

*From Gurukul  
to Gurukool*



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*For my dreamer brother,  
epicure sister and all you guys  
who remember your first crush.*



# April - The Fallout

**I**t was a bright sunny afternoon. Aadya turned on the air conditioner. It was hot, and Shradha and Mrinal were miffed by Aadya's decision to give up the job she got in the campus interview. The air conditioner cooled down the temperature.

Aadya was a beautiful and intelligent girl who had recently completed her MBA. She lived with her parents and brother Aakash, in Powai, Mumbai. Her father had retired as the director-general of Income-tax. She had an elder brother who was a Chartered Accountant. Her sudden change of plans had taken everyone by surprise. She was placed in a well-known firm. It was one of those last few days of her second year. The valedictory speech by her Dean changed everything. She spoke about education and how parents wanted their children to be educated by able hands. She went on to elaborate on how only a few people valued a teacher. How many wanted to take up a career as a teacher? She had asked, and the crowd laughed.

"How could anyone think of teaching as a career?" shouted one of the students. Dean had smiled and said you are here today because of them. That day everyone went home as usual, but Aadya carried a burden with her.

Late in the night when she slept, she thought of her school days, 'Yes it was fun and maybe the best part of her life.' She shared her desk with Mrinal. Shradha had joined their school in grade six. She never liked Aadya then but went on to be good friends during their time in college. Now they were almost inseparable.

On the last day of her exams after an in-depth inquest, Aadya met Dean. She told her how her talk the other day had

a massive influence on her and that she wanted to give up this job from campus interview and take up teaching.

Dean smiled. "Aadya, I am proud of you. You don't have to do that, just hearing you say this means a lot to me," she had said. Aadya was adamant. Dean asked her to speak to her family and then take the decision.

Shradha was sitting on a rocking chair. She kept moving to and fro making the chair squeak.

"Can't you stop that? I am sick of that sound," said Mrinal irritated.

"Sorry," said Shradha. Looking at Aadya, she continued.

"Seriously? Come on, Aadya, think rationally. This is a great opportunity. I mean, look at the pay package you have been offered," screamed Shradha.

"So it is all about money, huh?" asked Aadya.

"Oh come on Aadya, it is just that we don't want you to regret later. I mean with so many options available you want to be a teacher. For God's sake, come on *yaar*. Forget the pay, you would be dealing with fourteen or fifteen-year-old. Did you take up MBA to do this?" groaned Shradha.

"I agree with her. We worked so hard for two years, and it has paid off. I mean I am placed in an IT company, Mrinal in an investment firm and you in a reputed law firm. What more can one ask for? You want to throw away all of that?" asked Mrinal being reasonable.

"Guys, I agree with both of you. This sounds crazy and dumb. But I want to do something that will make me happy, and I think teaching will do that."

"Alright, hypothetically, you take up this job and say, within a month you figure out it is not for you. Then what? I mean the job offered to you would have already slipped from your hands," asked Shradha.

"Come on, Shradha, it is not as if I am never going to get a job if I give up this one," Aadya said surprised.

"Have you asked uncle and aunty?" asked Mrinal.



"I will speak to them tonight," said Aadya.

"What about Vikram?" asked Shradha.

"We are going to meet in the evening, right?" Aadya said, lost in thought.

"You mean you have not told him. Come on, Aadya, when did you start making decisions without asking him?" said Mrinal laughing.

Aadya knew this was true. Aadya and Vikram were classmates. Both had common friends, and they hung out every weekend. It was clear from the start that Vikram used to come only for Aadya. Somewhere during the end of the first year, Vikram had proposed. Aadya had not seen any reason to say no. They went out with friends and had a good time. Vikram was possessive by nature. Aadya felt this was his way of showing his love for her. By the end of the second year, he had already planned how their life was going to be for the next five years. The day they were placed through campus interviews, they partied hard. It was midnight, and Aadya had said she wanted to go home. Vikram escorted her. As they reached Powai Lake, Vikram suggested they sit for some time. That is when he laid down his five-year plan for them.

