hmm. They’re okay,’ Tisha shrugs. ‘Can we go now? We’re getting late for the gym.’

Ada checks her watch. ‘Right.’

‘And Kalindi,’ Tisha looks up from her cell phone nonchalantly and meets my eye, ‘When do you think you’ll be ... you know, okay again?’

‘I am okay. As in ... Physically, I’m fine ...’ I don’t know where she’s going with this, so I don’t know how to respond.

‘It’s just that I have taken over your spot as the captain. And coach was saying I should take it permanently, seeing as we need training and you can’t come to practice anytime soon.’

‘Captain of what?’

‘The basketball team, OF COURSE! What else? See what I mean? You probably don’t even remember the rules and stuff either. Plus with the broken arm and shit ... you need the rest,’ she looks pointedly at my cast.

‘Umm ... okay, I guess ...’

‘Anyway, don’t you worry, sweetie! I promise I’ll take care of the team and keep up your legacy; our house will win the finals this time too,’ she smiles (fake) sweetly at me.

‘I’m sure you will,’ I smile back (fake) sweetly too.

‘Great! See ya then, babe! Take care!’ she blows me a kiss and disappears into her phone before disappearing from the room.

‘What’s the deal with her?’ I ask Ada.

‘Don’t you worry, sweetie, she’s just finally getting all of your things, everything that she wanted but you had. Which reminds me: you need to come back soon, before you’ve nothing left to come back to,’ I can’t figure out if she’s being funny or serious. I hope she’s not being serious.

‘Enough now! Stop scaring her!’ Sameer interjects. ‘You kick some serious butt at basketball. Tisha isn’t bad either, though.’

‘Tisha just wants to be captain. She’s hijacking Kalindi’s spot and claiming to be trying to keep her *legacy* alive or whatever!’ Ada says heatedly.

‘Come on, man. She’s just a Temp. And before she becomes permanent, Kalindi will come back. Won’t you, Kalindi?’

I stare at them for a moment. ‘Are we seriously talking about school basketball team power games? I mean, *Hello! I’m in a hospital bed here! And I’m missing roughly seventeen years of memories!*’

‘Right. Sorry,’ Ada grins sheepishly. ‘I wish we could talk more, but we do have to go. We’ll come back tomorrow to see you. Get well soon!’

‘Yeah, see you!’ It has really been awesome to meet her. I can see why she’s been my best friend since we were tiny.

‘And,’ she moves in and whispers in my ear, only loud enough for me to hear, ‘bringing you up to speed: you are madly in love with Sameer and he with you. He’s been really sad and disturbed since you went ahead and had that accident.’ (At this point I want to ask her how exactly I went ahead and had that accident, but I don’t want to ruin the moment; she’s telling me about my love life and I have butterflies in my tummy.)

‘I’m sorry,’ I mutter reflexively. I wonder if it’s weird that I feel so guilty about getting into that horrible ‘accident’ and getting hurt.

‘Not the point. What I mean is I know you don’t remember stuff so you must be wondering what kind of a relationship you have with him. As your best friend, it’s my duty to tell you that you really love him and he really loves you—that’s the kind of relationship you have with him. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘Great,’ she moves back. ‘We’ll come back tomorrow then!’ She snakes her arm around Bharat’s and they turn to walk out of the room.

‘Stay hot!’ Bharat yells before they too disappear.

Now I’m left alone in the room with Sameer. Oh my God, I’m alone in the room with Sameer.

I don’t know what to say to him!

‘You are beautiful,’ he says.

‘I am?’ I ask. I’ve seen myself in the small mirror above the washbasin, and I think I look okay, but this is a glossy fashion magazine level good-looking boy, telling me that I’m beautiful.

‘Of course you do. You’re always beautiful to me.’

Oh. That’s just a nice way of saying I’m ugly, but since he’s my boyfriend and shit, he’s obliged to tell me I’m beautiful. I remember the sickly translucent skin and ugly scars I saw in the mirror

yesterday. I'm hardly beautiful.

But still, *he said I am beautiful!* That's what counts.

'What will it take to bring your memory back?' he asks.

'I, uh, don't know.' Like, duh. If I knew, wouldn't I have brought my memory back myself already?

'I might have an idea ...'

'Really? Like what?' I ask. I know Ada told me I love Sameer and Sameer loves me and all, but honestly, I feel a bit uncomfortable being alone with him like this.

To my horror, he leans in.

Shit, he's going to kiss me. And I'm going to totally freak out and run away. You can't honestly blame me. This boy is a lunatic. Does he honestly believe that kissing me will bring my memory back? Like seriously? Wake up! This isn't a fairy tale!

I move slightly back before he can touch me and ... oh. He's leaning towards my ear. NOT my lips. Oh.

'Let's give it a few days,' he whispers in my ear. 'Once you're discharged from the hospital and are allowed to go out, and you still do not remember anything, there is a place I want to take you to.'

My breath is caught. 'Is it just me, or did that sound incredibly romantic?'

He laughs. 'Hence the whispering. That's what makes it romantic!'

'Agreed. But, that's not the only thing,' I wink.

'Agreed.'

He pulls back and pecks my cheek before standing up.

Oh God. He kissed me. On the cheek, but a kiss for real. His actual soft lips on my cheek. I can still feel them. I'm so confused right now. I was mortified by the idea of him kissing me a moment ago, but as soon as his lips grazed my cheek, I turned into a weak-kneed, love-struck teenager. I guess one does need time to figure stuff out after losing practically all knowledge of one's previous life.

'You'll come back tomorrow?' I look up hopefully. Then adjust my expression in order to not come across as too hopeful and hence desperate.

'I will.'

I'll be waiting, I say in my head, as I watch him leave the room too.



FIVE

10 APRIL 2013

It has been a week since I woke up. And finally, *finally*, we are going home. They ran scores of tests on me, the names and needs of which I can't and don't even want to remember. Every part of my body was poked and prodded by one kind of a physician or another, and it was not a good feeling. I have also had three sittings with a psychotherapist. I'm not sure how I feel about that yet.

We have spent the entire week awaiting every test result in terror. But, thankfully, and much to my frustration, nothing new has been found. There have been no postoperative complications (the surgery on my brain was done when I was first brought in, which was twenty-eight days ago, and I was unconscious then), no new symptom has been discovered, the physiotherapy sessions have been going well and the neurosurgeon (Dr Sahani) said my brain looks good.

Apart from the lost memory, that is.

Yes, it isn't back yet. But Dr Sahani suggested—and we agreed—that the best thing to do at this point is to take me back home. He asked me to get back to my life, my normal routine. I jumped at the idea. I'm really fed up of this hospital ward.

Priya (the bitter medical student on detention and forced to do nurse work) has been assigned to me and I'm glad that I'm leaving. Anita told me that Priya has only a few hours left on her detention anyway, but I don't want to be around for any longer than absolutely necessary. What if by the time her detention is over, she goes ahead and does something terrible again and then I'm stuck with her for longer? No way I'm taking that risk. She's mean. She even seems meaner than Tisha. But then Tisha laces her meanness with sarcasm and sugar-coats her sentences with affectionate expressions like sweetie and babe and says 'that's adorable' when she really means 'that's so pathetic'. Priya, on the other hand, is in-your-face mean.

My only consolation is that Dr Sahani gave me permission to take short walks around the hospital in the evenings. There really are no lawns, so I end up walking in the corridors, which are usually busy, what with stretchers and crash carts parked by the walls and medical staff, patients and their family members pacing through hallways. But, whatever. I make sure Priya sees me when I step out of my ward to walk.

'All set?' Mum asks, entering my ward.

I look around. The room is practically empty, other than the bed and the odd piece of old but scrupulously clean and sterile furniture. Mum packed everything this morning before I woke up, minus the clothes I had to change into after showering. Which I did. And she packed my toiletries and dirty laundry and whatever as soon as I came out too. So by asking 'All set?' I think she means mentally. And mentally, I've been all set ever since I woke up eight days ago.

'Yes,' I say. I get up and put my cell phone in my pocket. Mum gave me my old cell phone right

after my best friends in the world left that day. The phone was password locked, and nobody knew the passcode. But when I had it in my hand, the weirdest thing happened: I automatically started touching and tapping away, unlocking the phone and checking notifications. Once it unlocked, I found out that I know my way around the phone pretty darn well.

I was amazed, until Dr Sahani said it's not unusual at all, and that we don't have anything to worry about (I WASN'T WORRYING, I WAS HAPPY, I THOUGHT MY MEMORY WAS COMING BACK) and that the brain operates in fascinating ways.

'What did you do with the bouquets?' I ask Mum. They were gone when I woke up and I've been wondering where, since then.

'I've put them in the car. It was difficult to fit them all, but we managed.' She smiles cheerfully. The smile and the cheer are for my benefit. There is nothing cheerful about week-old bouquets of dried and dead flowers, but Mum doesn't want me to feel low, so she's being all chirpy.

'Why bother? Who wants flower carcasses in their house?'

'Please don't be like this. I'm sure they wanted to come. Something must have come up,' Mum tries to pacify me.

'Like what? School starts on the 15th, and today is only the 10th.'

'Yes, but maybe they had something else ... practice or something.'

'Yeah, right. Tisha must be training to make sure she gets to keep the captain spot on the basketball team,' I laugh dryly.

'Well, I don't know what to say.'

'There *is* nothing to say! They met me and they didn't like me, so they didn't come back. The flowers and the fruit baskets and the get-well-soon notes stopped coming. They didn't even call or leave a message or anything. They don't want me to be their friend anymore. End of story.'

'All I'm saying is you don't rush to judge and make assumptions yet,' Mum says calmly. She has a weird look on her face.

'What? What is it?'

'What is what?'

'That face! Do you *know* something?'

'I don't know what you're talking about. All I know is that it's time for us to go home now. Come on,' she says. I search her face but come up blank. Maybe it was just my imagination.

We meet Dad at the reception area. He's just done signing heaps of paper. This is insane. You get sick, and you have to practically write a novel? Look at that thick stack of sheets!

'All done?' Mum and I ask together.

Dad looks from Mum to me. 'Yes, almost. There are these ... three documents you need to sign too.' He pushes two clipboards towards me.

I don't know what my signature looks like, but I guess it's time to find out. I pick up a pen and place it on the dotted line, where I'm supposed to put my signature. As expected, my hand automatically scrawls my name on the paper. Whoa. This is so cool. I'm like a pre-programmed robot or something (with just one of the memory discs missing, minor glitch).

'Here,' I hand back the clipboards to Dad in a very professional manner. Like it was no big deal. I

just made three signatures, without even remembering what my signature looks like. Like I do this every day. (I just realized that I could have found out what my name is by myself if nobody had told me! All I needed was a pen and a piece of paper. I wonder what other powers I have.)

‘I’ll get the car from the parking lot. Meet me outside,’ Dad says.

Mum and I start walking towards the exit.

‘Is it weird that I’m nervous?’ I ask.

‘A little. I can understand excitement and anticipation, but what do you have to be nervous about?’

It’s our home, not a person! You don’t have to worry about making a good impression!’ She laughs.

‘Don’t laugh. Not cool.’

‘Sorry,’ she mutters, but I can see that she’s trying to hold back laughter.

‘What’s so funny?’ I ask, irritated.

She shakes her head.

‘Then why are you laughing? Aren’t you like worried about me or something? What happened to the concerned mother who was sweet and constantly fussed about me being okay?’

‘Ah, I was worried in the beginning; you were this lost child who needed me. Now you’re getting back in your element. No reason for concern anymore.’ She shrugs nonchalantly.

‘What’s *that* supposed to mean?’

‘That means you are irritated, you’re angry at somebody—your friends in this case—you’re having a silent battle with that young nurse and, you know, you’re moody, in general. So you’re turning back into you, more or less.’

‘You mean the *mean-me*? The *me before the accident*?’ I ask. Oh my God, from what I’ve heard, I’m not sure I like the me-before-the-accident.

She does a mixture of a shrug and a nod.

‘What *is* with you today?’ I’m exasperated now. I know that she is only joking and she means all this in good humour, but I’m not in the mood. Which just supports her claim that I’m becoming irritated and moody again, like the old-me.

‘There’s your Dad,’ she points towards the car and we walk to it without another word.

We live on the sixth floor of a fifteen-storied apartment building and, as I enter the elevator, I feel more excited than I have felt in days. I’m going to see my home for the first time Post-Accident.

The lift stops with a ‘ding’ and I step out. Mum and Dad are right behind me. I look around, wondering which of the seven doors is the right one.

‘Let me guess!’ I hold my hand up to pause my parents. ‘The ... this one, right? 605?’

‘No.’

‘Okay, so this one then. 603. This is it!’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Mum says and makes no effort to hold back laughter.

‘You are so mean!’ I say heatedly.

‘What else am I supposed to do? Enter 603 and pretend it’s ours to not hurt your feelings?’

‘You don’t have to laugh, at least!’

‘Fine, then. Have five more guesses! I’m sure you’ll get it right this time,’ Mum laughs again.

‘NOT funny!’ I exclaim. ‘Dad, do you know what is wrong with Mum today? Why is she being so weird and ... chirpy and laugh-y today?’

‘I am but a man. And no man has ever uncovered the mystery that is woman,’ Dad replies, all sombre.

‘God, no,’ I groan. ‘Not you too. One childish adult as a parent is enough. I don’t need another.’

‘Okay, okay! I think your mother is excited about you coming home, and is showing it in unusual and goofy ways.’

‘Yeah, but tell her that it’s really pissing me off.’

‘I think she can hear you,’ Mum says making a fake-sincere expression.

I grind my teeth and decide it’s best not to engage her. I’ll talk to her when she becomes normal again. ‘Let’s just go home,’ I mutter.

Dad nods (smiling a little too, much to my frustration) and walks to 604. That was going to be my next guess! Okay, the one after the next, but whatever. Maybe recognizing doors isn’t one of my superpowers.

Dad unlocks the door and pushes it open. He bends down to pick up the bags he’d been carrying and I walk into my ... home. I expect to feel something, some kind of a sixth sense (or memory, hopefully) which would tell me this really is my home or that I have been living here all my life (or whenever we shifted here, since the apartment doesn’t really look seventeen years old), but ... *nothing*. I don’t recognize it. None of my lost memory comes back (surprise, surprise). The smell doesn’t seem familiar and I can’t see much; it’s dark with the windows closed and the curtains drawn, the only light in the room is streaming through the open front door.

I step in and look around in the darkness for the switchboard when ... ‘WELCOME HOME!’ No, it’s not my Mum and Dad; it’s, like, the whole world. Somebody flips on all the lights and the room brightens with a fluorescent glow, with intermittent red, blue and green—somebody seems to have installed ... disco lights?

I turn around to my parents, ‘What ...?’

Mum says, ‘Surprise!’ with the goofy grin back in place.

Oh. It all makes sense now. Mum was being weird because she was in on/or planned this surprise for me and my friends were being all absentee because they wanted me to feel all neglected and insecure, so that I would feel all the more loved and adored when I walked into this secret party they had been planning for me. Or that’s what I think this is about.

Mum hugs me from behind and lets me go in time for me to see all kinds of faces walking towards me. I recognize Ada, Bharat, Sameer and Tisha, but who are these other thousands (more like fifty, really) people? I recognize not one of them. Not one.

Suddenly, I’m being hugged and held by all kinds of people. Everybody is saying something (nice, maybe) to me, but all I hear is an irritating buzz. I feel disgusted by these unknown bodies rubbing against me. I now know how it feels to be held tightly by a tall man with a huge tummy, a short skinny girl who is all bones, a fair middle-aged woman who smells of garlic, a woman so fat she can barely get her hands round me, about twenty people my age who seem just as awkward and uncomfortable as I feel, and all I want to do is run.

This is all so clearly orchestrated and just so lame. Why would I feel like being touched by fifty strangers of various sizes and shapes, who are treating me like ... it's some kind of a cricket match, after which everybody makes a queue and shakes hands and pats each other's backs like they are best friends. Like I am Sachin Tendulkar and they are the Pakistan cricket team plus crew (and some more—there are just too many people).

The analogy makes me stop to think. If I know who Sachin Tendulkar is and what the Pakistan cricket team is and how cricket matches end, why the hell don't I know who this bunch of smiling and hugging strangers are? This amnesia thing is really twisted.

People are saying things like *so glad to see you, thank God, you're okay* and *aren't you such a fighter!* And I. Just. Want. To. Run.

Angry tears fill my eyes, as I push away a dark-complexioned woman with round-framed specs who is trying to embrace me.

'*Arey, beta kya hua?*' she asks. 'I'm your aunty, don't you recognize me?'

'No, I DON'T. I don't, okay?'

There is a stunned silence.

The woman speaks again, 'But—'

'But what? There was an accident and I got hurt in the head and lost all my memory. Didn't you *hear?*' I shout, now completely out of control. 'So I don't know who you are. And I don't know who all these other people are. So just, please.'

I turn away from the living room and wonder which direction to go to. I'm so mad I just want to run to my room and shut myself in it and never come out, but to do that I need to figure out which of the three doors from the living room lead to my room. If only my superpower could work for a second right now.

As I walk by, everybody makes way for me, as if I'm some kind of a wild animal on the loose. Oh, hell, even if I end up entering a bathroom, I don't care. At least I'll be alone there.

Just when I'm about to enter the door in the middle, my dad grabs my elbow and swiftly guides me to the door to the right. He shuts the door behind us and turns to me. I can feel his eyes on me, but I don't look at him. Outside, there is a low murmur; maybe everyone is discussing my outburst and thinks I'm crazy. Whatever. If they wanted me to not go crazy, they could've been sensitive enough to not form a team and assault me physically.

I can't see anything; this room is even darker than the living room was. I stumble and hit my big toe on something and let out an 'oww!' after which Dad flips on the lights, and I look around the room. There is a queen-size bed covered with a black bedspread, and five pillows with matching black cases piled by the headboard. There is a hairy grey rug under my feet, covering every inch of the floor, and the ceiling above my head is painted pitch black. All the curtains (black, obviously) are drawn, so there isn't even a speck of light coming from outside.

The walls are the only things here that aren't black. They're all white, surrounding the black ceiling. My knees feel weak and I slump back onto a black velvet pouffe and shake my head in wonder. 'What *is* this place?' Well, obviously, I know this is my room, but it looks like I've stepped into a different world. One with aliens or zombies or something.

‘You like to call it your den,’ Dad tells me.

‘What? *Why?*’

He just shrugs.

There are five lights on in the room, one at each corner of the ceiling and one hanging over my study table, but it’s still dark in the room. All of them are whitish light not yellow, but they’re all muted and decorative. Not one of them is throwing light enough to brighten up my dark room.

I just sit on the pouffe and stare at a black and white poster with the distorted faces of six men with the words LINKIN PARK written across it in a large, bold font, and A THOUSAND SUNS below in a smaller font. Above it, there is another poster which is also black and white and has silhouettes of the same six men standing against the sun and the words MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT written in capitals, under which are the words LINKIN PARK, in the biggest, boldest font possible. To its right, there’s a third poster, which is all black and has nothing on it except the words LINKIN PARK written right in the middle in white.

I must be a big fan of this LINKIN PARK thing.

Also, I’m getting really tired of all the black.

I get up and pull the curtains open. Dad helps me open the windows, which were slightly jammed. I obviously don’t open them often. When I move the rightmost curtain, I find that there is a door behind it.

‘Where does that lead to?’

‘A tiny balcony that has never been used.’

‘Let me guess—I don’t like to leave my den much?’

Dad laughs. ‘Yes, and opening the door brings light to the room, which kills the feel of your den.’

‘Hmm, interesting,’ I smile. After the initial shock the den gave me, I’m actually in a much better mood now that we are alone. I push the door open.

The balcony is very dusty and there are cobwebs on the ceiling. But I step outside anyway. Dad follows me. We stand side by side, with our arms resting on the dirty railing and I breathe in the fresh air. It’s around five in the evening, and despite the heat coming from a setting sun, it feels good.

We are at the back of our building and are facing the back of the building right behind ours. The balcony of the apartment across from ours is just about six feet away from me, though it’s covered in some kind of green canvas, so I presume nobody uses it. To our right and left are even more apartments. It’s like a concrete jungle of balconies over here!

‘Now I get why I don’t come here often,’ I giggle.

‘Not much of a view, eh?’

We laugh. There’s a sound behind us and we turn to see Mum entering my, er, *den*.

‘Is everything okay?’ she asks.

Dad looks at me and I nod.

‘Could you ...?’ It’s almost like she’s scared to even ask. Given my outburst outside, one can’t really blame her.

I nod again. ‘Yes, I’ll come out and meet everyone. Just give me another minute to myself, please?’

‘Okay,’ she says and signals something to Dad.

Dad whispers 'take your time' in my ears and leaves with Mum, probably to attend guests and apologize to them on my behalf.

I sigh. I know I should go out. I know everybody did all this to make me happy and they're all waiting outside to meet me, but I can't make myself go. What if they start hugging me again?

If I stayed here long enough, would they all leave? I wonder. And then feel guilty for being so self-centred. But I can't help the feeling. I do want them all to leave. But I don't want to hurt their feelings either. I'm feeling two things at once and I'm confused and feel my head's going to burst.

If my head bursts, I wouldn't have to go out and be social, would I?

'What are you thinking?' a voice asks from somewhere and startles me. I look around frantically, trying to locate the source, when the voice chuckles and says, 'Right in front of you.'

And then I see the giant green canvas in the balcony facing mine lift up to allow a tall, skinny boy to come out, and then fall back into place.



SIX

His jeans ride really, extremely, dangerously low on his nonexistent hips, supported by a thick belt. His white t-shirt has some kind of message printed on it in a foreign script and looks completely washed out and old, in a very stylish way. (Though, what the hell do I know about fashion, since I have lost seventeen years of memories? But it does look fashionable enough to me.)

His long, dark hair is all over the place. It forms wild waves and almost covers his eyes. As if on cue, he shakes his head in an expert motion that flips his hair away from his eyes and I can see his face properly. I wish I knew how to push my bangs away from my face that easily. For now, I just use multiple clips to stick them to my scalp so that they don't fall into my eyes and I can see.

'So?' the lanky, skinny boy speaks again. 'What are you thinking about?'

'Your hair.' I bite my tongue. I didn't mean for that to escape my mouth.

'What?'

'I mean nothing. Who are you?'

'Harsh Raj Sisodiya,' he says.

'Hi Harsh Raj Sisodiya. I am—'

'I know.'

'Oh,' I say. 'How do you know?'

'For starters: we're in the same school, in the same class, and the same section. Not to mention that the behind of your apartment is in extremely close proximity to the behind of my apartment.'

It might be an inappropriate joke to make, but it makes me laugh. 'So, are we like, friends?'

'Oh, no, no, no,' Harsh Raj Sisodiya shakes his head vigorously.

'Umm ...'

'Why? Because you aren't exactly in the habit of hanging out with ugly people.'

'But you're not ugly!' I say. *Far from it.* Is he kidding me right now? He's not classically handsome or anything, but he's okay! Definitely *not* ugly.

'I am too tall, too thin, have too much hair and too few muscles. And I am called Harsh Raj Sisodiya. Oh yes, I'm ugly.'

'I don't think so.'

'You do. You just don't know it yet,' he says with the utmost confidence.

I try to understand what that means but can't make any sense of it. But I have to think of something to say, or we'll run out of conversation and it'll become awkward to stand here and I'll have to go back in and then I'll just die. 'I think calling you Harsh instead of Harsh Raj Sisodiya will make you less ugly.'

'That's what my friends call me.'

'I can be your friend.'

‘THE Kalindi Mishra, friends with me, Harsh Raj Sisodiya, from the uncool, nerd crowd? I now believe those who said you hit your head pretty hard!’ Harsh laughs.

‘Not. Funny.’ I grit my teeth, but for some reason, I don’t take offence at all.

‘Oops, sorry. Too soon?’

‘Nah, it’s cool,’ I smile.

‘So, what are you hiding from?’ he points to the door behind me.

‘A houseful of hugging, smiling and chatting strangers.’

He nods intelligently as if he faces this every day and completely gets it.

‘You do know about my, uh, *situation*, don’t you?’ I ask.

‘Yup. Word travels.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Hmm.’

We stare at each other for a minute, smiling amicably. Then we look away and at the jungle of balconies around us. We look at each other again. And we look away. All these balconies are empty except for laundry drying on ropes and wires, even though I don’t think they receive any sunlight at all, surrounded by these tall buildings. We look at each other again. Then away. I start counting the balconies.

It’s awkward.

A tap on my shoulder makes me turn around. ‘Oh. Hey,’ I try to smile at Sameer.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asks, scanning the multiple balconies behind me.

‘Nothing, just talking to ...’ when I turn back, there’s no Harsh Raj Sisodiya there anymore.

‘Who?’

‘No one. I was just, um, thinking.’

‘Thinking?’ Sameer looks like the concept is completely alien to him. ‘But aren’t you like, *blank*?’

What do you have to think about?’

Did he actually just say that?

‘Was that inappropriate? Shit, I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s okay,’ I say distractedly. *Where did Harsh Raj Sisodiya disappear to?*

Oh, well. I guess this was as long as I could procrastinate. I can’t think of anything that will save me from going inside and meeting people now.

As we walk back inside, Sameer is saying, ‘It’s just all new, you know? I think I haven’t completely processed it yet.’

I nod.

‘I don’t fully understand what things have changed and stuff ...’

‘It’s alright. We can figure it out,’ I find myself reassuring him, although I’m pretty darn scared myself.

We walk out and I meet and greet the gazillion people gathered to see me. That’s what it feels like, as if they aren’t here to meet me or show their support, but to see for themselves what a freak with no memory looks and walks and talks like. They act all awkward around me, and I feel like I’m a bomb about to explode, again.

Ninety mostly-painful minutes later, I finally feel like I'm not going to die after all. Once their curiosity is satisfied, the crowd starts thinning. More and more people start leaving and I find myself breathing easy again.

'Here. You love pizza.' Mum hands me a slice on a Styrofoam plate.

I take a bite. 'I think I do!'

'You okay?' she asks under her breath.

'Uh-huh,' I nod and smile at her.

'Just a few more minutes and then you can go to your room with your friends, okay? I'll take care of the rest of the guests.'

'You're the best!'

'I am,' she winks playfully and walks towards the dining table, which looks like a complete disaster.

Ada hasn't left my side even once and the rest of my friends gather around me again.

'We'll see you in school then?' one girl says. I don't know her name, although I think she did tell me in the beginning. But everyone has been calling her Chip, which I think (and hope for her sake) is some kind of a nick name.

'Yeah,' I say and smile. These are good people, annoying, but good. They came to welcome me back to the world where I have spent seventeen years of my life, but I somehow feel completely new to it. They did make me uncomfortable, but I'm sure they didn't mean to. They are just as clueless about how to act around me as I am.

Chip smiles back and leaves with a bunch of people, some of whom wave, some who mutter 'see ya' or 'bye' and some who force their expressions to turn into half-smiles. I tell myself that they're trying their best, just like I am. Maybe my smiles look just as forced and fake.

We bid goodbye to a few more guests until only a few uncles and aunties are left. Mum signals to me that I'm free and I walk back to my room (the den or whatever). Ada, Bharat, Tisha and Sameer follow me.

I climb onto my bed and sit right in the middle, releasing a long breath. Tisha sits on my pouffe and the rest of them park themselves surrounding me on the bed.

'That wasn't so much fun, was it?' Ada says.

We all start laughing all at once.

'Totally not what we had imagined!' Tisha exclaims.

'What was the deal with all the hugging?' Bharat shakes his head, as if still in shock or something.

'Since when did that loser Michael become our *friend*?' Sameer asks.

'EXACTLY. And Sarabjeet Siddhu? Who invited these people?' Tisha exclaims again. She never speaks normally. She either shrieks or exclaims or mocks, like she's on some kind of a TV show or something, always under spotlight, all eyes on her and she can't *not* be dramatic for her many, many fans.

'I don't think people from nerdsville wait for invitations; if they did, they'd have to wait their whole lives!' Sameer engages Tisha.

'And still not get invited anywhere,' Tisha gets more and more dramatic.

As the two talk about how pathetic this Michael and Sarabjeet Siddhu are, I turn to Ada and ask, ‘Which ones were they?’

‘Michael was the short, fat boy in the blue checked shirt and blue trousers.’

‘Oh, the one with really short, spiky hair?’

She giggles. ‘Yeah. Hair gel overdose.’

‘And this Sarabjeet Siddhu?’

‘With the really long, black hair, in a thick braid. She’s Sikh; some Sikhs don’t cut their hair. Do you know that? I think you must know that, right? Because this is just a fact, not a person or incident and you’ve only forgotten people and incidents. Anyway. She was the thin girl wearing the loose six-pocket pants with a red tee?’

‘Oh yeah. She was kinda weird, no?’

