

The Other Side Of Love



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About the Author

Though she has been writing (and being published) since the age of eleven, it was only when she discovered blogging that her writing found a permanent voice. If she is not found expressing her mood swings at her blog [The Philosopher's Stone](#), then she would be for sure tweeting her lungs out 140 characters at a time on Twitter (@richa_singh).

She currently lives with her husband and seven fishes and many plants in Pune. Waiting for kingdom come.

She completed her novella as a part of an ongoing blogging challenge. When she had begun she had no idea it would garner such a positive response.

Her aim is to write books of such nature that the reader becomes a better person at the end of it. She is hoping the same for this novella too.



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Chapter One

Twenty Seven is the last age to get married and in style

Twenty Seven. That is what the world had told her. Twenty seven is the last age to get married and in style. Her younger sisters had already found their matches by love and she herself had been asked if she was seeing someone. Her refusal had probably confirmed their worst fears. Because after that all of them got married in a quick succession.

She was the eldest and by that attribute she should have been married first. One of them started to cry and the other one left the room. It was finally the youngest of the four who suggested that they be allowed to tie the nuptial knots before her.

"It's not like the men we love can wait forever," she spoke, deep tones of frustration in her voice.

Their mother of course didn't speak a word. She knew their words held logic but love for her first born withheld her from expressing concern. She agreed reluctantly. If she had created a furore over customs and family values she was scared that Radha, the eldest one, might force an alliance she doesn't want.

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"Have you thought of something?" the mother wanted to know from Radha.

Had she? She was twenty seven and not getting younger any day. Had she then wondered why her little heart refused to breach on the subject of matrimony? Was it Sushant? Could she tell her mother about him? And what will she tell? That though she has loved him for now seven years he has never for once even expressed a liking? Could she blame him?

"Radha!" her mother's shrill voice broke her thoughts.

"Mother there is this institute I have received an invitation from. They want me to join as a lecturer there. I was thinking of taking it up," Radha replied almost in a whisper.

Chapter 2

"Change my name? Me Never!"

"Mother there is this institute I have received an invitation from. They want me to join as a lecturer there. I was thinking of taking it up," Radha replied almost in a whisper.

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"This here, please sign the form," the lady behind the desk forwarded a piece of paper to Radha.

She haltingly extracted the pen from her bag and started to sign the blank spaces. It was perhaps after the seventh signature that she finally allowed herself a smile.

"Is there something wrong, mam?" the lady across asked a little confusedly.

Radha smiled a bit more and shook her head in negative.

Her signature. As a child she was always very fiercely protective about it. Her name did not just mean a way of being addressed to but also a way to announce her arrival to the world.

"But one day this name will change, my princess. Then what will you do? What will happen to the hours of practising this Radha Raman signature?" her father used to tease her.

"Change my name? Me never! Who will want to change my name? I will never change my name I love it so much! It has your name in it dad, its the best thing in my whole life!" she would reply angrily.

Her parents would laugh away. They had perhaps always thought that when it's time for her to settle down to life and its nuances, things would get better. But at twenty seven also, having her name altered just because she has gotten married seemed as stupid as it did all those years ago.

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The first day at her institute had been a strangely familiar affair. She had gotten up, decided to take a walk around in the campus and then by eight she was ready to reach her first class.

She did not know whether there would be many up that early to attend her lecture but then she hoped there would be enough to hold a class.

Just when she reached the classroom door, her phone rang.

"Sushant, I am about to take a lecture can I please call you back?" she hurried through her words.

"Yes you can all I wanted to tell you was that I am getting married. It's all fixed up!" he replied excitedly.

Chapter 3

If it wasn't for the isolated thought of love in her heart

"Yes you can, all I wanted to tell you was that I am getting married. It's all fixed up!" he replied excitedly.

Radha wondered whether the news in some way would help her move on from him. Whether now she would start looking out for a new engagement, for a new object of love to keep her occupied?

Occupied. Hadn't she taken up this new job to be occupied? To beat the deep sense of loneliness she felt when her three younger sisters, no matter how vitriolic, married and left?

But returning to that question, no she would not be able to move on from him. The world might seem to be a lot lonelier if it wasn't for the isolated thought of love in her heart. She wondered if her mind and heart loved him for his qualities or to quench the desire to feel attached to someone.

"I am very happy for you. Will call you in the evening to get details," she replied solemnly.

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But love must be found in better ways. She often thought. Why run after a man who dispels all doubts from her mind of a happier tomorrow. He has never as much as complimented the colour of her eyes, which she herself agrees is quite unique. Then too she wants to remain in love with him. After he happily announced the breaking news of his engagement, she even now cannot help but miss him.

"There is only little you can do to ask yourself the same question. The replies often don't change over a minute or so," a strange peaky voice broke her thoughts in the middle.

Startled, she turned to look at the door, a rather tall and lean woman with boyish hair was standing at the entrance. Her mischievous smile coupled with a rather comfortable demeanour intimidated Radha a bit. But she knew better than to reveal that. And so she casually smiled and gestured the lady to come inside. She still wondered whether the boxer shorts clad female deserved the address of "lady". But then she never judges people on clothes and she is not going to start doing that anytime soon.

"Sangeeta Lakhera, the new English teacher here. I joined last month. You seemed to be new too?" the woman rather quickly initiated the introductions.

"Radha Raman. I am here to teach chemistry to the graduation first year students. And yes I joined only last evening," she replied rather confidently as opposed to what she was feeling inside.

"So Radha what was it that you were asking yourself over and over again but getting no reply?" the lady called Sangeeta prodded.

Radha feigned ignorance perfectly.

"Come on its not like I was born yesterday. When a woman watches the tick tock of the clock for almost fifteen minutes she is surely not day dreaming but rather undergoing a painful introspection. Maybe you would tell me sometime later. Over a glass of beer perhaps," she replied in that dismissive tone, which announced the end of the discussion in a way.

After about fifteen minutes of courteous conversation, they together started to go towards the dining hall for dinner. It was on way that Sangeeta suddenly stopped Radha and turned to face her.

"There is something I want to tell you beforehand because you would most definitely get the rumours from somewhere else," she stopped short to maybe gauge Radha's reaction.

Noticing that there was not much change in Radha's expressions, she continued, "Radha. I am a lesbian and not the closet kind I am very open about my orientation."

Chapter 4

"When did you come to realise?"

Noticing that there was not much change in Radha's expressions, she continued, "Radha. I am a lesbian and not the closet kind I am very open about my orientation."

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A lesbian! What is she saying? Does she even know what does that word mean? Inside her head, Radha could hear a huge explosion. She has watched movies, read deep intense novels, to an extent even supported their cause. But to be with them, in a way that calls for social interaction. That's new.

"Here try the gulab jamun, they are softer than the leather base chapati," Sangeeta was walking ahead of Radha in the line for dinner inside mess. Her calm and cool attitude vehemently explained that she had no idea what Radha was thinking.

After about fifteen minutes of slowly crawling through the line, they settled to have their food at a corner table.

"Try the gulab jamun first. That way you would have built a first great impression of the mess food," Sangeeta spoke cheerfully.

"When did you come to realise?" Radha asked rather slowly.

"Almost the first day. I saw everyone taking three to four pieces and so I knew the delicacy is right there," she replied rather candidly.

Radha didn't respond instantly. It was now beginning to drizzle outside. Radha loved the monsoons they always reminded her of the time her father would be around, speaking to them of tales long forgotten. And her then super happy mother would bring in the hot hot pakodas. She misses him. She never speaks but it was after him that her life began to embark on this void, which is now becoming never ending for her. Radha thought about her mother who had always been the first one to speak on her behalf. Wonder how long she would continue?

"Will you not speak anything? What are you thinking now?" Sangeeta's voice startled her.

She shook her head and murmured, "nothing."

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"This over here is what makes the whole building look magnificent in moonlight. I often come on Saturday nights to click pictures of the structure. They always strike back to amaze me, the captured lights," Sangeeta was staring at the huge constructed pillar in front and sporting a faraway look.

"Sangeeta, when was the first time you know you understood what it was like?" Radha's curiosity suddenly found vent again.

Sangeeta didn't reply and it was only after she perhaps realised that the question was a huge space between them that she thought of answering.

"Radha what age are you?" she asked.

"Twenty seven," Radha replied.

"Are you the only child?" she continued.

"No. I have three younger sisters," Radha carried on.

"Any of them married?" she asked again.

"All three of them," Radha answered a bit quietly.

"And you being the eldest, aren't?" she persisted.

This time Radha chose to remain quiet. She could feel her cheeks go red with the firing of queries.

"Radha, you must be facing this socially awkward question for not more than two years. I have been asked such weird things for practically all my life. When people meet you they instantly first take stock of the point that you are not married at twenty seven and then soak in other things about you. I know you must be feeling weird, discomforted by the unwanted attention. Now put those feelings inside your head and imagine your whole life being like that," Sangeeta spoke with a deep throated voice.

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"All I want to say is that this boy is perfect for you. Job or no job, I don't want to get on with this drama and so please come down to meet him," Radha heard her mother rant on the other side.

Radha quietly kept down the phone and imagined her next few days to be spent bickering with her mother over some new *rishta* all over again.

Imagine what must have Sangeeta gone through? Has she even accepted her orientation to them? Her parents, do they know?

Just then her phone rang, she saw the name of the caller. Invariably a smile came on her face, she of course rebuked herself on it. But then she did miss him, how could she deny that?

"Oh Sushant, with the new job and a highly busy schedule, there was hardly any time to return your call. I am so sorry. Yes tell me about this new woman you are to now marry," she spoke into the phone in a sweet, happy voice.

Chapter 5

"It's the full stops that scare people, commas often give new life"

"Oh Sushant, with the new job and a highly busy schedule, there was hardly any time to return your call. I am so sorry. Yes tell me about this new woman you are to now marry," she spoke into the phone in a sweet, happy voice.

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And so in this way her first day at university turned out to be quite interesting. Sushant's announcement did little to boggle her but still the fact that she was not going anywhere with her own matrimony plans somewhere perturbed her.

Honestly she never thought herself much of a wife over the years. She was a fabulous cook, a wonderful homemaker and always the first one to make sense in confusion. Despite all of this, her picture of a perfect wife never quite matched up to her personality. One may question why? She always felt that marriage demanded her to be more of a woman, and that always irked her.

"Do you mind if I come in?" she heard Sangeeta's deep voice at the entrance. Woman was a master of imitations, she never sounded the same somehow. Always held a different tone a different flavour to her voice, Radha thought.

Radha smiled and nodded to indicate her approval.

"Tomorrow we will be free all day, kids have an excursion to go to," Sangeeta continued.

Radha didn't respond, she of course had heard the news too.

"Do you have any plans?" Sangeeta asked.

Radha's silence conveyed her reply perfectly.

"Then it's decided, we are going for a city tour tomorrow. Just the two of us," Sangeeta happily replied.

It was almost an hour after Sangeeta had left that Radha couldn't stop thinking about her last words, "Just the two of us." She had never quite heard them from anyone all her life. The thought of being with someone alone and happy about it, was a rare feeling for her.

It was right then that she saw her phone ringing again. Her mother had a fight to complete and Radha didn't have the patience to endure, the silent button was put to perfect use.

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"The commas. The beauty of English language lies in these commas. They are so perfect. Better than the full stops one keeps referring to. You get it Radha," Sangeeta's lilting voice floated around Radha who quite found herself overwhelmed by the fun she was begging to have in the city.

Why didn't I ever step out of the house? Why did I detest going shopping and movies with everyone? Is this a different me? When did I stop enjoying this crisp sunshine which fills me with such warmth I have never known it seems? Radha's mind was on cloud nine. Her heart felt flighty, she didn't know what had changed since she had received that call. That one call which told her that Sushant was now

engaged.