"You know Aadya, very soon all my dreams are going to come true."

"With our first few months' salaries, we will buy a nice car. Then we will invest in a beautiful house overlooking the lake. Within a few years, we will be free of the loan then we can invest in another house, you know, for the future," he continued excitedly.

Aadya smiled.

"See I have planned out everything," he said, holding her hand.

"Come on, say something," he said, not getting any response from Aadya.

"What can I say? You have planned everything to perfection," she replied.

A sudden jerk from Mrinal brought Aadya back to the present.

"It is going to be tough to disclose this to Vikram," she said.

"Don't worry, we will be there. And I think if he loves you, he will respect your decision just like you do," said Shradha.

It was 7.00 in the evening. Aadya chose to wear a grey colour floral prints dress, which Vikram liked. Vikram picked her up. Both stayed in the same locality and the place chosen was close by. Within ten minutes, they reached the restaurant. Mrinal, Shradha and another friend were already there. They chose a corner table and placed the order. They spoke about how they were going to miss college, classes and friends. It was already 10.00 when they walked out of the joint and kept their conversation going, walking by the footpath.

"I don't think I would miss anything. I am looking forward to work. It is going to be so cool," Vikram said excitedly.

"I agree," said Shradha.

"I am going to miss Dean's pep talks," said Vikram laughing loudly.

The next few minutes went in criticising everything about Dean and other staff. Aadya was quiet.

"You know the best lecture was the one given on the last day. Teacher, oh God, who would ever want to be one? I mean after completing MBA we look for earning big bucks not take up some lame job like teaching," Vikram said.

Mrinal and Shradha looked at Aadya, who was visibly upset.

"I don't think there is anything wrong with it," said Aadya.

"What, teaching?" asked Vikram.

"Yes," said Aadya.

"Oh, who would marry a teacher? Maybe another teacher," said Vikram laughing loudly.

Shradha chuckled.

“Stop it guys,” said Aadya loudly.

Mrinal and Shardha could see a huge tsunami approaching.

“Come on, who would want to be a teacher?” said Vikram taking Aadya’s hand.

After postponing for the longest period, Aadya decided this was the right time to let Vikram know.

“Vikram, I want to be a teacher,” said Aadya.

“Oh, I did not know this. So you want to teach A, B, C, D....,” he said mockingly.

Aadya pulled her hand out of his grip and stood facing Vikram.

“Vikram, I am serious. I am giving up the job I got through campus, and I am planning to take up a teaching job,” Aadya said calmly.

The sentence hit Vikram like a thunderbolt. He looked at her, shocked. All the plans he had made for the next five years came down crumbling.

“What are you talking about? Are you out of your mind?” Vikram said impatiently as the initial shock began to wear off.

“I have been thinking about this for some time, and I am quite sure,” Aadya said coolly.

“Leave all the thinking to me, damn it. What do you know about this job? Here you will be earning lakhs, and you want to give up all that and take up a job which will fetch you not more than 20%,” demanded Vikram calculating.

“What do you mean by ‘leave all the thinking’ huh? Am I not capable of seeing what is good for me?” asked Aadya in despair, taking a few steps back.

Seeing Aadya hurt, Vikram tried to pacify her. He held her hand, which Aadya freed.

“I did not say that. What I meant was that you need to be practical. It is all nice to say ‘I want to do social service, I would die for my country’, and all of that. But the reality is we need money for survival,” said Vikram matter-of-factly.

“I thought you would be supportive, Vikram,” said Aadya.

“What is it that you want me to do? Applaud, call out to people and let them know how foolish my girlfriend is?” Vikram said loudly and sarcastically.

“I am glad I took this decision, Vikram. Otherwise, I would have ended up marrying a moron like you,” said Aadya fighting back the tears.

She left the place, walking and running towards her home.