‘We aren’t even sure if it’s a *she!*’ Tisha exclaims, shrieks and mocks—all at the same time.

I look puzzled and Ada leans in to whisper something in my ear when Tisha sighs loudly. ‘Really? You think the boys don’t have eyes? She has an actual moustache. More than anybody else in class! Also, everybody can see that she has no *assets* to prove she’s a girl! It’s so obvious!’

While Tisha starts laughing, nobody else joins in. Ada looks at me as if to apologize for Tisha’s behaviour and the boys just try to look occupied with their cell phones.

‘Is there a reason why we hate these two?’ I ask.

‘They’re nerds. They’re awkward and uncool and all they do is top every test and all that, but they’re like, really stupid,’ Tisha says and adds, ‘Also: zero dressing sense. *She* dresses like a boy. And he dresses like a ratty fifty-year-old man.’

‘*And that is our problem, because?*’ I almost ask, but decide it’s best to let it go. If I keep asking questions, she’ll never shut up. Harsh Raj Sisodiya was right. We are the cool crowd of the school and we do not hang out with ugly people. It’s so awesome to know that we’re the kind of people who judge others based on what they wear and hate them with such intensity if they do not pass our strict fashion-filters.

Sameer and Tisha try to uncover who invited the nerds to the party and I feel like Sameer is a girl inside. The thought just pops into my head out of nowhere. He has the drama of a teenaged girl, the interest in fashion and it’s just something in the way he’s gossiping that makes me feel like he is a girl, stuck in the body of a boy. I try to shake that image out of my head. He’s my boyfriend, after all. But the image keeps on reappearing as I see him and Tisha make fun of the nerds. I hope the silence from Ada and Bharat means at least they do not approve of this.

‘So, when’s your memory coming back?’ Tisha asks suddenly.

‘Umm, I don’t know ...’

‘I ask only since we have school starting Monday and it’s the 10th already! Just about five days!’

‘I know that ...’

‘Do you feel up to it, honey? School?’ Ada asks, looking very sympathetic.

‘Yeah, we were talking just yesterday and we wondered how this is gonna work,’ Bharat interjects.

‘How what is gonna work?’

‘Studies and stuff. Like, do you remember what Calculus is?’

‘I ...’ I run that word over in my head. Calculus. Calculus. Calculus. ‘I don’t think I do.’

‘Shit man! You’re screwed big time!’ Tisha shrieks.

‘Whoa there. A little sensitivity,’ Bharat chides her.

‘No, but really,’ Sameer interjects. ‘If she doesn’t remember anything from our course, she has no base. Will she have to repeat *all of her education*?’

‘Will they even let her join XII grade with us?’ Tisha exclaims.

I’ve never thought about these things. I’ve thought about joining school, but all I’ve thought about school was friends and Tisha taking over my basketball captain spot on the team. And I’ve always felt like my memory is going to come back any moment now. It’s been nine days since I woke up. Amnesia caused by post-traumatic stress should have subsided by now. I had my hopes pinned on coming home and being back in my room and my entire life flashing in front of my eyes like a mixture of a slideshow and collage, making me remember everything in a fraction of a second, like BOOM. Or something a tad less dramatic.

But oh my God, I don’t remember anything. If they let me join class with everybody else, I’ll fail and be left behind while everybody else goes off to college next year and I sit and wait for my memory to come back.

‘Relax, guys,’ Ada tries to salvage the situation. She must’ve noticed the expression on my face. ‘Her memory will come back. We’ll help her.’

‘Yeah, we’ll help, but what if it doesn’t work? What if—’

‘Then you can be the basketball captain permanently. Good for you,’ I say before Tisha says anything else.

She opens her mouth again, but Bharat speaks up before she has a chance to say anything. ‘We have to figure out a way to make you remember.’

I nod.

‘Or else we’ll have to become your teachers and help you with your fourteen years of education. All the way from nursery to XI.’

‘I know how to read!’ I say. ‘We don’t have to start from nursery!’

‘Oh, great! Let’s find out from where we have to start your education,’ Bharat says.

‘Are you serious?’ Ada asks.

‘Yeah!’ Bharat looks pretty darn excited.

‘You up for it?’ she turns to me.

‘Yes, why not? I can take it!’ I say.

‘The alphabet. Go!’ Bharat orders.

‘ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ.’

‘Animal starting with B.’

‘Umm,’ I think hard but can’t come up with anything. ‘Baby elephant?’

‘Impressive. Although *bear* is a more regular response,’ he jokes.

‘Oh, right. Bear.’

‘Two times two?’

‘Four,’ I make a face. ‘I’m not a complete moron, you know? I just lost my memory, but that doesn’t make me stupid!’

‘Okay then: three hundred forty-seven times six hundred four?’

‘Ooh. Bring it on. I’ll need a pen and a paper.’

We go on like that for a long time and everybody joins in. Sameer asks questions from science, Bharat takes care of maths, Ada, social sciences and Tisha, English. After two hours of constant questioning, my head hurts a little, but I’m mostly relieved. I seem to know most of what has been taught to me over the years.

‘How is it that you know how to solve this, even though you don’t know what Calculus means?’

I shrug, staring at a bunch of sheets in front of me.

‘Science is kind of twisted too,’ Sameer says. ‘You remember what everything is, just not who invented it. And you know what the theory means, but not what it is called. Hmm. Interesting.’

‘I’m okay at chemistry though,’ I say.

‘Yes, you are. Better than biology at least. You don’t remember any biological terms! Good thing we haven’t opted for bio.’

‘Then?’

‘PCM,’ Bharat states. ‘Physics, chemistry and maths. Plus we have English mandatory and we’ve chosen physical education as optional.’

‘Okay,’ I nod, trying not to be overwhelmed.

‘Well, she’s good at social studies. History, civics, geography—she knows her stuff,’ Ada declares proudly.

‘But we don’t have social studies in our course in XII standard,’ Tisha sighs (I think it’s more of a mockery). ‘How come you don’t remember even a single poem?’

‘I’ve no idea!’

‘No stories? Fairy tales? Rhymes? Anything?’

‘Nothing,’ I shake my head.

‘Do you know who Shakespeare was?’

‘Yes. A great poet and playwright?’

‘Can you name any of his poems or plays?’ Tisha looks at me as if her life depends on my response.

‘No,’ I say in a small voice.

‘Oh my God. Okay, never mind. Let’s try something else. Do you know who Cinderella is?’

‘I’ve heard her name.’ I’m a little unsure.

‘Really? That’s great, you’re doing great. Now: do you know Cinderella’s story?’

I think hard. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Peter Pan? Pinocchio? Harry Potter?’

I shake my head.

‘Do you remember any book you’ve read, like EVER?’

‘I can’t think of—’

‘Oh my God! Really? *Twilight*? *Fifty Shades*?’

‘No.’

‘*Gossip Girl*? Please tell me you remember *Gossip Girl*.’

‘I ... don’t.’

‘I give up,’ Tisha exclaims dramatically and lies down on the bed. She’d literally been jumping up and down on her toes, asking questions. And I failed so badly in her subject!

‘Come on. Chill! She has all the time in the world to read books,’ Bharat tries to console her.

‘Where will she even start? She has a long journey from *Cinderella* to *Fifty Shades*.’ Tisha shuts her eyes and looks so dejected that I actually start feeling guilty for letting her down. Under all that drama and attitude, I think she’s actually very sweet and cares about me.

‘Well, it’s not *absolutely necessary* for every girl to read that series ...’ Bharat starts, but Ada silences him with a look. (Maybe *Fifty Shades* is another of the topics you don’t engage Tisha in, for fear of her never shutting up about it.)

‘She needs to work extra hard on English and physics. But overall, she’s in a fairly decent position,’ Ada says. ‘She’ll be okay.’

‘She doesn’t remember Christian Grey. There’s nothing *okay* about that,’ Tisha announces with an air of finality. I have no clue what she’s talking about.



SEVEN

11 APRIL 2013

It's been nine days since I came out of my coma, and my memory is still not back. Call me a hopeless optimist, but I really thought that if I slept in my own bed for a night, I'd magically remember everything when I woke up the next morning. Well, it's the *next morning* right now and I don't remember a thing from my past. Also, I feel a bit dizzy, but I don't think it has anything to do with my medical condition.

After my friends left yesterday, Mum showed me around the house and I strained my head really very hard to remember the lost years. I stopped and stared at every piece of furniture, forcing my brain to recall something, anything—any piece of memory I have of the dressing table, chair or washbasin in question. It did not work, but I'm positive it will; I just have to stare at each object for longer, something I couldn't do with Mum following me around and looking at me all funny.

Right now, I have more pressing issues on my mind. Like choosing what to wear. So far Mum has been bringing cotton shorts and T-shirts to the hospital for me to wear. Now, for the first time, I have to choose what to wear by myself. And the thing is—it's not as easy as one would think it'd be. The cotton shorts and T-shirts Mum brought to the hospital were basically stuff to sleep in, which was okay, since I was a patient admitted in a hospital and my friends weren't dropping in to meet me and looking good wasn't high on my list of priorities. But now I need to get my life back on track. And how am I supposed to do that if I can't even find something half decent to wear!

When I say decent, I mean decent. Some of these tops have these huge symmetrical cuts at the back, some don't even have a back, some are made of material so thin it's practically transparent and some are off shoulder, some are cropped. The dresses are way too tight, the skirts way too short and I don't seem to have anything ... *regular* in my wardrobe. Like a pair of jeans, or a shirt that covers more than it exposes. You won't believe the kind of bottoms I have—leopard print leggings, jeggings cut out at extremely odd places, and like really, really tiny hot pants.

Oh, look at this! Leather pants. They don't seem cut anywhere, and are my best bet if I want to cover my body from waist to ankle *and* not camouflage myself as a jungle animal all at the same time, but the thing is—it's the middle of summer and we're in Delhi and I'll get fried if I step out wearing these.

Hmm.

I grab a towel and head to the bathroom. I'll just take a shower first and deal with the clothes when it comes to it, which buys me fifteen minutes. I quickly step out of my clothes and into the shower. The cold water hits me and I cool down instantly. There's something about washing your hair on a hot summer day ... well, what do I know? This feels like the first summer of my life, but it does feel pretty darn good.

Also, I've noticed I use the term *pretty darn* very often (even when I'm just thinking). I make a mental note to ask Ada if it used to be my catchphrase. Maybe it is. Maybe my memory is coming back after all, in tiny pieces.

I get all excited as I rub a sweet smelling aqua effect, refreshing face wash on my face. The tube also says FOR OILY TO NORMAL SKIN and under that SENSATIONAL FRESHNESS AND MOISTURE BALANCE. I turn it around to read the application and ingredients on the back. Maybe that's something I do. Maybe I read stuff printed on bottles of stuff.

As I towel myself dry, I feel very positive about my memory coming back. The doctors were right; if I get back to my normal routine, it'll start coming back to me. I'll just go right back to my regular life seamlessly and—

Is that? It isn't. Oh, dear God, it *is*. It *most definitely* is.

Shit, shit, shit.

'MUM! MUM! MUMMY!' I wrap myself in the towel and step out of the washroom. I yell 'MUM' a few more times before she comes running to my room.

'What is it? What's wrong?' she asks.

'Mum—'

'Are you okay? Does it hurt somewhere? Where?' she shoots a flurry of questions towards me.

'Yes, I'm okay,' I try to calm her down. 'Everything's fine.'

She pauses, observes my face, looks around the room, and then back at me. 'Then why on earth were you screaming?'

'I was screaming because ... wait, let me show you and then you will scream too,' I turn my back towards her and pull down my towel. When there's no screaming after seven seconds, I ask, 'See?'

'Yes,' Mum says like nothing's wrong with the world.

'Yes? What do you—' Now I'm completely baffled.

'The angel tattoo on your lower back. Sure, I see it.'

'You *knew* about this? Are you serious!?!' I adjust my towel and spin around to face her. 'You're telling me you *knew* I have a black and red angel inked on my body, and you are *okay* with it?'

'I never said I was okay with it. But I know about it. You got this almost a year ago; we had a huge fight about it.'

'And? Your teenage daughter goes ahead and gets a tattoo, like a *real* tattoo and you do nothing?'

'I yelled, you yelled back, I put you under house arrest, you escaped in the middle of the night, I took away your cell phone for a week, you didn't talk to me the whole time. But what can be done? The tattoo is permanent, after all,' she shrugs.

'Oh God. You really need a lesson in keeping-your-teenage-daughter-under-control,' I shake my head in disbelief.

'Maybe I did. But not anymore; you hit your head and now you're not troublesome anymore.'

'Stop winking! This is not funny, Mum. Tattoos are dangerous. Do you even know what place I got this from? For all we know, I might have AIDS.'

'Oh, you don't,' Mum sits next to me on my bed where I have slumped down and puts her arm around me. 'We got you tested for all sorts of infections when I first got to know about the tattoo. You

used to push us around a lot, but I did have some power over you. I dragged you to the hospital and we did the tests and thankfully, you were clean.’

I nod. ‘Are there any other surprises I should watch out for? Body piercings? Am I a part of an underground cult or something?’

‘None that I know of,’ Mum pulls me closer to her and I rest my head on her shoulder.

‘Hmm. I didn’t find any piercings. Didn’t find the tattoo sooner, the mirror in the hospital washroom was barely six inches big.’ I sit with my head on Mum’s shoulder and she pats my back softly. ‘Do my friends know about the tattoo?’

‘Oh, yes. You were very big on showing it off. Always low cut pants and short tops.’

‘That’s another thing—my clothes.’ I make a face.

Mum laughs and messes up my hair with her fingers. ‘I’ll pick something out for you today. Tomorrow, we can go shopping.’

‘That would be nice.’

She gets up and opens my cupboard, while I move with the cupboard door as it opens. The door has a full length mirror on it, and I try to put my hair back in place. Mum pulls out a yellow tank top and a pair of dark blue shorts and hands them to me.

‘Thanks,’ I murmur. ‘I’ll go put these on.’

As I reach the bathroom door, Mum says, ‘It’s going to be okay.’

I turn around to face her.

‘I know it’s difficult. It feels new and it must be scary, but let’s just take it one day at a time.’

‘Hmm. I just don’t get how you can be so ... so okay with all this? Aren’t you even a little bit worried anymore?’

‘In your language: *are you kidding me?* Do you think I’m not scared?’ She looks serious, loving, strong and strangely vulnerable, all at the same time.

‘Then how come you’re so cool with it?’

‘Because happy or sad, we do have to go through this, whatever’s going on. So why not make lemonade?’

I nod. ‘Wait, what? That didn’t make any sense!’

‘Oh, you know what they say! When life gives you lemons, make lemonade and all that?’

‘Actually, I don’t.’

‘Ohh, right. The memory loss. I forget,’ Mum laughs at my expense and I try to act mad at her, but fail, so I join her in laughing at me instead.

We’re laughing at my serious medical condition. We’re awfully weird people.

I still cannot see him. It’s almost 3 p.m. and only I know how difficult the last five hours have been for me. After Dad left for work, I’ve watched three shows on TV, which were all unrealistic, with women cooking in the kitchen loaded with heavy jewellery and expensive clothes, like it’s the most normal thing in the world. I’ve also tried reading a book Mum fished out from an old carton for me, when I told her Tisha was very upset about me not knowing Cinderella’s story. So I read that book, which was just about twenty pages long with a huge font and big pictures all over it. So it hardly took

me ten minutes to go through it. Tisha will be so proud.

Then I helped Mum in the kitchen, which wasn't much of a task because a) she said cooking for two people is a piece of cake and she had already done half of the job and b) she didn't trust me with the knife, potato peeler or the gas stove. So I just sprinkled salt on the salad and applied *ghee* to the chapattis.

Then we had lunch, watching a cookery show on the TV. Mum went to lie down for a while after lunch and when I got bored in my room and went to hers, I found that she had fallen asleep, so I tiptoed back to my room, lay down on the bed and stared at the Linkin Park posters for half an hour. Overall, I've almost reached the point where I could actually die out of boredom.

And I *still* cannot freaking see him.

I've left one of the windows overlooking the balcony open and have been peeking outside every five minutes, to see if Harsh Raj Sisodiya is in his balcony, but there's no sign of him. The tent hasn't moved even the slightest in the last umm, seventy-three minutes since I opened the window and first peeped out.

But of course.

He must be there. Last time I saw him, he was completely hidden under the tent and I had no clue there was a person under it until he spoke to me. There's a good chance he might be there right now. I get up from the bed and open the balcony door. Stepping out, I call, apparently to a green canvas tent, 'Hello?' and wait for five seconds before saying, 'Are you there? Harsh Raj Sisodiya?'

There is silence for a few seconds, after which there is a ruffle and a head pops out. It's clearly not Harsh Raj Sisodiya's. And that's a little creepy.

The head rises up and soon I can see her neck and then all of her down to her knees. Her thick long hair reminds me of ... I've seen her ... oh! She's that tomboyish, nerd girl Tisha was bitching about. Something Siddhu. What is she doing here?

'Hi,' I say.

'Hey.'

'I ... know you. You came to my place yesterday.'

'Yeah, I'm Sarabjeet Siddhu.'

Sarabjeet Siddhu. Right. 'Yes, I know.'

'You do? Who ...?'

'Tisha. And Sameer. They told me about you after you left.'

'That can't be good,' she mutters.

For a moment, I don't know what to say. Then I figure I should be covering for my friends and I smile brightly (I hope she doesn't see through it) and say, 'No, no. You've got nothing to worry about. It was all good.'

Sarabjeet gives me a really funny look.

'How are you?' she asks.

'I'm fine,' I nod.

'Good.'

'Good.'

We get silent for a few seconds. ‘Umm, is Harsh in there?’ I point to the canvas tent.

‘Yup.’

‘Okay ...’ I wait for her to ask him to come out, but she doesn’t. She just stands there. I shift on my feet. ‘What is he doing?’

‘Watching a movie.’

Oh, so that’s why he hasn’t come out; he must have earphones on and can’t hear the conversation (or whatever it is) I’m having with Sarabjeet.

When she doesn’t say anything, I ask, ‘Which movie?’

‘*The Karate Kid*,’ Sarabjeet says. ‘The newer one, the one with Will Smith’s kid in it.’

‘Great,’ I nod, as if I understand which movie she’s referring to.

‘Though, I’ve seen it plenty of times. So I’m just reading my book.’

‘Which book?’ I ask again, as if I’d know if she tells me. Except maybe if she’s reading *Cinderella*.

She pulls out an electronic device the size of a paperback, only thinner, from under the tent and shows it to me. From where I’m standing, I can see just about nothing on it.

‘It’s just something I like reading. You wouldn’t be interested,’ she shrugs.

I’d have thought she meant I’m stupid and she’s reading something intelligent, but she got slightly red in the face, which makes me think what she’s reading is a touchy topic.

‘Hmm, okay,’ I try to act normal and decide not to probe, so that she doesn’t turn redder.

She pulls out a printed handkerchief from a pocket of her denim jumpsuit and wipes her face, muttering, ‘Hot.’

‘Yeah, I was wondering, don’t you guys get uncomfortable in this tent?’

‘We have a tiny table fan. And it’s just the beginning of April, you’ll see what summer in Delhi actually means. We’ve become almost resistant to moderately high temperatures like 40 degrees.’

‘Do you guys hang out in there every day?’ I ask. I don’t know if 40 degrees is actually high, or if she’s being sarcastic, so I think it’s best to not indulge into that further and make a fool of myself.

‘What, no! Just when Harsh is grounded,’ Sarabjeet laughs, her face lights up, as if remembering something hilarious. Which in this case, I guess, is her friend getting grounded.

‘Why is Harsh grounded?’ I ask curiously, her smile making me smile.

‘He ... well, actually, it’s a long story,’ she says and looks at everything but me.

My face drops suddenly and I try to control it. Of course. I’m an *outsider*. Why would they let me in on their secrets and personal jokes? Talking to her for twenty minutes over balcony railings doesn’t exactly make us the best of friends. I nod and take a step back. ‘I should get back in ... My mom ... I’ve got stuff to do ...’

‘Oh ...’

Embarrassing tears well up in my eyes without warning and I wonder why this hurt so much. Tisha says mean things to me all the time and that never hurts me, and that’s when she’s my friend. I don’t even know Sarabjeet Siddhu, except that she’s Harsh’s friend and my friends aren’t her biggest fans. It shouldn’t matter.

I get back in my room and turn around to close the door. ‘See you,’ Sarabjeet says to me when my

face is turned towards her.

‘Bye,’ I mutter and stretch my lips in the semblance of a smile.

‘Get well soon,’ she calls, but I’ve already shut the door and put the latch on.



EIGHT

15 APRIL 2013

First day at school. I'm grateful that I lost my memory now, not a year later; I still have one school year left to make memories. Mum says school years are the best years of one's life. So, just in case I don't get my memory back, I'll at least have this one last year of school memories. Which cheers me up, but not much.

I'm really nervous about going to school and attending classes, and everything else going to school involves. I don't remember what's where. Over the last four days, Mum has helped me with getting ready to get back to school. She showed me where my bus stand is, so that she wouldn't have to go with me today. She said I'd find that embarrassing, going to the bus stop with my mum, in front of my friends. I take her word for it, but I don't see myself being anything but deeply thankful if she comes with me.

My bus number is S-21. It's a yellow coloured EICHER bus, with THE PRESIDENCY CONVENT written on its sides and back. Mum packed me a really thin sling bag, with just one notebook, two library cards, my school ID card, a couple of pens and my wallet with lunch money in it. She said they serve a mid-day meal at my school, but I buy food from the canteen with my friends. Also, I do have all the books from the booklist for XII grade, but apparently, we do not study from NCERT books, and just keep them as a syllabus. Mum assured me I'll find all the thick reference books in the library.

Just yesterday, she joked, 'You should thank me for having poked my nose in your business all these years. Or I wouldn't have any idea how to get you prepared for school now.'

Even though I just smiled, I secretly did thank her with all of my heart. What if I'd, like, packed all my books and a pencil box in the big backpack I saw in my bed's storage (and had assumed was my school bag) and turned up in school like that, given I boarded the right bus? And what if I'd gone to have lunch with the rest of the school in the dining room, while my friends waited for me in the canteen? It would have been so embarrassing. (Although, my friends wouldn't wait in the canteen for me; they'd take me with them—we're in the same class. Maybe not Tisha though; I'm sure she'd have no qualms leaving me behind.)

Ada has come over a couple of times in the last four days and told me there's nothing to worry about and that they'll all be there to help me settle down. Sameer said that too, over the phone. He calls me twice every day. He says we used to talk for hours on the phone every day. But I somehow can't picture that. Every time he calls, our conversation goes something like this:

'Hey, what's up?' he says.

'Hi. Nothing much, I'm just reading a book or watching a movie or talking to Mum or having dinner or going for a shower or something equally uninteresting.' Let's consider the reading-a-book scenario

for now.

‘Oh, really? Which book?’

‘It’s called *The Black Beauty*. Have you heard of it?’

‘Of course I have. Everybody has. Do you like it?’

‘Yeah, it’s nice. I’ve only read about one third yet.’

‘Hmm. It’s just strange to see you read books.’

‘Why? I don’t read?’

‘Not really. Nobody does; who has the time?’

I do, I say in my head but keep silent otherwise. I then ask what he’s doing and he tells me either cricket practice or working out at the gym or hanging out with Bharat and Kapil (Tisha’s ex, who didn’t come to see me at the hospital and later because Tisha did and he didn’t want to bump into her) at a *sheesha* lounge (apparently, smoking *hookah* is cool) or playing billiards with his club friends.

I ask if he’s having fun playing/working out/taking drags of hookah/hitting small balls with a stick, and he says yeah. Then we make small talk for a few more minutes and hang up when it gets too awkward to handle.

We literally don’t have anything to talk about. Whenever I say I’m reading a book, he says no one reads books. When I say I’m watching a movie he asks me which, and then says I’ve seen it already. When I say I’m talking to Mum he starts laughing and says, ‘You’re so funny,’ like I’m kidding. When I say I’m having dinner, he says I don’t eat! Like for real, I just nibble at fruits like grapes and oranges, because I’m constantly on a diet. He doesn’t believe me when I say I love pasta and chocolate brownies.

And, worst of all, when I once said I was going for a shower, he made his voice all husky and asked me to *show* him. I was confused, but then he explained he wanted me to send pictures and started to say some dirty things I’m sure he thought were sexy but were actually, more than anything, just plain creepy. I freaked out and hung up and have never mentioned anything about showers since.

He just doesn’t get that, for me, it’s not years of real, honest, true love, like Ada told me. I’ve only actually known him for about fourteen days. And his attention flattered me in the beginning, but he can’t expect me to pick up where we were before I got into the accident. Now, we don’t have anything in common and it’s like the beginning of a relationship for me, and I’m not comfortable flirting with him like that.

Anyway, boyfriend troubles aside, I need to concentrate on the mountain of problems ahead of me: making it through a whole day of school without embarrassing myself enough to never go back again.

Today, I woke up at 6.30 a.m., after an uncomfortable, panicky night that left me all tired and puffy under my eyes. I showered and got dressed in my school uniform, which meant a white shirt tucked into a too-short dark green checked skirt, which Mum said isn’t too short for me—it’s the length I always wear to school.

Mum insists I have breakfast, but my tummy feels really funny, and I’m not sure I can trust myself to keep food down. Throwing up in the school bus or assembly won’t be the best start to my last year at school. But Mum doesn’t listen, so I quickly gulp down the milk and grab a large chocolate chip cookie.

As I pick up my bag and walk to the front door, nibbling on the cookie (which doesn't taste as delicious as it did yesterday morning), Mum says, 'What about the sandwich?'

'Mum, I *can't*! I'm not kidding, I'll puke.'

'Your recess is at 11.30. You'll starve!'

'*I'm not kidding, I'll puke,*' I repeat, desperately trying to make her understand.

'Okay, okay. But just for today. From tomorrow—'

'You're the best! I promise I'll finish my breakfast every morning.'

'Yeah, you will. You won't have a choice,' Mum smiles and helps me secure my sling bag on my left shoulder (I'd been holding it and my cookie in my left hand, my right hand is still in a cast) and opens the front door for me.

'Can't you come with me? Just to the bus stop?' I plead.

'Trust me, you don't want that!'

'I do. I really—'

'You don't. And don't worry, you'll be just fine,' she assures me.

I'm not particularly reassured, but I do know her enough to know that she's not going to come with me, no matter how much I beg and plead. She does all this saying she's protecting me. I don't see how, but I don't have time to argue.

I get into the elevator and mutter 'see you' to Mum, who's standing by the door.

'Bye,' she smiles.

I walk to the bus stop, which is just two minutes away, and stand with the other kids, waiting for the bus. The first thing I notice is: PEOPLE STARE. Even as I turn to the girl next to me and smile, she just stares at my cast and turns away to whisper something in the ears of the boy standing next to her. I look away from her and notice everybody else is staring too.

I quickly finish the rest of my big cookie, pray for the bus to come soon and look at my shoes for 167 seconds. That's when a bus stops in front of us. It is yellow and EICHER and has THE PRESIDENCY CONVENT written on the side, but it's not S-21. It's J-04 and I see all the little kids board it and the bigger kids stay back.

'This one's for juniors. Hence the J,' a voice says from behind me and I turn around to find Harsh Raj Sisodiya standing there.

'Oh, hi,' I say. I am genuinely pleased to see him. It's like I've been alone in a battle for a painfully long time, and have finally found a comrade.

'Hello to you too.'

'What's up?' I ask, mimicking how Sameer always starts a conversation with me.

'Nothing much, just waiting for my school bus,' Harsh says, leaning against a metal pole nonchalantly.

I blush and mutter, 'Of course.'

'How's it going with you?'

'All's well, you know, just waiting for my school bus,' I copy his tone.

He mutters, 'Of course,' and looks down at his feet.

'Haw! Are you making fun of me?'

He laughs, 'Sorry, you're just so easy, I couldn't help it!'

'You're mean,' I make a fake-mad face and he laughs harder.

People are staring even harder now. What *is* with them?

'Do I look funny? Is it my hair?' I lean towards Harsh and whisper.

'Your hair looks fine to me.'

'Then what is it? Why is everybody staring at me like this?'

'I told you! People like you don't socialize with people like me. And when they do, other people stare,' Harsh says.

'It's not that. They were staring from even before you got here,' I explain. 'Is it the cast?'

'It can't be. Casts are cool around here. Everybody who plays sports gets them at least once in a couple of months. Or at least a crepe bandage every once in a while. It shows that you're hardworking or really strong and can endure pain. Also, people pay attention and ask you what's up.'

'What kind of stupid logic is that?' I make a face.

'Hey, it's not my logic. It's just how it works around here.'

'Hmm. So then what? Why the staring?'

'Might have to do with the complete memory loss. Also, the personality change rumours flying around.'

'How do they all know? Do they think I'm a freak? And what rumours?'