For a few moments outside that class she had felt dizzy with confusion. She suddenly felt her whole life was going to end in the next few minutes. Sushant was her epicentre for now seven years and if he goes to be somebody else's apple of the eye, what will she do? That helplessness she had felt back in the hallway suddenly has no space right now.

"And you know Sangeeta, it's the full stops that scare people. Commas often give new life," she replied smilingly.

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The day had been exhausting. She had probably never walked so much in her life and yet she didn't feel tired at all. Bidding Sangeeta a warm goodbye, Radha briskly walked inside her own room. She opened her well tied hair and walked over to the mirror.

What she saw didn't surprise her much, a pale long drawn face with bluish green eyes. They told her the eyes were a genetic gift from her grandmother. Radha observed the fine lines around her lips that had started to show, her eyes were always the charm on the small face. But then she thought, has she ever cared how she looked? Otherwise a frantic mother always telling her to dress up would have affected her.

That's another issue that her petite structure and five foot stature did very little to augment any good looking dress.

And the phone, it hasn't stopped ringing all day. She has ignored it, put on silent even switched it off but it doesn't leave her side at all.

"Sushant! I know you have been calling me all day. I was busy sightseeing all day. Can I call you tomorrow please, I am very tired," she answered in a rush.

There was some feeble words at his end.

"What do you mean I am not sounding tired? Okay so now I will push, need to go off to sleep, yes yes tomorrow eight will call," and with that she kept down the phone.

She turned back to the face in the mirror. She was wrong, it was not the same girl she had always talked to. This one was different. It had life, it had a spark. It now wanted to live. It now wanted to live not for others but for oneself.

Chapter 6

"Sarcasm seems to be the flavour of my life"

She turned back to the face in the mirror. She was wrong, it was not the same she had always talked to. This one was different. It had life, it had a spark. It now wanted to live. It now wanted to live not for others but for oneself.

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"Why what's wrong with me now?" Radha spoke confusedly into the phone.

Her face was cooking up all kinds of weird expressions, she was taken aback at his sheer sarcasm. What had she done now?

"But Sushant, here I was asking about your fiancé. What did I do wrong in this?" she continued sounding still baffled.

After a few moments she heard the phone being kept down on the other side. She was quite sure she didn't hear the typical words which announce the end of the call. So should she assume the phone was quite theatrically banged on her? That's new again.

"I have never even experienced that before. People banging phones on me," she murmured to herself.

"Here you are taking to yourself? Will you leave one sign of craziness for others?" Sangeeta's bright sunshine voice strolled in.

A startled Radha looked up.

"When did you arrive?" Radha asked her slowly, still reeling under the effects of last call's theatrical end.

"Just in enough time to hear you chatter with yourself. Radha, university pays lecturers a good amount to afford a psychiatrist. I know many," Sangeeta continued with her sarcasm.

Sarcasm. I am being subjected to this emotion a lot recently. With mother and her constant remarks about the running body clock and now Sushant with his weird retort that I have changed. Sarcasm seems to be the flavour of my life. Radha thought this inside.

"Are we still on for that lunch?" Radha hurried away the topic in a different direction.

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It was nine thirty and there was not a wink of sleep in her eyes. She first thought of taking a walk in the garden and then it struck her. She could start handling some of the unfinished sarcasms of the day.

"Hey Sushant! What is up?" Radha spoke into the phone in her best voice.

From the other side she heard, "You found time in your busy schedule to even speak to me. Thanks

man!"

The sarcasm couldn't end, it seems. In seven years he had never vied for her time or attention. And now he was going berserk commenting and in a way expressing his displeasure. Such a strange mix of events. Radha thought this all inside her head.

"Okay I am sorry. Now tell me how is the courtship period going on?" Radha asked slowly.

"Forget about that. I always talk about myself. Never do we discuss your life. Tell me Radha how are you? How is the new place? Are you settling down well?" he asked her in a very serious tone.

Radha got slightly amused. Are we really getting into discussing me? She wondered. Suddenly the words new and changed were becoming synonyms of her life.

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"Okay you tell me Sangeeta if I told you that a man loves me only when he sees me running away would you say he is worth it?" Radha asked in her softest voice.

She had been behaving strangely all day and Sangeeta could not understand the reason behind it. But of course her question helped get a lot of answers.

Chapter 7

"Were my feelings that frivolous?"

She had been behaving strangely all day and Sangeeta could not understand the reason behind it. But of course her question helped get a lot of answers.

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"You must tell me the boy's name," Sangeeta spoke in jest.

Radha only looked more innocent if possible to avoid any further prodding.

"I am pretty sure you have a complicated love life going on. From all my experience, which I have many, it's a one sided affair," she continued.

Radha looked faraway at the students playing football on the field. Football. He surely wanted me to come and see his matches every week. And by routine I always went. Was it love?

Radha could have continued a bit more. In fact she could have carried out the perfect act of ignorance she was continuing, rather well. But then the bombardment of thoughts inside her head made them difficult to be contained.

"How can one be sure that it was love? What if heart has conjured the idea of love to keep oneself happy? Or occupied? What defines that it was love and not just a mere thought of same?" Radha finally broke her silence.

Sangeeta stared at her. She saw a strange light on Radha's face. Like these questions were more rhetoric than expecting some answers. And so she decided to not speak, she knew the queries put up would be answered in a while.

"I often think that for seven years I loved him or simply identified an object of love to while away my time. If I was at home I might have been a wreck. Just the mere thought of him marrying someone else used to kill me. In the past two days I have coped up pretty well. Were my feelings that frivolous? Did he mean to me nothing more than an enjoyable past time of youth?" Radha spoke as if she was in a way rebuking herself, the contempt was so clearly visible on her face.

Sangeeta only smiled, she knew that preaching is never the key to such situations. She had to wait for the emotional upheaval inside Radha to subside.

"Seven years, Sangeeta. Seven years. You wanted to know why I didn't get married while my younger sisters did? Its because I was waiting for Sushant. And so the delay. This news of him getting engaged should shatter me. It should kill me from inside. But no. That's not the case. I feel free. I feel like someone has opened the cage door and asked me to fly away. Like I had for seven years not waited for my marriage to him but only his marriage to anyone. The wait was only for his marriage. Why the hell do I not want to cry? Why do I feel like a burden is lifted?" Radha's voice took a sharp upward curve.

"What if it is? What if I told you that all your conclusions are true, then?" Sangeeta spoke in her softest voice.

Chapter 8

But that was all hidden..

"What if it is? What if I told you that all your conclusions are true, then?" Sangeeta spoke in her softest voice.

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Radha's life was changing. She could feel it. One may say it was the metamorphosis inside her but that old twenty seven year old woman who always thought she was different had changed. The world she never wanted to be a part of was now welcoming her.

"Yes this side of the market has better dresses. We must see them," Radha spoke enthusiastically.

Her younger sister only stood and stared at an overtly happy Radha walking briskly along the road. She had come to visit Radha at the university as a break from her boring "married" life. Radha was more than happy to be the gracious guest in return.

"What has gotten into you? Are you in love?" she asked unabashedly glaring at her with piercing eyes.

Radha laughed throwing her head back.

"Quite the opposite. I am out of it. I never quite accepted Pinkie, but I was in love with Sushant. All my life, I desired for him to say something to me. I never got married because of this wait," Radha spoke like she had found a strange sense of desire to only speak truth now.

Pinkie just didn't know what to say to her. She had never in her life seen Radha look so carefree and speak so casually. Of course they all knew it was Sushant who was the reason for the delay in her marriage. But that was all hidden, never had such an explicit statement of agreement been presented.

"And you know he is now engaged to someone else. I quite thought that should see the end of me. But see here I am taking you around shopping and chilling with you. Humans are strange, they never quite know how to react at things. No?" she continued in that candid tone.

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"But of course you are also against the whole marriage thing. Radha tends to attract likeminded people," Pinke spoke sarcastically.

Sangeeta looked highly amused.

"No actually when I said I don't like men. I meant it quite seriously. I am a lesbian," Sangeeta spoke in her sweetest voice.

Pinkie just looked on dumbfounded. She was feeling like the Alice in wonderland who was not happy to go down the rabbit hole.

Radha herself was trying to control her giggle. She knew Pinkie was going to be one helluva a shocked person right now.

"Okay Pinkie I will now take your leave. I have an early class to take. It was great meeting you. Radha will you join by lunch at least?" Sangeeta spoke these words while raising herself from the chair.

"Yes I should be there by that time. Hold a table at lunch for the two of us. Goodnight," Radha replied smilingly.

"Are you by any sheer chance turning over to her side? Have you also stopped liking men and you know started to like," Pinkie didn't complete her sentence. She felt the termination of it might pronounce blasphemy through her mouth.

Radha on her part had nothing to say in that remark. She found herself surrounded by too many things to even pay attention to Pinkie's words. But despite that she was happy.

"Forget Sangeeta, tell me how is married life?" Radha asked, drawing a chair next to Pinkie.

Chapter 9

"And I just knew I was different from the rest"

"Forget Sangeeta, tell me how is married life?" Radha asked, drawing a chair next to Pinkie.

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"Your sister left?" Sangeeta asked in between mouthfuls of gulab jamun.

"Yes today morning. She took the eight o'clock bus," Radha replied.

"She is a strange fellow. Doesn't seem like she is your sister," Sangeeta continued, without as much as raising her head from the lunch plate.

Radha laughed and said, "Initially everyone feels like that about her. But spend some time with her she isn't so bad."

"I can still recall her shocked expression when I told her why I don't like men," Sangeeta spoke in jest.

Radha smiled, "Well will you blame her? It's a little difficult to accept initially."

"Yes I remember, how you asked me sitting in same chair the first day- 'when did you come to realise'," Sangeeta said.

"You had understood my question and still you didn't speak!" Radha exclaimed.

"Well you were a complete stranger to me then. How could I answer such a personal question," Sangeeta replied.

"Well then why was I not stranger enough to tell about your orientation," Radha commented cheekily.

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"I was eight at that time," Sangeeta suddenly started to speak.

It was nine in the night and after an early dinner, Radha and Sangeeta had decided to take a walk around campus in abject silence. The silence which was soon broken in ten minutes by that weird remark.

Sangeeta turned to see Radha who looked quite confused at the statement.

"I was eight when I had my first kiss. And I just knew I was different from the rest," Sangeeta carried forward the conversation.

"Who was the girl?" Radha asked with a curious cat look.

"It was a boy. I hated the kiss. I could barely remain within myself after that. I thought it was one of the ugliest I had felt all my life," Sangeeta replied, she had now levelled her gaze with Radha's.

Radha only smiled and nodded a bit.

"After that too I wasn't totally confirm. But then when I finally realised that the girl who was my best friend meant the world to me, my doubts started to rise. But when did I know that this is it?" Sangeeta

took a pensive pause here.

The rustle of the leaves on the ground due to wind, filled up the lull in the conversation. Radha waited patiently to hear Sangeeta's story.

"Yes it was also because I was more comfortable with boys. You know what I mean? Like probably you are more at peace around girls, because you don't have an adrenalin rush of meeting an opposite sex. In my case the same sex was the culprit," she smiled mischievously at the end of these words.

Radha now began to really understand some things about her. But some, of course, remained unanswered.

"Sangeeta, right now, when you are walking with me how do you feel? The adrenalin rush which makes one conscious or the camaraderie of a casual friend," Radha spoke these words and locked her eyes with Sangeeta. She somewhere wanted more than just words to answer this question.

And suddenly the phone began to ring. Flashing the name of Sushant.

Chapter 10

It would be harmless..

And suddenly the phone began to ring. Flashing the name of Sushant.

She was quite enjoying the walk through the campus with the soft breeze of the night. And of course Sangeeta. But her mind wandered to the sarcasms hurled at her for not picking up phones and she submitted to the call of duty.

"Sushant, hello. What's going on?" she began to speak into the phone and slowly started to walk beside Sangeeta who was now sporting a very pale expression.