Mrinal and Shardha ran behind her. She told them to leave her alone. Tears kept rolling from her cheeks. The unexpected turn of events made her extremely bitter. She reached her building, strolled past the security and entered the lift. On reaching, the floor she lived in, she rang the doorbell. Her brother answered. He was shocked to see her in tears. She hugged him, and both walked towards the sofa. Everyone spoke at the same time. Aadya gathered herself. She told them about her decision to become a teacher and Vikram’s reaction to it.

“That bloody loser, how dare he yell at you? Who is he to question?” said Aakash, who was more worried about the treatment meted out to his sister.

Her parents did not know how to respond. They loved her and did not want to hurt her. They did find the decision strange, and but, their son found it fine, so they did not voice their opinion.

## May – The Unusual Turn

Getting a teaching job was not as easy as she had thought. Every advertisement she looked at said B.Ed degree was compulsory. Around five schools did not mention it. Taking a chance, she applied to these schools. The wait was never-ending. Normally schools recruited during April and May for the next academic year and she could see the end of May approaching. It was Wednesday, and her frustration ended when she got a call from a reputed school called “Gurukul”. A Gujarati trust owned it. It was a decade old and had already gained a reputation for one of the best schools in the entire region. The school was well-known for giving children an all-round development. Sports or fine arts, it had it all.

The flipside was that the job was in a small town called Mansar in the coastal area. It also had arrangements for boarding. Teachers recruited from other cities were given accommodation there. The interview was on Friday. Leaving the city was something Aadya had never thought of. Her parents and brother would never allow her to stay in another town all by herself. Initially, she was in two minds. Since she did not get a positive response from other schools, she thought she might as well go for the interview.

She got up early and searched for something appropriate to wear. She chose a purple colour *Kurti* and blue jeans. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and was content at the way she appeared. Carrying a nice embroidered bag, she took her parents’ blessing and left for the school’s trust office. Aakash dropped her wishing her the best.

Aadya walked to the reception and told the receptionist that she had come for the interview. She was politely told to be seated. Aadya took a seat close to the exit. She looked around. There were five women and three men. Women were dressed in cotton and chiffon saree and men in formal shirts and pants. After a long wait, it was Aadya's turn. She was facing a panel consisting of five people. There were two elderly women, two middle-aged men, and a young man. His name was Siddarth. He had her bio-data. Looking at it he said, "Why anyone of such high qualification, you know, MBA from such a reputed institute would want to join us?" he asked. A hesitant Aadya narrated the incident that made her take up teaching. They were impressed, particularly Siddarth. The degree required for teaching "B.Ed" was what she did not possess. Somehow, Siddarth did not want to lose her. He purposed that she complete B.Ed in two years through correspondence. She agreed. They discussed her salary. She knew it was little more than the 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the salary offered to her by the job she had in hand.

It was alright, she thought.

"Are you ready to shift to Mansar?" asked a middle-aged woman from the panel.

"Yes," she said.

"Alright, we provide accommodation for staff. Either you can take that, or you can look for one on your own. Speak to your family and let us know," said the man.

Aadya nodded.

"You still have fifteen days for the school to reopen, but we would like to know your decision soon," said Siddarth.

"I will take it up," said Aadya confidently.

Siddarth smiled.

She was to report to school a few days before the school reopened for the next academic session. She agreed. As she stood up, one of the trustees said, "Aadya, we have a dress code for the school. Teachers can wear only *salwar kameez* or *saree*."

“Yes Ma’am, I know, actually I have only two *salwar kameezes* which are heavy and can be worn for special occasions, so today I came dressed like this. I am sorry,” Aadya said with a smile.

“Oh, that’s alright,” the lady said.

As she left, Siddarth looked at her. A young girl giving up a corporate career with a handsome salary to take up teaching amused him. She was smart and beautiful with all the qualities to make it to the top. Had he met her under a different circumstance, maybe he would have asked her out? He smiled at the thought.