'One, you're quite famous. Two, I'd love to say they don't, but there is a good chance they do. And three, the rumours about how you're a changed person after the accident. Maybe people are just curious to see if it's true.'

'This is nuts,' I shake my head in disbelief. 'And it's none of their business.'

'No gossip is anyone's business, but that doesn't stop people from gossiping.'

'Why do you talk like that?'

'Like what?' Harsh asks, looking genuinely curious.

'Like you're some hundred years old and really wise and know everything?'

'Do I? Hmmm. Interesting.'

'Also like that!' I exclaim. 'Like you're observing the world in third person.'

'What can I say? I'm a student of this exciting journey called life.'

'And I'm like *this* close to hitting you.'

He laughs.

Just then, a bus stops in front of us. This time, it's the right one. Instead of moving forward, Harsh takes a step back and watches as everyone around us board the bus.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

'My friends save a seat for me. No rush.'

Which reminds me, Bharat and Kapil are on the same bus too; the rest of my friends have different routes. Ada told me Bharat would save a seat for me.

After the eight or so other people from the bus stop board, we move forward and Harsh sweeps his arm to the side and proclaims, 'Ladies first.'

I climb in and look around for Bharat. 'Here!' he calls from the second last row. As I walk

towards him, I hear Sarabjeet, who has what I assume to be her bag on the seat right next to her, say 'hey' to Harsh.

Harsh whispers, 'See you around,' to me and takes the seat, while I nod and walk on towards Bharat.

'Hey,' I greet Bharat.

'Morning!' he says cheerfully and shifts to make place for me. 'This is Kapil,' he points to the boy sitting on his other side.

'Oh. Hey Kapil,' I smile. 'I've heard a lot about you.'

'Great, and I've met you a zillion times,' he says and winks.

The half-hour journey to the school is basically uneventful. We just chat with each other and I realize I like them both. Bharat is really funny and although Kapil gets a little uncomfortable now and then, we don't have too many awkward situations.

As the bus parks inside the school, I start feeling funny in my tummy again.

'Everything okay?' Bharat asks. Ada must've told him I've been freaking out.

I nod.

'You sure?'

I shake my head.

'Ah, relax! We're all here, it's all gonna be just fine!'

'I hope so.'

'What are you so worried about?' Kapil asks.

'First day at school,' I say.

'Oh, right. It's so weird, all of this.'

'Shut up, dude,' Bharat interjects. 'You're gonna make her puke faster. At least let's all get out of the bus. I don't fancy getting thrown up over!'

I punch his arm and get up. As we climb out of the bus, I say, more to myself, 'I'm not going to throw up.'

'That's the spirit!' Bharat cheers me up and Kapil winks at me.

We see Ada standing with Tisha and Sameer a little ahead and as we walk towards them, Kapil mutters, 'See you around,' and walks away from us.

Not fair. I like him! Why is he not allowed to hang out with us just because he and Tisha broke up? I'd trade him for Tisha any day.

'Tempting, but not gonna happen,' Bharat whispers, as if reading my mind. 'Kapil insists on staying away from her and Tisha just won't stay away from us, so Kapil has to stay away from us in order to stay away from Tisha. That's how it works.'

Before I can say anything, Tisha calls, 'Hey! Look who's back!' like she didn't see me just a few days ago. I've been away from school exactly the same number of days she's been away from school.

'Just smile, it's all good,' Bharat murmurs under his breath.

I nod. 'Let's do this.'



NINE

Our first period is maths. The teacher, Mr Prasad, walks into the classroom, doesn't acknowledge the students, writes down an equation on the board with a marker and turns to face the class. 'I need to make a quick phone call. I need every one of you to have solved this when I come back.'

'He's an ass,' Ada whispers in my ear. She's sitting with me, and behind her is Tisha.

'REAL ass,' Tisha mutters, eyes wide in drama.

Okay, so far, it's been quite smooth. I joined my friends near the bus stand, we walked to our classroom and, on our way, they pointed where the basketball court, cricket field, auditorium, tennis court and assembly block are. (During which, they kept staring at my face curiously, until I had to tell them NO, NO SUDDEN MEMORY FLASHBACK, upon which they acted like they weren't expecting that to happen anyway.) They promised they'd show me the rest of the school during recess.

We reached our classroom, XII C, and dumped our bags on what Ada told me are our usual seats. Then, we went outside, into the corridor, and just ... hung out. Like almost literally. We came right outside the classroom, in the corridor and just stood there and talked. Tisha gave me a commentary on every passer-by. Usually stuff she tells me is information I don't think will be of use to me in this lifetime, but I figure it's better to know than not know.

When the bell rang, we walked to the assembly block and formed a queue. There were lots of queues there. Bharat said the principal makes all the students line up in queues every morning for fifteen minutes, under the pretence of morning prayers, just so she can stand on the stage facing us and feel like she owns our, umm, butts.

It didn't really make much sense but it made me laugh, until I was shushed by the class monitor. I shut up and sang the national anthem with everyone else (yes, I remembered it), and walked back to the class in the queue. We took our seats, the class teacher took our attendance and left.

She did walk by my seat and ask, 'All okay?' to which I said, 'Yeah, all good,' and smiled at her. She said, 'Good, good,' and walked away.

Five minutes after she leaves, Mr Prasad jots down a maths problem on the board and asks us to solve it before he gets back from his short phone call. Using my left hand (Dad said it's lucky I'm a lefty, what with my right arm being fractured and in a cast and all that), I copy what he wrote on the board on my notebook and stare at it for a minute. Then I pick up my pen and start solving the problem.

A minute later, Bharat asks, 'What are you doing?'

'Solving this thing.'

'Which method are you using?'

'I ...' I try to remember its name, but can't, '... don't know.'

'You serious?' Ada says and peeks in.

I continue solving the problem. Two minutes later, when I'm all done, I look up to find all my friends assembled around me, looking at my notebook in awe.

'How did you *do* that?' Sameer asks.

'I don't know, I just sort of, knew.'

'Oh come on! Have you been *studying* at home? Have you been practicing maths *secretly*?' Tisha exclaims, wrongly smelling a scandal.

'No. Why would I practice maths secretly?' Now I'm a little confused.

'That's just genius!' Bharat says. 'Tell me how you—'

Just then, Mr Prasad walks in and everybody rushes back to their own seats. 'What's the commotion there? Why isn't everybody at their seats?' he yells.

Nobody says anything. We just pretend to be engrossed in our respective notebooks.

'ANSWER ME.'

'Sir, Kalindi solved the problem,' a girl with thin pigtails and round body says. I don't know her name. (But I think Aastha would suit her. Or maybe Saadhna. She looks like an Aastha or Saadhna. Though I have to agree I don't know anyone with either name.)

'So? You're in XII standard now. Why is it a surprise that one of you was actually able to solve a problem a XII grade student should be able to solve?'

'I've solved it too,' a guy raises his hand. A few people join in, calling 'me too, me too'.

'It's not that, sir. Actually, Kalindi lost her memory over the summer, so it's unusual that she remembers how to do maths,' Aastha/Saadhna announces. She then explains the whole case (or her version of it) to Mr Prasad.

Oh, great. The one thing I wanted today was a lot of attention from everybody around.

After she is done, Mr Prasad looks at me with interest. 'Which formula did you use?'

'I don't ...' I stand up at my seat and look stupid. I have no idea which formula I used. I just knew how to solve it, and I did. And I do know how that sounds, so I don't say it out loud.

Mr Prasad comes over to my seat and picks up my notebook. When he's done inspecting it, he nods and put it back down on my desk. 'Okay. You may sit,' he says before he walks away.

I sit down and finally feel like all eyes are not burning a hole in my back.

'So, how many of you were able to solve the problem?' he asks.

Half of the class raises its hands.

'And the rest of you?'

'But sir, what about Kalindi? How can she solve the problem and not know the formula she used?' Aastha/Saadhna asks.

'Do I look like a doctor to you?' Mr Prasad thunders.

'N-no, sir ...'

'I don't know why Kalindi could do what she did. But I do know that mathematics is about more than just remembering the names of the theorems.'

Aastha/Saadhna nods her head frantically.

'Now, have you solved the problem?'

'Yes sir,' she says more confidently.

‘Very well then. Let’s begin today’s class.’ With that, he flips open a middle-sized book on his desk and starts teaching.

By the time the class is over—I don’t admit this to Ada or Tisha—I grow a little fond of Mr Prasad. I don’t think he’s an ass at all. He does shout at students a lot, but he’s a really good teacher. It feels so great writing $LHS=RHS$ or HENCE PROVED at the end of the solution. And amongst other things, I really enjoy learning the names of the formulas and theorems I’d successfully applied in the beginning of class.

‘Cheese sandwich?’ Sameer asks. I think he’s mocking me, or maybe giving me a chance to change what I said, but I just nod.

‘Yeah, cheese sandwich. Grilled, please,’ I repeat to the vendor (his badge says Kishan) at the school canteen stall and pull out the money from my wallet to pay him.

‘It’s okay, I got it,’ Sameer says, but I’ve already handed over the money.

I take the token Kishan hands me and join Tisha at our table. Ada is a house captain and Bharat the Head Boy, and they had to attend a meeting with the Principal to discuss something. So it’s just Tisha, Sameer and me. I can see Kapil standing by a table, talking to some boys, but he doesn’t look our way. Tisha doesn’t look his way either. Not openly, at least; she is constantly keeping track of his location though. I’m curious, but decide not to meddle.

Sameer joins us a moment later, carrying a plate of cucumbers and tomatoes, and a diet Coke. He puts it on the table and Tisha drags it towards herself. ‘Thanks,’ she says. ‘What did you get?’

‘A grilled cheese sandwich,’ Sameer announces. ‘But guess what Kalindi got!’

‘What?’ Tisha asks, as she takes a sip of her diet coke and picks up a slice of cucumber.

‘A grilled cheese sandwich.’

‘No. Way.’

Her eyes are shining with uncontrollable glee, making me want to poke them out. Just because she doesn’t eat anything except salad doesn’t mean I have to starve too. Why would anyone want to do that to themselves? Following the footsteps of my old self is really getting to me now.

‘What’s wrong with a cheese sandwich,’ I ask, because they’re looking at me expectantly. I already know the answer. CALORIES.

‘Are you kidding me? Do you know how many calories that is?’ Tisha’s drama increases with every word she utters.

‘Yeah, I do.’

‘And you’re *still* ... I give up! I don’t get you!’ She raises her arms in the air in a sign of surrender and flops them back down with a big sigh.

‘A few extra calories aren’t *that* bad,’ Sameer interjects.

‘Not bad if a girl wants her butt to be the size of ... of Australia or something,’ Tisha shakes her head in disbelief.

‘Aww, you’re so worried about me, that’s so sweet,’ I try copying her condescending, fake-concerned tone. ‘But I’ll be okay, honey. Mum said I lost six kg while I was in coma. It’ll take a lot more than just one sandwich to get my butt fat.’

‘Well, suit yourself.’

‘You should watch out, though. I hear that even though diet Coke doesn’t have actual calories, it does expand bones. So, you know,’ I motion with both my arms, ‘really wide bone structure and ... naah, don’t worry, sweetie. I’m sure you’ll be fine.’

Tisha’s face has suddenly gone pale, as if she’s seen a ghost. ‘I ... umm.’

‘She’s just kidding. Relax!’ Sameer laughs.

‘Yeah, I’m sure it’ll be just okay. It’s just one can of soda. No biggie. Right?’ I try hard to control my laughter.

Tisha looks confused now. Maybe she’ll figure out I was just fooling with her eventually. But right now, she looks like she’s not willing to take any risks.

‘25!’ Kishan calls from the counter and I get up to get my sandwich. Sameer follows me.

‘Was that really necessary?’ he asks.

‘No, but it was fun!’

‘Look at her; she looks like she wants to puke every drop of what she drank.’

‘Fine, I’ll tell her I was joking,’ I say.

We both pick our plates of sandwiches from the counter and I ask the vendor, ‘Can I also have a bar of chocolate, please?’ I turn to Sameer and say, ‘I’m thinking something with a lot of calories. Just to freak her out.’

‘You’re just evil, aren’t you?’ he laughs.

‘I’m learning from her, and experimenting on her,’ I wink at him.

As we take our seats at the table and dig into our sandwiches (yummy, by the way), Sameer tries to wave away Tisha’s fears and I try to tell her I was kidding, but she doesn’t look convinced, though. Now that she’s not being bitchy for a moment, I realize it’s actually not too bad being around these people. Sameer is sitting and chatting generally, and not being creepy in the least, and for once, I don’t feel like I walked into a fancy sitcom setting.

The feeling doesn’t last. As soon as Tisha decides to drop the matter till she confirms with the nutrition guide at her gym, they’re back to gossiping, eyes lit with all kinds of scandals that reached their ears recently. I really can’t shake the feeling that Sameer is a girl inside.

During PE (Physical Education) class, I feel a little left out. With my right arm in a cast, I can’t do much except sit on a bench and read. For optional subjects, all sections of XII grade have class at the same periods. Ada, Tisha and Sameer have computers as their optional, and I’m with Bharat and Kapil in PE. They sit with me on the bench and open their books on their laps.

‘Go, play! I don’t mind,’ I say, after I see them ruffle the pages of their books and look longingly at the cricket ground in front of us for five minutes.

‘Really, you don’t mind?’ Bharat asks.

‘Oh, stop feeling guilty. Just go, I’m perfectly fine here. I’ll watch you guys play,’ I smile encouragingly.

‘Swell!’

They jump off the bench and run to get their cricket gear on. A bunch of boys divide themselves in

two teams and the PE teacher tosses a coin, before putting on a cap and assuming the role of an umpire. Bharat and Kapil are in opposite teams, so I am faced with the task of choosing a team to support. Maybe I'll watch the match for ten minutes before deciding.

Ten minutes later, I decide two things. One, I quite like cricket. And two, Bharat might be the oldest friend I have, but from what I deduce, his team is no match for Kapil's. I support Kapil's team. The match lasts 90 minutes—two periods in a row—and ends with Kapil's team losing (sigh). Turns out, they were only good at batting. I forgive myself for supporting the bad team. It wasn't my fault; I didn't have enough information before I picked a team and I had nowhere to gather information from since my friends ditched me to go play a stupid game of cricket.

I get up and dust off the back of my skirt before picking up my book and the boys' books. They are still getting out of their gear and, when I catch his eye, Bharat says, 'Go on ahead. We'll need to freshen up after this and you don't wanna be here for that!' I roll my eyes at him and decide to walk back to class by myself.

On my way, I see Harsh with Sarabjeet and Michael, holding a thick book titled 'Something Something C++'.

Harsh smiles at me and asks, 'Good first day?'

'Umm, it could've been better,' I make a face.

'And then again: it could've been worse just as easily.'

'Whatever. The team I supported lost.'

'Victory isn't defined by wins or losses. It is defined by effort. If you can truthfully say, "I did the best I could; I gave everything I had," then you're a winner,' Harsh announces in all seriousness.

'What the ...' I don't know what to say. I look at Sarabjeet and Michael, to see if they think this boy is a little crazy too. 'Where did you—?'

'Read it somewhere.'

'Oh. You.'

'Oh. Me.'

We laugh and I shake my head at his absurdity. As I enter my class, he walks on with his friends. I wonder where they're going but don't feel it's appropriate to ask. I set the boys' books down on Bharat's desk and slump down on my bench. Not a bad first day. It could definitely have been much worse.

As if on cue, a moment later, Tisha enters the class. With wide eyes, a piercing voice and hands on her hips, she exclaims in a demanding tone, 'Oh. My. GOD. Was that Harsh Raj Sisodiya and his dork group I just saw you *laugh* with?'

I sigh.



TEN

28 APRIL 2013

Sometimes I think maybe I am not being who I am supposed to be. I've tried to find a place I'm comfortable in and settle down, like generally, just find my place in the world, but I can't. I feel agitated, like I've been feeling since the last two weeks. After the novelty of joining school and meeting everybody and getting back to my life passed, I've been feeling a little unsettled. I feel like ... like there's something missing. Something other than the seventeen lost years, of course.

I can't find ... peace. Or something. I don't know how to explain this. When Mum asked me if I was okay, tonight during dinner, I couldn't even fake a smile and say yes. I can't burden her with my troubles when she's already gone through so much since my accident. And it's becoming increasingly difficult to keep her out of this. I have nobody I can talk to about this.

'I don't know,' I said.

'What is wrong?'

'I don't know,' I repeated.

We went on eating and watching TV silently. Mum and Dad kept shooting me concerned looks, but I refused to look up and pretended to not notice. I didn't want it to be a big deal.

Now I am back in my room after dinner. I just turned on the muted bedside lamp (it's shaped like a jelly fish, and glows like one too—it's actually pretty cute). In the dull light, I stare at the Linkin Park posters. Who *are* these people? I make a mental note to ask somebody.

This doesn't feel like my personal space. I feel like ... I'm a visitor here. Like this is a hotel I'm temporarily staying in. I like the lamp (which we bought last week when I went shopping for decent clothes with Mum) and I've started to like the pouffe, but the rest of it is just ... The black curtains, the black ceiling, the dim lights, walls bare except one with the LINKIN PARK overdose, this boring plain black bed, the rugs, the clothes in my cupboard, the ridiculously high heels I can't even stand in, let alone walk. And the dressing table, there are more shades of lipstick than I can count, and all sorts of other things.

I feel a crushing sense of helplessness. This is not me. This is my exact opposite. None of this defines me. The worst bit is: I don't even know what *does* define me.

As I lie here, staring at the white ceiling, there is a quiet knock on my door, before it is pushed ajar.

'Dad?'

'You asleep?' he whispers.

'Not yet.'

He walks in and closes the door. 'Why the darkness?'

'It's always dark in here,' I say and sit up on the bed, leaning against the headrest.

Dad sits down at the foot of the bed and says, 'Is something bothering you?'

'Yes. But I don't know what.'

He just sits there, and I think he's waiting for me to talk. I don't know what to say. I honestly have no idea what exactly I'm feeling right now and why.

'My memory should've been back by now.'

For some reason, I'd thought my memory was going to come back when I went back to school and slid back into my routine life. But that hasn't happened in the two weeks since I've been going to school, and it's getting really frustrating. If my memory could just come back, everything would be normal again and all my problems would vanish in a jiffy.

'I'm really bad at chemistry.'

As I say this, my throat feels raw. I want to scream and tell God or science or whatever it is that's playing games with me that THIS. IS. NOT. FUNNY. You can't take away a girl's entire lifetime of memories and expect her to join XII grade and do well. Except for the magic I seem to create when presented with a maths problem, I suck at pretty much everything. Tisha was right, I am screwed. I have no basics. And I don't even like Tisha.

'Tisha is mean. She's SO mean.'

It's been getting more and more difficult for me to be around her. It's like she has a personal agenda against me. Nowadays, her meanness isn't even laced with *honey* and *sweetie* and she doesn't even feel the need to twist her words around to insult me indirectly. She now bullies me right to my face. I don't let her overpower me, but I have to stoop to her level to get back at her.

'And Ada is ... she's spineless. She just does whatever Tisha says and never stands up for herself. It's like she's afraid of Tisha.'

Ada has been mute all this time, while Tisha has spent her time openly bashing me and others. I can see that she doesn't like the cruel things Tisha says about everybody and how smug and rude she is, but she chooses to ignore it all and agrees to be her BFF-cum-punching bag.

'And Dad, Sameer! He's a girl. Like literally. The drama, the gossiping and fashion magazines and haircuts and chick-flicks and everything: the complete package.'

And he's my boyfriend! I sometimes want to puke when I realize that. He's always around, looking good and being Tisha's other BFF and giggling with her. And then he puts his arm around me like we've known each other for years, which we might have, but it is not the same with me anymore. I don't like him. I think I would've thought he was okay if he weren't my boyfriend. But picturing him as my boyfriend and knowing he's a girl inside ... I want to puke. I almost hate him.

He did this thing a few days ago where he picked me up from my place after school and took me to this place—it was a dimly lit studio called THE TIME TRAVELLERS, which had a small stage where a long-haired and bearded young man played the piano. Opposite the stage was a small bar in a corner, and the other corner was set with a number of tables. We sat at one. Then he looked at me expectantly, like I was magically supposed to remember everything. He looked disappointed, almost hurt when I didn't. He then explained to me how we used to come here for dates all the time, and this was our secret hangout place and none of our friends know about it because it is *our* place.

While he sat there looking into my eyes and being all forced-romantic, I, frankly, was

uncomfortable. Apparently, the pianist was one of the best in the country and played tunes of exclusively LINKIN PARK songs. And LINKIN PARK is supposed to hold a very deep meaning to me. It was one of the many things Sameer and I had in common. But although I did enjoy the music, being alone with Sameer made me feel queasy.

‘I have no one to talk to. I have no friends.’

The only people I do like and who don’t kiss Tisha’s tushie are the two people who’re the busiest. Kapil can’t hang out with our circle, since Tisha is always there, and the rest of the time, he’s busy with cricket practice and some other things I don’t know about because I’m not close to him. And Bharat, being the Head Boy, is always caught up in something or the other the few times that Tisha and her two BFFs are always around.

‘Sarabjeet gives me weird looks and I can’t even talk to Harsh.’

Whenever I’ve seen Harsh these past two weeks, Sarabjeet has always been in the vicinity. And when she’s not, it’s my own friends giving me weird looks for speaking to the King of the Dorks. Sometimes I feel like Sarabjeet wants to say something to me, but when I look at her directly, she looks away and ignores my presence.

‘And the ... the ...’

Nightmares. I don’t tell Dad, who’s studying my face intently, worry etched all over his. I’ve been having scary dreams the past few nights. I lie in bed for hours in the darkness, trying to fall asleep, and when I do, I wake up in a cold sweat. Every time, there’s a fall. I fall down something and wake up before I hit the ground.

‘I’m trying. I’m trying so hard ... but I don’t think I can ...’ I go silent. Dad is looking at me, and softly holding my foot in his hand and patting it, as if to soothe me and make it all go away. I don’t think it’s working. My eyes fill with tears.

‘I don’t know what to do ...’

A sob escapes, and my shoulders start to shake. As I begin to cry, Dad gets up from the foot of the bed and comes to sit by me and hold me tight. I bury my head in his shoulder and cry. Huge sobs rack my body as tears soak Dad’s shirt.

I don’t know how much time passes as I keep weeping in his arms. He keeps holding me, patting my back, trying to console me without words. Slowly, my tears stop. I rest my head on Dad’s arm and just stay there. I am exhausted. There’s no energy left in me to keep going, no fire left in me to keep fighting.

And the thing is, except Tisha, they are all okay. They’re not bad people. But the thought of going back to school tomorrow and spending another day trapped in all the drama makes me want to dig a hole in the ground and bury myself in it. Maybe it’ll be better if I just ... stay away. Being alone has got to be better than being with Tisha.

‘Giving up is not an option. It’s our obligation to try our best. Trying is all we can do, and all that matters,’ Dad says softly.

I pull back and look at him. I feel better.

‘Now, you should go to sleep. School day tomorrow.’

I nod.

‘Good night, Kalindi.’

‘Night, Dad,’ I murmur.

He gets up, ruffles my hair and smiles softly at me, before leaving the room, closing the door behind him.

After he’s gone, I flip off the bedside light and stay up for hours. I think about what he said and wonder how he felt. Maybe he thought that my high school problems are stupid. Or maybe he understands what I’m going through.

Whatever the case, what he said makes perfect sense. I can’t give up already. I haven’t even tried properly yet. Everything has been okay on the surface. Anyone watching me all this time couldn’t have guessed there was this storm building up inside me. It has all been normal and it can continue to be normal. I’ll go to sleep and forget about this breakdown.

I’m sure I’ve been overthinking this. I’ve been bugged so much by Tisha’s behaviour, it has taken over too much space in my head and slowly the pressure has kept building and now I’ve made it into something much bigger than it is. Maybe it will be okay when I go to school tomorrow. After all, it has only been fifteen days. I have to try harder.

I close my eyes and soon fall asleep.

I wake up just once, at 3.43 a.m., after falling off something in my dream. I sit up on my bed and breathe heavily. I think somebody was chasing me and I was running and running and running till there was no ground underneath my feet to run on. That’s when I fell. It felt like flying for a second, just a second, until I hit ... well, nothing. I woke up and my body was no longer falling. I take a gulp of water from the bottle on my bedside table and lie back. I turn to my side, put a second pillow over my head, hold it tight and go back to sleep. Or at least try to.

29 APRIL 2013

The next morning, I wake up with a sharp headache. Turning off the alarm helps for a second. I make a mental note to change the alarm tone on my phone. ‘Mum,’ I mutter, but it doesn’t come out loud enough for even me to hear it, let alone my mother, who must be in the kitchen, making Dad’s breakfast. My teeth are clenched tightly because of the pain I’m feeling and I try and fail to unclasp them.

I lie on my stomach and dig my head into the pillow and shove it in as hard as I can to get rid of the ache, and for a minute, I feel better. But as soon as I stop putting pressure on my head, the pain comes back. I open my eyes and quickly shut them again. Now I know why they call it ‘blinding pain’. I literally cannot see. ‘Mum,’ I mutter again, grinding my teeth in pain.

Ten minutes later, I hear my door pushed open and Mum say, ‘Wake up! You have school! Didn’t your alarm ring? You’re late!’

‘Aaargh.’

‘Are you okay? What’s wrong?’ she bends down and looks at whatever is visible of my face.

I slowly turn to my side so I face her, taking care not to raise my head from the pillow. I carefully open one eye.

‘What is it, Kalindi?’

‘My head ... it hurts ...’ I groan.

‘Let me get you something for that. Can you get up?’

‘No ...’

Mum disappears from the room for a minute and when she comes back, even though I protest, she makes me sit up and adjusts some pillows behind my head. She pushes my head back into the pillows and places a glass against my lips. ‘Drink.’

‘What is it?’ I ask, my voice all gruff and unlike-my-voice.

‘Aspirin. You’ll feel better in no time,’ she explains as I take a sip and gulp down the sweet but odd tasting liquid. ‘I would’ve tried rubbing a balm on your forehead first, but you look like you’re in a lot of pain. And the balm never works on you anyway.’

After I’m done ingesting the medicine, I ask, ‘Why?’

‘You have migraines. Balms don’t work, neither do your migraine meds. Aspirin works like magic.’

‘Doesn’t feel like magic,’ I moan. It’s like my head is literally gonna explode. I still can’t see everything; there are white spots and blanks and double vision all at the same time. For once I’m grateful to the bloody curtains for keeping the room dark.

‘Wait for it,’ Mum runs her fingers through my hair and says.

I shut my eyes again.

‘*Suno*, where are my keys?’ my dad’s voice interrupts my wait-for-magic-to-happen.

‘Coming,’ Mum calls and gets up.

Dad is already here, ‘Where did you put them? I can’t find anything when I need it!’

‘I put everything where it belongs,’ Mum says and goes to the master bedroom to look for Dad’s car keys.

‘See, *that’s* the problem. You have these designated places for things and I apparently know about none of them. Why can’t you just leave things where *I* put them?’ Dad follows Mum around, while she goes from bedroom to bathroom to living room, looking for the keys. I watch through my half open eyes and the completely open door of my room.

‘Because then the house would be a mess.’

‘But at least I’ll be able to find things.’

‘Come on, how hard can it be? The newspaper is in the newspaper stand, your watch on the bedside table, shoes in the shoe rack, keys hung on the key holder—’

‘Then why aren’t they on the key holder now?’ Dad asks.

‘That’s what I’m trying to find out.’ It’s amazing how calm Mum is, even when Dad is fuming in irritation. He gets irritated when he is late for work, which is every morning.

‘I’m getting late.’ Dad looks at me and shakes his head, as if to get me on his team in the battle and ask you-see-what-I-have-to-deal-with?

I shrug and smile. My parents are adorable.

‘Here it is!’ Mum’s voice sounds victorious.

‘Where did you find them?’ Dad walks up to her and takes the keys from her.

‘In a pocket of the trousers you wore yesterday.’

‘Oh.’

Now Mum looks at me with a I-have-to-take-care-of-two-kids look. In all of the twenty-eight days of my new life, she has told me three times how my dad is very childish and it’s like she has two children. She shakes her head just like Dad was doing a minute ago and comes to me. ‘How is it now?’

‘What?’

‘Your migraine?’

‘Oh, right,’ I try to feel the pain in my head to gauge its extent, but can’t feel any of it, ‘Oh God, it really is magic. It’s GONE. All of it!’

‘What did I tell you?’ Mum smirks.

Yeah yeah, we get it; you take care of both of us like it’s nothing and you’re proud of it, is what comes to mind. But ‘Yes, you did,’ is what I say. ‘But ...’

‘What?’

‘Can I skip school for today anyway?’

‘Who said I was going to let you go? Look at you! You’re in no condition.’