She could hear him go on and on about his engagement plans and also the girl in question who was apparently very pretty. Once in a while she turned to give a smile to Sangeeta. Sangeeta returned it with an equally confused look.

"I am alright. Yes of course I miss you. I miss home. But this is different. This is something new and honestly I am enjoying it as well," Radha spoke quite seriously.

Sushant didn't say much after that. He sounded a bit disappointed. After the formal niceties got over the call ended.

"This Sushant is he an ex-flame?" Sangeeta asked as soon as the phone was hung up.

Radha again found herself at the silent end of the conversation. Was he an ex-flame? Define flame, someone you like? Someone who likes you? Or a mutual thing?

"I liked him. And somewhere I wished it turned out to be something of a forever kind. Well, now he is engaged to a girl and the story has pretty much received its befitting end," Radha replied in a tone which somewhere announced the premature end to the topic.

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"Mother, this is something I don't want to do. I am serious. Soon you will wish you hadn't done this. And yes of course I will be the first one to tell him how you are forcing me into this," Radha screamed into the phone. This was one of those rare moments when someone she loved so much had finally managed to work up her angry side.

"Is there some issue?" Sangeeta who was peacefully having lunch on the other chair asked in her most serene tone.

"She has sent a boy to meet me. And well he is supposed to be some hot shot human being who she believes is just about perfect!" Radha's volume went up a notch higher this time.

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Radha picked up her simplest suit and braided her tight into a plait. She smoked the lower end of her eyes with kohl and with one last look into the mirror left her room. He was waiting outside the

campus for her. The man her mother felt was just about perfect.

Six feet one inch. His eyes were deep set in the sockets. His crooked grin gave him a boyish look but then the broad shoulders coupled with a steep stoop of the back presented the mature side. He was thirty three, mother had told her. And his well kempt hair spoke about his profession as an accountant. The love of his life perhaps was definitely a calculator.

"And you must be Radha, you are prettier than that photograph they showed me," he began to speak in his deep throated voice. The only thing that made her take proper notice of him. The voice did somewhere soften her otherwise rebellious stand.

"And you are Shikhar, the man my mother feels is just about perfect for me," she spoke in a mocking tone. It was only seconds later that she realised how much of her contempt was reflected in her voice. But his grin got wider and for some strange reason Radha became more comfortable.

She turned around, Sangeeta was still standing at the campus gate. Radha had asked her to stay there because she had planned to make up an excuse and not go out with the "perfect man". But something told her she could at least go out for a coffee, it would be harmless.

Radha waved at Sangeeta and smiled wide in a way to communicate that she could go ahead with her "women in writing" class without Radha accompanying.

For a moment Radha thought she saw a darker emotion on Sangeeta's face but then next moment the smile returned and she turned her back to proceed inside.

Chapter 11

"Your life needs clarity"

For a moment Radha thought she saw a darker emotion on Sangeeta's face but then next moment the smile returned and she turned her back to proceed inside.

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"It has been two days and you haven't quite spoken about that guy you met," Sangeeta spoke over the commotion in lunch.

"Well there isn't much to tell. We went out for coffee and then he left back for his city. After that there has not been any communication," Radha replied casually.

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"Are you not interested in getting married like ever?" Sangeeta asked once the lunch got over.

"Honestly I don't know. I sometimes think I was never interested and Sushant was as close I came to feeling something in that direction," Radha carried on with the little bit of lunch left in her plate.

Sangeeta watched her intently. She does seem to be a rather strange woman to encounter, she thought of Radha. Her taut face with a rather limited stature coupled with petite framework, altogether give a very complex outlook to her personality.

"Bhaiya ek gulab jamun," Radha called out to the helpers on the side.

The mess was filled with loads of people, a rather extreme sight for the university. Apparently some of the campus exchange students had stopped over for their meals at the same time.

"Yes but then you know sometimes you must realise that your life needs clarity. I mean you need to settle down someday," Sangeeta prodded further.

Radha looked up in one swift glance and which told Sangeeta, to at best back off from the discussion.

"Sangeeta!" The two women turned around to see a visibly ecstatic lady calling out for Sangeeta.

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"You know her from a long time it feels," Radha remarked once the formal introductions got over and the lady in question had also left.

Sangeeta didn't reply instantly, she rather went on to look at the receding party of students on the left.

"Something wrong Sangeeta? You don't look alright," Radha spoke with concern.

Sangeeta slowly turned to meet Radha's eyes. She looked to be in some trouble, Radha thought.

"Kavita was my girlfriend in college. It was only about two years back we parted ways. Seeing her here is a little tough on me. If you don't mind I will take leave. Will see you over for dinner," and with these words Sangeeta left Radha standing at the mess gate.

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It was the soft music in the background and the dimmed lights that formed the perfect setup. Sangeeta found her spirits lifted and a renewed sense of confidence surge in her heart. She still wondered why she finally thought to meet him but when Radha cancelled on their dinner plans she decided the alternative was not bad.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked in his characteristic deep voice.

Sangeeta only smiled and shook her head, "No nothing as such. Just a glass of water, Shikhar."

Chapter 12

And somewhere those feelings were resurfacing

Sangeeta only smiled and shook her head, "No nothing as such. Just a glass of water, Shikhar."

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"Radha, I met Shikhar yesterday night. Apparently he has not left town," Sangeeta spoke slowly.

Radha looked up with surprise and confusion but she chose to remain silent.

The weather was stormy and the incessant rain outside had made it difficult for them to take their ritualistic night walk outside. They were indoors, sitting across each other in Sangeeta's room.

"They didn't start the generator, it's been quite some time. The candle will sniff out in another five minutes," Radha replied, avoiding all forms of face-off with Sangeeta for now.

Sangeeta rose from her chair and walked to the cupboard on the side. She picked up the bunch of candles lying there and returned rather briskly.

"Here. We have enough candles to last five nights in a row without electricity. Will you now tell me what's going on? Shikhar seems to have the idea that you really like him," Sangeeta continued.

"Where did you meet him?" Radha asked sharply.

"I was going to the market when I found him standing outside campus. He wanted to meet you but seeing me he became conscious. After about a few minutes he asked me for dinner. You had cancelled on our plan and so I thought this seemed like an alright idea," Sangeeta replied, her face giving no notice to the rather embarrassed Radha in front.

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Radha had been quiet for long enough for Sangeeta to lose her patience. She had questioned Radha a lot of times over the Shikhar matter but each time she was met with utter silence. Radha was not ready to answer simple questions like, "why did you lie?" "Whats the status update?" Any of those things.

"He lied. I clearly told him I was in no mood for marriage. But he has taken a strange liking to me. Now what could I do? And I had told him to leave town. I assumed he would have. I have not even received his phone calls as you can see," Radha spoke in a mad rush.

There was a sudden drop in decibel after her mini outburst. Sangeeta herself decided to drop the subject watching her react so animatedly.

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"Its been a long time since we have even sat down like this. No?" Kavita looked longingly at Sangeeta. There had been moments in the past few days when both had remembered better times. And somewhere those feelings were resurfacing.

"Yes it has been. But then you were the one who decided to part ways. I was always happy to be with you," Sangeeta replied pensively

"Would you call me more often now? I miss you," Kavita spoke with almost a choking of throat.

Sangeeta in return remained mute. She had suffered in silence all these years. She had never got a chance to tell Kavita that for her the decision was life shattering. Would calling Kavita be alright with her peace of mind?

"It's better if the times we spent remains as it is and we all move on from them completely," Sangeeta spoke.

"Are you saying you would not call me?" Kavita asked abrasively.

Sangeeta again kept quiet to convey her reply.

"Is it because of that woman?" Kavita replied keeping her eyes focused on figure of a woman walking towards them.

Chapter 13

"It's about a life you lived"

"Is it because of that woman?" Kavita replied keeping her eyes focused on figure of a woman walking towards them.

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Is it because of Radha that I have started to behave strangely? Am I in love? Have I not realised it at all? Sangeeta's mind was abuzz with all of this. She casually looked at Radha who was now walking slowly alongside her. She does look to be different than the rest. And somewhere Sangeeta always felt drawn to talk to her. That time when she was standing at the campus gate and Radha was going away with Shikhar, she felt something inside. Like a piece of her heart was broken. She instantly attributed it to probably the sense of loneliness she felt on a bright day with no company. But then was it all?

"Where are we going?" Radha asked chirpily.

"To this coffee shop close by," Sangeeta replied smilingly.

"This is new. You are asking me out in a proper fashion, no hurried calls. And now I see you walking me to this place as well. What's the plan?" Radha had mischief written all over her face.

Sangeeta laughed out loudly. She spared another glance to observe Radha. How different she looked now! A petite small woman who barely smiled is now full of joy, energy. She secretly thought Radha was growing with her. She wanted to believe her company had an effect on Radha.

"Here the coffee shop, we have arrived," Sangeeta spoke quickly.

They walked inside the one room place and asked the waiter for an empty table.

"Hello Radha," Shikhar's voice spun both of their heads.

Radha remained silent for as long as the moment lasted. She thought this was too much of a coincidence to believe. She slowly turned to face Sangeeta who was now making way outside.

"Would you at least have a cup of coffee?" Shikhar spoke pleadingly.

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"Have you decided to not speak at all?" Kavita's harsh tone pierced through Sangeeta's restless mind.

"No No. It's just that I am feeling a bit lost off late," she replied softly.

"Will we say Radha has something to do with it?" Kavita continued in her coarse tone.

Sangeeta of course remained quiet.

"You realise Sangeeta that Radha is not like us. She may feel an ounce of attraction but being like us needs a greater deal of acceptance. It is not only about heart or emotions, it's about a life you have lived. A belief that existed inside you which you need to give up," Kavita ranted off.

"But Sangeeta I have felt her to be different. I can see that all her life she has not quite believed in the things taught to her," Sangeeta spoke quietly.

"Then why did you take her to Shikhar? Why did you not tell her the truth?" Kavita asked quite abrasively.

Why did she? What made her see that the option of Shikhar was a saner one for Radha?

"Because I don't know if my feelings for her are due to loneliness or actual love. And she doesn't have time for me to test that. I think for her own good I want to spare her the conflict of deciding not only whether she loves me but also whether she loves me enough to give up everything," Sangeeta replied, lowering her volume to barely being audible now.

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"And so how was the meeting with Shikhar?" Sangeeta asked a visibly perturbed Radha.

Chapter 14

"To move on with my life"

"And so how was the meeting with Shikhar?" Sangeeta asked a visibly perturbed Radha.

"I don't know. He looks to be a great guy doesn't he? And mummy also finds him a great option. Perhaps Sangeeta the time has come for me to move on with my life. For long I remained stuck at Sushant and then of course came a time when I thought marriage was not for me. But now I realise I was wrong. Spending time and life with someone you love is the best thing one can do. Thank you Sangeeta if it wasn't for you perhaps I would have not reached this decision," Radha replied calmly, though lines of trouble did remain etched on her face.

Sangeeta smiled and spoke, "You take the first few steps and perhaps things will change for better. Maybe this is the decision that will give you the desired break."

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"Love. Kavita, love should have many meanings. Don't you think?" Sangeeta spoke cheerfully.

"You seem to be in a great mood today. What happened? Has the craziness of Radha started to wear out," Kavita replied, looking highly suspicious.

Sangeeta laughed and spoke, "It never happened to ride on me. I was always happily single after you left."

Kavita frowned a bit more.

"Will you tell me what happened now? I saw you leaving with Radha from the library today," she spoke.

"Oh nothing. She has started to like Shikhar and has in fact decided to get engaged to him. Is it not the absolute best news ever?" Sangeeta replied happily.

"Now we know the truth. Don't we? Well so the matter is now closed forever?" Kavita asked, deepening her frown with every passing minute.

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"I told her," Radha spoke softly.

"Told who?" Sangeeta asked.

"Mother. I told her about Shikhar," Radha replied.