I check my reflection using the front camera of my cell phone and agree with Mum one hundred percent. I look horrifying and am in no condition to be let out in public. My hair’s frizzy, standing up at odd angles, my eyes are swollen and have dark circles under them. Actually my entire face is a little red and swollen. It’s obvious that I had a rough night. I’m glad Mum doesn’t ask me about it. ‘I need rest.’

‘Yes, you do. Lie down, I’ll get you some warm milk. Then we can find something on TV to watch together.’

‘Sounds heavenly,’ I say to myself, as I close my eyes and listen to Mum get my milk from the kitchen.



ELEVEN

30 APRIL 2013

I have mixed feelings about school. Not particularly *my* school, but *school*, in general. And not just school in general, but school and all things associated with it, generally. I mean I don't know whether I advocate this whole widely followed system of schooling.

Take teaching, for example, the way we are taught at school, or how we are divided into four separate houses, and standing in queues for assembly, with teachers keeping an eye out for mischief. Kids in my school are mischievous. For instance, right now, there are fireworks bursting in the next block, the sound of which echoes loudly where we are assembled in a queue for the morning prayer and such. All the hundreds of students are silent as a stone, while the teachers run about to try and find the source of the racket.

Anyway, what I really mean is, we are sent to school since we are less than three years old, and we make friends and we have teachers we blindly follow and worship and sometimes have a crush on or hate, and they tell us what to do. We do not have a right to decide how we feel about it—we are only allowed to do what we are told to do and nothing more, nothing less. I'm pretty darn sure that's not the best way a child should be raised.

There are some positive things about it. I mean, we learn how to be around others, and we learn to start making friends with people we like and enjoy being around and have things in common with. And, in the process, we find ourselves: the kind of people we are, the sort of things we like, dislike and believe in and so on.

But my point is ... well, actually I forgot what my point is. I'm just getting stuff from the high-schooly movie I watched with Mum yesterday, and mixing it with my feelings. My feelings being: 1) Thanks to my sucky memory, I don't remember making friends, and the friends that I woke up to about a month ago aren't exactly people I have a lot in common with or enjoy being around and 2) I have no clue about the type of person I am; the things I like, my beliefs and stuff like that.

The only thing I know for sure is that I certainly do not like Tisha. Even now, when I'm glowing internally with glee, watching teachers and staff members rushing about and students trying to hide their smiles (just like me), Tisha is making this majorly-bored expression and sighing like this is a complete waste of her precious time and she'd rather be done with the assembly on time and get to class. Well I'm certainly having a blast and hoping for the fireworks to go on forever and delay classes as much as possible—which is something I can see in Harsh's expression too. He is standing a few steps behind me in the row next to mine and I turn to steal a look. His arms are folded against his chest and he looks pretty darn pleased with himself. He catches my eye and winks at me. I can almost see him mentally patting himself on the back, even though his lips are stretched in only a very small smile.

My eyes widen. *He did this.* He is the student or one of the students who planned and executed this prank, hence the self-satisfied expression.

I shoot him a look to enquire and confirm my theory and he just shrugs nonchalantly as if to say *I'm-not-telling-you-but-hell-yeah-I-did-this* and *it's-no-big-deal* at the same time.

I shake my head in disbelief. This boy. Now I'm even happier about the fireworks. Even the dirty looks Tisha shoots my way (she must've seen my eye-conversation with Harsh—she sees *everything*; that's what she does in life) don't affect my mood in the least. The first time she saw me talk to Harsh, her reaction was of a magnitude better suited to a full-blown MMS scandal. But then that's her. And I don't like her, but I've vowed to myself not to let her affect me.

'Honey, you need to work on your taste,' she whispers sweetly.

'Oh, you care too much,' I whisper back equally sweetly.

'That's because I *do* worry about you,' and a worried look she does shoot at me. What a drama queen.

'Just ...' I wonder what to say to explain it to her and then I find the one word she'd use in such situations, 'chill.'

'I'm only saying this because I don't want to be blamed when your memory *does* come back. If the ... *real* you could see what you're doing ...'

'What the hell does that even mean?'

'Aw, darling, I'm just looking out for you. When you become yourself again, you'd hate me for letting you hang out with King Nerd and his folks,' Tisha makes a sympathetic face and looks at me as if she pities me.

'Tisha, let it go,' Ada whispers loudly. She is standing right in front of Tisha, who is standing right in front of me in the stupid assembly queue. I know I vowed not to let Tisha affect me, but I really want to just run away.

'How can I let it go? *Are you kidding me?* She's our friend. What will we tell her when her memory comes back and—?'

'I'm just saying this is not the place ...' Ada protests weakly, but Tisha ignores her and continues her preaching for the next fifteen minutes.

It's only after assembly is dispersed (after there is an announcement that such pranks WILL NOT be tolerated and they WILL find the culprits and they WILL be punished) and we get back to our classroom and take our seats, that Tisha finally drops the matter. Our class teacher enters and the class falls silent. She starts with the roll call and I steal a look at Tisha to find her immersed in the cell phone she's keeping hidden under her desk, before stealing a look at Harsh. I turn back after checking his regular spot and realize he wasn't there. I sit very still and move only my eyes to surreptitiously scan whatever's visible of the room without turning my head. I still can't locate him. Where did he go?

I turn to my right, pretending to get a notebook from my backpack and *there he is!* He's sitting two benches behind his regular spot and to my intense embarrassment, seems to have been looking at me the whole time. He saw all of the stealing a look, not being able to steal a look, looking around surreptitiously, turning to my right and then finally finding him—and I'd been thinking I was pretty

sneaky (though I'm glad at least Tisha didn't spot us again). He has the same goofy smile on his face that he always does. The one that says I-have-a-secret.

I look away from him and pretend it never happened. Man, what is it about this boy?

For the next two and a half hours, we sit mostly quietly. Even before the first teacher has a chance to wrap up, the next teacher is stationed at the door, which is a huge loss for us. The two-minute break between classes is all we look forward to during the entire lecture. So finally, after all three classes before lunch are done with, we get up and yawn/stretch/sigh/moan or something else along those lines.

During these moments, I feel like the entire class is just, sort of, *one*. Like all forty-five of us are in some way just one common body. Each of us goes through the same thing as the next person and reacts to the same things, but each with their own way of letting it out. After its rather eventful start, it has been a lazy morning for all of us, and we all seem to be relieved to step out of the confines of the classroom walls and walk the corridors. Or at least that's my theory of how the entire class is feeling; there's no way to prove it.

'Let's go to the mess today, check out how it's been doing,' Bharat says.

Everybody just sort of nods. We walk to the mess in silence. We sure do seem to be in a weird mood today, all of us. All five of us are here, but nobody's saying anything, we're just joining a pre-formed queue and loading our plates with stuff that looks vaguely edible. I notice that Tisha's plate is almost completely empty, but I don't ask. Everybody knows she doesn't eat.

After we're done piling up food on our plates, we pick up a corner and sit down, half of us take chairs, half just sit on the table. We eat silently, and I look around to see if anyone's going to speak today. Bharat and Sameer look quite busy with eating, helping themselves to liberal amounts of food, Ada is carefully taking small bites, like a lady, and Tisha is completely ignoring her plate, which only has a few slices of cucumber and tomato on it anyway. She's still pretty engrossed in her phone.

I'm not very hungry today. I nibble on some grains of rice till everybody decides they're done eating and we take our plates back. Almost immediately after, Bharat and Sameer excuse themselves to go somewhere—they don't tell us where—and I start walking with Ada and Tisha, although we don't seem to be going back to class.

'Where are we going?' I ask.

'Hmm?' Tisha looks up from her phone.

'Don't know,' Ada replies.

'Where are we going?' I repeat.

'Umm, anywhere. Someplace quiet,' Tisha says. We keep walking around looking for a quiet place, which is difficult to find, since this is lunch period and every student in school has poured out of class and found a place to hang out, like a colony of ants emerging from a hole and spreading all over, marking their territory.

'There?' Ada asks, pointing to the basketball court, where there are only a few people hanging out.

'Perfect,' Tisha says. Once we reach there, she abruptly stops walking and sort of spins on the toes of her feet to turn back and face us, making us stop abruptly in our tracks too. Her eyes are lit in delight as she dramatically exclaims, 'So? What is the plan for tomorrow?'

‘Umm, plan for?’ I ask. Maybe because this is Tisha, I’ve got a bad feeling.

‘Tomorrow? I thought we’d celebrate it over the weekend,’ Ada says.

‘Why can’t we celebrate twice? After all, we can’t just *not* do anything tomorrow and wait for the weekend to come! His birthday is tomorrow!’

‘Whose birthday?’ I ask.

‘Sameer’s!’ Tisha rolls her eyes at me. ‘He’s your boyfriend, dude. And you don’t know when his birthday is!’

‘To be fair, I don’t know a lot of things,’ I mutter.

‘A lot of things don’t matter. Sameer’s birthday does. So, what is the plan?’

‘I ...’ try to think of something brilliant off the top of my head, that would completely blow her away, but the top of my head can’t come up with anything, ‘... don’t know.’

Tisha sighs theatrically. At this point, I decide to go mute and be a silent listener to the conversation, which goes as follows:

‘How about we all bunk school tomorrow and go out somewhere?’ Ada suggests.

‘What, like a road trip?’ Tisha asks.

‘Yeah, we could go to—’

‘Gosh, no, seriously? It’s pretty hot for an outing, don’t you think?’

‘Oh, right. Then what?’

‘Okay, so this is what I think we should do: we go out shopping for a great gift today after school and order a cake and stuff and then show up at his place with all of this at 12 and SURPRISE!’ Tisha shrieks excitedly.

Hmm. I’ve only lived about a month, but this doesn’t sound too original or unusual to even me.

She continues, ‘We’ll mislead him by telling him that we have something planned at night, going to a club or something, so he won’t expect us to show up at his place in the middle of the night!’

‘That’s a great idea!’ Ada (surprise, surprise) agrees.

‘I *know*, right? This is going to be absolutely perfect. I even have a gift picked out.’

‘Ooh, what is it?’

‘You’re. Not. Gonna. Believe. It.’ Tisha goes into full-fledged drama mode at this point.

‘Argh, come on! Tell me!’

‘Okay, okay. Check this out: I have a friend, from my last school—Anjali, you don’t know her, and her brother is like some sort of a big deal in the textile industry, okay? So he lives in Mumbai and deals with import export or something in the lines of international shipments and what not. Like, pretty freaking influential and stuff. And he got his hands on an original Linkin Park T-shirt. And get this: it is SIGNED BY CHESTER BENNINGTON HIMSELF.’

‘NO WAY.’

‘YES WAY! Imagine, a black T-shirt, with the LP logo on it in red, green and white, where the white portion is signed by freaking Chester Bennington. I managed to convince Anjali’s brother to sell it to me and he shipped it to Anjali. I just have to pick it up today. Sameer’s going to be completely blown away.’ Tisha looks very pleased with herself.

‘No kidding,’ Ada shakes her head in awe, her eyes all wide.

Tisha looks at me, and I realize it's probably time for me to re-enter the conversation. 'Umm, so you guys all love Linkin Park, huh?'

'What? No, God, no. I don't hate them, but I'm not a big fan either. Neither is Ada. Although *you* used to be mad about them,' she crinkles her eyebrows as if in thought.

'I figured, from all the posters in my room.'

'Hmm. Sameer and Kapil are like diehard fans of LP though. Not that I care about Kapil anymore. But my point is: Sameer will totally adore my present,' Tisha says.

'I'm sure,' Ada chips in.

'And what are you getting your boyfriend?' Tisha asks me. I sense resentment and mocking in her tone.

'I haven't thought of anything yet.'

'Well, you've got to think quickly, there's not much time left.'

'I know that now, but I just found out moments ago that it's his birthday tomorrow!'

'Don't worry, we can look for something when we go shopping today. I have to pick up a gift too,' Ada offers.

'That'd be great,' I say. Now, I can hardly find something as awesome as signed Linkin Park merchandise, but I can't exactly show up there without a gift either. *He's my boyfriend*. It feels weird to even think it.

So once I get home after school, I quickly get out of my school uniform and change into a pair of blue jeggings with a red top and tell Mum I need to go to the mall with Ada and Tisha for a couple of hours. I leave when the phone rings, which is the signal that Ada and Tisha are waiting downstairs.

We wander the mall for hours and I get really tired of trying to figure out what to get Sameer. If he does love Linkin Park as much as I've been told, Tisha's gift is going to win first position hands down. What can be better than a signed LP tee? What do boys like?

I finally end up entering Archie's and assembling a collection of all sorts of pretty shit into an even prettier basket and getting it wrapped. It's a gift more suited for girls, but then I do think of Sameer as one, so it makes a lot of sense that way. I've put in a box of chocolates, a greeting card, a bottle of perfume, a key ring, a rather beautiful diary and a pen, a refrigerator magnet shaped as a heart (I don't know why) and a bolster with the movie poster of *The Dark Knight* printed on top. It becomes a really big basket of goodies and I feel a little less jittery. Sameer is basically a girl; he'll like this. And the safe thing about picking such a wide variety of stuff is that even if he doesn't like some of these things, there will still be enough items left for him to like. No one individual on the planet could dislike EVERY item in the basket.

The only problem is, when we're done shopping, I'm pretty broke, which is a little sad, since I had my heart set on this pair of Chuck Taylors I spotted at the mall earlier today. I've spent all the money Mum gave me and have nothing left. I take the basket home with me. My mum already knows I'm dating Sameer, so I don't suppose she'd be against me getting him gifts on his birthday. Though I bought him all this only because I was told to. He's not my boyfriend, not really. I mean, sure, before I got into that accident, but now I don't even know him. I just hope he understands this (better sooner than later) and lets me go.



TWELVE

I get home and tell Mum about the plan and am surprised by her reaction. She is okay with me going to Sameer's place in the middle of the night, and partying till the morning. She apparently knows Sameer's parents and said she doesn't have a problem with me spending the night at their place if all my other friends are there.

She said she'd just speak with Sameer's parents to confirm, so I tell her it's a surprise, at which point she assures me she'll ask Sameer's parents to not tell him. I call Ada and ask if we could tell Sameer's parents about the midnight surprise and she said she'd have to check with Tisha, so we get Tisha on conference, who goes all *of course we can tell them, duh, who do you think is going to let us in and arrange everything if not his parents?*

So I tell Mum she can call Sameer's parents, which she does, while I have dinner with Dad, watching an IPL match on the TV, where the Chennai Super Kings are kicking some Pune Warriors butt. Dad is very much into cricket and keeps track of all the matches taking place. This season of IPL began the day after I woke up from my coma and, watching the matches with Dad, I've begun taking a real interest in it.

Ada calls and I answer, picking up my empty plate from the table and taking it to the kitchen sink with the other hand. 'Hey.'

'Hi, be ready by like 11.30. Bharat will come pick you up and the rest of us will meet you at Sameer's place,' she says quickly, like she's in a rush.

'Sounds fine.'

'And don't bring the gift.'

'What? Why not?'

'We won't have time to arrange it or anything. We can do gifts in the evening.'

'Umm, okay then.'

'Cool, see you then. I'm so excited!' and excited she sounds.

'Me too,' I mutter, meaning it a little. Hanging out with my friends isn't exactly fun, but I can see myself settling down and making a place of my own amongst them. The only problem is that Bharat is too busy and Kapil can't hang with us while Tisha's there, which is always. I don't like Tisha. Which leaves just Sameer and Ada, both of whom are Tisha's BFFs and always by her side. Kind of difficult to build my place in the group, but I can try.

They're all always saying it'll be so great once I get my memory back. They talk about my past as if it was an intensely fun, never-ending series of really happening parties and like we were all a tight-knit group, with especially Tisha and I being inseparable. No shit. Going by the stories they tell me, we *were* practically inseparable. And I try extremely hard, but I. Just. Can't. Picture. It.

At 11.35 p.m., I get a text from Bharat and make my way downstairs. It takes us fifteen minutes to

get to Sameer's place. Once we're parked, we join Kapil, Ada and Tisha near the elevator. Kapil is willing to be around Tisha because this is a 'special circumstance' where neither of them is willing to back down. We all get in and Tisha pushes the button to Sameer's floor.

'Excited?' Bharat asks.

'Oh, hell yeah,' Tisha exclaims.

We reach the floor and step out of the elevator. Tisha calls Sameer's parents and asks them to open the door and let us in, which they do, a moment later. Bharat enters first, carefully carrying the cake. I notice Tisha is also carrying a package.

'What's that?' I ask.

'Some decorations and stuff,' she shrugs.

Bharat sets the cake down on the centre table and Tisha starts putting all sorts of decorative stuff around it. She gives the confetti blaster to Ada, who passes it over to Kapil. We switch off the lights once we've lit the candles and I check the time. It's 11.57 p.m.

'Call him,' Bharat asks me.

I dial his number and he picks up after half a ring.

'Hey,' he greets.

'Hi Sameer. What's going on?'

'Nothing much. Was just about to go to sleep.'

'Sleep? But it's your birthday in like, two minutes,' I say.

'Yeah, that's why I haven't gone to sleep *yet*. I know there'll be a zillion calls I'll need to answer.'

'Yeah, nobody's going to let you sleep tonight.' Just as I say this, a landline phone on my right starts ringing. I start, but Bharat places a finger on his lips to shush me. Oh, I get it. He called the landline so that Sameer will come out to pick it up and SURPRISE.

'Who's calling at this time?' Sameer's voice questioned through the phone.

'Me?' I ask.

'Yeah, I can hear a phone ringing in the background.'

'Oh, umm,' I look around and Tisha pokes a finger at the dial of her watch, which I cannot see from here, but assume she's trying to convey it's 12.00 and say, 'I think it's yours.'

'What? No. Hold on, lemme check,' he says and a moment later, light from his room floods the gallery through his open door. 'Oh yeah, it's mine. But I swear I could hear it coming from the background,' his voice is very low and it feels like he's talking more to himself.

'Who is it?' I ask, just as he emerges into the living room. Our eyes are adjusted to the darkness, but he obviously can't see us clearly in the candlelight. Ada and Bharat flip on the lights and we yell together: 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY!'

He looks completely and utterly surprised for a second, before his face splits into a big 'O' and he exclaims, 'Oh my God, guys! Thank you *so much*. But you *shouldn't* have,' and then he giggles.

Way to gay it up.

1 MAY 2013

From where I'm sitting perched on Sameer's desk, my legs resting on his revolving chair, it looks like

we're on a reality show. There are no cameras though—I looked. Kapil and Bharat are lying lazily on Sameer's bed, Ada is sitting on the bed too, inspecting the LP T-shirt (yeah, Tisha brought and gave the frigging tee to Sameer, while making Ada call me up and ask me to not bring my gift. I strongly suspect she wanted to steal the show, which she would have anyway, what with the high level of amazingness her gift promised, but she felt the need to get rid of the competition just the same), Tisha is typing furiously into her phone since she can't go fifteen minutes without making her presence felt on all sorts of social networking platforms and Sameer is sitting by a window, accepting birthday wishes. It's caller number 73. Yes, I'm keeping count. It spices things up and keeps me from falling asleep right here on this desk.

'Can we go home now?' I ask. Sitting on a hard wooden desk for two hours in the middle of the night is *literally* a pain in the butt.

'Mmm?' Tisha looks up from her phone. I feel privileged.

'Home. I'm sleepy.'

'But this is Sameer's special day! We can't *leave!*'

'Seriously. Look at him. He's been on the phone for hours now. I bet he wouldn't even notice if we just left.'

'That's so awfully selfish of you. Don't you think you should be here with him today?' God. Too much drama for 2.37 a.m.

'Fine. Then I at least have to change out of this,' I motion towards my top, which is plastered with cake. Apparently, on birthdays, cake is applied to the faces and bodies of people present, instead of being eaten. I tried to wipe it out, but there is still a little left on my top and my hair. I thought we would go home in a little while, but if we're planning to stay all night, I need a change of clothes, and to wash my face.

'Actually, me too,' Tisha says, looking down at her own dirty clothes. And slowly, all the others follow suit. It's like nobody realized we were all covered with sugar and whipped cream until I pointed it out.

'Let me find something for everyone,' Bharat says and gets up. He opens Sameer's wardrobe and steps back to inspect the contents inside. 'Hmm. Who'd like a pink tee?'

'Me,' both Ada and Tisha say.

Bharat tosses it to Ada, 'Here you go,' he says, and to Tisha, 'Sorry, a little biased here.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Tisha drawls, while Ada's cheeks turn pink.

'Black?' he asks and looks around. Tisha, Kapil and I say yes, but he keeps it for himself and says, 'I don't think I'm the right person for this job. Too much pressure.' He then turns towards Ada, tilts his head towards the bathroom and heads there, Ada following close behind.

'These two,' Tisha mutters. The situation we are in right now can be called a rather uncomfortable one, what with Tisha and Kapil not being on speaking terms. I look from Tisha to Kapil and back again and try to think of something to say. Unable to think of anything, I get up and go to the cupboard. I pick up a couple of T-shirts and throw one at each of them and select one for myself.

'What's this?' There is a green women's handbag lying on the bottommost shelf of Sameer's cupboard.

This time Tisha doesn't look up from her phone. I look at Kapil and he shrugs. I look at Sameer, who's facing away from us and towards the window and ask, 'Sameer? Whose is this?' I take out the bag and raise it up to show him what I'm referring to.

'Huh?' he turns to look at me. 'Oh, that's yours.'

'Mine?' I ask.

He says, 'Yes. You left it behind the last time you were here. I keep forgetting to give it to you.' He goes back to his phone call.

'Ah, yeah. You lost your memory,' Tisha points out, as if just remembering so.

'Ah, yes, I did indeed.'

'It's getting really old now.'

'Like I'm doing it on purpose. Why would I leave my handbag behind?' I mutter to myself, just as Bharat and Ada come out of the bathroom, clasped together. They're making out rather heavily as they stumble across the floor, reach the bed and fall into it. Kapil gets up and out of the way just in time.

I close the cupboard shut and walk back to my spot on the desk, taking my handbag with me. It's an oversized bag and is like really heavy. Just as I'm about to open it and snoop around, a rather interesting conversation ensues between Tisha, Bharat and Kapil, so I listen in. It's the first time I've seen Tisha and Kapil even speak on the same topic, let alone agree on it.

'Ugh, guys really,' Tisha sighs.

'Get a room,' Kapil looks at the lovebirds and shakes his head.

'Why? What's wrong with this one?' Bharat winks.

'That there are other people in it,' Tisha says.

Bharat: 'One would think you'd have enough decency to look away.'

Kapil: 'One would think you'd have enough decency to not make out in front of us.'

Bharat: 'There's nothing decent about not making out, my friend. Just pathetic.'

Tisha: 'But there sure is something indecent about you guys making out like RIGHT IN FRONT OF US. I mean—we're RIGHT. HERE.'

After that it gets repetitive and I lose interest. Bharat continues to make out with Ada and argue about it and Tisha and Kapil continue protesting. I open the flap of the handbag they say is mine and that I have no recollection of. There's a wallet inside, with some cash, a few ID cards and bank cards, a picture of Tisha and me hugging and making weird faces and some bills. Let's see, what else.

There's a key ring, with two keys, one of which I suppose is to my apartment. I remember Dad mentioning they changed the locks, since I lost my key and anyone could have found it and got into our home. Although I don't see how the said person finding the key would know which of the millions of homes in Delhi to go to and try the key. But that's parents: overprotective, overcautious and perennially paranoid. At least *my* parents seem to be that way.

I find a round pack of compact powder, a few coloured pencils (I'm unsure about their purpose, they look like lipstick liners but could just as easily be eyeliners—the thin body of the pencil doesn't say anything), there's mascara, a few shades of lipstick and a small, round container of lip balm. Also, wet wipes, skin cream, moisturizer, sunscreen, breath mints, a couple bottles of nail polish, a box full of small shiny balls that look like something used for makeup but honestly I have no clue

about, a few small bottles of perfume, sticks of chewing gum, a medium sized diary, some Disprin, my cell phone charger, some bars with *SNICKERS* written on them and a small teddy bear.

Phew. It's like I used to carry my entire freaking world with me.

'Anybody wants Snickers?' I ask, waving a bar in the air.

'Here,' Kapil says and I throw the bar to him, which he catches with unnecessary flourish and animation, like he's in a cricket ground and just caught a ball and I'm OUT.

'I've got another one.'

Both Bharat and Sameer ask for it, and I have just one, so I say 'share' and throw it at an unoccupied portion of the bed between them, roughly equidistant to both of them. Sameer grabs it first.

'Do you know how many calories that bar has?' Tisha grimaces.

I shrug.

'You only kept it with you in case of emergencies. Nobody eats Snickers just for *fun!*' She looks absolutely scandalized.

I don't entertain her, and instead shove a stick of gum into my mouth. 'Want some?' I point the rest of the pack in her direction.

'No, thanks, sweetie. I like to keep my sugar intake in check. And I've already reached today's limit.'

'But it's no longer that day. We're three hours into a new day,' I state, confirming the time on my phone. I'm just messing with her because everybody else is silent and it's the most boring party ever, although this is the first birthday party I've attended so I have nothing to compare it with.

Ada takes a stick of gum from me but Tisha doesn't, maybe on principle or something. When after a few minutes, everybody looks close to falling asleep, Tisha gets up and plays music on the stereo, which jolts everyone awake. She turns on the disco lights (yeah, Sameer has disco lights in his room, for REAL) and turns off the regular lights.

She then climbs up in the middle of the bed (everybody moves back a little to make space) and starts dancing, throwing her hands in the air, tossing her hair around, shaking her hips and what not. After a moment, Ada gets up next to her and joins in. It takes the rest of us about thirty seconds to join in. The bed is king size, but really not big enough for six teenagers to be jumping on. But we jump on it anyway.

'Isn't the music going to disturb other people?' I yell over the music to Sameer. Arguably, it is the middle of the night, and this room isn't exactly sound proof.

'The room's sound proof,' Sameer yells back. Of course it is. So that's why he couldn't hear the landline phone ringing in his own home, but could hear it in my background earlier tonight.

'Fancy,' I shout.

Sameer nods his head and turns sort of towards me, so now even when we are six people dancing in a group, it's like the two of us have created our own smaller group inside the original one. When the music changes, he puts both his hands on the sides of my waist and kind of sways with the song, swaying me with him. I have to agree that this is kind of fun, minus the hands on my waist bit.

We must look really stupid hopping on a bed, all wearing T-shirts of the same size but different

colours. But the disco lights blink in a way that keeps us from actually seeing anything for more than a fraction of a second. As if that wasn't enough, Tisha starts singing along too, and is once again joined in by everybody else except me. I don't know the song, just like I don't know any other song. In the thirty days of my life, my education in music has been fairly limited.

As soon as everybody starts singing along with the song, the music turns into noise. But they seem to enjoy the noise much more than the music, whereas I can feel my eardrums protesting. And, when Sameer twirls me around so that my back faces his front and wraps his arm around my stomach, that's when I get *really* uncomfortable. Our bodies are touching at places they should not be touching, and suddenly I am acutely aware of the existence of my butt.

Then he leans down and whispers (actually, he speaks at a regular volume used during conversations, but given the noise around, it translates into a whisper) in my ear, 'What's up?' like it means something. Like *what's up* did not mean *what's up*, but something else. Something more. Once again, I feel like I'm letting him down by not remembering this secret language or personal joke or whatever we used to share. These people keep making me feel guilty about letting them down by not remembering. I make my face curve into a small smile, and hope that compensates for not remembering what *what's up* means to us. He leans further down and kisses the base of my neck. And keeps kissing it.

Oh God. We're supposed to make out. I remember the things Bharat and Ada were doing and my blood turns cold. I can't deny him his girlfriend on his birthday. How am I supposed to convey the message that I'm just not ready without ruining his special day? He kisses my cheek, and I can sense him moving toward my lips. I'm not just nervous or scared or panicked, I'm NERVOUS AND SCARED AND PANICKED. I try to tell myself that maybe it won't be all bad. He sure looks yummy enough. *But he's a girl inside.* And I don't 'like' like him. Too late. He pecks my lips softly, which feels a little awkward, what with him standing behind me and holding my chin to keep my face turned towards him, and meeting me halfway.

He turns so as to face me directly and leans down once again. *Oh God, oh God, oh holy freaking God.* His lips touch mine and I feel a shiver go down my spine. Not a good one. I don't know if I should be doing this just because it's his birthday and I don't want to hurt his feelings and possibly create a scene and embarrass him and myself in front of our friends.

Sameer pulls back for a second to look at me. I look back at him, not sure what my face looks like right now, or what he's searching for in it. Before he leans back in once again, I notice Bharat looking at me with what looks like concern, though I can't be sure, given the unreliable blinking disco lights. Before the light blinks on again and I can be sure, my line of vision is blocked by Sameer, who is kissing me again.

It really doesn't feel right. I am cornered and defenceless against this and a sob escapes my lips. I'm not sure he even notices.

'Hey, dude,' Bharat puts a hand on Sameer's shoulder and says, 'Give it a rest!'

'Yeah, *now* who needs to get a room?' Ada teases, though our level of making out is ten levels behind hers and Bharat's. But I'm grateful for the interruption.

'Seriously. There's a party going on here and you two are busy eating each other's faces,' Bharat

teases.

Sameer laughs and resumes dancing, at a more comfortable distance from me. I steal a glance at Bharat and hope the look in my eyes conveys my thanks to him.



THIRTEEN

It's 4.46 a.m. and I am back to sitting at my spot on Sameer's desk. Everybody else is lying in varied stages of drunkenness on the carpet on the floor. Bharat and Ada are making out again in a corner. Sameer, Kapil and Tisha are lying flat on their backs, staring at the ceiling as if it were the sky or something. Kapil gets up a little, rests himself on his elbow and takes another slug from the bottle of Sprite and vodka mixed in almost a 50:50 ratio.

After we got tired of dancing, Kapil suggested we take a break and get sloshed. Apparently, dancing isn't fun enough without an unhealthy quantity of alcohol flowing through one's veins. Everybody else was quick to agree. Except, surprisingly, Tisha, who looked at Kapil warningly and said, 'No funny business, okay?'

'What funny business?' Kapil asked.

'You know what I mean. I'm not going to let you get away with anything under the excuse of being drunk.'

'Right. As if I'd even want to do anything funny with someone like you.'

'What do you mean: *someone like me*?' Tisha asked acidly. 'I don't remember you letting any chance of—'

'Well, that was before I knew who you really are,' Kapil cut her off. They fought like cats and dogs for another ten minutes, which frankly, was fun to see, mostly, since it was the first time I had seen them speak directly to each other.

After they were done arguing, they joined us on the floor, where we were mixing Sprite in vodka bottles and vice versa. After my first sip, I had pretty much decided I'd never drink a drop of alcohol again in my whole entire life. But when Tisha made fun of me for being a sissy, I tried another sip. That's when I decided *for sure* that I'd really never drink a drop of alcohol again in my whole entire life.

The others went on drinking while I perched on the desk. After the initial half hour of dedicated drinking, they started mellowing down and relaxing.

'I'm like, so drunk,' Tisha tells the fan she's staring at.

'Me, too,' Ada agrees, her face buried in Bharat's shoulder.

'Let's not waste the buzz. We should dance it off a little,' Tisha suggests.

There are *hmms* and *yeahs* from everywhere, but I don't see anyone actually getting up to dance, not even Tisha herself. I go back to digging into my handbag and find pepper spray hidden in a secret pocket in the back. I put it back and pick up the medium sized diary instead.

I open it up. It seems to be my personal journal. The first page says PROPERTY OF KALINDI MISHRA: DO NOT DARE TOUCH, which impels me to turn to the next page in curiosity. The next few pages have all sorts of pin codes and maps of every region of India. I flip to the first page I've

written in. I browse through the diary, last page to first, to find out that I've written maybe fifteen pages and the rest of the journal is blank. I count to be sure of the exact number of pages I've filled. Fourteen.

I shiver with delight and anxiety. This is my window to my past. Fourteen pages. I wish I'd written more. But fourteen pages are better than nothing. These fourteen pages will tell me about my life pre-accident in my own words. When others tell me how things were, I never know what to believe and what not to. It never feels like they're describing me or my life. The girl they talk about, the things she used to do doesn't feel like me. But now I'll know.

I'm more excited than I've ever (in thirty days of my life) been before. But I don't tell anyone. I keep it my little secret for the time it takes me to read the fourteen pages. It feels like even though I'm physically present in Sameer's room, my mind is in a completely different place.

After two pages: I'm smiling. I sound exactly like Tisha. I've written animatedly about how we went to pick up a dress for my last birthday and shopped around and finally found the perfect one. It took us like seven hours to find it. We skipped from one shop to another. To borrow a couple of sentences from the journal, I'd written: *'OMG, Sameer is totally gonna freak out when he sees me in this. I just CANNOT wait till my birthday! And Tisha is such a gem, we shopped for like hours and she never once complained. She even ditched her plans with Kapil to come with me.'*

After five pages: I'm still smiling. Sameer and I have spent a really romantic day, first at school, then we sneaked off to THE TIME TRAVELLERS, where the pianist played our favourite LP song at my request, then we went to Sameer's place and fooled around while his parents weren't home. For some reason, when I read this, the voice in my head narrating this isn't mine. It's Tisha's. Maybe because the tone in which the pre-accident me wrote is extremely similar to Tisha's. I even felt briefly that maybe this is some sort of game they are playing with me and Tisha wrote this for real. But I recognize my handwriting. This is all me.

After eight pages: I'm no longer smiling. My face turns into a frown. I've written about a fight with Mum. We had a fighting match when she found out about Sameer and me. I argued that everybody has a boyfriend and it's no big deal and that I really love him and she countered that she doesn't care if every single sixteen-year-old had a boyfriend, *not* her daughter. And that *it is* a big deal and what do I know about love? And for some reason, I felt the need to point out that I'm almost seventeen, which did not seem to make too compelling a case. I used some very bad and indecent adjectives for Mum and I feel guilty about it now.

After ten pages: I'm smiling again, but not really. I'd written this particular entry the day after I turned seventeen. I wore the special dress I found with Tisha. At one place, I've written, *'Man, was it fun or what? I looked smashing hot in my dress and Tisha rocked in hers. Ada tried to make us feel guilty about leaving her out and said she felt like an outsider and that we don't pay enough attention to her. Jeez, she's such a whiner and attention seeker. Just like that time at school when Tisha was absent and she told me that she really loved having me to herself, just like old times, when we were kids and all that. She blames Tisha for coming into my life and between our friendship or whatever.'* I'm confused. Why did I dislike Ada so much and ignore her to be with Tisha instead, when clearly, Ada and I have been friends since kindergarten?

There are only four pages remaining, and I desperately want them to answer my doubts. I would hate it if they don't. Stories without endings are just cruel to the reader. I read extremely slowly, not wanting it to end. What I don't know is that reading those four pages is going to change my life. Once I'm done reading it, which takes only five minutes, I read them again. And again. My brain just can't seem to absorb all that information.

I read again, deliberating at each word, trying to put everything in place. Trying to understand. Once I'm done reading it for probably the fifteenth time, I look up and towards my group of friends. Although I'm not sure *friends* is the word that describes what they are to me anymore.

Tisha is sitting up now, her head resting in her hands, elbows on her knees. Ada is fast asleep in Bharat's lap. Bharat's resting his head on Sameer's bed and staring at the ceiling. Kapil is still drinking, talking to Sameer in drunken whispers. Sameer is looking at me. Nobody's saying anything.

'Why did you guys break up?' I ask.

'Say wha?' Kapil looks up.

'You and Tisha—why did you break up?'

He shrugs his shoulders.

'Tell me,' I ask sternly.

'Ask her.' Kapil points at Tisha, who has been listening in, but pretending not to.

'What?' Tisha mutters.

'You know what.'

Sameer and Bharat turn to look at us too.

'None of your business,' Tisha says, all haughty.

'If it involves you screwing my boyfriend and Kapil dumping you for it, it sure as hell is.' My voice is calm and calculated, totally betraying how I feel inside.

'What the ...' Bharat looks flabbergasted.

Ada is up too, and she looks at me with wide eyes.

'They think I'm completely stupid. They think I don't know. But I do. That bitch. That fucking bitch. She always tried to be like me. The clothes I wear, the way I do my hair, my shoes ... EVERYTHING. Now she stole my boyfriend. And after all this, they pretend like nothing is going on? Did they think they could keep it up behind my back and I wouldn't know? I know. I know and I'm going to ...'

'You ... how ...' Tisha opens and closes her mouth like a goldfish.

'I can explain,' Sameer gets up and walks towards me. 'It's not what you—'

'DON'T YOU DARE COME NEAR ME,' I thunder. 'You ... behind my back ...' I feel unable to say anything, so I just get off the desk and shake my head repeatedly, trying to estimate the extent of betrayal my friends have put me through.

'Let me explain,' Sameer insists, but keeps his distance from me.

Tisha is standing now too. I can't read her expression, but it's certainly *not* guilt. Maybe confusion.

'You don't need to. I know, okay? I *know*,' I yell.

'If I could just ask one question: WHAT IN THE NAME OF FREAKING HELL IS GOING ON?' Bharat asks.

‘Don’t act like you didn’t know. You betrayed me, all of you!’

‘It’s not like that ...’ Ada begins weakly. She’s crying.

‘Then what *is* it like? How fortunate that I lost my memory, wasn’t it? Then we didn’t have to deal with all of,’ I make a triangle between where Kapil, Tisha and Sameer are, ‘*this*.’

‘No ...’

‘And you have to appreciate the timing. Bang on,’ I laugh.

‘Today after the exam, I went to ask Tisha how hers went. I was just glad that tomorrow will be the last exam and we’ll be done, but when I found her, she was fighting with Kapil. Kapil looked majorly pissed off at her, so I asked her what’s going on. She didn’t tell me. So I asked Kapil. He said ask your boyfriend, like it had something to do with Sameer. I got confused. When I went to find Sameer, he was with Tisha and they were deep in conversation, like it was something really important they were talking about. At first, I was mad at Tisha because she didn’t tell me, and she was telling Sameer. But then I saw it. They were holding hands. And it all made sense.’

‘Is your ... memory back?’ Tisha asks.

‘No.’

‘Then, how ...?’

‘I kept a journal,’ I wave it in the air for everyone to see.

‘Where did you find it?’ Sameer asks.

‘In my handbag, which you had in your cupboard, why?’

‘You left it here. The day our exams ended. We had a party somewhere else and you knew it, but you still came here to meet me,’ Sameer explained.

‘And?’ I ask.

‘I told Ada and she said she’s totally on my side. We decided I’d let it go for now and wait till tomorrow and confront them once the exams were over.’

‘And when Mom told you I wasn’t at home, you said you need to go to my room and messed up the whole place. And then left.’

‘And?’ I ask again.

‘Then when I came back home, I saw my room was trashed. You, like, wrecked the whole place,’ Sameer said. ‘I tried to call you, but the calls wouldn’t go through. So I called Tisha to ask her where you were.’

‘And I called Ada,’ Tisha says. ‘She didn’t know where you were either.’

‘Yeah, and it was almost midnight and you’d told your parents that you were going to the party and you told me you were going to confront Tisha and Sameer but nobody knew where you were. We got worried and so we met up here and I finally told them that you knew about them ...’ Ada explains between sobs before breaking into full-fledged crying mode again.

‘Then we got a call from your mom. She told us about the accident,’ Sameer finishes.

There’s silence, and we all look at each other. I look from Ada to Sameer to Tisha, trying to decide who I am most mad at. Bharat is looking at the scene like he’s hearing this for the first time. Kapil has passed out on the carpet.

‘And when I woke up weeks later, without my memory, you just decided you’d hide the truth from

me forever,' I mutter.

'No! No, no, no,' Ada shakes her head furiously.

'We just didn't want to hurt you,' Sameer says.

Tisha doesn't even pretend to feel guilty.

'You guys ... I'm disgusted,' I say, with a certain air of finality. Like this is it. We're done.

Nobody says anything. Not one person in the room has the decency to even say the word sorry.

'I'm going home,' I say, shoving my journal, which I'm still holding, into my handbag.

'I'll drop you,' Bharat says.

I look at him angrily, like I can't even deal with spending another second in the presence of even one of them. But he looks apologetic. I no longer know what to believe and what not to believe, but he looked equally stumped by the news and going by the words of three *friends* who completely betrayed me, he played no role in any of this.

I nod silently and walk out and into the rising sun.



FOURTEEN

As soon as Mum opens the door, I fling myself into her arms and break down. I hadn't trusted Bharat enough to cry in front of him in the car. He even came with me till my front door. Before leaving, he just sort of shook his head and said, 'I don't even know what to say. Just ... take care, okay? And I'm here if you need me.' I nodded bravely, fighting tears that were trying to force their way out. He left, shaking his head. Once I made sure he was gone, I rang the doorbell. When I saw Mum, I sort of completely lost the last thread that was holding me together and collapsed in her arms, bursting into tears.

'What happened? Oh God, what's wrong?' Mum panics instantly.

'Mum,' I whisper and sort of stop supporting my own weight, leaning heavily on her.

She struggles to keep me standing, and walks me to the couch and makes me sit down. 'What is it, Kalindi? Did something bad happen? How did you get home?' She goes into full-blown paranoid-mother mode, which makes Dad come out.

'What's going on? Why are you two crying?' Dad looks alarmed.

'It's okay,' I say quickly, to calm them down. 'It's alright. Nothing happened.'

'Then why are you crying?' Mum asks.

Dad kneels down on the carpeted floor in front of me and studies my face. 'What is it?'

It takes me a couple of minutes to calm down enough to speak coherently. I take a sip from the glass of water Mum has brought for me, and my throat feels less pathetic. I clear my throat and wipe my tears, before saying, 'I want to change everything.'

'What do you mean, Kalindi?' Mum asks, looking so concerned I feel guilty once more.

'Everything, Mum. My room. I hate it. There's way too much black in it and I feel like I'm trapped in a dungeon or something. I want to change the colour of the walls, the stupid curtains, the bedcovers, the posters on the wall and just everything.'

'Okay ...' Dad says. 'But at least tell us what prompted this idea?'

'I just ... I've been ...' I shake my head. 'I don't know how to say this.'

'What is it, Kalindi?' Mum prods.

'Ever since I woke up, I've been trying to be this girl I used to be. I wanted to fit into her life. Her room, her clothes, her friends, her interests—everything. I knew how I used to be pre-accident, I got it from whatever you guys and everyone else has told me about me. But the thing is: I'm not the same girl. I'm *not* her. I don't know that girl. I don't know who she was and, from whatever I do know about her, I don't like her,' I look at my parents' expressions, which clearly say what-the-hell-is-going-on-here. I sigh. 'I really don't know how to explain this.'

'We're with you. I get what you mean. I mean I get it as much as any person other than you could possibly get it,' Dad assured me.

Mum nods in agreement, her wide eyes looking at me like I'm a wounded little bird and she'd physically protect me from any and every danger that threatens to strike me.

'I don't want to be that girl anymore. I don't want to fit into her life. I don't want to like the things she liked. I don't want to stay up in bed every night forcing my brain to just freaking remember the past. I don't want to be with people who can't accept me as I am now and are just waiting for my memory to come back. I don't want my old life back,' I breathe out. I actually feel physically relieved saying it out loud. So relieved, that I go on, 'It feels like there used to be an entirely different person, and I have been given her looks and approximate size and shape and have been asked to play dress-up. BE HER. That's like the mission I've been put on.'

'That makes sense,' Mum says.

'Yes, see? We totally get it!' Dad nods fervently, trying to mimic my tone. Not my present tone, the tone of my voice when I am happy and don't feel like I was run over by a truck. At least emotionally. I don't know how much sense this makes, but it is how I feel.

'I certainly don't want my old friends back,' I add softly.

It's like the inside of Mum's head suddenly lights up. Like there's an actual bulb that turned on once I said that last sentence. She doesn't ask. She just looks at me, waiting for me to expand.

'They lied to me. All of them. Ada, Tisha, Sameer, Kapil. Maybe even Bharat, but I don't think so. Which is confusing, because I honestly don't know what to think anymore. What to believe and what not to believe. I can't trust any of them.'

'What did they lie about?' Dad asks.

'I can't ... I'm sorry, I can't tell you. But they just ... they took advantage of my accident and my memory loss to hide the truth from me. What kind of a person does that?' I shut up, when my voice starts to break.

My parents are understanding enough not to prod. A minute later, I tell them I'm tired and they walk with me to my room, where I slump down on the bed and release a huge breath.

'I do understand why one could have a problem with the décor,' Dad looks around the room as if noticing it for the first time, and says.

'You think?' I smile.

'Yeah, the bedsheet is black.' He looks down at the grey hairy rug on the floor and adds, 'Also, what's this thing I'm standing on? Is it like a dead animal or something? A bear, perhaps?'

Mum laughs and says, 'It's synthetic. Kalindi insisted on getting it.'

'I'm just glad that at least an animal didn't have to die so that this girl here could have a hideous rug made out of its skin in her room,' Dad says.

Mum and I look at each other and laugh.

'Well, it is kind of dark in here, isn't it?' Dad continues.

'I swear to God!' I groan. 'We need to do something about the lighting in here. None of the many many lights give out actual light. Just sort of a dull glow.'

'Noted, and will be taken care of,' Dad bows a little at me, which makes me giggle.

My parents are adorable. They're joking around with me, when I know that they're actually worried inside, just to make me laugh. I feel another tug of guilt and want to tell Mum all about what I

wrote in the journal and how bad I feel about it, but I really am tired.

As if sensing it somehow, Mum says I need to sleep now and adjusts my pillow and kisses my forehead. 'Sweet dreams,' she whispers.

Dad touches my cheek and doesn't say anything, but it makes me feel like it is all going to be okay. Once they leave, I sigh loudly and close my eyes.

The one good thing about going to sleep after staying up all night, followed by a huge fight, a lot of crying, soul-searching, secret-confessing and joking around, is that you are completely exhausted and when you sleep, you sleep like a log. You fall into a long, dreamless sleep. And the good thing about dreamless sleep? No nightmares.

4 MAY 2013

I don't go to school anymore. It's not as if I *won't* go to school *ever*, of course I will, but I simply feel like I can't face it just yet. It's the fourth day that I have missed school. Mum and Dad are totally cool with it. After my breakdown the other day, they've been treating me like they usually do, like nothing ever happened, and it wasn't a big deal. But I've seen them steal glances at each other when they're around me. Dad jokes to overcome the embarrassment of having to deal with expressing emotions, but he's not fooling me. And Mum looks at me with her paranoid-mother expression when she thinks I'm not noticing.

Other than that, all has been well. They've agreed to let me stay at home for as long as I like. My school is going to close for summer vacation in a week anyway, so technically, I'd only be extending my vacation by one week.

I look at the schedule in my hand, which goes like:

FINAL TERM EXAM (for class XI): MARCH 1 to 15

EXAM BREAK: MARCH 16 to APRIL 14 (*four weeks*)

CLASSES START (for class XII): APRIL 15

SUMMER BREAK: MAY 13 TO JUNE 23 (*six weeks*)

CLASSES RESUME (for class XII): JUNE 24 onwards

It was really weird that I got into the accident on 15 March, the day my exams ended, and got better enough to get back to school right on time. I didn't even miss a single day; I was there in school when it reopened on April 15. Pretty much sucks, getting sick during your vacation and getting better when it's time for school.

'How did your wet towel manage to get all the way here?' Mum calls.

'Where?' I ask, getting up and walking towards the sound of her voice.

'To the kitchen platform?'

'I was hungry.'

'You eat too much,' Mum says as I pick up my wet towel from the kitchen, where she's busy doing something to ladyfingers.

'You must be the only mother in the whole world who would say that to her only child.'

'I didn't say I *mind* your eating too much. I was simply stating a fact.'

'What? I *like* food,' I say defensively. Also, I don't have anything to do, so I get bored. I'm a

person without a past, some painful new memories I'd rather not think about, and no friends. The days get really long when one doesn't have anything to do. And I have a tendency to confuse boredom with hunger. So I eat. Also, my mother is an excellent cook.

Mum laughs. 'It's okay! I was only joking. Having a kid who eats a lot is a definite improvement on having a kid who never ate anything.'

'Ah, I had an image to maintain. And I mean that in the literal sense too,' I wink.

Mum laughs, and I walk back towards my room, my wet towel in my hand. I open the door to my tiny balcony and step out into the sunlight. The first three things I see are: Sarabjeet, Harsh and Michael. It's hard to avoid conversation, when they are all standing about five feet away from me, facing me. But I try. I hang my towel on the railing and do not look up at any of them.

'Hi,' Harsh says.

Great. Now I *have* to look up. 'Hey.'

'Hey,' the other two mutter.

'Hi,' I say.

'Haven't seen you at school almost all week?' Harsh asks.

'Yeah,' I shrug non-committally.

'Umm ... are you alright?'

'Yeah.'

'So, what's up?' Harsh Raj Sisodiya is really trying to get me talking.

'Nothing much,' I say.

'What have you been up to?'

'Nothing. Just, sort of ... *existing*.' I look away from all of them and frown at the floor. This one really got me thinking. What *have* I been doing these last few days?

'Do you want to come over?' Sarabjeet asks.

I look up with a jolt. What? I thought she didn't like me. I look at them. They're all in school uniform and look like the same people I bump into at school every day. But never once has Sarabjeet Siddhu actually started a conversation with me. 'What?' I ask, to make sure I heard right.

'Come over? We just got back from school and came straight here. You could join us ... if you want.' She turns a little pink in the face, clearly embarrassed.

'Oh, umm, okay,' I agree quickly, not wanting to embarrass her more.

'Great!' Sarabjeet's face lights up.

'Do you know how to get here?' Harsh asks.

'I ... don't think so,' I say, wondering for the first time, *how does one get from my place to Harsh's?* I've never contemplated the idea of being at his place before.

'You'll have to take a right from your building, turn right at the end of the block, walk straight, and then take a right again at the first turn,' Sarabjeet tries to explain.

My face must've given away my confusion, because Harsh says, 'Never mind, I'll meet you at the main gate of your building.'

'Great, I'll meet you there in five minutes,' I say. I shut the door of the veranda and announce, 'MUM, I'm going to a friend's place for a while.'

‘Where?’ Mum is in front of me in less than a second.

‘A friend’s place.’

‘Umm ...’

‘Harsh Raj Sisodiya from over *there*,’ I point towards the closed balcony door.

‘How do you ...?’

‘He’s with me in school. Same class and section. Anyway, I don’t have time to explain. He’s meeting me downstairs; gotta go.’

‘Do you have your phone with you?’ Mum calls just as I’m about to turn the doorknob.

‘Yeah, yeah. Relax!’ I step out and rush to the elevator. I reach the main gate of the building in record time. It takes me a minute to catch my breath, and ready myself to look completely unaffected and nonchalant. Like I hang out with cute guys at their place and with their friends all the time and this is no big deal. I see Harsh walking towards me, and my tummy does a flip.

‘Hi Kalindi Mishra,’ he does a little bow thingy, his goofy smile in place.

‘Hello Harsh Raj Sisodiya,’ I giggle.

‘Shall we?’

‘We shall.’

We start retracing his steps from a minute ago. ‘So, how’s it *really* going?’ he asks.

‘Not so good, actually,’ I have no idea why I admit that to him.

‘May I ask why?’

‘You may.’

‘Well, why?’ he looks at me in a way that makes me a little self-conscious, in a good way. I’m aware that he’s looking at me, and we are in broad daylight, and one simply does *not* look appealing under direct sunlight, what with all the numerous tiny imperfections open and well lit for display.

‘Long story,’ I shrug. I really do not want to get into all that now and depress myself again.

‘Some other time,’ he agrees. His eyes are gorgeous. Like very dark grey, almost black but not quite, with eyelashes uncharacteristically long for a boy. His brows crinkle in an extremely adorable fashion when he smiles his goofy smile or studies my face. He’s doing the latter now.

‘What?’ I ask.

‘You’re really pretty up close.’ Just like that. Like it wasn’t the best compliment of my (admittedly unusually short) life or anything. Like it was insignificant. Like it wouldn’t make butterflies attack my stomach.

‘Thank you,’ I mutter, suddenly quite shy.

We reach Harsh’s apartment, and just as we’re about to enter, we see Sarabjeet and Michael coming out.

‘We have to go,’ Sarabjeet announces.

‘Why?’ Harsh asks.

‘I promised Mom I’d look after Geet, she’s my little sister,’ she adds, looking at me, ‘and I completely forgot. Now Mom has to go to the market and I’m not home to babysit Geet.’

‘That sounds like you,’ Harsh says and asks Michael, ‘Why do *you* have to go?’

‘Because he doesn’t want to have to ride the Metro alone later,’ Sarabjeet says.

‘More like *she* doesn’t want to have to ride the Metro alone now and is dragging me with her to keep her company, even though we have different routes after three stations,’ Michael says.

‘Wow.’

‘What?’ Three sets of eyes turn to me and I realize I’d said the *wow* aloud.

‘That was the longest sentence I’ve heard come out of Michael’s mouth,’ I explain.

Harsh laughs, ‘He’s the shy kind, that one.’

‘Wait till you get to know him better. Then he doesn’t shut up even if you pay him to,’ Sarabjeet adds.

‘Do you want me to come with you or not?’ Michael threatens Sarabjeet, whereupon she fake-apologizes to him and he fake-forgives her and they say their goodbyes and leave, but not before promising to come over tomorrow and inviting me to hang out with them once again.

Once they leave, Harsh turns to me, ‘So?’

‘So?’

‘What do we do now?’

‘We walk me back home and meet up tomorrow at your place,’ I say.

‘Sounds like a plan.’

And then, we retrace Harsh’s steps from a while ago, leading to my apartment. When we get back to my building’s gate, we wave goodbye, and I find that I’m really looking forward to meeting him tomorrow.

‘That was quick!’ Mum observes, as I get in through the door she has held open.

‘That was awesome,’ I declare.

She looks at me maybe to check for signs of craziness or something. She really must think I’m retarded.



FIFTEEN

5 MAY 2013

I wake up feeling a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. Or anxiety in anticipation of making new friends. I feel hope and despair at the same time. I don't want to mess this up. Also, I really like Harsh and I want him to like me back. I don't know what a girl has to do to make a boy like her.

I shower quickly and join Dad at the dining table for breakfast. My Mum fasts every Sunday for some reason. I butter my toast slowly and spray some pepper on it before placing my omelette between two slices. Halfway through eating it, I feel nauseous.

'Everything okay?' Dad asks, looking up from his newspaper.

'I guess.'

'Not hungry?' he points to my half-eaten breakfast.

'I don't feel so good.'

'What doesn't feel good? The arm okay?'

'Yeah, yeah.' My cast was removed three days ago, after six weeks in plaster. After the cast was cut off, the X-ray scans showed that my fracture had completely healed and I had regained almost complete use of the arm. The doctor said it'll be back to normal in a couple of weeks, as it gets used to movement again. 'I guess I'm just nervous.'

'Oh, yes. I heard you're making new friends,' Dad says. It's half a question, half a statement.

'I've been friends with Harsh ever since I came home from the hospital. I mean, sort of.'

Dad nods.

'It's the first time I'm going over to his place and actually hanging out with his friends and stuff, though.'

'You're worried about nothing,' Dad assures me.

I nod. I hope he's right.

After breakfast (Dad finished mine and promised to not tell Mum, she really insists on finishing everything on your plate and not throwing anything away) I go back to my room. It's 10.13 a.m. and I don't know what time I'm supposed to go over to Harsh's place. I open a window to peek into his balcony. No signs of human existence. Although there is a bird sitting on the railing. I close the window and sit down on my bed.

I open this book I've been reading, but I find it impossible to concentrate. The book is one Dad gave me, and said he thought I'd enjoy it. And I do. It is a book by John Grisham called *Theodore Boone: YOUNG LAWYER* where Theodore Boone is a thirteen-year-old boy, who likes to think of himself as a lawyer. He rides his bicycle around the small (also, fictional) city of Strattenburg. Both his parents are really busy lawyers and he has picked up a lot of things from them over the years. Grisham writes that Theo was undecided about his future, but his dreams oscillated between being a

famous trial lawyer and a great judge. Both of which seem to me like exceptionally well-decided paths. He just has to choose between two extremely awesome career options. He couldn't go wrong either way.

Theo has a friend, April Finnemore, who he has known since pre-kindergarten and they are each other's best friends but there is nothing romantic between them. Theo says there is not one boy in his class who'd admit having a girlfriend. They were too young for all that, and even though Theo had been warned that things would change drastically, he felt it was unlikely to happen to him. I laughed when I read about that. Right now he doesn't want anything to do with girls. Just wait a year or two and see how things change! I made a note to ask Dad if this book has sequels. I'd love to find out what happens next.

Anyway, so April's parents are getting a divorce, which is hard on her and Theo finds himself in the middle of a rather sensational murder trial. As I read about Theo sitting in his geometry class, trying to stay awake, when there is an announcement on the intercom of his classroom, asking his teacher to check Theo out and send him downstairs, I forget feeling nervous about meeting Harsh. I've gotten too involved in this work of fiction by this point to care about real life.

Theo is wondering who checked him out of school and all sorts of scenarios come to his mind, but before I can find out, I hear someone call my name. I put the book down with a groan. I was really into it, but then I have seven weeks of time with myself to look forward to and I can devote all of it to reading. Right now, Sarabjeet is calling my name.

I pull a window open and she yells, 'Hi!'