Sangeeta felt a jolt inside. The pace of matters and the formalisation of things were getting to her a bit. But she dare not reveal it on her face.

"Oh that's great news! She must be happy!" she reacted in a higher tone to express the excitement. The key is on express because perhaps feeling it was a far away thing for now.

"Yes she was happy. I think I heard her cry," Radha replied quietly.

Sangeeta smiled slightly and started to stare down at her shuffling feet. She felt a bit nervous inside.

"And it is strange you know Sangeeta. I always thought of myself. Mother was so happy. If I had known I would bring such a deep emotion to her I might have agreed much before," Radha spoke as if in deep trance.

Chapter 15

Self mockery hadn't quite finished

"And it is strange you know Sangeeta. I always thought of myself. Mother was so happy. If I had known I would bring such a deep emotion to her I might have agreed much before," Radha spoke as if in deep trance.

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Fourteen autumns have come and gone. It's the fourteenth spring which is now in the air. The breeze outside still has its wintery cold but then the bright sunshine is threatening to take it away.

She looked at herself in the glass window which was slowly doubling up to be a half mirror for her. The hair which once stood as black as one could imagine them to be has now started to show hints of those chalky whites.

"Ma'am the new professor has arrived. Is waiting to meet you," the peon's hushed voice interrupted her thoughts in mid.

She turned around, the door was half open and he was standing in the no man's land. She knew that asking him to stall the appointment would invariably get conveyed to the new visitor.

"In five minutes," she replied crisply.

She closed the window tight shut to probably block the winds of change from entering her mind anymore. Slowly she returned to her desk, settling a few files she accidentally toppled the name plate. She bent over to pick it up, "Dean, University."

She inwardly laughed, did she ever imagine a day would arrive when she would call herself that?

Self mockery hadn't quite finished because the creaking noise of the door reminded her of the impending visitor.

She quickly took out the file of the new joinee and settled down in the leather chair.

"Good afternoon, Miss Radha," she spoke these words by reading the name from the top of the green file and smilingly raised her head to face the new entrant.

Her face froze and she met a similar emotion the other side.

"Sangeeta," standing at five foot the lady clad in a maroon saree slowly whispered.

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"So what if she has joined university, why do you even care!" Kavita spoke exhaustively.

"You don't get it do you? In her marital status there is divorce, in children section there is a daughter. In her work experience there is a gap of exactly fourteen years. This is a Radha who is broken, shattered and most importantly an outcast," Sangeeta replied in anguish.

"Are you the sole person entitled to manage her affairs? Is she not big enough to see to her life?"

Kavita unperturbed by the pain on Sangeeta's face continued.

"There can be a few things that can break a person in this way. If you had met her you wouldn't react like this. She hardly spoke," Sangeeta replied, the expression of concern glued to her face.

Chapter 16

"Better times to come"

"There can be a few things that can break a person in this way. If you had met her you wouldn't react like this. She hardly spoke," Sangeeta replied, the expression of concern glued to her face.

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The day had started with a light breeze, the sun was also playing hide and seek today. And an otherwise gloomy hostel looked a bit more cheerful to Sangeeta. She had all the details about Radha's room number. She in fact had extracted it the very next minute after Radha left her office. The question was whether she should go to meet Radha? For fourteen years they have not spoken to each other for a moment. And now they are meeting again. Under a different world, at a different age and now too she is single but then has a daughter to accompany.

A light knock lifted her head.

"No matter how many times you ask yourself that question the answer will not change. Long back, you had stood at my room's entrance while I was sitting on a chair thinking. And well these were your first words," Radha's voice unlike her physical appearance remained untouched by age. It still had that spring in the tone.

Sangeeta smiled, how vividly she remembered that day. She was wearing shorts and T-shirt and her hair were so short she hardly had to comb them ever.

"Come inside," Sangeeta replied smilingly.

Radha walked in briskly. She had a strange sense of tranquillity on her face now.

"So dean? Of University? Wow!" she instantly exclaimed, post settling down on the chair next to Sangeeta.

Sangeeta laughed loudly throwing her head back.

"It was a strange set of events which triggered all this. But none so entertaining for a bright sunshine day like today," Sangeeta replied in a rush.

For a while neither spoke. They only looked at each other and smiled a bit and then suddenly a lot.

"It's so good to meet you. I wish I could tell you how happy I am to see you," it was Radha who broke the silence.

Sangeeta continued to smile, she had somewhere lost her appetite for speaking. She only wanted to listen to Radha.

"Arti. My daughter. She knows all about our friendship. In fact last night I told her that you are the Dean here. She is quite excited to meet you. She often asked me why we never stayed in touch all these years," Radha put in the silent question in a way of mixing words.

But of course the question was asked, the onus was on Sangeeta to answer.

"Why we didn't meet? Or why we didn't talk? Such questions really have no answers and we both

know it so. Let's just remember that today is what we have. A time well spent can be a great foundation for better times to come," Sangeeta replied happily.

Chapter 17

"So it worked out between you two?"

"Why we didn't meet? Or why we didn't talk? Such questions really have no answers and we both know it so. Let's just remember that today is what we have. A time well spent can be a great foundation for better times to come," Sangeeta replied happily.

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"Why are you so tensed Radha? Are the students giving you a tough time?" Sangeeta spoke in jest.

Radha didn't respond. In fact she remained seated in the chair as it is.

"Mummy, I am going alright. Please take care of yourself," It was Arti's innocent voice that called for her attention. Radha looked at her child and suddenly started to cry.

"Please don't cry. Its only two days. I will get back right? Now please be a good girl mumma. Sangeeta aunty, will you promise to make her happy?" Arti's expectant face had lines of hurt all over.

Sangeeta nodded vigorously and smiled at the child.

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"It's the first time she is going away from me. Ever since she is born I have not left her side even for a moment. I have a feeling this will be tough on me. But then I cannot go against the ruling. Can I?" Radha continued to speak dejectedly.

Sangeeta could see that her heart was still not fine at the prospect of Arti spending two nights away from her. But then as she had put it, what choice did she have?

"Radha, if you don't mind what really happened? I mean I remember you being very happy with your decision. And Shikhar was a great man, I remember," Sangeeta finally couldn't hold on to her questions anymore.

Radha suddenly got up and quietly walked out of the dining hall.

Sangeeta had no choice but to follow.

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"It's a full moon night. Do you remember how beautiful this building always looked in moonlight," Sangeeta was staring at the structure bathed in white light. Shining like a pillar of illumination for those lost in realms of darkness.

"He loved me. He really did. For years I thought this is what I always wanted. But then slowly things started to change. There were always things like, "you don't understand" "you don't get it" and then on a few days nothing. The silence killed me. Honestly I could have carried on but the moments where I had to pretend to be someone else had started to become endless," Radha stopped speaking all of a sudden. In the same way she had jerked into an explanation, she halted too.

Sangeeta knew there was more. She could sense it.

"Sometimes I feel his affair did a favour to me. It allowed me a guilt free walk out. I could finally say "it's not working out" and let the blame be on his shoulders. He tried. He really did. I could see that he put in efforts and started to become a much nicer person. But well I never allowed things to be same. My escape path was chalked out. But Arti, it's for her I feel the worst. I think I am selfish. I should have imagined her life as a broken marriage offspring," Radha again stopped but this time it looked to be conclusively.

Sangeeta did not answer or offer any words for her explanation. She knew they would do little to amend things anyways.

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"And at home? How did they take it?' Sangeeta asked.

"Mum passed away last year. It was a huge jolt for me. But then I knew she will not be with me forever. Sometimes I feel that was the reason why I even got married," Radha and Sangeeta had walked back to the hostel and were enjoying a cup of tea.

"And the sisters?" Sangeeta spoke in between the sips of tea.

"All married with kids. Whether happily or not, who cares! Not divorced that's what they say is their saving grace," Radha spoke with a scorn in her tone.

Sangeeta only stared at her. She had still not deciphered whether the divorce had caused Radha the pain on her face or the marriage she survived.

"Another cup of tea?" Sangeeta asked.

"Yes. And since when did you start to have tea? Weren't you always the coffee woman?" Radha commented.

"It's Kavita. She is always cribbing about making once coffee and then tea for herself. With time it became two cups of tea forever," Sangeeta replied, with a hint of smile.

"Kavita. So it worked out between you two?" Radha spoke slowly.

Chapter 18

"Is it love for you?"

"Kavita. So it worked out between you two?" Radha spoke slowly.

Sangeeta who was still holding the cup of tea in her hand, suddenly felt the warmth run through her entire body. It must be the warm tea of course, she thought. Did it work out between us? It was a strange question which hounded her almost every single day. And not until this very moment did she really went looking for answers. She somewhere felt like it was her duty to give explanations to Radha. Why was it so? Perhaps this was for another time.

"Radha I don't think I have narrated to you the events surrounding the night I told parents about my orientation. It was a stormy night both in sense of spirit and weather. They had seen me with a girl in a not so comfortable position and first they thought to take me to a psychologist. When I vehemently refused, they made me sit down to discuss. They thought their child is seriously ill. My mother was the worst that time, she was taking it way too hard. All the rituals, customs, cultures were being reminded to me. I very politely explained to them how I have myself undergone this scrutiny inside my head and found no changes. So perhaps as I had accepted it, they should also," Sangeeta raised her head to watch Radha's reactions.

She was still watching with those intense eyes.

Sangeeta gave out a huge sigh and said, "They threw me out. Yes, they said they cannot and will not bear the brunt of my follies. My father spoke of the high values he has harnessed in himself and my mother spoke as to how much of a virgin Mary she considers herself to be. For them their life, their values, their traditions were more important than their daughter's happiness. Leave that, they were more important than their own daughter's existence in their life. I walked out of the house with a bag full of clothes and my empty heart. I never went back and to give them credit they never tried finding out about me also," Sangeeta spoke like it was a normal day affair to discuss such things, she paused to take a sip from the cup of tea.

"And then there was that time Kavita came into my life. For long it went well but my inability to express love dented our relationship and she left. Only to return in a short span of time, but the relationship taught me a serious thing about my life that I have lost the capability to love anyone, forget about women all together. But Kavita somehow doesn't get that. She continues to stay with me, changing my choice of beverage from coffee to tea. Takes me to a mandir for prayers, throws my clothes in a bag and forces me to go out for a trip and then for a few days prohibits me to go to university so that I can sit at home and relax. So you know as for the question that did it work out, I think it worked out perfectly for me but whether I can say the same for Kavita I highly doubt that," Sangeeta finished with a sweet smile.

Radha somehow found it all too hard to take. Inside her heart she felt a turmoil rise but then she convinced herself that she must not let it spill over.

"So this is love, right?" Radha asked casually, controlling her facial expressions albeit they reveal much.

"Kavita loves me. And I wish I could deny this fact because it somehow makes me very guilty inside. At the same time, I need her. Remember Radha when you decided to get married to Shikhar you said that you realised how you need someone in your life to love? Perhaps not love, but yes now I know how I need someone to love me. I am human, I am always thinking about myself you see. Kavita makes me want to get up each day and crack a joke about life or even mock her over something, I

know it would make her happy. Is it love for you? Then I am in love," Sangeeta answered, her cup was empty but the emotions inside her heart was filled to the brim.

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"Does it ever get to you that she never loved you?" Kavita spoke softly.

"Who? Whom are you talking about?" Sangeeta feigned ignorance.

"Like you don't know. Radha married a man, no matter how much you want to convince yourself. Forget about her loving you she is incapable of loving any woman. It's been fourteen years and it has still not settled inside your head," Kavita replied in a sharp tone.

"Rubbish! I have no such thoughts. You keep insinuating things, I never felt like that about her!" Sangeeta exclaimed.

"Really then why have you not even for once reciprocated my love in fourteen years?" Kavita raised her volume a bit.

Sangeeta didn't reply.