Well, just because I am inside my room (which is like 1.2 feet behind where I was standing in the balcony talking to the three of them yesterday) doesn't mean my hearing is impaired. I don't point that out to her, though. Not the best opening for possible friendship. 'Hey, Sarabjeet!'

'Harsh just went down to get you,' she says,

'What? He didn't need to. I know the way now!'

'That's what *I* told him!' she turns to Michael, who is sitting inside in Harsh's room, on something I cannot see and says, 'Isn't that exactly what I told Harsh?'

Michael looks up from something he seems engrossed in (which I can't see) and does something that's between a nod and a shrug.

'Anyway,' Sarabjeet says, after she's done frowning at Michael. 'Hurry up and go. I mean come!'

'In a minute,' I say and close the window shut before yelling, 'MUM! DAD! I'm going,' and rushing out the door.

'Have fun,' Mum says.

'I will,' I yell back.

'Bye!' Dad says.

'BYE!'

When I get to the main gate, Harsh is already there, waiting for me. Also, inspecting an ancient Maruti 800. It's maroon, but not really—its colour has faded several shades and now it's just some sort of extremely discoloured version of maroon, with scratches and dust all over it.

But that's not what I'm looking at. Harsh is wearing a black button-down shirt, and I don't know

what it is about that black shirt. It just does something to him, makes him look completely dashing. I can't stop looking at him. I look majorly underdressed in my plain yellow jeans and white tank top that has a print of a girl wearing huge sunglasses and smoking a cigarette on it.

'Hey,' I say.

'Oh, hi, Kalindi Mishra,' he looks away from the ancient car and turns his complete attention towards me. It's just unfair. When he pays this much attention to me, I feel all squirmy and like, I do not deserve this amount of notice.

'What's up?' I ask.

'I was just looking at this car here. Don't you think it's adorable?' he questions.

'Umm, I think it's pretty ... old and rusty and unreliable. But yeah, adorable. That too.'

Harsh laughs. 'You're just judging it by its age and current appearance. When I see it, I see a car that has spent its lifetime with a family. The model is over twenty years old and it is well-worn, which means it was used a lot. Can you imagine the number of happy memories this car has shared with the family? Taking them to the movies, road trips, annual functions at schools?'

'I ...' have nothing to say.

'I think cars represent a sense of anticipation. They take people to places they want to go, places they are looking forward to being at. Constantly. Every time a person gets in a car and drives it somewhere, it is with the intention of getting to point B.'

'That ... makes sense.' I find that the experiences of my thirty-four-day-long life are too limited to make an intelligent comment.

'Anyway, let's go?' he asks.

'Sure.' My face has become kind of small. I wish I knew more about the lifetime of cars so I could talk to Harsh about them. I fall silent, thinking about my shortcomings, and about just how much the accident messed up my life.

'I notice things,' Harsh says after a while, as we walk to his place, side by side.

'I noticed.'

'I also noticed you have a cast missing?' he motions to my right arm. 'I felt there was something missing yesterday, but just couldn't pinpoint it.'

'Yeah, we got it removed a few days ago.'

'You feel better?'

'Yeah. For starters, I can do my hair better.'

'Hair's important,' he nods intelligently.

'Don't judge me! My hair's like really annoying. It's cut short in the front and just keeps getting in my face and I have to use a dozen pins to keep it in place and all that doesn't look pretty when I do it with one hand. It looks like a hornet's nest.'

Harsh inspects my head. 'Definitely better than a hornet's nest, I have to agree.'

'See? Having two hands helps,' I prove my point with a flourish.

'What have you been up to, Kalindi Mishra?' Harsh asks, as we wait for the elevator. I like the way he says my full name.

'You mean since we last met yesterday?'

‘Twenty-one hours is a long time.’

‘I’ve been reading a book.’

‘Which book?’ he asks, genuinely interested.

‘It’s called *Theodore Boone: Young Lawyer*. By John Grisham. Have you read it?’

‘I can’t say I have. Tell me more about it.’

We get in the elevator and he presses *seven*. ‘Why seven?’ I ask.

‘Because that’s where my home is.’

‘But we are on the same floor! I mean, our balconies are on the same level and my house is on the sixth floor.’

‘Be prepared for low ceilings then,’ he smiles. ‘Anyway, what were you saying about this John Grisham book?’

‘It says, *Theodore Boone: YOUNG LAWYER* on the cover and *THEODORE BOONE: Kid Lawyer* in all the right page headers. So I’m not sure what to call it. Let’s call it *Theodore Boone*.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘It’s about this thirteen-year-old boy who wants to become a lawyer or a judge when he grows up. And his parents are both lawyers too. And his friend, April, who’s been his friend since pre-kindergarten. He gets involved in a really grand murder case trial.’

‘Is it any good?’

‘Oh, yes. Much, much better than my flat narration of it.’

‘Your flat narration got me interested,’ Harsh says. We exit the lift and walk to his door.

‘You can have my copy once I’m done,’ I offer.

‘That’d be great. Which makes me think: we can be really successful borrowing neighbours. You could just throw the book over to me when you’re done and I’ll catch it. You could get DVDs of movies and games from me in the middle of the night if you get bored. It’s brilliant actually. We can have a long-lasting symbiotic, borrowing-lending relationship.’

Harsh turns the key in the slot and we go in.

‘How will we borrow sugar, but?’

‘What do you need sugar for?’

‘I don’t, but neighbours borrow sugar, don’t they?’

‘Let’s make a deal to borrow only things that we actually need,’ Harsh says and I laugh.

We pass through his living room, walk past the kitchen and enter his bedroom, where Michael is sitting on the bed, playing a video game on a laptop, looking really fierce. Sarabjeet is in the balcony, talking on the phone. I look around the room. ‘Whoa.’

‘I know, right?’ Harsh grins goofily.

‘It’s like you don’t even have a wall!’

‘That was the intention. We got the place repainted and the colour I chose for my room didn’t turn out the way it looked on the placard. Dad refused to have it redone. And so the infinite posters covering every square millimetre of the wall.’

I look around, trying to make sense of it all. There are posters of all sorts of sizes, shapes, colours, textures. There’s a white one that says ‘THE BIG BANG THEORY’ and has four guys and one

jumping girl on it. One is black and red and says 'TOP GUN' with half a face and some military looking stuff on it. One is multi-coloured, but mostly yellow, red and black, saying 'SHOLAY' with two men and two women on it. I recognize one of the men as Amitabh Bachchan. He's the one actor in the whole world that I know of. I've got a lot to learn.

'This is ... something else.'

'Why do I feel you're not saying that in a good way?' Harsh raises his eyebrows.

'I'm not one to judge. Out of these many, many faces on your walls, I recognize one. There's no way I'd know if your taste is good or bad,'

'Who do you recognize?'

'Amitabh Bachchan,' I point to the *Sholay* poster.

'Aaargh, darn!' Michael suddenly yells. 'Sorry. I just got killed in my game because I got interested in your conversation.'

'Hi, Michael,' I say.

'Hey, Kalindi. What do you mean you know no one except Big B?'

'I don't know what a Big B is.'

Nobody laughs at me or makes fun of me. 'It's a nickname for Amitabh Bachchan.'

'Oh. Yeah, I kind of lost all memory of people and incidents when I had that accident, so I don't know any movie stars,' I explain.

'We must start your education immediately,' Michael says with a sense of urgency.

'You know what the good thing is about that?' Sarabjeet asks, entering the room and keeping her cell phone in her jeans pocket.

'There is a good thing?' I ask.

'That you get to watch F.R.I.E.N.D.S for the first time. I don't know if you've seen it before or not —'

'Neither do I,' I interject.

'Which is exactly my point. You have no idea what people would give to experience F.R.I.E.N.D.S for the first time again!'

'It's a TV show,' Harsh explains to my puzzled face.

'It's not just a TV show. It's the BEST TV SHOW EVER MADE. TV isn't TV without F.R.I.E.N.D.S,' Sarabjeet lets out.

'She likes it,' Harsh mutters.

'I gathered,' I mutter back.

'We need to show her *The Dark Knight* right away,' Michael insists, like his life depended on it. 'There's a lot to catch up, not enough time.'

'I think she can live without watching Batman,' Sarabjeet rolls her eyes at Michael.

'Says the F.R.I.E.N.D.S lunatic.'

'Like you are any better. Gushing over a stupid superhero like a little child.'

'It's better to be a child than watch stupid sitcoms like a middle-aged woman.'

'What did you—?'

'Guys, guys, GUYS!' Harsh yells to shut them up. He turns to me and says in a lower tone, in a

manner of explanation. 'We don't have visitors often. The kids get over-excited.'

I just look at the three of them, wide-eyed. In my short thirty-four-days-old life, I have never once seen seventeen-year-olds acting like this. They have no trouble in the whole world. Sarabjeet doesn't have to worry about her eyeliner not matching the colour of her clothes or her lipstick smudging, or having the perfect pair of shoes for every occasion. She hasn't even put on so much as some lip balm. Michael just cares about video games and superhero movies, and I can tell by looking at him that he doesn't spend hours applying gel to his hair and setting it just right.

And Harsh ... oh, Harsh. He covers his walls with a zillion posters and observes old cars closely. He comes to walk me from my place to his and his to mine. He plants fireworks to go off during the school assembly. He tells me I look pretty up close. He wears a black shirt that turns him into a knockout. He plans to get into a long-lasting symbiotic, borrowing-lending relationship with me, as neighbours.

And they want me to hang out with them. They're actually fighting over who gets to show me movies/TV shows of their choice first. *I can be one of them.*

I am so glad I came over. I could make *real* friends.

There's just one thought in the back of my head, bugging me. I look at Sarabjeet and say, 'I thought you didn't like me.'

'Why would you think that?' she looks confused.

'You know, the day we talked? You were in Harsh's balcony and I was in mine? I just—'

'Oh, I knew it!' she shouts suddenly. 'I remember. You asked me why Harsh was grounded and I didn't tell you.'

'Yeah, and after that, every time I bumped into you guys at school, you never spoke to me.'

'I get nervous. You were one of *them*. I thought you were like them.'

I don't need to ask who *them* is. 'And now? What has changed?' I wonder what kind of rumours have been flying around school. Did word get out, of the events of the night of Sameer's birthday?

'Well, now you seem alright. You clearly don't like *them* much. Anyway, the thing is: I couldn't tell you why Harsh was grounded that day, because it is not something you tell someone over a distance of six feet.'

I am confused.

'Harsh was grounded because—'

'SARABJEET!' Harsh yells.

'What? She wants to know,' Sarabjeet points at me.

'Yeah. I want to know,' I chime in.

'Man, I should never have let you two near each other.'

'Try and stop us now,' Sarabjeet challenges and comes close to me. She mutters in my ear, while Harsh turns away from us, looking absolutely embarrassed. 'He was grounded because his parents came back early one day. And they heard voices coming from his room's computer.'

Then she stops and looks at me expectantly, like I'm supposed to connect the dots or something. Well, I can't. 'And?' I ask.

'Oh God, kill me,' Harsh groans, his face still away from us.

‘Harsh was ... busy, engrossed in ... stuff. He didn’t hear his parents come in. They entered his room and,’ she looks at Harsh with an evil grin on her face, absolutely enjoying humiliating him, ‘let’s just say: he was in a hurry to zip up his pants.’

Now it dawns upon me. From where I’m sitting, I can’t see Harsh’s face, but I can bet my face has turned even redder than his. Sarabjeet and Michael laugh loudly, while I blush and Harsh gets annoyed.

‘What? It’s only normal. Find me a seventeen-year-old boy who doesn’t do it and then we’ll talk,’ Harsh defends himself, heatedly.

‘Still. It doesn’t make the story any less hilarious!’ Michael jokes.

‘Sure doesn’t,’ Sarabjeet adds.

Once everybody returns to a more normal state, we vote on a movie (I just second Harsh’s vote, the least I could do after embarrassing him so much) and shut all the doors and windows, draw all the curtains and watch it in silence.

It is an animated movie called *Up* which is about an old man who wanted to be an explorer as a kid, and after his wife dies and some builders want to run down his home and build a mall or something on that land, he makes the house fly, with three hundred thousand or so balloons and this small but fat boy scout gets trapped in the house too, and thus is added unintentionally in the old man’s journey to this Paradise Falls that he had dreamed about going to. There is a large bird called Kevin and a lot of dogs who can talk and a very dangerous villain, who is also an explorer.

The movie makes me cry at three different places, and gets pretty intense by the end. It is awesome.

Afterwards, we hang around for a little while and talk about the movie. When everybody gets ready to leave, they say ‘see you at school tomorrow’ to which I make a face. Harsh asks me why I don’t come to school and I don’t tell him the details, but just that I had a fight with *them* and I don’t have any friends. At that point, the three of them insist that I can hang out with them and make me promise I’ll come to school tomorrow.

We take the stairs and part ways. Sarabjeet and Michael take the Metro to their respective homes again. Harsh walks me back home again. As I wave goodbye, I have a wide smile on my face. I was worrying for nothing. Today has been better than I could have hoped for. I look forward to tomorrow.



SIXTEEN

6 MAY 2013

I spot Harsh waiting at the bus stop. It takes me thirty-three steps to get to him.

‘Kalindi Mishra!’ he says, as a way of greeting.

‘Harsh,’ I tilt my head to the side happily.

‘What a pleasure to see you.’

‘Only, not really. You knew I was going to come.’

‘That doesn’t mean I cannot feel pleasure seeing you here,’ he explains.

Before I can think of a response, bus no. S-21 comes to stop in front of us. Once again, we step back and let others board it before getting in ourselves. ‘I’ve arranged for a seat to be reserved for you.’

‘Thanks.’

When I get in, Bharat and Kapil half get up from their seats to let me know where they are sitting, as if they really think I am going to join them. I look away and sit with Harsh.

‘Hey!’ Sarabjeet greets us.

‘Hi,’ we respond in unison.

She shifts to make space for us. I sit next to her and Harsh sits next to me. We are all very quiet; there seems no need for conversation. Harsh takes out a comic book called ‘Lee Folk’s PHANTOM’ to read, while Sarabjeet and I silently stare out of the open window. Apart for once, where Sarabjeet fights a little with the kid sitting behind us for the ratio of window sharing, we don’t speak till the bus stops inside the school campus.

I sigh and rest my head against the seat in front of me, while students begin to disembark.

‘Didn’t sleep well last night?’ Harsh ask.

I shake my head a little, forehead still against the seat in front, which messes my hair a bit.

‘That’s too bad; we have a strict stay-up-at-all-times rule here at school.’

‘Too bad,’ I nod, messing up my hair more.

When Harsh gets up, Sarabjeet and I follow suit. I rub my eyes and walk with them to class. A few people stare, but I ignore them. We get to class to dump our stuff, and Michael is already at his seat. I sit with Sarabjeet, and Harsh joins Michael at the seat behind ours.

During assembly, I notice that Ada and Tisha are not sitting together, and when we come back to class, weirdly enough, only Ada and Bharat share a bench. Sameer sits at the end of the corner-most row, Kapil at the second-last seat in the row next to Sameer and Tisha three seats ahead of where Ada and Bharat are. For a second, I get curious about this division in the group, but quickly let it go. I have nothing to do with them. I should not care.

The thing about people who’re considered nerds at school is: they study in class. As soon as the

lectures begin, Sarabjeet is engrossed in every word that leaves the teacher's mouth. Her concentration is Yoda-level. I turn around to see Michael and Harsh were more or less like her too. Although Harsh does meet my eye for a second and wink at me before turning his attention back to the teacher.

The rest of the day goes by without anything of note happening. During the break we go straight to the mess, which is good, because I know *they* are at the canteen. After lunch, we hang out at this secret hideout, which is right opposite where the buses are parked. We sit on the broken benches surrounding what once used to be the football field. But it was too small and they eventually shut it down and built a new one on the other side of the campus. Now they park the school buses in half the area and the rest is unused and neglected.

The twenty minutes we spend there are the best twenty minutes of my day. Harsh is, like, really funny and Sarabjeet and Michael fight like little kids. Even though I'm in kind of a sombre mood and don't really talk much all day, it's fun to just hang around these people.

The last two periods are optional and the periods I dread the most. Harsh, Sarabjeet and Michael, they all have to go to Computer Science, while I have to sit alone outside, attending PE when I have no one to play with. 'Come with me,' Harsh gets up and says.

'What? Where?' I ask.

'Just come.'

I get up and get my PE book with me.

'Harsh, we have to get to class for CS,' Sarabjeet says, referring to the computer lab.

'I know. You guys go on.'

'And you?'

'I'll join you later,' Harsh says.

'Cool.' Sarabjeet and Michael leave the classroom and I turn to look at Harsh.

'Where are we going?' I ask.

He smiles his goofy smile and starts walking up the stairs. I follow him. Four flights up, we get to a closed door. There is a huge lock on it. Harsh pulls it down a little and it gives away.

He opens the door and steps outside.

'Why are we going to the terrace?' I ask.

'Because you need to take a break,' he states simply.

He pushes the door closed, but doesn't lock it. We are on the terrace now, which is very hot, it being midday in summer. I wonder if Harsh thought this through. No way am I going to bunk two classes and spend that time sweating and getting tanned under a one o' clock sun instead.

Harsh starts walking again, and I follow him. He reaches the wall at the edge of the terrace, climbs up onto it, jumps down and disappears. My heart gives away. *What the hell just happened? Did he just jump off a terrace?*

'HARSH!' I shriek, running towards the wall.

'What?' he replies, in a very calm and not-dead tone.

I peek down to see that it was only a six foot drop. He's standing there, looking up at me with that huge goofy grin on his face. I sigh with relief. 'You're ... impossible. I swear my heart *literally*

stopped beating for a second there.'

Harsh laughs loudly. 'I was just trying to get you to a cooler place. The terrace is really hot, you know?' he states matter-of-factly.

'You were trying to give me a heart attack, that's what you were trying to do!'

'Easy now, tiger. Climb down.'

'Don't you ever do something like that again,' I warn him and get on the boundary and jump down next to him. 'This is an excellent bunking place.'

'It is.'

The building of the Presidency convent is built in a modern style. There are rectangular blocks everywhere. The front has seven rectangular blocks, each placed in a way that looks haphazard, but is obviously pre-planned and because they are there to enhance the beauty of the building, a lot of free space has gone to waste. Like the part we're standing in right now. It is surrounded with walls on all four sides and looks kind of like a huge water tank made of cement, minus the water.

Harsh sits down on the ground and offers me his handkerchief. 'In case you don't want to get dirty.'

'What do you know? I happen to like dirty,' I say, tongue-in-cheek.

'Whoa. Did you intend for that to sound super-hot? 'Cause it totally did.'

'That's just me. The effect I have on people.'

We laugh, and grow quiet after a while. We sit silently, side by side. The silence is anything but awkward. It's almost melodious. It's like we are in our own separate worlds, yet together.

After a while: 'Tell me whenever you're ready,' Harsh says softly and then we fall silent again.

For the next twenty minutes, we just sit. When I can't take the voices in my head anymore, I say, 'I'm having nightmares.'

'What kind of nightmares?'

'Like, I fall. I mean that's the one thing that happens every time: I fall, and then I wake up. The falling is preceded by a wide variety of horrific things.'

'Things like?' Harsh asks. Something about his voice ... I've never seen him this serious.

'Sometimes there are people chasing me, and I run for my life. Sometimes I am sitting on a cliff with a boy and we are kissing, and his face sort of transforms and becomes all grotesque, and I pull back in alarm and fall down. Sometimes someone throws me out of a moving car and I fall on the road headfirst.'

He nods.

'It's been happening ever since I woke up from that coma. I can handle it, mostly. But it's getting worse. I'm always scared. I try not to fall asleep at nights, but when I eventually let go, I wake up from a new nightmare and get all paranoid.'

'You haven't told your parents?'

'No. They worry.'

'They should know. Maybe there's something that can be done.'

'Like what?'

'Seeing a therapist, maybe?' he suggests.

'Are you implying I'm crazy and I need a shrink?' I laugh out loud.

‘This is no joke, Kalindi Mishra. You having nightmares that keep you awake all night is *not* funny to me,’ he says, angry. I’ve never known this side of him.

‘Sorry.’

‘I’m not saying you’re crazy. But you had a traumatic brain injury, followed by brain surgery. You lost your entire memory. There is a good chance this has something to do with that. Maybe this is one of the side effects or symptoms or something. Or maybe these are not dreams, but hallucinations. In any case, you need to see a doctor.’

I get silent again. I don’t know how to tell him. This is something I try to not even think about, and saying it out loud, telling Harsh, would make it tangible. It would make something exist for real, something that has only ever existed in my head. ‘You don’t understand,’ I whisper, my voice breaking. I don’t want to cry.

‘Then make me. Explain it to me.’

I shake my head, and the first tears escape my eyes.

‘Hey! Hey, hey, hey,’ Harsh wraps his arm around me and pulls me close to him. That makes me cry even more. I sob quietly into his shirt. ‘You have to tell me, Kalindi. I want to help.’

‘You can’t help ... no one can,’ I say between tears.

‘Please don’t cry,’ he pleads quietly. I sniff and take a minute to stop crying. I shift my head from his chest to his shoulder and sigh.

‘I can’t promise I can help you, but I want to. And I’ll never know what’s wrong until you tell me. You can’t keep it all to yourself, Kalindi. I’m here for you; that’s what friends are for. You can tell me.’

I think for a minute. Harsh stays silent. I think he knows I’m going to tell him; I can sense him waiting.

I finally say, ‘I don’t know if these are just nightmares, or ... if some of this is true ... like, memories.’

Harsh is silent for a second, as he takes this in, then he asks, ‘Do you think some of this has happened before? To you?’

I nod. ‘I don’t know. I have *none* of my memories, Harsh. It is so frustrating.’

‘Why do you feel these are not nightmares, but memories?’ he asks urgently, like he can’t bear the thought of any of this having happened to me.

‘Nobody knows how the accident happened. *They* are all liars, but from what I can gather, after the last exam, I went to Sameer’s place, trashed it and was on my way to the party to confront him and Tisha. But I never made it there. I was alone. At least I left Sameer’s place alone. The doctor said I was most probably in a car accident. But I don’t know how to drive a car. So somebody must’ve been with me. But who?’

Harsh doesn’t say anything but I can feel him thinking.

‘None of *them* was with me. Although I know they’re all liars, there is no physical evidence of any of them being in a car accident or any other kind of accident recently and I don’t think they would have any reason to hurt me, at least not physically.’

‘Yeah, I don’t think they’d do that either.’

‘Then what the hell happened?’ I feel frustrated. ‘Only two scenarios come to mind, both equally horrible.’

He doesn’t ask what.

‘One is that I was kidnapped. And the other is ...’ I don’t want to say it out loud. I don’t want to say it out loud. I don’t want to say it out loud. ‘... the other is ... rape.’

There is a certain finality to the way that last word comes out of my mouth. It’s like saying it aloud made it official. Now the idea is not just a demon in my head—but the possibility actually exists.

‘NO!’ Harsh protests as soon as the word leaves my mouth. He gets up and starts pacing around, as if too unsettled to sit.

It just breaks my heart. I feel like crying again, but I hold myself together. I start speaking in a rush, ‘But maybe it’s all in my head. Maybe nothing of this sort happened. Maybe it was just a hit-and-run case. Yeah, that makes sense. Some drunk driver hit me and then panicked, so he ran away leaving me there. That has to be it. I’ve just been paranoid and been reading too much stupid stuff online. I’m sure nothing like this happened—’

‘But that *is* the point. You’re *not* sure.’

I get up too, trying to convince him. ‘I am. I mean, yeah, I don’t remember, but I’m sure I’m reading too much into the nightmares. They could be a result of the trauma; I mean even if I was hit by, say, a car and that caused everything that happened, that in itself has to have some ... side effects.’

‘Why are you trying to convince me it’s not what you actually think it is?’ Harsh looks completely frustrated and his eyes are almost bloodshot.

‘Because I can’t see you worried like this,’ I say before I can stop myself.

His expression changes completely in a matter of seconds. ‘You are ... unbelievable.’ He holds my face in his palms and looks at my face. ‘You have been going through all of this alone, never complaining, never telling anyone ... and when you have so much to deal with, you are worried about me being worried? You’re just unbelievable,’ he says, shaking his head in disbelief.

‘I care about you. And I don’t want to worry you,’ I say honestly. ‘I have never seen you like this. And I want my wide-goofy-grin-Harsh back.’

‘*Your* wide-goofy-grin-Harsh?’ he raises his eyebrows.

‘Whatever,’ I shrug, pulling back from his hold.

He laughs. ‘Whatever.’

We have to rush back, since the bell has gone off and we’re supposed to get our bags and go to the bus. Harsh climbs back to the terrace first and then helps me up. Once we’re inside, Harsh returns the lock to position, so that it looks like it isn’t broken and useless.

As we climb down the stairs, he says to me softly, ‘It’s going to be okay. We’ll find a way.’

And I say, ‘It *is* okay. Don’t you worry about me.’

And Michael’s voice says from ten feet away, where he’s packing his bag in the classroom, ‘Where on earth have you two been?’



SEVENTEEN

7 MAY 2013

‘You really need to help me with this,’ I mutter to Sarabjeet, who’s absorbed in the voice of our chemistry teacher.

‘What?’ she mutters, looking slightly irritated for having been disturbed.

‘This. Chemistry. I don’t get it.’

It’s like she has to forcibly tear her eyes away from the blackboard to look at me. She frowns, ‘What?’

‘My amnesia? No recollection of past life? Sucking at stuff like chemistry? You need to help me with it.’

‘Oh, right. Yeah, relax. I’ve got it covered. You’re in safe hands. I’ll get you up-to-date over the summer vacation,’ Sarabjeet says and turns her attention back to the teacher, sort of dismissing me. Which makes me want to annoy her some more.

‘Thank you so much. You’re the best. I can’t tell you how grateful I am, to—’

‘Shhh!’ she cuts me off. ‘If you don’t let me concentrate now, we’re *both* going to flunk.’

I hadn’t thought of it like that. I shut up.

I stay mute for the rest of the class, wondering how to face Harsh. After school yesterday, he insisted that we go meet the doctor who operated on me after the accident. I tried to talk him out of it and told him I was just not ready to face Dr Sahani and the answers he might have, but he told me now is as good a time as ever and that he’s with me. He said knowing is better than not knowing. No matter what the truth is, it would be better to know than to wonder and dread.

When he put it like that, it made a lot of sense. So I went to the hospital with him. But as we sat in the waiting room (Dr Sahani was busy with a patient, and we hadn’t made an appointment), I began panicking. *If Dr Sahani tells me that I was, in fact, raped that night, how is that supposed to help me? It’ll just solidify my worst nightmare. If I just don’t know, and I try really hard, I can convince myself that it was just a hit-and-run. But once I know, I’ll know for life. I’m just not ready to deal with that information.*

Just then, Dr Sahani came out of his office and asked us to come in. ‘Kalindi! How are you doing today?’

‘I’m ... I’m good.’ I got up from the chair I had been waiting in and walked up to the doctor. Harsh was right behind me.

‘Great to know,’ Dr Sahani was inspecting my face for I don’t know what. ‘What brings you here?’

When he asked that, all I wanted to do was run away and never come back. *I was NOT raped. I was NOT raped. I was NOT raped.* I kept repeating it in my head like a mantra. Like if I said it enough number of times, it would become true.

I really was going to do it. I was going to ask him.

‘Would you like to come in?’ Dr Sahani pointed to his office door. ‘Perhaps we could speak more privately?’

I couldn’t do it. Standing in front of Dr Sahani, one sentence away from getting the answer to the question that had bothered me every day and every night since I woke from that coma, I was convinced that I was, indeed, raped. I was a hundred percent sure it happened. I couldn’t have Dr Sahani confirm my worst nightmare. I just couldn’t. I felt all the energy drain from my body and I just wanted to run away.

‘No, it’s okay,’ I spoke calmly. ‘I just wanted to thank you for saving my life.’ And then I smiled the most difficult smile of my life and left the hospital in a hurry.

Harsh and I didn’t speak on our way back home. Or in the bus on our way to school this morning, or at assembly, or when we got to class, and now the lecture has started and I can only try to get him to talk during the lunch break. While I appreciate his not bringing that incident up, not speaking to each other at all bothers me a great deal.

When we do get to lunch, I get all jittery. I don’t know what is going through his head. It’s scary.

We get up and make our way to the mess. Sarabjeet and Michael walk ahead, discussing something they learnt in CS yesterday. I fall back and walk with Harsh. He looks straight ahead.

‘Harsh,’ I say.

‘Kalindi.’

‘Mishra.’

‘What?’ he asks, finally looking at me.

‘Kalindi Mishra. You call me Kalindi Mishra.’

I don’t know why that one short sentence gets me all emotional. He’s looking at me and I look at him. Something changes in his expression and, just like that, he becomes the wide-goofy-grin-Harsh again.

‘Kalindi Mishra,’ he says and smiles a little.