"You think I am a fool. I have given you my life here. Do you not see? She is just a mirage and will always be," Kavita's voice shook under the influence of her tears.

"Kavita! Its not like that. I do love you in my own ways. You know I am incapable of an emotion like that. Trust me, Radha has nothing to do with my heart not now not ever," Sangeeta drew a sobbing Kavita close and remained like that for a while.

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"Sangeeta!" Radha called out for her across the alleys outside the offices in university.

Sangeeta turned around and gave her a sweet smile.

"I was wondering if it's alright with you, can I take you out for coffee?" Radha spoke in a rush.

Sangeeta remained quiet, she had no idea what had extracted that from Radha.

"It's just that it's been so long I have had fun that I wanted to go out and enjoy myself. I hope it's not something weird. Will Kavita have an issue?" Her voice dropped down to a whisper at the mention of Kavita.

"Kavita? Why would she react? It's not like you have decided to like women? Last I checked you got married to a man. Why will she be jealous then? Or have you changed your orientation in these years?" A surprised Sangeeta found Radha's words a bit startling.

"Of course not. Of course not," Radha stumbled into an explanation which invariably turned her red.

Chapter 19

"Even I cannot take away that right"

"Of course not. Of course not," Radha stumbled into an explanation which invariably turned her red.

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"It's been sometime that I have done things for my own happiness. I was twenty seven and harrowed over not getting married and post that it was because of that very thing that life lost all its peace of mind," Radha was sitting across Sangeeta in a leather sofa chair, holding a cup of coffee quite wistfully in one hand.

"Was it that bad? Did it not work at all?" Sangeeta asked quite seriously.

"It did. In the beginning it was amazing. Shikhar was a thorough gentleman, he never as much as raise his volume also. But then he wanted more of me. And he was not wrong. But after the initial inertia phased out, my heart began to recede. I have never spoken to anyone about it but I think I had suddenly come to stop loving him. He became a stranger to me or if one might want to say I became a stranger to myself," Radha stopped short of saying something. Her halt was not as smooth as ends of conversations usually are.

Sangeeta could sense it and so she only intensified her gaze so as to jerk Radha back into speaking.

"When I decided to marry Shikhar it was more so for mother. She had started to take things quite badly, every now and then we fought. Sisters you know never had a great relationship with me but mother was different. She loved me and she had allowed me a lot of space. I somewhere felt she should not pay the price of my own weird nature. She deserves better for all that she had done for me. And then Shikhar came along, he didn't really happen to me in first go, it was only after you arranged a second meeting that pulled the trick. He always used to thank his stars he stumbled into you that night," Radha finished with a soft smile.

"Shikhar was someone I liked because he always looked so much in love with you. Honestly I used to be amazed by his sense of emotions towards you. I always thought I could never bring myself to feel like that for someone. I, of course, was happy for you but I considered Shikhar lucky because God had given him this immense capacity to love. It's very rare," Sangeeta found herself more quiet at the end of those words.

Radha had a strange look on her face.

"Like Kavita. I see her and I always feel you mean the world to her. She has been there forever it seems. But now I know you love her too. So eventually things did work out, right?" Radha spoke softly.

"Things surely worked out for me. I can't quite say the same for Radha," Sangeeta replied with a hint of smile on her face.

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"How was it?" Kavita asked abrasively.

Sangeeta laughed.

"You sound jealous?" she mocked Kavita.

"Why should I be jealous? She is not going to fall in love with you. Not because she doesn't prefer women but because you are an impossible person to love," Kavita continued in same coarse fashion.

Her reaction made Sangeeta laugh a little more.

"You would never quite believe the entertainment you provide to my life," Sangeeta spoke in between laughs.

"Yes please go ahead and laugh about things. You are now forty years old and look at the connections you have made in your life. Only me. And that too not because you worked hard but only for my immense love for you. Listen look here," Kavita suddenly walked close enough to Sangeeta's chair.

Sangeeta raised her head to meet Kavita's eyes.

"Kavita what happened?" Sangeeta this time spoke with some seriousness.

"You do realise I love you a lot. I don't want any Radha to take away this right from me," Kavita spoke almost in a whisper.

"Even I cannot take away that right from you," Sangeeta replied with a smile and a tight grip on Kavita's hands.

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"You people were best of friends?" Arti asked innocently.

"Yes we were and are as well," Sangeeta replied sweetly.

"Best friends are coolest. No?" she continued in that childish voice.

Sangeeta nodded and of course flashed another smile.

"When will mother get free from her lecture?" Arti asked this question almost the tenth time in last half an hour.

Sangeeta looked at her watch again, it was one fifteen, in another fifteen minutes it would be lunch.

"She would be here in another fifteen minutes. Then we can all take you for lunch, ok?" Sangeeta tried to reason out the umpteenth time with her again.

"Can you show me the photograph?" Arti spoke suddenly.

"Which photograph?" Sangeeta looked at her confusedly.

"You both are best friends na, mummy says best friends keep each other's photograph close by. That's why mummy has your photograph in her wallet always. Show me the one you have in your wallet?" Arti's rippled voice created a furore in Sangeeta's mind.

Chapter 20

"In deep turmoil"

"You both are best friends na, mummy says best friends keep each other's photograph close by. That's why mummy has your photograph in her wallet always. Show me the one you have in your wallet?" Arti's rippled voice created a furore in Sangeeta's mind.

"Arti," Radha arrived minutes later at Sangeeta's office door

Sangeeta looked up to see Radha in a totally different light. She herself didn't know what to make of the latest information and somewhere her mind continued to remain in deep turmoil.

"You are joining us for lunch?" Radha asked casually.

Sangeeta nodded slightly and rose to follow the mother-daughter duo in small steps.

"What happened? Hurry up you are walking way too slowly today," Radha turned around beckoning Sangeeta to pick up pace.

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"Arti this is the first time you are having lunch here. Try the gulab jamuns first," Sangeeta said.

Radha smiled deeply and said, "I remember you telling me the same thing when I had my first lunch here."

"Have you both always been each other's best friends?" Arti suddenly asked.

They both nodded simultaneously.

"Mumma show Sangeeta the picture you keep in your wallet of her," Arti spoke in her sweet innocent voice.

Radha and Sangeeta both froze at the child's words. For a few minutes neither tried to make eye contact with the other.

"Mumma show!" Arti suddenly picked up volume.

"Arti first finish your lunch okay. Only after that will we talk. Mumma says na talking during lunch is a bad habit," Radha spoke sternly.

A disappointed Arti quietly turned back to eating food.

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"Really? I mean you think this means something?" Kavita asked, her frown deepening with every passing minute.

"I am not saying it means something but it's a bit strange. You don't think so?" Sangeeta spoke haltingly.

"It may mean anything but I can assure you it doesn't mean that she loves you. Do you get it?" Kavita replied in a harsher tone.

"Why do you always begin to play around the same topic? Even I am not saying it means that she loves me. All I am saying is that her keeping my photograph in her wallet is strange. That's it," Sangeeta replied irritably.

Kavita became quiet.

"Tomorrow," Sangeeta began to speak all of a sudden.

"What tomorrow?" Kavita asked a bit startled.

"Tomorrow I am taking you to a resort for a weekend trip," Sangeeta replied finally managing to smile as well.

"Really! We are going! I am so happy! I love you so much," Kavita threw her arms around Sangeeta's neck and hugged her tight.

Seeing her reaction Sangeeta began to laugh loudly.

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"I imagine all is done then. I am calling the car if you are ready?" Sangeeta asked, picking a bag off the side table.

"Yes I am ready. How do I look? I specially bought them for this trip, though with your latest mood swings I didn't think we would still go," Kavita spoke happily.

Sangeeta laughed a bit more as she had been continuously doing since morning, watching Kavita's excitement.

"Are you guys going somewhere?" Radha's soft voice left both of them staring at her with a strange expression.

Chapter 21

Almost faltered into an explanation

"Are you guys going somewhere?" Radha's soft voice left both of them staring at her with a strange expression.

Kavita was almost on the verge of reacting when she saw that Arti was standing beside Radha as well. Her innocent eyes swept away all the anger from Kavita's mind.

"Are you guys going somewhere Sangeeta aunty?" Arti asked in her sweet child-like voice. The question held too many emotions, Sangeeta could sense there was more.

"It's her birthday tomorrow and we hardly know anyone here. I thought the five of us could have a dinner. But then it's alright you guys carry on," Radha almost faltered into an explanation.

Sangeeta didn't quite know what to say, she was on one side moved by Arti's silent plea but then she knew that Kavita deserved this alone time she had promised.

"Why don't we celebrate your birthday somewhere else? Get mummy to pack your clothes and we would all go away for a short and sweet trip," no it wasn't Sangeeta but Kavita who melted first. She couldn't bear to stand the thought of leaving Arti alone on her birthday.

A bright smile instantly sprung on Arti's face but Radha registered no change as such.

"No it's quite alright. You guys carry on," she replied stoically.

"Radha you can stay back, we are taking Arti along with us then," Sangeeta who now found confidence in Kavita's plan, walked up to Arti and held her hand, indicating the changed status.

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"I still feel we came uninvited. Kavita must have been looking forward to this," Radha spoke into Sangeeta's ear in the car.

Of course Kavita could hear her but then she chose to overlook.

Sangeeta only laughed to dismiss the talk.

"Mumma there is a thing I want to ask you both," Arti's question spun both the women's head who felt the age old photograph might be picked up.

They didn't even dare to look in her direction thinking perhaps that might defuse the situation.

"And we have reached," it was Kavita's booming voice in the car which averted the issue.

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Radha and Arti were alone in their room now. Radha was busy unpacking the suitcases. They had only a couple of hours to rest, the jungle safari would start by late evening.

"Mumma I have a question," Arti suddenly asked.

"Yes beta," Radha answered sweetly. In the vicinity of their room with just the two of them she could

answer any question of her daughter no matter how awkward.

"Mumma does Sangeeta aunty like women? Is she you know," Arti stopped short from completing her sentence.

Neither of them spoke, the silence absorbed the entire room.

"A lesbian?" Arti finally said the dreaded word.

For a few seconds Radha was transported to that night when shorts clad Sangeeta had candidly told her that she was a lesbian. The simplicity of her acceptance about the orientation was thoroughly mirrored in her comfort but inside Radha's mind there had been an explosion.

And then things had changed, Radha had started to realise that being a lesbian was probably a more comfortable thing. Women are truly an interesting companion for many including women themselves. Radha had found herself a changed person with Sangeeta. She was much more happy and confident. She never felt judged for her age, looks or even marital status. Under a man's perverse eyes she always found these aberrations inside her.

But then did that have to do with the fact that Sangeeta was a great human being or that she was a woman? All these fourteen years Radha thought about this one single question. The complexity of this answer never quite left her. Was she comfortable around Sangeeta because of the human being or the gender?

But yes returning to the question at hand, her daughter of thirteen years is waiting for some answers. How much is the truth of such things relevant?

"Why do you ask honey?" Radha asked her quite sweetly.

"Mumma I saw them kissing," she replied scandalously.

Radha didn't know what hit her more, the fact that Arti saw or the fact that Radha had to hear it.

She mulled over it for a while. A lot was already done, the impression was made in Arti's mind. Now probably the handling of her queries was left.

"Yes darling she likes women. She is a lesbian. But does that change how you see her?" Radha spoke softly.

Chapter 22

"Will you not judge me?"

"Yes darling she likes women. She is a lesbian. But does that change how you see her?" Radha spoke softly.

Radha waited patiently for Arti to perhaps say something. To bring up more queries because her angel like face did contort into various expressions.

"Mumma what happens to such people? Can they be cured? This must be a disease because they cannot live a normal life. They cannot get married and you know do things humans like to do," Arti started her question with some hesitation.

Radha was surprised to see how Arti's questions resembled many of her own doubts in the beginning of her friendship with Sangeeta. She too before being exposed to Sangeeta as she is, always thought this could be cured with professional help. It's a mockery of her own maturity, she thought that at twenty seven she had the comprehension of a thirteen year old.