I smile back. He smiles wider.

And just like that, we’re fine again. We reach the mess and once again fill our plates with whatever catches our fancy, then look for an empty table to sit at.

‘We need to devise a plan for Kalindi’s education,’ Sarabjeet says, as we sit down with our food.

‘What?’ I ask.

‘You’re not bad exclusively at chemistry. We’re going to have to bring you up to date in all the subjects,’ Sarabjeet says.

‘Relax, we have six weeks to do that,’ Harsh says.

‘Six weeks to cover the basics of *all* the subjects? Like from nursery to class XI?’

‘I’m not completely stupid,’ I protest.

‘See? She’s not completely stupid,’ Harsh says.

‘And I don’t think kids have chemistry or physics in nursery,’ Michael points out.

‘You know what I mean,’ Sarabjeet says.

The rest of the conversation happens excluding me, like I’m not even here, and it goes like this:

Harsh: 'Yeah. And it's simple. There are six subjects. She can handle PE herself; it's easy enough.'

Michael: 'We can help with English, but it's not something she'd need to worry about either. It's just reading, and she can read.'

Sarabjeet: 'Yeah, she can cover English during classes at school, with the rest of us.'

Harsh: 'That leaves only physics, chemistry and maths.'

Sarabjeet: 'Only?'

Michael: 'You can take chemistry, Sarabjeet. I'll take physics.'

Harsh: 'I'll handle maths. She's good at it anyway. Will just need a little help.'

Sarabjeet: 'Maybe it can be done over summer vacation, after all.'

Michael: 'Hmm.'

At this point, I interject, 'Sounds like a plan!' They all look at me like they'd forgotten I was with them. 'I have three personal tutors!'

'Lucky you. If I taught me, I'd always top class,' Michael boasts.

'Well technically, you do teach you, when you study,' I say.

'I meant if I had a teacher like me,' Michael says, then turns to Harsh. 'This young girl needs to be disciplined. She needs to learn how to talk to her tutors.'

'Indeed,' Harsh says. 'I believe in spanking.'

Out of the blue. Just like that. I blush bright red in less than a second. 'You guys are terrible,' I mutter.

'We are, aren't we?' Michael asks Harsh.

'We are indeed,' Harsh laughs.

Then we get busy eating and I look up only once I've practically licked my plate clean and am sure the blush has gone away.

We get up to leave. Just as we're about to leave the mess, Ada and Bharat enter. They stand directly in front of me and Ada says, 'Kalindi.'

I try to ignore them and keep walking, but she shifts to her right and blocks my way again.

'At least give me a chance to—'

'NO.'

And then I walk away. Harsh, Sarabjeet and Michael continue walking with me like nothing happened. Nobody brings it up even when we hang out at the old football stadium.

It's when we walk back to the classroom that Harsh asks me in a voice barely audible, 'Okay?'

'Okay,' I repeat.

'Okay,' Sarabjeet nudges me and says.

'Okay,' Michael joins in.

10 MAY 2013

'Mum, I'm going to be at Harsh's place,' I call out from my room.

'Why am I not surprised?' she calls back.

'Because you're my mother and you know me?'

‘Because that’s all that you do after school.’

‘What else is there to do?’ I ask. By now I’m at the door to her room, where she’s lying on the bed reading a magazine.

‘Umm, let’s see,’ Mum looks up from her magazine and says, ‘There is spending time with your mother and talking to her. And telling her about these friends you go to meet every day.’

‘I don’t go to meet them *every* day.’

‘This is the fifth time this week that you’re going. And today is Friday. It’s a perfect 5:5 ratio.’

‘I wasn’t keeping track,’

‘I was. That’s what mothers of beautiful teenage daughters do professionally.’

‘Ugh, Mum.’ I emphasize the ‘U’ so it sounds like m-uuuuu-m and roll my eyes.

‘Go. But come home soon. Or else I’ll go to your balcony and start yelling, totally embarrassing you in front of your new friends.’

‘The real problem is,’ I say, ‘that I don’t even think you are kidding.’

‘Because you’re my daughter and you know me?’ Mum asks, tongue-in-cheek.

I walk over to her, kiss her forehead, and say, ‘Love you my weird, weird mother,’ before leaving.

Harsh is waiting for me downstairs. I have borrowed my mother’s concealer (although without her knowledge) and applied it around my eyes. I then covered it with a layer of compact powder. I don’t want Harsh to think I’m still having nightmares and can’t sleep. He doesn’t say anything to me, but when my eyes are puffy at school or I yawn while Michael teaches me to play Call of Duty, he looks at me in a way that says it all.

I tried to get him to stop coming to get me from my house, but he didn’t listen. Now I get anxious every time I step outside in natural light with him. He’d see exactly how tired and troubled I secretly am and give me that look he gives me. Hence the make-up.

‘Hey!’ I say.

‘Kalindi Mishra,’ he nods.

‘Why do you have to come to walk me to your place and back every time?’

‘Because.’

‘Because?’

‘Because.’

He’s not going to tell me. I shrug.

‘Michael couldn’t come today,’

‘Why?’

‘There’s this gaming competition in the neighbourhood. Let’s just say, he has gone to make us proud and bring home some pizza money.’

‘He goes to these things a lot?’

‘Not a lot. Only when we’re out of money for pizza. Then he goes out and wins some competition or the other and the money lasts us for about two months.’

‘Smart.’

‘I’d say. One must do what one has to do to fill one’s belly. Also, pizza is important.’

‘Couldn’t agree more. By the way, why do we always hang out at your place?’

‘It’s the most convenient for me and you. For Sarabjeet and Michael, it the same distance to each other’s places and my place, so the distance doesn’t matter to them. Sarabjeet’s place is out of the question because she has a little sister who is a major attention-seeker and never leaves us alone. Michael, well, he doesn’t like staying home so he brings his laptop and plays video games at my place instead.’

‘Thank you for that detailed information, but I was asking why don’t we ever hang out? Like out. Not at someone’s place.’

‘Oh, that. Worry not, Kalindi Mishra, it’s not because we’re geeks and self-satisfied, which is true though, now that I think of it,’ Harsh laughs.

‘Then?’ We have reached the seventh floor and are just coming out of the elevator when my phone starts buzzing. Ada. I reject the call.

‘Because it’s hot outside! Nobody steps out in the Delhi heat, if they have the option of staying home instead.’

‘Oh.’ I reject another call from Ada.

‘We do go out in seasons other than summer, if that’s what you’re worried about.’

‘I was just curious,’ I say, rejecting yet another call from Ada. When she starts calling, she keeps calling for like an hour. She has been doing this ever since *that* night.

‘Hi Sarabjeet,’ I say.

‘Hey, I’m kind of busy, so excuse me,’ she says, without even looking up from her thick chemistry book.

‘Um, okay,’ I say, rejecting another call from Ada.

‘Why don’t you just take it?’ Harsh asks.

‘Because if I do, I’m going to yell.’

‘Then yell. Yelling’s got to be better than keeping it all in. Let some of it out.’

And when my phone buzzes the very next second, I pick it up without thinking, ‘What?’ I bark into the receiver.

‘You need to let me explain,’ Ada says quickly, as if worried I am going to hang up before she has a chance to say what she wants to say.

‘I don’t *need* to do anything you say I do!’

‘Just please listen to me. I never wanted to do anything wrong to you. I supported you. When you told me Tisha and Sameer were having an affair behind your back, I was with you. I didn’t tell them you knew. I—’

‘LIE! You told them I knew. That’s how they know. *You* told them,’ I yell. Even Sarabjeet looks up from her book.

‘But that was later. You were missing. We needed everything we knew to find out where you were. And Tisha and Sameer were freaking out about Sameer’s room. They guessed that you knew anyway.’

‘They had just guessed. You confirmed it.’

‘I told you why I did it. And how does that matter now, anyway?’ she asks, sounding desperate.

And for the life of me, I cannot find a single good reason why it mattered that Ada told Tisha and Sameer that I was onto them. But I was not going to accept that. ‘I ... don’t care. I *just* don’t care.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,’ Ada breaks down, and despite everything, my heart goes to her. I want to make her stop crying.

‘It’s not that simple, Ada,’ I groan. I try to remember the reasons why I’m mad at her, to make me strong and keep me from accepting her apology. ‘You betrayed me. After I woke up, you let me think that Sameer was my boyfriend and we were in love and that Tisha wasn’t the backstabbing bitch she is.’

‘But ... but you don’t know how it was. After the accident, your condition was critical. We didn’t know if you were going to make it ... and then, when you were out of danger, we still didn’t know what kind of damage your brain had suffered.’

‘And you freaking took advantage of that brain damage!’

‘It was not like that! You woke up nineteen days later. Sameer and Tisha were there at the hospital every day to check on you, like I was. We were all worried about you. We thought you were not going to make it ... those nineteen days were horrible. And they felt guilty about betraying you.’

‘Sure they did,’ I let out a dry laugh.

‘You weren’t there, Kalindi, you didn’t go through what we did. It was not easy on them at all. When you finally got out of the coma, and we got to know about the memory loss, they asked me to give them a chance to make it right and assured me they were not going to mess it up this time.’

‘And so you chose to become a part of their betrayal?’

‘I didn’t see it like that. Initially, I couldn’t tell you the truth because you had just woken up and I didn’t know if you were strong enough to handle it. And then, I was hoping you’d get your memory back. But you didn’t. And the lie kept building, till we got to a point where I just couldn’t tell you anymore. It was too late, I had already caused all the harm I could,’ Ada sounds defeated as she says this.

‘You should’ve just told me the truth when I woke up. Instead of introducing Sameer to me as my boyfriend, you should have just told me we used to date but then broke up.

‘I didn’t know if you were strong enough to take it!’

‘It wouldn’t have mattered to me! I didn’t remember him, I didn’t remember our relationship. I wouldn’t have missed what I didn’t even remember having!’ I exclaim.

‘I know, but I didn’t! And then the lie just kept building up and I couldn’t take it back anymore. And you have to understand that I needed to stay friends with Tisha. Before Tisha came into our lives, you and I used to be best friends. Then after she came, she took my place in your life and you guys left me out. And then you lost your memory and changed so much. I didn’t know who you were anymore. You didn’t feel like you.’

‘And now I do?’

‘Now I’ve gotten used to the new you. But I needed a friend. It felt like I had already lost you and I couldn’t rat out Tisha and lose her too. So I had to stick by her lie.’

‘So you made your choice,’ I mutter.

‘I made a mistake. Will you stay mad at me forever?’

‘Yes!’

‘What? Now you’re going to hang out with the nerds?’

‘Maybe I will. I don’t need cool. I need true. And they are honest. I can trust them. And they’re not waiting for the old me to come back; they’re okay with who I am right now.’

‘I don’t have a problem with who you are!’

‘Yes, you do. All of you. You just made me feel like I was disappointing you over and over again for not remembering. You’ve been waiting for me to remember.’

‘Oh, God, why don’t you get this? We made mistakes. I was confused; I didn’t know what to do or say ... and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,’ she starts sobbing again.

It’s not like I don’t see her point of view. I do see it, but I’m still mad and I don’t know if I can trust her or not. I need some time to think it over.

There’s the sound of something falling, and I say, ‘Hello?’ into the phone.

There’s a rustle, before Bharat says, ‘Hello? Hello, Kalindi?’

‘Yeah. Hi Bharat.’

‘Hey, how are you?’

‘Good, I guess,’ I say.

There’s silence, and in the silence, I can hear Ada cry in the background.

‘Just give her a chance,’ Bharat says quietly.

‘I need time. Tell her I need some time.’

‘Alright. You take care, okay?’

‘I will,’ I say and hang up. I don’t ask him to take care of Ada; I know he will anyway.

I realize I’ve been pacing around Harsh’s room all this while and Harsh and Sarabjeet have been staring at me unblinking. I slump down on the bed with a sigh. They don’t ask me directly, but they don’t stop looking at me. And they’ve already heard one side of the conversation anyway. So I tell them.

I lie back on the bed, legs still dangling and touching the floor, and start telling them what happened. Saying it out aloud helps me think clearer. Everything makes more sense once I say it. After I’m done, they do not tell me what I should or shouldn’t do. They’re just there. Like friends are.



EIGHTEEN

11 MAY 2013

The next morning, I didn't see Harsh at the bus stop. When I got into the bus, Sarabjeet asked me where Harsh was, so that obviously meant she didn't know either. When we got to school, Michael said even he didn't know where Harsh was.

'Maybe he's sick?' I suggest. *Or sleepy.*

'Maybe,' Sarabjeet nods.

I call him, and the phone rings, but he doesn't pick up. I call again. No answer. I get a bit worried, but Michael says he's sure Harsh must be okay and just missed his bus or something. I nod.

What they don't know is that I kept Harsh up last night. We hadn't discussed the nightmares since the day I chickened out of asking Dr Sahani about my 'accident' or whatever. But last night, it got unbearable. I woke up, drenched in sweat, just twenty minutes after I switched off the lights and went to sleep. I was shaking furiously, and even though I didn't remember most of the dream, the last fleeting images left in my head were of me running away from something or someone, naked, and then stumbling down in panic and falling.

My breath was ragged and I felt restless. I turned on all the lights in the room (we'd replaced the old ones with the others that actually emit light), like if I made the room bright enough, no more nightmares could enter my head.

My water bottle was empty, so I went to the kitchen to get some water. I passed through my parents' bedroom on my way and peeked in. I really needed the comfort of human presence, but they looked so very peaceful in their sleep that I couldn't wake them up. When I got back to my well-lit room, I noticed the screen of my cell phone was lit too. I picked it up to see a text from Harsh.

> All okay?

I responded: >> Yeah

> You sure?

>> Not really

> Another nightmare?

>> Yup

> Anything I can do to help?

>> Don't know

> Come to the window

>> Why?

> I can't sleep either. Let's stay up together, till you're okay to go to sleep.

>> You don't have to

> Trust me, Kalindi Mishra, there is nothing more I want to do than stay up with you at night ;)

>> You made it sound dirty

> That's just me. The effect I have on people.

>> You stole my line!

> And I made you use an exclamation mark!

>> Big deal

> I know. Now, kill some of the many, many lights, they're hurting my eyes. And come to the window. Let's stay up together.

And then, I turned off all the lights, leaving only my jellyfish bed-side lamp on and pulled my desk close to the window. Harsh called me and I sat by the window, talking to him. He had a bean bag out in the balcony and spent the night there.

We talked for hours, before I realized I was making him stay out, without even a fan, in the middle of summer. 'Aren't you hot?' I asked, to which he said, 'I'm always hot. I sometimes feel guilty for contributing to global warming.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Yeah, right.'

'Well, it is cooler outside in the open, than inside my room.' Whereupon I decided if he was comfortable enough, he could stay up the entire night.

I was scared to go back to sleep and he didn't seem to mind, so even though I knew I was being selfish, I just wanted one night without more than one nightmare.

Now I regret keeping him up till 6 a.m., after which Mum got up and I started getting ready for school and Harsh said he's going to sleep for just a little while before getting ready for school. But I can't have everything. I've become accustomed to sleeping just a couple of hours every night, but I can't expect Harsh to stay up all night and then make it to school too.

I catch Bharat looking at me, and when our eyes meet, he waves.

I nod ever so slightly in response, then turn to look at the blackboard. It's the last day of school before summer vacation and it's a Saturday, so it's a half day. No one looks particularly interested in the lectures. We just want this over and done with so we can start our vacation.

Despite it being a half day, it feels like an eternity has passed when we finally walk towards where the buses are parked. Sarabjeet goes into the bus to leave the bags and reserve our seats and I walk over to the other end of the old cricket ground and sit on one of the rusty benches. I look at the school building and the buses and kids talking excitedly to each other, and I just feel tired. I sigh.

School is not half as bad, with Harsh and Michael and Sarabjeet around. There is a lot of staring; I'm the freak who used to be extremely popular, the basketball captain, and then I got into this mysterious accident and lost my memory, a part of my brain was affected and it altered my personality, and I had a fall out with all of my old friends at the same time and started to hang out with the nerds. I can't blame people for making me a prime subject of gossip.

The thing about this part of the old cricket ground is that even though it's practically uninhabited during lunch period, it's not half as empty at the end of school. One half of the field is devoted to parking buses and the other half is now bustling with students. Sarabjeet said the buses will be about half an hour late, since it's the last day of school before summer vacation and the staff always need some extra time to pack up and leave. I look towards my bus to see what's keeping her, when I see a

widely grinning Harsh walk towards me. He's wearing the school uniform and has his backpack slung over one shoulder, and with the goofy laugh in place, he looks quite a sight.

'Harsh!' I exclaim, getting up from the bench and dusting off my skirt.

'Kalindi Mishra!' His voice reminds me of last night, and makes me blush instantly. We talked for six and a half hours, practically the whole night, and although I did not have much to share, given the short span of memory still present in my head, he told me all about his life. And we talked and talked and talked all night. Now I feel like I *know* him. I wonder how any person can actually really know anyone else without staying up all night, talking.

'Where have you been?' I ask. 'Have you been here in school all this while? Oh, gosh, were you hiding out there in the bunking place? *Without me?!*'

'Whoa! Easy, tiger. I wouldn't dare bunk classes without you!'

'You'd better not.'

'Understood,' he nods seriously.

'Where have you been?' I ask. I feel all warm and fuzzy inside, filled with all those delicious feelings like being adored and cared for and safe. Last night really changed the chemistry between us.

'That is, in fact, what I came here to tell you,' he says. And then stops, inspecting my face.

'Then ... what are you waiting for?'

'I'm just wondering if it's the right place.'

'Just tell me!' I insist. I can't imagine him being nervous about saying anything to me. To me, it's like he cannot say or do anything wrong.

'Okay, so after last night, I went to sleep for a while, and couldn't get up on time for the school bus.'

'I knew it! Michael said you must've missed the bus, and you were up all night, so—'

'Let me talk, Kalindi Mishra. Nervous human right here,' Harsh interjects.

'Oh, okay.'

'So when I got up, I'd already missed the bus. I got dressed and was going to take the Metro, but then I remembered last night.' He pauses and looks at me, anxiety clearly written all over his face, which, more than anything else, makes him look adorable, but makes me nervous about what he's going to say too. 'And I remembered your ... nightmares.'

I gulp.

'That day when we went to meet Dr Sahani, you should've just asked him. The truth was just one sentence away, and it has been bugging me ever since. That you're going through so much, when you could just *know*. Once you know, we could work towards making you feel better. But you just ... didn't ask.'

I don't say anything. I know what is coming next, and I steel myself to face it. While inside, my heart just keeps shouting, '*No, Harsh, no. Don't say it. Please don't say it and ruin everything.*'

'On my way to the Metro station, I made up my mind. And I'm sorry. I know I should've asked you, but you needed to know. It's important for you to know,' Harsh's voice gets desperate and urgent.

I grit my teeth. 'You didn't.'

'I'm sorry. But I did.'

I shake my head in disgust.

Harsh continues, 'I went to the hospital and asked to meet Dr Sahani. He recognized me from that day when we went to meet him together. He knew there was something on your mind that day that you didn't say. And I told him what it was.'

'HARSH!'

'I had to. From where I'm standing, I could see that this was the only way. Without knowing, no one knows how many months or years you would spend contemplating and dreading the truth.'

'*You had no right,*' I mutter angrily.

'Probably not. But I did ask him, Kalindi. And he said *it definitely wasn't rape*. He said he couldn't emphasize enough, that you were not abused sexually,' Harsh smiles. 'Did you hear that? It's good news. You don't have to worry about it anymore! Now you know that at least you weren't—'

I cut him off, seething with fury. 'Good news? You invaded my privacy. You spoke to my doctor, who is bound by law to keep the details of my case confidential. They have these rules for a reason. Because some things are personal.'

'I just wanted to help you!'

'What if Dr Sahani had confirmed a rape? HOW WOULD THAT HAVE HELPED ME?' I yell. A few people turn to look at us, but I don't care.

Harsh speaks softly, 'I figured that if Dr Sahani told me that you were indeed raped, I didn't need to tell you. A least not until you were ready ...'

'So you were planning to lie to me?'

'I wouldn't have lied, I just wouldn't have told you about it till you were ready to face—'

'ARE YOU LISTENING TO YOURSELF RIGHT NOW? YOU WERE PLANNING TO BETRAY ME, TO KEEP ME OBLIVIOUS, JUST LIKE THEM,' I point towards where *they* are standing, staring at us. Well, *everybody* is staring, so *they* are not the only ones.

'No, Kalindi! You know I would never do that to you!'

'BUT YOU ALREADY DID. AT LEAST IN YOUR HEAD!'

'You're missing the main point here,' Harsh reasons desperately. 'I didn't need to keep you in darkness, because *Dr Sahani said it was NOT—*'

'I DON'T CARE WHAT HE SAID. You freaking went behind my back and took advantage of my faith in you. I trusted you. I fucking trusted you!' I scream.

'What's going on?' Michael asks me. He has just gotten to the scene with Sarabjeet.

'Ask *him,*' I say. 'It's not like anything is personal anymore. It's not like we respect other people's privacy or anything.'

'Okay, I don't know what's going on here,' Michael says calmly, 'but shouting out your personal business and whatever in public doesn't exactly help maintain your privacy.'

'And what are *you* guys looking at?' Sarabjeet bellows at the mob in general. 'Don't you have anything more interesting to do than meddle in others' business?'

People start dispersing a little, a few of them pass comments and snide remarks, but I hardly pay attention to them.

'Sort it out,' Sarabjeet mutters.

‘And don’t create another scene,’ Michael adds walking away with Sarabjeet, leaving me alone with Harsh.

‘How could you?’ I ask Harsh.

‘I don’t understand what you are so mad about,’ Harsh says angrily. His anger angers me even more. What does he have to be mad about? I’m the victim here.

‘I’m mad about you taking advantage of my vulnerability!’ I exclaim, heatedly.

‘I did no such thing. My only intention was to help you. You hide the tiredness in your eyes with make-up, stifle your yawns in class the whole day, suffer headaches and body aches, you ... you keep the lights in your room on the entire night. *The entire night*. When was the last time you slept for more than two hours in one night? Have you looked into the mirror recently?’

‘It has nothing to do with you! It’s none of your freaking business!’

‘You know what: IT IS. It became my business when we became friends,’ Harsh says from behind gritted teeth. I can see his jaw clench in anger. ‘It became my business when I started caring about you. And do you think it affects only you? Do you think it doesn’t kill me to see you like this? What you don’t understand is that you DO NOT HAVE TO GO THROUGH THIS ALONE.’

‘I—’ I begin to say something, but he cuts me off.

‘LET ME FINISH. You need to know what your body has been through and you have to talk to your doctor. They can help. There are treatments. You don’t have to be all valiant and keep it bottled up inside so that you don’t worry your parents. They’re your parents, they worry. That’s what they do. If you don’t give them this reason to worry, they’ll find something else.’

‘That does not give you any right to interfere in my life and go behind my back.’

‘You needed to know. Dr Sahani said it wasn’t a rape, Kalindi,’ Harsh says, his voice soft, as if he doesn’t want to fight anymore and is just giving up. ‘It’s good news. Now you can stop wondering and dreading. And if it had been a rape, Dr Sahani said there is counselling. There is therapy, you could —’

‘Just stop, okay?’ I sigh. ‘I hardly know you. But I thought you were my friend, I trusted you. Hell, last night, I even confessed that I like you. Is that why you did this? To earn points or something? What did you think doing this would do?’

‘You know that’s not true.’

‘How do I know that? How do I know anything anymore? How am I supposed to trust *anything* or anybody?’

‘You can trust me,’ Harsh murmurs.

‘Like hell I can,’ I laugh. ‘You knew you never had a chance with me. If not for my brain damage ... I would not have lost my memory and my personality hadn’t been completely different. And someone like you wouldn’t have dreamt of having a shot at me.’

‘Kalindi.’

‘Shut up. Just ...’ I’m silent for a moment. ‘You do know that I even talked to you in the first place because of the brain damage, don’t you? The injury to my temporal lobe caused me to lose my memories and the injury to my frontal lobe caused my personality and behavioural inversion. I don’t want you thinking I actually liked you even for a second. Stay the hell away from me.’

And with that, I walk away and don't look back.



NINETEEN

21 MAY 2013

I am absolutely and utterly miserable. Wretched, dejected, depressed and just plain sad. I have no one. There is no one. I feel horrible about what I have done. And in the ten days since I've done it, I haven't had the courage to even face him, let alone tell him I didn't mean half the nasty things I said.

But I still feel betrayed. I feel bare. Like he knows something about me that he had no right to interfere with. I don't want to think about it. So I get back to the audio book I was listening to. Not that I like it very much, or at all, for that matter. I don't know what it is about audio books, they are just not very bookish. I don't feel like there is a conversation between the author and me at all, even though this book in question is a first person narrative. It feels very much like a third person was chosen depending on a specific set of factors: their gender, age, accent, oration, texture of their voice and other such required features, and then paid to read out a book, which is just a job to them. It feels artificial.

Plus you can't adjust the speed with which you read the book. Like sometimes I read a book very very quickly from the beginning to end because I just WANT TO READ IT SO MUCH. And some other times, I want to read extremely slowly and savour every word. And some books are so funny I want to pause and laugh for a minute before resuming, and without actually having to PAUSE it.

I've read twenty-three books in the past ten days. That's kind of all I do. I tried listening to music in the beginning, and although I like music, it does not actually engage me and keep my mind occupied. I need to keep my mind occupied, lest it wander to the immense tragedy of friendlessness in my life.

In the fifty-two days of my new life, I have managed to have fallouts with two separate and completely different sets of friends. It's quite an achievement.

'Kalindi,' Mum calls from the kitchen. 'Breakfast!'

'Not now,' I call back.

'Then when? It's already 10.30.'

'In a while.'

'KALINDI!' she yells, like yelling would scare me.

I get up and go to the kitchen, but only because I want to. 'I'm not hungry,' I moan.

'Of course you're not hungry. How could you be? All you do is lie on your bed all day, which hardly requires energy.'

'Exactly why I don't need to eat more and accumulate even more of it.'

'That is not what I mean. I'm asking you to go out. Make up with your friends,' Mum says. She keeps saying that, like it's that simple.

'I don't want to make up with them. You don't know what they did to me.'

‘Because you don’t tell me.’

‘Because I can’t. You’re my mother,’ I try to reason with her.

‘And that’s why you should tell me! Maybe I could help.’

‘I don’t want anybody’s help. Why are people always so inclined to helping others?’

‘Because that’s what being a human being means,’ Mum says, with sage-like wisdom.

‘What do *you* know about being human?’

Mum looks puzzled for a moment, then says, ‘Now you’re just fighting because you have nothing else to do.’

‘I have plenty to do!’

‘Like?’

‘Reading,’

‘And?’

‘And what? Reading is enough.’

‘Fine! Fine. Read, if that’s what you want to do. It’s impossible trying to reason with you. Just please at least take a shower and change into clothes that don’t smell.’

‘This doesn’t smell!’ I lean to smell the fabric of my sleeve and it does smell, actually. But I’m not going to accept that in front of my mum.

‘Just wear something clean, okay?’

‘Fine,’ I say and walk out towards my bedroom, silently congratulating myself for getting out of having to eat breakfast. Recently, I’ve been so full all the time and when I am hungry enough to eat, everything tastes tasteless.

‘And shampoo your hair!’ Mum calls after me.

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘And make it quick. Breakfast’s getting cold.’

I sigh. So much for dodging breakfast.

When I come out of the shower, I do feel better. This is the first shower I’ve taken in three days. Otherwise I just lie in my bed all day and all night, without caring what day or time it is. It’s like the past ten days have been just one very long day—with the exception of Mum forcing me to eat, bathe and talk every now and then, whenever she feels like it.

I towel my hair dry and fling it to one side to prevent it getting into my face. I have regained complete function in my right arm by now, and it no longer hurts even a little bit. I keep my head tilted to one side and open the balcony door. I am already out in the balcony, hanging the towel on the railing by the time I remember that I no longer go into the balcony.

But no harm done. The two windows and one door of Harsh’s room that open onto the balcony are all shut. He wants as little to do with me as I want with him. I feel a pang of nostalgia, but I control myself. I cannot let myself remember all the good times I’ve had with him and all the amazing things he made me feel. I have to remember how he betrayed me and use the knowledge of that memory to stay strong and away from him.

No matter how warm and fuzzy and pretty and safe and whatever he made me feel.

I get back in and shut the door. Before Mum has a chance to nag me about breakfast again, I lie down in my bed and resume my audio book. I figure I don't have to go to the dining room and eat till Mum forces me to. I do know that she will, but I will delay the inevitable as much as I can.

And sure enough, fifteen minutes later, Mum peeps into my room. 'Why didn't you eat your breakfast?'

'Because I'm not hungry. I told you. Didn't I tell you?'

'Clever. Eat.'