"Love. Arti in life many things will change for you. Your goals, the journey to reach them your values but you know what will never change? Definition of love. Love is what equates us all as human beings. It nullifies us in all aspects. No poor, no rich not even woman or man. I love you a lot if you had been a son perhaps I would have loved just as much. All sorts of discrimination are man made. We decide what's right or wrong. But then does the heart know that honey?" Radha spoke very calmly. She knew that Arti needed time more than words to understand this new way of thinking.

"Can I tell you something mumma? Will you not judge me?" Arti spoke haltingly.

Radha nodded.

"I don't like Sangeeta aunty any more now. I feel she is evil," Arti replied with tears in her eyes.

Radha had no idea what could bring about such a change in her daughter's behavior. She was always quite a loving person, such statements unnerved Radha but she knew better than to say anything to Arti.

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"I wonder why you people never joined us for safari. It was great fun," Sangeeta exclaimed at the dinner table.

"It was Arti, she was feeling sick from the long road trip to the hotel and I thought some rest might do her good," Radha spoke courteously.

Sangeeta only had to hear Radha's voice to know something was not right. She had an inkling of it the moment Radha had cancelled the plan but now all her doubts were coming to be true.

"It's alright she is after all just a child. She might have gotten sicker if she accompanied us," Kavita cut in with a sharp remark.

Radha noticed how Kavita hadn't left Sangeeta's side ever since they had come to the resort. She was consistently finding reasons to sort of guard Sangeeta.

"Here let me pour it out for you," Kavita took the jar of milk rather abruptly from Radha's hands.

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Radha was sitting quietly in the porch outside her room. She wondered what her life had in store now. Divorced at forty one and perhaps deemed to be a single mother for life, she could see many roadblocks. Bringing up a child was easy but the loneliness that accompanies it was preying on her mind. She hadn't thought this through, she thought. The divorce was an impulsive decision. Shikhar had been a great husband and more importantly a fabulous father. Why did she happen to rush out of the marriage so soon? His affair was like a welcome break for her.

"No matter how many times you think about that question, the answer will not change over a minute," it was Sangeeta's usual sarcastic voice that cut across Radha's thoughts.

Sangeeta drew a chair next to her and settled down slowly.

The place was completely dark, it was a moonless night.

"The beauty of a place is either in full moon light or in absolute absence of it," Radha remarked.

"I wonder which one you prefer," Sangeeta replied.

"Would you believe? Absolute darkness. Something about not knowing the obvious works out for me. I don't like to know the truth. Why do you think my marriage worked for fourteen years? It was the sudden moonlight which did the damage," Radha spoke smoothing the tone of her voice.

"I wondered where you would be, what you would be doing. Whether you are happy or not? Do you think about me? Have you forgotten me? There wasn't a day I never thought about you," Sangeeta spoke in a rush.

Chapter 23

"Broken much of my defenses"

"I wondered where you would be, what you would be doing. Whether you are happy or not? Do you think about me? Have you forgotten me? There wasn't a day I never thought about you," Sangeeta spoke in a rush.

Radha remained quiet. She didn't know whether the rant she heard was something she had been dying to hear or dreading to. This suddenly put her in some sort of an answerable situation. Like the words Sangeeta spoke were more like questions. They wanted to know whether Radha felt the same in these fourteen years.

"Sangeeta when I was twenty seven my sisters got married. My mother who was a widow always thought of me and me alone. So much so that in the end I had to leave house to find peace and in some way provide her too. But that didn't stop the saga. I was still twenty seven, running away to a twenty eight but the age was important when I was not married. I met you, fresh as spring, wanting to move the world in a way she wishes to. I wanted to be you, here I was scared about being an old maid and you were celebrating your homosexuality," Radha stopped to watch Sangeeta's face. Hints of disappointment had started to flood it, Sangeeta had perhaps figured out that the answer was a negative. She had seen too much into Radha's actions.

"And then when did I fall in love with you, I have no idea. In fact not up til quite late in my life could I learn to accept it inside my heart. But what could I do? And I did not even have the strength back then to say it to myself out loud forget to you or more importantly the world. I watch Kavita and I get jealous now. She got to spend all these years with you and look now she has become an integral part of you. She makes me feel like an outsider in your life, I feel like screaming at her. But then what rights do I have to do that?" Radha had started to silently cry by now. The tears were fast rolling down her cheeks.

Sangeeta didn't know what to say or do. She was bursting with things inside and yet on the exterior she remained frozen. Who was she kidding? She always loved Radha, in the six months time they spent together she knew that if she ever came close to loving someone it would be Radha. And if someone asked her why, she would never be able to answer it with anything concrete. Precise reason why she could never stop loving Radha. She always thought if she knew the reason she would destroy it and the love would end.

Sangeeta rose from her chair and went to stand beside Radha. She slowly bent down to level her face across Radha's, she looked deep into Radha's eyes and kissed her. There was nothing more she could decide that would be right at that moment.

Radha tried to jerk off from Sangeeta but Sangeeta retrained her and in the tussle that followed Sangeeta very quietly spoke, "let go, just for tonight."

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It had been three days since they had returned from the trip. Kavita had gone on to be merry and happy, clueless about the events of that one night in resort. Arti too had of course no inkling. And the two people who did know what had happened remained aloof from each other, much less talk about it.

Sangeeta now knew it was true, the emotions she had observed in Radha fourteen years back were not a mirage. They existed and perhaps still do. Radha of course bore the larger brunt of the situation. She knew that no matter how far she has come from that age of twenty seven, things have not changed much. Today she might not be a daughter but she is most importantly now a mother.

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"I bought these dresses yesterday and I think some of it might fit you," Kavita's voice rang out from the other room.

Sangeeta was preoccupied with some paperwork and though half her mind was somewhere else, duty still called out to her.

"Did you not listen?" Kavita walked in abruptly.

"Yes here I did, can't you see I am working!" Sangeeta raised her volume slightly.

Kavita didn't reply and went back in.

Sangeeta became uneasy at her outburst and decided to make up for it.

She rose from the table and went to fetch for Kavita. She found Kavita sitting on the window pane looking outside.

"I am sorry," Sangeeta spoke softly.

Kavita turned around and smiled. She nodded and said, "Its my fault. Sometimes I think I become way to demanding as a person. I should give you space. I am sorry."

Sangeeta only stared at her. She felt deep pangs of guilt inside her heart.

"Don't think about all this. Get up and try on the dresses, I want to see them. I might even take one for my ownself," Sangeeta replied.

"Not tonight, perhaps some other time," Kavita replied, averting all forms of eye contact.

Sangeeta sighed, she could see that Kavita was a little disturbed and reluctant to express it as well.

"You know Kavita what is the best part about having you around?" Sangeeta asked sporting a strange look on her face.

Kavita didn't respond, only looked on.

"You make me want to live more. Only to make you happy. I have never felt like that for someone," Sangeeta spoke almost in a whisper.

Kavita was too choked with emotions to speak.

"A couple of days back I was imagining my life without you. I think I felt a part of me died only by thinking about it. You have in these years broken much of my defenses it seems," Sangeeta continued to speak in a soft whisper.

Chapter 24

"Please explain the equation once again"

"A couple of days back I was imagining my life without you. I think I felt a part of me died only by thinking about it. You have in these years broken much of my defenses it seems," Sangeeta continued to speak in a soft whisper.

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Now she knew, there was no running away from the fact that Sangeeta was the reason behind her detachment in marriage. Shikhar was a great man and perhaps parts of him always knew that Radha remained in the marital life more out of duty than will. But what could she do now? The facts are there, her life is sorted and yet she doesn't have the strength to do what her heart wants her to do.

Will it ever get alright? Will I ever be happy in love? Radha's mind exploded with such questions.

"Ma'am could you please explain the equation once again?" a petite girl in class broke the trajectory of Radha's thoughts.

Radha had no choice but to rise from the deep trance of turmoil and proceed to the board for explanation.

"So the left side of the equation denotes the inputs for the equation. Sulphuric acid when combined with sodium hydroxide reacts and gives us a neutral compound, a salt Sodium sulphate and water. This way right side is a more balanced combination with the end products. All equations happen because the present set of inputs are unstable and need to move towards a more stable combination," she stopped speaking suddenly.

Every word around her had started to speak in between lines. Every line, every monosyllable was telling her more than they actually meant.

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"Is there something important to discuss?" Sangeeta spoke stoically.

"No nothing. I just wanted to get out of campus and have coffee. Did I take you away from something important?" Radha asked, keeping her voice and head low.

"No nothing pressing as such but then Kavita wanted to go out for dinner with some friends. And she insisted I accompany her," Sangeeta continued in her no-nonsense voice.

Radha felt a jolt just listening to that name. She raised her head slowly to meet Sangeeta's eyes, she could see that there was no emotion or feeling there. Sangeeta had decided to remain deliberately aloof.

"Mam your order please," the waiter's crisp voice offered some respite from the electrifying tension between them.

"A latte for me," Sangeeta replied in a sharp tone.

"Nothing for now,' Radha answered softly.

For a few minutes neither spoke. They only shifted their gaze from one point in the cafe to the other carefully avoiding each other. They both had understood the discomfort in the understanding they now shared. It was for real, their love. There was no scope for ambiguity.

"An equation is never quite balanced when it's incomplete. And balancing it takes a lot of energy, sometimes it releases harmful by products also. On the whole completing an equation in actual is a difficult process," Radha suddenly started to speak.

Sangeeta stared at her with a confused expression.

"I was teaching today in college a certain equation and while explaining I saw how on paper it looks so simple but in real to conduct a complete reaction, a lot of efforts are involved. And not all by products are beneficial. But at least one is. One compound is stable and also useful," Radha paused to register Sangeeta's reactions.

Comprehension had started to flow on Sangeeta's face.

"It seems difficult on paper to execute it but once it is complete the end result is more permanent. Its more stable, until then the two compounds left as it is will remain restless," Radha spoke haltingly.

Sangeeta still hadn't spoken a word.

"Ma'am your coffee," the waiter suddenly interjected the one sided conversation.

After he left the silence on the table was ceremoniously resumed.

Only ten minutes later, Sangeeta kept her coffee back on the table and said, "Since when have the compounds started to be restless? You almost speak as if they have a mind of their own here."

Radha got startled to hear her voice, she raised her head to observe Sangeeta. Sangeeta was smiling at her in that mischievous way she normally does.

And the air got lighter it seemed, inside Radha's heart alacrity burst. She suddenly started to feel the reaction proceed.

Chapter 25

A decision had to be reached

And the air got lighter it seemed, inside Radha's heart alacrity burst. She suddenly started to feel the reaction proceed.

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"Maa, you seem to be very happy today. Something happened at work," a rather surprised Arti couldn't comprehend the sudden change in Radha's behavior.

They had finally talked and after fourteen years confessed to each other their most heartfelt emotions. They knew that now a decision had to be reached and the culmination of their love facilitated.

Radha though oblivious to what was happening around her, did feel a little pained to observe Arti. She knew that her biggest challenge was now that thirteen year old. She had to find ways to melt Arti, in fact she had almost designed the path for it.

"So Arti, tomorrow we will have dinner at Sangeeta aunty's place. She specifically invited you," Radha spoke happily.

"Mumma why? Do we have to go," Arti's reaction was much beyond disappointment.

Radha smiled at her nervously and hugged, "Yes darling she has even bought a set of teddy bears for you."

Of course Radha knew why Arti was so uncomfortable at the thought of visiting Sangeeta's place. Somewhere it unnerved her to realise that the journey to redemption might be tougher.

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"But why are we calling them for dinner?" Kavita exclaimed.

"Because they are our friends, Kavita," Sangeeta replied nonchalantly.

"Why did you not ask me before inviting them?" Kavita spoke in a rather upset voice.

"Because I thought someday you would realise how stupid you were being by reacting like this. And then such polite encounters will help you see things in better light," Sangeeta spoke in a harsher tone this time round.

"I have a bad feeling that a few years down the line I would curse the day I met Radha," Kavita answered back rather angrily.

Sangeeta could see the trend. One thing will lead into another and before anyone of them would realise, they would have fought with each other. She looked at Kavita, Sangeeta imagined a time without her. Without her irrational behavior, over the top expressions and sarcastic language, Sangeeta shuddered to imagine.

"Do it for me. Lets please be nice to them. They are good company. And then Arti is such a cute girl. Now cheer up and please don't bring up a fight on this," Sangeeta dropped her anger and started to speak in soft tones.

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"Hello Radha, hi Arti sweetie. How are you?" Kavita greeted the visitors at the door.

Radha returned a weak smile but Arti didn't even muster that. She only nodded and quietly followed inside, holding her mother's hands.

"How are the two of my favourite people in the world doing?" Sangeeta spoke beaming all over.

Something is strange, Sangeeta seems to be in an over the top happy mood. Kavita thought to herself rather deeply.

"What will you like to drink? Should I get you some juice Arti?" Sangeeta asked Arti politely.

Arti managed a soft smile and a generous nod to accept the favour.

Sangeeta instantly bolted out of the room to get the desired beverage.

Kavita was finally left alone with the two guests and her weird thoughts inside.

"How is school Arti?" Kavita tried an ice breaker.

"It's good. The summer break is almost round the corner," Arti answered rather quietly.

"Time flies. Here it was spring when we had shifted back to the university and now look Summer is round the corner," Radha commented.

"How true! Time does fly. It seems like only yesterday when you came visiting me in office," Sangeeta's voice boomed in the background indicating her impending return.

Almost everyone raised their head to watch a quick stepping Sangeeta approach them.

"Here Arti, a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and cookies to accompany," Sangeeta kept down the tray on the side table and served the little girl herself.

Arti didn't say anything, she only stared at Sangeeta first and then at her mother. She had acquired a strange sense of discomfort on her face.

"Mumma can we please go home?" she uttered rather frantically.

Chapter 26

"Will you at least be honest enough?"

"Mumma can we please go home?" she uttered rather frantically.

Almost everyone in the group froze. They wanted to understand what had just happened and more importantly why it had happened.

"Let's have dinner here sweetie and then perhaps leave. See Sangeeta aunty has brought you gifts," Radha tried to pacify Arti with the lure of presents.

Arti didn't reply anything. She remained a little stuck in place and expressions as well.

"See this teddy bear, we got it just for you," Sangeeta quickly rushed to bring in the set of packed boxes from other room.

Arti looked up to meet Sangeeta's eyes, they both exchanged a very troubled look. Arti slowly took the gift from her hands and smiled.

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"Of course all of us have been waiting for the new Vice chancellor to resign. He has created such a mess," Kavita was talking animatedly at the dinner table.

She had not left Sangeeta's side even for a moment. Though she put up a brave show, she did not for once feel at ease throughout the dinner. She knew enough to understand that things have changed. There was something about Sangeeta and Radha and the sudden chemistry they radiated which made Kavita suspect things.

"But then he has also done a lot for the students. The mess has improved, teachers are getting more regular at classes, the attendance has gone online. So many advancements," Radha commented.

"I agree with Radha. He has done quite a bit for the university," Sangeeta chipped in.

Kavita found herself sidelined once again in the evening. Though she had been sitting right next to Sangeeta all the time, Kavita felt quite distanced from her. On the other hand, there was not a moment when the other two women didn't stop to exhibit their compatibility.

Kavita smiled and rose to bring in the desserts from the kitchen.

"Arti, we bought your favourite butterscotch today. You like it a lot na," Sangeeta leaned over towards Arti and spoke sweetly.

Arti began to have that convulsion again. She didn't respond, her smile got evaporated and her eyes mirrored the troubled look once more.

The air became heavy all too quickly and then before anyone could change the dynamics, Arti began to speak.

"I want mumma to get married again. I think I want a father in my life," she blurted out.

Everyone around again began to feel the chills, this time her reaction was far more shocking than "I want to go home".

"Arti, what is all this? Have you forgotten what to speak in front of people? Sangeeta I am sorry but I think I will take your leave now," Radha rose with a jerk and quickly walked out of the door.

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"Arti behaved rather strange tonight. No?" Sangeeta asked Kavita while sitting in the porch extending her room.

Kavita who was enjoying a cup of tea on the side did not reply.

"Do you not think so?" Sangeeta asked again.

"No. I don't think so. Sometimes I feel if I was a child I would have reacted same because people would have let me. Being a grownup I have to pretend more," Kavita replied, deep tones of sarcasm ingrained.

"What do you even mean by that?" Sangeeta snapped.

Kavita began to get up from the chair and leave.

"No, don't go like this. Talk to me. What did you mean by your last statement?" Sangeeta asked, her eyes not leaving the frozen figure of Kavita.

Kavita didn't speak for a long time. She somewhere tried to collect her thoughts but they all made her want to cry. There was so much she had done for Sangeeta that now wanting credit for it seems like a slap on her own face.

"Kavita," Sangeeta spoke softly.

Kavita quietly turned back and settled on the chair again. She noticed her tea had gotten cold enough to not want to drink now. But the nervousness inside compelled her to still hold the cup in her hands, perhaps for inner moral support.

"Sangeeta, for long I have been with you without expecting much. My parents of course you know have long stopped talking to me. There is a small sister who still calls me off and on. And then there is a brother who leaves no occasion to not mock me. Very little family is left behind to support me, or much rather to even acknowledge me. You were and are my family, the thought of you not being there is more like death if I can permit myself to say so. Yet I want you to be happy, I can see Sangeeta and you are working out. She is undoubtedly in love with you, something I had known for long. And always tried to refute for my own vested interests. Will you at least be honest enough to tell me before hand? I will quietly move out of here, leave the city, never to haunt you back again," the last words were spoken with such painful expressions etched on Kavita's face that they instantly evoked Sangeeta into silent tears.

Chapter 27

Tring-Tring, the phone rang

"Sangeeta, for long I have been with you without expecting much. My parents of course you know have long stopped talking to me. There is a small sister who still calls me off and on. And then there is a brother who leaves no occasion to not mock me. Very little family is left behind to support me, or much rather to even acknowledge me. You were and are my family, the thought of you not being there is more like death if I can permit myself to say so. Yet I want you to be happy, I can see Sangeeta and you are working out. She is undoubtedly in love with you, something I had known for long. And always tried to refute for my own vested interests. Will you at least be honest enough to tell me before hand? I will quietly move out of here, leave the city, never to haunt you back again," the last words were spoken with such painful expressions etched on Kavita's face that they instantly evoked Sangeeta into silent tears

Kavita walked away from her. She didn't know if Sangeeta would even long for her in days to come. But then Kavita knew she needed to be on her own, time had come to test things her way.

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"Arti, why is it that you are behaving in this way? Why are you possibly trying to embarrass me in front of my friends?" Radha could hardly contain her anger.

A cowering Arti couldn't help but cry. She knew she had done a huge mistake, broken all false promises of being a good girl. But then her mother had been party to many broken promises, no?

"Arti will you look at me and speak," Radha screamed at her, trying to understand why her usually obedient child did what she did.

"Mumma, I don't like Sangeeta aunty. I don't like her," Arti wailed.

"Does that give you the right to talk stuff you just did?" Radha didn't lower her volume one bit.

"Mumma, but you know what I think, she is trying to take place of father. I don't know why but I always get that feeling," Art stumbled into an explanation between sobs.

Radha couldn't say anything to Arti now. She wondered what had just happened. What part of child's mind sensed that?

"Please go up to your room now. I will talk to you only in morning," Radha spoke with lowered tone but firmness intact.

"But mumma," Arti spoke haltingly.

"Arti, I said in the morning. Now go upstairs please," Radha's please almost did have a shade of desperation.

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And Sangeeta had guessed it right. She found her sitting in the corner lunch table in mess. She had a plate full of food on the table and an expression which clearly showed her disinterest in eating.

"Hello," Sangeeta spoke softly and drew a chair across to sit.

"Hi," Radha replied meekly.

They both stared at each other, speaking through their troubled eyes.

"I see you have taken the gulab jamuns," Sangeeta remarked quietly.

"Where is Kavita? She hasn't come down for lunch with you today," Radha spoke softly.

But then they knew each other better to sense what was the issue at the other end.

Sangeeta smiled weakly and said, " She has gone somewhere and I have no clue where."

Sangeeta did not have to give reasons or justifications as to why Kavita had gone because that's something that was very much understood.

Radha was happy inside, she was. Hadn't she waited for this moment ever since she stepped in here? For a while she forgot her own issues.

"I hope Arti is fine," Sangeeta said.

"Yes she is fine. Of course she is slightly off handish, but I know with time things will settle," Radha replied slowly.

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"Mumma I was thinking of calling papa and getting the two of you back together," Arti's voice cut across the room to hit Radha.

Radha, who was sitting on her table correcting test papers, suddenly felt her world go dizzy.

"Arti, you are thirteen years old. Please behave like one," Radha had no choice but to scream again.

"Mumma, I miss him. I think you people should get back together. I know he would be more than happy to do so," but Arti was not even slightly taken aback by Radha's anger.

"How do you know that, Arti?" Radha suddenly felt more fear grip her.

"Because I called him today. And he is saying you and I should go back home, I have even packed my bags," Arti replied with a strange sense of calmness in the face of extreme anguish on Radha's demeanour.

Tring-Tring, the phone rang...

Chapter 28

Her actions were hurting many

Tring-Tring, the phone rang...

Radha almost skipped a beat or two. She half expected it to be Shikhar with his fairytale plan. Who would have thought someone's fairytale could be another's nightmare?

She quietly picked up the phone.

"Madam, are you interested in a credit card from our bank," a very peaky woman's voice met Radha from the other side.

Radha without speaking a word cut the phone and slumped into the chair. She realised what a huge scare that had been for her. But then nothing was over as of now, Arti's expectant face was still staring at her with a strange expression.

Radha looked up, her heart lost all its anger and she felt like any mother would, to see her daughter disappointed and depressed.

"Arti, come to mumma," Radha called out to her softly.

Arti got up and with small steps came close to Radha.

"You realise mumma loves you? You do, right?" Radha spoke, caressing her cheeks.

Arti nodded slightly in affirmative.

"Will you please do mumma a favor? Go unpack your clothes and call daddy saying everything is fine. You would be happy to share your time between him and mumma. Will my princess do that?" Radha continued in a lilting voice.

Arti for a moment looked to rebel but then all of a sudden something changed about her. She slowly went upstairs and began unpacking.

After a few moments, Radha heard her speaking to Shikhar on the phone, "No Papa I love you, but I realise it was not a great idea. No Papa, please don't come here. No Papa, promise me you won't."

Radha felt her eyes get welled up with tears, she knew her actions were hurting many. Arti with her emotions and now Shikhar with his hopes.

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"I always wanted to be the first one to say 'I don't care' " Radha was taking animatedly while sitting on the lunch table.

But strangely she could see that her enthusiasm was not equally matched with Sangeeta. She was not participating in the conversation as much.

"Is something wrong?" Radha finally asked.

"No, no. You were telling me about that boat trip you took," Sangeeta spoke casually.

"I told you that fifteen minutes ago. Where is your mind today?" Radha looked suspicious.

Sangeeta didn't reply instantly. She remained quiet, shuffled her gaze around, she could see many were staring at them. She knew the college was abuzz with rumours. They had an idea as to what was going on.

"Its Kavita, she hasn't even called since. I mean I know she is angry but she could at least inform me as to where she is," Sangeeta spoke softly, but her eyes gave in to the trouble inside.