I groan and get up again. While I eat my stupid breakfast, Mum gets ready to go somewhere. She's wearing a pretty green saree, with her flat footwear which I'm not really fond of and has an oversized handbag hanging on her shoulder. 'Have you seen my mobile?' she asks.

I shake my head and call her number. It rings in her bedroom and she goes in to retrieve it. She looks around, as if assuring herself that she has everything, and then walks over and sits in the chair opposite me. And does nothing. She's just sitting there.

'Are you telling me you got all dressed up and ready to sit at the dining table?'

'I'm not telling you anything.'

'Where are you going?'

'To the market.' She does not elaborate.

'Then why aren't you going?'

'I'm waiting for something.'

'Mum. I promise I will finish my breakfast. You don't have to like guard me to make sure that I will eat everything,' I roll my eyes at her.

'Maybe I do.'

'No, seriously. I'll eat it.'

'Yes, you will,' Mum says simply, not getting up to leave, like I had hoped.

The doorbell chimes and, walking towards the door to get it, Mum says to me, 'Take care, sweetie. And remember that you can only move on if you forgive. Holding grudges doesn't get anybody anywhere.'

Which would've been totally weird if, in the next second, she hadn't opened the door to let in Ada, Bharat, Tisha, Sameer and Kapil. 'What the ... Mum, what is this?'

'Ada called me. They're good kids. I've known them almost as long as I've known you,' she points to Ada and Bharat and says.

'So now it's *your* turn to betray me? Is there a script we are following? Can I trust *no* one now?' I cannot believe this. My own mother.

'Oh, don't be so melodramatic. You'll be fine,' Mum dismisses everything I have said and leaves. 'Have fun!'

Once she's gone, there is an awkward moment, which isn't exactly unexpected. *They* keep standing at the door, not stepping in; I keep sitting at the dining table, not eating. We keep staring at each other.

'Come in, I guess,' I say finally.

They enter. Nobody says anything. I am completely out of words too. I am nervous and glad and a little angry and betrayed, but I don't know what I feel most strongly. This is the first time I've had

human company other than my parents in over a week. I've forgotten how to be around people. *At least Mum made sure I showered and changed into decent clothes*, I think.

After a while, I suggest, 'Let's watch a movie?'

There are nods and *hmms* and *okays* from everyone, so I lead them to my room. I put in a DVD I borrowed from Harsh, and turn it on. We find places to sit. I turn my study chair around and sit on it, Ada and Tisha climb up on the bed and lean against the headrest, Kapil takes the pouffe on the other side of the bed and Sameer and Bharat sit on the sides of the bed, legs resting on the floor (which is not the most comfortable position to watch a movie in, but I don't say anything). The movie begins.

It's the movie Michael had been endorsing that day I first went over to Harsh's place: *The Dark Knight*. It's about a superhero, Batman, who is incredibly rich and also handsome, although the latter might be my personal opinion. I feel like everybody in the room other than me has already seen the movie, because Michael told me EVERY PERSON ON THE ENTIRE PLANET HAS SEEN IT. I picked up *The Dark Knight* because Michael spoke so highly of it and I didn't want to bore everybody with a bad movie. Although admittedly, *they* were very different from Michael and there is a good chance they'd not like what Michael worships.

(I miss Sarabjeet and Michael, but I had to let them go. I don't have the right to steal Harsh's friends.)

The fact that they've all seen it gives them plenty of space to not be interested in the movie and talk to me instead, but they don't. Five minutes into the movie, everybody including me is immersed in it and we're all silent for a really long time.

Finally, over an hour later, Kapil breaks the silence by pausing the movie, turning to me and saying, 'Umm, I really have to be somewhere. I just came here to tell you that it was none of my business. I mean I knew my girlfriend had been cheating on me with Sameer, but you and I, we were never close. It wasn't my place to tell you that before you lost your memory, your boyfriend cheated on you with my girlfriend and you should not be with that boy after you ... it's confusing.'

'It's okay,' I say. And for some reason, I burst out laughing.

'Okay ...' Kapil looks at me oddly. 'What's funny?'

'You came here just to tell me that and I dragged you into my room and made you watch half a movie before you finally told me?'

'You didn't give me a chance!' he checks his watch. 'I should really get going.'

'Yeah, yeah, sure.'

'So, we're cool?'

'We're cool.'

'Cool. See you then,' Kapil says and lets himself out.

After the front door clicks, assuring me that it's locked properly, I turn to look at the rest of them. They all look at me. I exhale, hiding a smile. 'Begin,' I say.

'We were in love. And we still are. I'm sorry but we are!' Tisha begins animatedly.

'Okay ...'

'It was one time. You and I were together, and I went behind your back ... but it was one time. We only cheated once,' Sameer adds.

‘We were going to tell you. We just didn’t know how,’ Tisha says passionately. ‘Because we love each other and can’t live without each other. Before we had a chance to tell you, you found out on your own, and then there was that horrible accident and you were so badly hurt ...’

‘We were so scared. I felt so guilty. We didn’t know if you were going to wake up and recover from it or not, and we felt so guilty about what we did.’

‘If you hadn’t made it, your last memory of us would’ve been that of us betraying you. We were so scared that was going to happen.’

Sameer nods, ‘That was all we could think about. But then you woke up and we were told that you lost all your memory. It felt like the perfect scenario. We wanted to make things right. We felt like we were given another chance.’

‘Well, to be honest, I wasn’t too inclined towards this plan,’ Tisha exclaims, her drama not even annoying. ‘I said we could just, like not tell you that Sameer and you were together. And then Sameer and I could be together.’

‘That sounds like you,’ I grin.

‘Hey, don’t judge! I really love him. And seeing him try to make things right and be your boyfriend was hard on me,’ Tisha says.

‘And so you began to be mean to me.’

‘That’s the real me. I’m mean. I mean I know nobody thinks of themselves like that but like, it is true. It’s just who I am.’

‘That’s the most twisted apology I have ever encountered in my short life time,’ I say.

‘I’m really sorry for everything, Kalindi. I thought I had another chance and I owed it to you to try and I blew it,’ Sameer says.

‘I’m sorry too,’ Tisha says.

‘It’s okay. I get it,’ I smile.

‘Yay! Come here, you!’ Tisha shrieks and hugs me tight.

I laugh. At this point, Sameer excuses himself too. He says he also needs to be where Kapil is, and he too was just waiting to apologize before leaving. I assure him we’re cool, and let him go.

Ada starts to say something, but I hold my palm up to stop her. ‘I know,’ I say, ‘you made a mistake, and you didn’t know,’ I add, pointing at Bharat. ‘All is forgiven and forgotten. Keeping track of who did what to me and why I’m mad at whom is getting really exhausting!’

As soon as I say this, Ada joins Tisha and me in the hug. They pull in Bharat too, and we only break the hug when I croak that I’m suffocating.

We resume the movie, since it really is awesome and we all get really into it, but this time, we all sit on the bed. We finish the movie, gossiping all the while. It is very different from sitting formally in different corners of the room and staring at nothing other than the TV screen.

When the movie ends, Tisha turns to me, ‘So, what’s the deal with the delicious tall guy, what’s-his-name?’

I know who she means, but I act innocent. ‘Who?’

‘Harsh Raj Sisodiya,’ Ada supplies.

‘There is no deal.’

‘Of course there is a deal. You like him, don’t you?’ Tisha asks, before going completely nuts and shrieking, ‘Ohmigod, you like him!’

‘I thought you didn’t like nerds,’ I state, to shift the topic.

‘I don’t. But he’s hardly a nerd. He used to be one, like in IX grade. But now he’s become quite the hunk. I wonder why he chooses to continue to hang out with the other nerds, though.’

‘Because they are his friends. And they are good people. And just because they don’t dress like you or party like you doesn’t mean they’re not fun,’ I defend Sarabjeet and Michael.

‘Whoa, easy!’

‘No, seriously.’ I look around the group and say, ‘You guys live in a make-believe Ken and Barbie world, where everybody is perfect and everybody has to have a partner and go on dates and dress impeccably. But we’re seventeen. *Seventeen*. We’re in school. And they’re the way school kids are supposed to be. They’re in no hurry to grow up.’

‘Okay. Is it just me or does anybody else think this girl here is completely in love with Sarabjeet Siddhu and has secretly turned lesbian?’ Bharat asks ever-so-seriously.

‘It’s not Sarabjeet she’s completely in love with,’ Ada says, wisely.

‘Oh, yeah! But she is in love!’ Tisha teases me.

I change the direction of the conversation again. ‘I’m not in love with Sarabjeet, or anyone else. I just feel that those are honest people. Non-pretentious and true. And I like hanging out with them.’

‘Which brings us back to: what’s the deal with you and Harsh?’

‘There is no d—’

‘Come on!’ Ada interjects. ‘You know we are not going to let it go. Not after the scandal you created in front of half the school. You *have* to tell us.’

Tisha nods furiously in agreement.

Bharat isn’t as interested as the girls, because thankfully, unlike Sameer, Bharat is not a girl. But he does look curious.

I exhale deeply and begin to tell them. I tell them about how we first met at our respective balconies and how we met again at the bus stop. How we kept bumping into each other at school and Sarabjeet invited me over. And how we became friends. And how he is so funny, and his eyes are so gorgeous. How he comes to walk me to his place and walk me back every time, how he bunked classes and took me to this brilliant hiding place. How he listened to my fears and held me and made me smile.

The weird thing is, as I tell them this, I don’t feel like it is a big secret anymore. When I first told Harsh about the nightmares and my fears, it felt like a huge step forward, trusting him and opening up to him. But now when I repeat the story, I feel like it was just a detail. Like it was inconsequential and unimportant.

And as I speak, I realize why that is. It’s because when I told Harsh, the nightmares and my fear of some of them being true still existed. When Harsh went to Dr Sahani and found out that I was not raped, all those fears vanished, along with the nightmares. I haven’t slept well in the days since the fallout with Harsh, but that is not because of the nightmares, but because of the fallout with Harsh. There *have been* no more nightmares.

‘So then what seems to be the problem?’ Tisha asked, looking so genuinely confused, she even forgot to add drama in her tone.

‘The problem is that I am only just now realizing that there is no problem. That it was all my fault. That day near the buses, I said some exceptionally horrible things to him. He went behind my back and talked to my doctor and even though it was to help me, I felt so betrayed. First by you guys, then by him too,’

‘You can’t blame it all on us!’ Ada protests.

‘I can and I will.’

‘That’s not done. We’ve never even spoken to the boy, let alone been mean to him!’

I groan. ‘What have I done?’

‘We can make it right,’ Ada says. ‘You have to talk to him and tell him your side of the story. He might not want to listen in the beginning, might not take your calls, and when he does take your call, it’ll only be to yell at you, but then later when you’ve given him time to cool down and then go over to his place, he’ll forgive you. Trust me.’

‘He’s not me. And you were never as mean to me as I was to him.’

‘But you *have* to try,’ Tisha lets out. ‘You can’t *not* try!’

‘I wouldn’t even know where to start ...’

‘Just tell him the truth,’ Bharat gives his first piece of advice.

‘And trust me, he’s going to forgive you. He likes you; he can’t stay mad at you!’ Tisha nudges me.

‘How do you know he likes me?’

‘Just like I know you like him! It’s what I do.’

‘I thought your thing was being mean,’ I say.

‘That too. Now. Are we going to do this or what?’

‘What, NOW?’ I panic. I’m not ready to face him yet.

‘No better time than the present!’ Bharat says and gets up, everyone following his lead.



TWENTY

Three minutes later, we're knocking on Harsh's front door. Harsh's mom opens the door and tells us to wait, while she calls Harsh. His door is shut and he refuses to come out.

'What's wrong?' his mom asks him through the door. 'It's just Kalindi and some other kids from your school.'

'Tell her I don't want to see her,' his voice comes from inside and breaks my heart.

'What are you doing in there?' his mom asks.

'Nothing.'

'I hope you're not doing ... that thing we grounded you for ...'

'MOM!' Harsh yells.

I snicker, while Ada, Tisha and Bharat don't get it.

'Just open the door,' his mom tries again.

'NO!'

She turns to us and says, 'I don't know what's wrong ...'

'It's okay, Aunty. We'll come back later,' I say.

As we walk back to my place, I feel my heart sink. Before today, I've never had to walk from his place to mine without him by my side. What if he never forgives me? What if he never talks to me again? I call him up, he rejects the call. We repeat this about ten times.

By the time I unlock my front door, I'm completely freaked out. 'We *have* to do something.'

'But what?' Ada asks.

I walk straight to my room and open the balcony door. 'Harsh!' I yell. 'Harsh, Harsh, Harsh. Harsh, Harsh, Harsh, Harsh, Harsh!'

Nothing moves. He doesn't open the door or the window.

'HARSH!' I scream again.

'What are you doing?' Ada asks.

Tisha and Bharat simply join in.

'HARSH! HARSH! HARSH! HARSH! HARSH!' we yell in unison, Ada joining in too, after a moment's uncertainty.

A few windows in both our buildings open. And a few from the one around ours. But not Harsh's. We try again. 'HARSH! HARSH! HARSH! HARSH! HARSH!'

This time, he opens the door enough to peep out. Maybe he was wondering whose the other three voices were.

'Please listen to me, Harsh,' I waste no time. But he has already closed the door as soon as the first word left my mouth.

The door is closed again. We all look at each other, and begin shouting at the same time. 'HARSH!'

HARSH! HARSH! HARSH! HARSH!’

But I know he is not going to fall for it again. We keep calling his name for a minute, but Harsh completely ignores us.

‘I have an idea,’ Tisha says. ‘We could shock him into opening the door.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask.

She points at the ladder in my balcony. ‘We could like put this ladder here across from one balcony to the other and you can tell him if he doesn’t come out, you’ll go to him over it.’

‘That’s so lame,’ Ada says. ‘This isn’t a Bollywood movie scene.’

‘You have a better idea?’

Ada doesn’t. Nobody does. So we pick up the aluminium ladder, which is not very heavy and, after a little struggle trying to get the flat top to hook onto the railing of Harsh’s balcony securely, we get it in place. We fix the other end between the metal railings of my balcony. The ladder is now firmly placed horizontally between our balconies.

We have sort of created a bridge between the two balconies. Admittedly, nobody walks on a ladder generally used for painting houses, placed horizontally between two buildings, but that has never been our intention. We just want to shock or scare Harsh enough to come out. It is pretty cool.

‘Come out or I’ll come to you!’ I yell.

There’s no response from him.

‘I’m not kidding. I’ll climb onto this stupid ladder and walk across it.’

There’s no response.

‘Harsh Raj Sisodiya. I will freaking get up on this ladder and come to you.’ I’m getting frustrated. He isn’t even saying anything. He’s not even asking me to go away and leave him alone. He’s just ignoring me completely. Like I don’t even exist anymore. It hurts like hell.

‘She’s not kidding,’ Tisha chimes in.

‘She’s really crazy. She *will* get up on this ladder,’ Ada adds.

‘A ladder that is not exactly structurally sound,’ Bharat says.

‘Get up on this,’ Tisha points to the concrete base of the railing—it’s made of iron rods embedded in a two-foot high base of bricks and concrete. I climb up onto it, which is not dangerous at all, but Bharat holds onto me from behind anyway.

‘WHOA! She’s climbing up. Another step and she’d be on the freaking ladder!’ Tisha exclaims.

We’re not yelling too loudly, just loud enough for our voices to reach Harsh. We don’t want people in my building or Harsh’s or any of the others to start peeping out again. Although this is the middle of summer in Delhi and it’s a weekday, so half of the people living in these apartments have to be in office and the other half are taking naps in their air-conditioned bedrooms after lunch.

‘Harsh, I’m coming,’ I say.

‘What are you doing, man?’ Bharat says. ‘This has got to be at least a seventy-foot drop. Do you want her to die?’

‘Just come out already,’ Ada adds.

‘I just want to talk. Please come out, Harsh.’

We’re quiet for half a minute. I feel like he is going to come out this time.

He doesn't.

'Please give me one chance to explain ...' my voice starts breaking.

He still doesn't come out.

'What the hell is this guy's problem?' Tisha says softly, turning to Ada.

Ada shakes her head, 'This is just cruel. What more can she do?'

'The ladder plan clearly isn't working,' Bharat observes.

While they are speaking softly amongst themselves, I put my right foot on the base of the ladder and climb up. Without thinking, I take two more steps forward.

'KALINDI!!?' Ada, Tisha and Bharat yell in unison.

Their voices jolt me out of whatever got into me and I make the mistake of looking down. I am standing right in the middle of the ladder. 'OH MY GOD!' I shriek, terrified. My legs shake and my knees get all wobbly. I automatically bend over and grab the ladder with both my hands. My feet are well placed and I cling to the ladder with all my limbs for my dear life.

'What are you doing?!'

'COME BACK HERE!'

'ARE YOU SERIOUS?!'

'THIS IS DANGEROUS!'

I don't know who screams what. I'm a little preoccupied with trying not to fall. As everybody goes into panic mode, Harsh's door finally opens. 'What's going ...?' he begins to ask, but freezes at the sight before him.

'Hi,' I grin nervously. My eyes are filled with tears. I'm petrified. *What have I done?*

'What the hell is wrong with you?' Harsh asks in disbelief. 'ARE YOU CRAZY? HAVE YOU COMPLETELY LOST YOUR MIND?'

'Maybe. I think for a minute there, yeah.'

'What were you thinking? What were all of you thinking? Have you all gone mad?' Harsh freaks out. He grabs the end of the ladder, trying to secure it with his weight.

I turn my head around slowly and carefully. I can see only Bharat, who is doing his best to keep his end of the ladder steady. I hope Ada and Tisha are doing the same; I can't see them and I'm too scared to turn more.

'We didn't know she was going to actually do it!'

'We looked away for a second and boom! There she was bang in the middle of the two buildings!'

'And don't blame this on us! You were the one who refused to come out even after we warned you several times!'

'Yeah, if anything, this is your fault!'

'My fault? Did I help her set up this ladder—?'

'Guys?' I say, my voice shaking badly. 'Could we discuss whose fault this was after I get out of here ... or die?'

'Nobody's dying!'

'Nothing's going to happen to you!'

All of their voices are high-pitched and panicky. Ada has stopped speaking a while ago, and I

suspect she is crying. Like me.

‘I don’t want to die,’ I murmur.

‘You’re not going to,’ Harsh assures me. ‘We’ll get you out of here.’

‘Which way can you move? Which would be easier?’ Bharat asks.

I sniff. ‘I ... I can’t ...’

‘Come on, Kalindi Mishra, don’t give up now! We’ve got this,’ Harsh looks me right in the eye and promises.

‘I’m ... so sorry,’ I sob. ‘All those horrible things I said ... I didn’t mean any of them ...’

‘Shhh! Calm down. It’s okay, it’s okay.’

‘Should we call the fire department or something?’ Tisha asks. Her voice sounds oddly high-pitched and gruff.

‘I don’t think ... I can’t hold on that long,’ I say.

‘You can and you will,’ Bharat says. ‘We’ll try to get you out, but we have to call the fire department just in case we need help, okay?’

I nod slowly, fearing the slightest movement could make me fall. ‘Okay.’

‘Can you move forward?’ Harsh asks.

I’m resting on my hands and knees. I don’t know how to move. ‘Please hold the ladder still,’ I say and try to move towards Harsh. I shift my knees forward slowly, but find that I can’t. I let out a sob. I’m going to die.

‘Give me your hand,’ Harsh says. He frees his left hand and offers it to me.

I slowly unclench my right hand and let go of the ladder. I move it up and hold Harsh’s hand.

‘See? Not so difficult,’ he tries to encourage me, but I can hear the fear in his voice.

He lets go of the ladder completely and when I look at him with panic, he says, ‘It’s okay. It’ll stay put.’ He offers me his other hand and I take it too. He grips both my hands tightly and steps back little by little. ‘I’m going to pull you towards me now, okay? Don’t move your knees just yet. I’ll step back and you just lie down on your stomach. Don’t worry, I’ve got you.’

‘This ... I can’t ...’

‘You don’t have to do anything. Trust me, Kalindi Mishra, I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Now, I’m stepping back, and I’ll pull your arms with me. Don’t worry; I’m holding you tight.’

And he is. I am too. He walks back and since he’s holding both my hands, I’m pulled towards him too. Slowly, I am lying on the ladder, flat on my stomach. Harsh lets go of one of my hands and holds my upper arm instead. Once he has the hold secured, he lets go of my other hand and does the same. He pulls me forward, and this time, my legs are dragged forward too.

Now that my upper body is off the ladder and in Harsh’s balcony, I feel a little confident. I push back on the step my feet are resting on, propelling my body forward. Another push and I’m all the way in. Harsh helps me climb off the ladder, and as soon as my feet touch solid ground, they all resume yelling at me and I resume crying.

‘What got into you?’ Ada cries.

‘What if something had happened?!’ Tisha exclaims.

‘That was, by far, the coolest thing I have ever witnessed and been a part of in my life,’ Bharat

looks amused.

‘You are absolutely nuts,’ Harsh shakes his head.

My knees give up and I sit down on the floor in relief. *I’m alive. Harsh saved my life.* He sits down with me and holds me while I cry.

‘We’re coming,’ Tisha says and they all get into my room and shut the door.

Harsh and I are alone. I sniffle as I blurt out everything that has been bothering me. ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I know you were just trying to help me. But when you told me, it was so out of the blue. I was completely unprepared for it and I know it was good news, but I was struck with this overwhelming sense of personal violation, and I couldn’t see past it.’

‘It’s okay. It really is,’ Harsh begins. ‘You don’t have to—’

‘No, I do. I have to explain. When you told me you met Dr Sahani ... I was already dealing with a lot of friend-issues. I didn’t know who I could trust. But I trusted you. And you went behind my back. You had your reasons and your intentions were great, but, right then, all I could feel was this crushing sense of betrayal. I was relieved at the news, I *was*. But I still lashed out at you and said so many horrible things to you. I was hurt and I just wanted to hurt back ...’

‘You didn’t mean it?’ Harsh asks softly. His voice is shaking too, and I look up at him to see tears in his eyes.

‘No! No, no, no, never. I could never ... I didn’t mean any of them.’

He nods, pursing his lips. Like I do when I’m trying desperately not to cry.

I feel my heart sinking. I can’t see him like this. I can’t see him so hurt. I can’t be the reason for his pain. I rest my forehead against his and whisper, ‘I love you, Harsh.’

He pulls back to look at me, as if to confirm what I said.

‘Yes, I do. I know we haven’t known each other long, but I love you. I know I can be really mean, and I said some really hurtful things to you, but I didn’t mean any of them. I just love the way you are. I love everything about you. I can’t believe how much I love you. Hell, I can’t believe one person can love another person as much as I love you.’

The perfectly romantic moment is ruined by a knock on the door of Harsh’s room. ‘Open up!’ Tisha yells from the other side.

‘Darn,’ I mutter. I start getting up, but Harsh pulls me down on the floor again.

‘I love you too, Kalindi Mishra,’ he says softly into my ears.

AS IF THEY WEREN’T THE MOST WARM AND BEAUTIFUL WORDS EVER SPOKEN. AS IF THEY DID NOT MAKE ME WANT TO DIE AND LIVE AT THE SAME TIME. AS IF IT WAS NO BIG DEAL. *I LOVE YOU, KALINDI MISHRA.* LIKE THE WORDS WOULD NOT COMPLETELY TRANSFORM MY LIFE. AS IF THOSE BEAUTIFUL, BEAUTIFUL WORDS WOULD NOT CHANGE THE MEANING OF THE WORD ‘LOVE’ FOR ME.

‘You do?’

‘Hell, yeah! No girl has ever walked and then crawled across a ladder placed horizontally seventy feet off the ground for me!’ His wide, goofy grin is back. My life is complete.

The knocking on the door gets more impatient and we sigh.

‘I’ll get that,’ Harsh says and kisses me on the cheek while getting up. And then walks to the door

like the KISS NEVER HAPPENED. BUT IT DID. IT BURNED A HOLE IN MY CHEEK.

I was midway getting up when he had slid the kiss in. I sit back down and just stay there, absorbing what happened. Just for like 2.35 seconds, after which I am smothered by hugs and kisses as Ada and Tisha assault me, while Bharat and Harsh stand grinning.

Epilogue

THREE MONTHS LATER

‘Just remember the values of individual elements, and you’ll be fine. Here, revise this table,’ Sarabjeet passes me a notebook.

I go through the periodic table with hundred per cent concentration. Actually, more like ninety per cent. Ten per cent of my attention is always on Harsh, who is sitting to my right, looking out of the window of the bus, like we do not have a chemistry quarterly exam in less than an hour.

He catches me looking at him and winks at me before turning his attention back to the world outside school bus number S-21.

Once we reach school, Michael joins us and Sarabjeet and Michael start revising the course beginning to end at dizzying speed. They invite me to join in, but I feel like my head is going to explode, so I shut all the books and just try to breathe. Outside, I see Ada, Bharat, Tisha and Sameer, all immersed in the same book. I walk over to them.

‘Hey,’ I say.

‘Hi! Are you done revising? I think I’m going to die,’ Tisha includes me in her pre-exam morning drama.

‘You’ll be fine,’ Ada says. ‘I’m certainly going to flunk.’

‘Shhh! Reading here,’ Bharat says, pointing at the book he’s reading from. Then he looks at me and shakes his head, saying, ‘Women.’

I roll my eyes.

Sameer shuts down his notebook and says, ‘I’m done. Only God can save me now.’

‘All the luck,’ I say.

‘Hey guys,’ Harsh walks to us and says.

There’s a chorus of one *hey*, one *hi*, one *what’s up* and one *how’s it going bro?*

‘All set?’ he asks me.

‘Yeah. Could you go over chelation for me once?’ I ask. As we walk towards our exam hall, Harsh explains it to me once again.

Before we know it, the bell rings and we have to rush in. Everybody wishes everyone else good luck and we all go to our allotted exam halls. Thankfully, Harsh and I are in the same room.

We take our seats and wait for the question paper to be distributed. I write my roll number on the answer sheet and think about how thankful I am to Sarabjeet and Michael for helping me study. I couldn’t have made it to even this point without them.

In the past three months, I’ve settled in my own life better. My memory isn’t back (no surprises there) but I now have a lot of friends. I mostly hang out with Harsh and Sarabjeet and Michael, but I’ve been friends with my old friends too. Turns out, Tisha was only mean to me because I was dating the boy she loved. Now she’s still mean, just that her meanness is not directed at me.

Every day I get to know Harsh better, I fall more in love with him. He is my best friend, my

teacher, my partner in crime, my confidant and just the best guy ever. He makes me laugh, and I feel like I can talk to him about just about anything under the sun.

My parents are extremely happy about me having so many good friends and being so brave and getting my life back on track. But Mum likes to complain about how she misses me lying in my bed all day, and how I don't have much time for her anymore. We didn't tell my parents about the ladder incident. I do not wish to be grounded and bound in restraints for life.

The question papers are distributed and as soon as I'm done scanning through mine, I look over at Harsh.

He mouths, 'Okay?'

'Okay,' I gesture back.

He grins his goofy grin and turns back to his question paper and so do I.

He is the best thing that has happened to me in all the four months and twenty-one days of my post-accident life. There have been no more nightmares. And I am no longer confused about what I like and what I don't. I don't sit around waiting for my lost years to come back; instead, I have built a new life. I sometimes do wonder about how the accident really happened, but I know I will most probably never know. Dad says that is life. You simply cannot get answers to everything on order.

I don't have a past. I look at Harsh. The present is perfect. And I look forward to the future.

Thank you!

After the end of every book, I am faced with the task of thanking people who were with me when I wrote it, who helped me—either by *actually* helping me or by just always being there by my side, looking over me (figuratively, not literally; because that would be creepy). And I start thinking of names, mentally make a list, but by the time I jot down the names, I forget tonnes of people and eventually take a lot of heat for that. So I'll mention a lot of names this time around.

Beginning with my editors at Penguin, who were the first (and only, till now) readers of my manuscript—Vaishali Mathur and Ameya Nagarajan. From the initial draft to the final, your confidence in me and inputs on the manuscript have been invaluable. The rest of the amazing team at Penguin, who work so hard on taking care of every aspect of every book.

My friends are in a habit of over analysing the sequence in which their names are listed in the acknowledgements, and then grilling me about it. My remedy—alphabetical order. Abhay Mishra, Akansha Sharma, Ankit Fadia, Ankit Mittal, Ankit Rai, Apaar Julka, Ashay Shukla, Avantika Mohan, Deepika Rathore, Durjoy Datta, Hina Tekchandani, Mridula Tripathi, Naman Kapur, Nidhi Sharma, Orvana Ghai, Pratham Jain, Preeti Shenoy, Rajat Bhasin, Ravi Subramanian, Ravinder Singh, Sachin Garg and Viyali Michael. Thanks, you guys, for being a part of my world.

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