Radha cringed, not that it was seen physically but her insides took a turn so to say. Kavita, this name always did something to her. Why can she not disappear in person and in thought? She wondered out loud in her head.

"She will come back, give her time. Why, it's just been a couple of days, no?" Radha spoke flawlessly, hiding all her discomfort behind pale expressions.

Sangeeta nodded vigorously but still the awkwardness of expression didn't quite leave her face.

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"Mumma, I am going to call daddy again. I miss him. It's nothing serious. I only want to talk to him," Arti suddenly spoke this after the dinner got over.

Radha again found herself staring at the child. She was finding it impossible to handle her it seems.

Radha nodded to sort of show her acceptance.

"Hello Papa, I miss you," and with these words she started to cry.

Chapter 29

Perhaps it was all destined

"Hello Papa, I miss you," and with these words she started to cry.

Radha watched her sob for a while, before finally taking over the phone. Radha had not spoken to Shikhar in a long time and well it felt strange that she was now going to discuss as awkward a topic as the present one.

"Hello, hi how are you?" Radha spoke nervously into the phone.

From the other end, she heard a lot of things. Words she had expected to come her way, words of sadness, disappointment, longing, and accusation. And then the world around her, which was also crashing without any noise, spoke on the sides too. The telephone did much more damage to her than all the tears of Arti put together could.

Why was it so, she couldn't answer. Why a single call from Shikhar made her more depressed about life than any other thing, she couldn't understand. Perhaps the sheer failure that stared in her face through Shikhar, the doomed marriage she lived through. It was that which scared her, which planted a doubt in her head.

I was sure about Shikhar also at one time, Radha thought out loud in her head. And maybe like that didn't work out, Sangeeta also might not. How many times will I make Arti suffer the same pain? The pain of parting with a loved one. She had never said it in front of any person, no judge no family member nowhere, but she knew her divorce was the greatest source of sadness to her daughter. Not even Shikhar, as much as he would want to show how much sad he is.

"I understand, I will call you tomorrow," Radha spoke these words after a long silence and hung up.

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She was of course sitting there, sipping her regular cup of coffee. And the lilting music in the background easing her senses a bit, though nothing of the calmness was reflected on her face.

"Hello," Radha spoke slowly and settled on the chair across Sangeeta.

"Hi," Sangeeta replied softly.

A waiter suddenly appeared out of nowhere, a tray in his hand accompanying a glass of water.

Radha politely took the glass and gestured him appreciatively.

"This little place is fast becoming a very happening place, no?" Sangeeta tried to make small talk.

But then Radha had neither the time nor capacity for it. She had to react, she had to say something, she had to get things out of her system. The result or outcome mattered less to her, venting meant more.

"This over here is the one place where I met Shikhar for the first time. You remember?" Radha spoke with a strange bland voice.

Sangeeta had sensed it the moment she watched Radha enter the coffee house that she was not alright

at all. Sangeeta nodded to communicate her affirmative reply.

"Right over here, at that counter. And for fourteen years I was with him, I loved him. I did. But then why I couldn't continue, I wondered. I went in search of answers plenty and all of them stopped at you. I kept a photograph of us together and in my life's most desolate times they served a happier purpose," Radha paused.

"I never told you but this job here at the university was planned. I had come here to give my life a new beginning with you. I met you at the office the first day, you had changed and yet I could sense that change was exterior. I wanted to tell you even back then that I love you. You are perhaps the only person whom I could never forget. But then you told me about Kavita, I forgot about everything. How could you do this to me? I was angry and desolate but then I could not say anything to you. I had no rights. Out of a stroke of luck, I discovered you love me too," Radha took a sip from the glass and rose her head to meet Sangeeta's eyes this time.

She could see tears in them. Somewhere her heart broke into a million pieces.

"Sangeeta long long back I could not culminate my love for you because I was a daughter. I could not burden my mother with my own anomalies. Don't look so shocked, it was an anomaly. What could I do? Tell her I am in love with a woman? I could not. I am ashamed of this fact but as much as I want to I cannot run away from this also. I could never accept my love for you to people," Radha stopped again, she sort of tried to collect the rest of her cluttered thoughts.

Sangeeta knew there was more, she knew that the hesitation was in the next part. The deciding part.

"You never asked me, I had mentioned on Arti's birthday that I had planned a dinner for five. You never questioned who was that fifth?" Radha spoke softly.

Sangeeta expressed her confusion through reactions and not words.

"Sushant never quite got married you see. He was always in love with me and things never got to a revealing stand. It was years after I had gotten married that I met him in a party and he told me the truth. By then I had Arti and Shikhar and I was very happy. When he heard about my divorce, he instantly called me and asked me out again. But I had flown down here to be with you," Radha spoke the last bit haltingly.

Sangeeta could feel her coffee cold and her heart racing.

"I think I am going to give him a chance again. I am taking the next flight out of here and going to take up a job in his city. If all goes well I might marry him," Radha spoke the last bit in whispers but with a strange sense of firmness.

The silence that dwelt around them was encompassing everything.

Sangeeta wiped away tears from her cheeks and began to smile weakly.

At this Radha broke down and said, "Years ago I did it for my mother, and today I am doing it because I am a mother."

Sangeeta also began to sob a little now.

Just then Radha looked outside and saw Kavita standing on the street speaking into the phone. Radha turned around with a surprised expression and looked at Sangeeta.

"She is with me. I asked her to wait outside. Radha, I loved you a lot and still do but I cannot live

without Kavita anymore. Her resilience has broken the guards of my heart. I don't know how it happened, when it happened but she is now my life, whatever little is left of it. I came here to tell you this," Sangeeta spoke softly and in between tears.

Radha stared outside and saw Kavita again. A strange smile played on Radha's face, for the first time in her life she didn't feel jealous of Kavita. Radha could not believe it herself but she felt relieved to find her with Sangeeta. She felt like a part of her guilt left her heart.

Perhaps it was all destined, perhaps destiny knew she would always choose a path opposite to Sangeeta, that her responsibility would always tie her down. And so every time she decided to leave Sangeeta half way, Kavita came around.

She would always love Sangeeta. Whenever her heart would flutter it would bring back memories bittersweet. But then she would again be haunted by her life's miseries and responsibilities. And her same pained heart would remind her that to love Sangeeta she never really did have enough strength as much as Kavita.

The End

Author speaks

The End

As practice I am copying the last line of the previous post of the story, which in this case was "The End". And how befitting it seems now. Today 31st July is actually the end of the month long blogging challenge called Ultimate Blogging Challenge. Many things happened in this past one month, many friends I stumbled into, many smiles I smiled, many tears I cried and many laughs I shared in the comment sections. Overall the experience made me a better person.

A better person, yes. My common vendetta against some of the "novels" I see on bookshelves is this, they make you a worse person at the end of the read. The basic principle of reading gets defeated.

So I always want to tell people a story which helps them realise something they really didn't ponder over. Something they were always preached about never made to experience. Why did "To kill a mocking bird" become such a huge classic, because it was probably the first time a white guy saw the futility of his own mindset, felt the pain of his fellow black countrymen.

Moving on, the lecture can always be converted into a separate post. Today let the author speak and not the self assigned guru for all.

How did it begin?

An fb chat:

Me: Corinne how can I take part in this UBC.

Corinne: I have shared a link go read about it, you must really try.

Me: I am scared I won't be able to.

Corinne: Just write short posts and I am sure you would be able to do.

Why a story?

I suck at writing normal posts (like this!). I cannot discuss things that are close to my life or perhaps don't fall in the realm of fiction. My imaginary world is far better than my actual reality. Writing 31 unique posts with no story nothing would have made me give up on second day. And so the idea.

Why this?

Story started with the post 'Twenty seven is the last age to get married in style' and back then I had no idea what I was going to write next. I wanted to write about being twenty seven (which is what I turn this October) and the words flew. Really nothing was planned at this level. After I had written this post, I became Radha. Yes this is a catch in my writing style. I cannot and somehow don't want to as well, write in third person. So just in case I do write in third person I have my alter ego placed in the story.

Why the subject of homosexuality?

Being Radha was lonely. I imagined things happening to her, exciting things. And suddenly the thought of having a gal pal entered. When I decided that it should be a lesbian friend, I don't remember. It fit in somehow. At this time many plots were running in my mind. There was one which involved a lot of shooting and violence, I scrapped that. Then there was the run of the mill twenty seven not married issues. I thought my Radha like me should have issues peculiar to her. And before I knew it the plot was ready. I wrote it quickly in a diary and then as they say rest is history.

How was the experience?

It was a routine. I came home at five thirty. Read blogposts from six to eight. Prepared dinner and was free by nine. Read a book for an hour. By ten I read other blogposts, random ones not UBC. And then exactly at eleven, started to write the post for the day. It was almost as if it went by the clock. Without fail I wrote. I once went for a party came back at twelve and still wrote. Now you may ask me why did I have to do that? I could have slept and written it in morning. All day Radha lived inside me, she thought about her life, she wondered what would happen and even cried tears of joy and pain together. I had to write her story, I had to get her out of my system. Days I tried to sleep without writing I couldn't sleep.

Why the end?

Many people mailed me, some texted me some commented here. In office people hounded me at tea asking many questions. They wanted to know why not that? Why not this? Why at all such an end? Some agreed with the end partially, some completely and some rejected it. They all made me very happy inside. I had managed as a storyteller to evoke a certain bond between readers and the characters. They had all imagined these people as their own friends, and imagined a certain end for them. Imagined a happily ever after (their own version of it) for the story. I loved each one of their inputs. I really did. And somewhere I realised that this is my achievement, to make people take the story back home each day.

Still why the end?

My friend Anshul wrote how this was a Bollywoodish end and he was not happy. Why Sushant? Why at all show a happy end? Yes of course even my very own Apoorva Kapoor also mentioned her slight discomfort at the entry of Sushant. She though also said, life has so many opportunities one can never know. My Radha like me is slightly bollywoodish, she may not be courageous but she is bollywoodish. And I wanted a happy end for her. I didn't want her to be left alone without someone to love. I know what you would say now, if she had to compromise on her love with Sangeeta why not Shikhar? Why not go back to him? Who says if you cannot complete your love story go back to the mistakes you have validated? I am not one of them to support this. I wanted Radha to have a fresh start, after all Sushant was her first love. Why not give it a fairytale touch? And poor Sushant harassed you people so much he deserved to come back to haunt you guys :)

Radha decides to marry Sushant after all. Arti grows up to be a wonderful lady who is forever sensitized on the issue of homosexuality. One day after she completes her college, she has a candid chat with her mother Radha and suddenly out of nowhere talks about Sangeeta. Arti accepts that all these years back she did something she should not have done and that she is aware how Radha sacrificed her love because of Arti's apprehensions. Sangeeta and Kavita live a wonderful life. Sangeeta misses Radha off and on and she often mentions it to Kavita who without fail always has a taunt ready for her on this. Anyone interested in the three sisters? Well they all become victims of infidelity from their husbands but eventually forgive them and still remain happily married :)

My friend Maggie's birthday is today. A great fan of Harry Potter shares her birthday with not only the wonderful boy who lived but also his creator- JK Rowling :) She had a very interesting point of view about what happens after the end. She says that Arti grows up to be a lesbian who finally discovers that all her fears or apprehensions at thirteen about his mother being a lesbian was because she herself felt those emotions inside. Her scared demeanour and frantic behavior was like a reaction to this sudden realisation. I myself found this wonderful as a concept. It makes the plot so interesting and also plausible upto a certain extent.

Thank You!!

But I cannot help but thank all of you, every single one of you who took time to read. Who took pains to come back and still read further. It always made me feel very happy to see your comments. I cannot open blogs in office but the moment comments arrived I quickly checked them on my phone through mail alerts. I love all of you! And I cannot begin to tell I happy I feel that in this huge sea of bloggers I have you people as friends, to love me and my writing.

Thanks a lot, I wish words could express my gratitude.

Richa.