Siddarth was the grandson of the founder Mr Yoginder Parekh who had two sons Jaganmohan and Venugopal. Both looked after the steel manufacturing business situated on the outskirts of Surat, Gujarat. Siddarth’s father, Jaganmohan, headed it. Siddarth had completed his MBA a few years back and had looked after two schools and two hospitals they owned. All of twenty-eight, Siddarth had lost his grandmother recently who had battled cancer for a decade. Their family was planning to expand the already existing charitable hospital to add a cancer ward in the memory of Siddarth’s grandmother at Mansar. He now lived mostly in Mansar taking care of the school and hospital. He loved the quietness and leisure of the small town and enjoyed living there. He worked hard to bring in the best of treatment from abroad and metro cities to the small town. He spent most of the time trying to collaborate with organisations abroad.

Aadya called her friends and told them about her new job.

“Mansar? Are you crazy?” asked Mrinal.

“No, I am not,” said Aadya smiling.

“Teaching was alright but then shifting to a small town?? Now this is madness,” said Mrinal.

“I know, but then this is the only school that got back to me and is ready to hire me even though I don’t possess a B.Ed degree,” she said.

“Hm alright. Let us meet today and then discuss,” she said sadly.

Next Aadya called her brother and told him about the offer. His reaction was very similar to that of Mrinal. At dinner, the family discussed Aadya’s job in Mansar.

“I think Aadya you should look for a house on your own. I mean Dad and Mom can shift there with you. I can manage here. I will come over during the weekends. I think it will be a welcome change for them as well. It is nice to get away from the hustle-bustle of the city,” he said.

Their parents agreed. The idea of living in a small town excited them.

“I think we two will first visit the place, look for a decent house, and later you can shift,” he said.

That weekend Aadya went shopping with her friends. The mall was raining with offers and discounts. They shopped at various outlets. Her friends helped her pick up dresses appropriate for her new job.

“Did you speak to Vikram?” asked Shradha as they sipped coffee at a coffee shop.

“Why would I? It is over,” said Aadya feeling the pain that she had been going through.

Though she looked normal, the break-up hurt her. She had planned her life with Vikram, and now that things had fallen apart, it was difficult to move on.

“I think moving to another place will help you heal,” said Mrinal.

Aadya nodded.

Next week Aakash and Aadya drove to Mansar. It was a small town on the Arabian coast. The weather was warm and humid. Aakash had a friend who was from Mansar and had given him the address of a realtor. There were many great houses, but Aadya liked one in particular. It was close to the school and had a beautiful flower garden. They paid the advance amount. A week later Aadya and her parents moved



to the new house. They loved the spacious home. Aadya made room for a cane sofa amid the flower garden. Her bedroom had a huge balcony from where she had a view of the rear side of the school. She was proud of her decision and was happy that her parents had already made friends with the neighbours and gushed about everything that was happening in the new place.

Aadya was not used to getting up early. The alarm went off, and after a few snoozes she got up with her mother screaming, "Why don't you put that thing off? Are you going to wake up the entire town?"

Yes, it was the first day of school. The timing was from 8.00 to 3.00. She was nervous and excited at the same time. It was the school-reopening day for teachers. Aadya reached exactly at 8.00 am. She waited in the waiting room. She met the principal Dr Revati Sharma who called the head of the department of humanities. She was a stout and short woman in her early fifties. She was asked to brief Aadya on the responsibilities she would be given. She welcomed Aadya. Thanking the principal, both made their way to the staff room. It was vast and airy.

As the students were to report the week after, the teachers were in the staff room. There were small groups with four to five teachers who appeared to be sitting department wise. Their team was on the far-left side. There were five teachers in all. Aadya took a seat next to Komal. She was a young teacher who had joined Gurukul the previous year. There was Mrs Mishra, an experienced one who was a few years away from retirement. She gave Aadya a cold look, which meant she clearly disliked her. She had heard about her appointment through the head of the department and did not like the fact that she was an MBA and a non-B.Ed graduate.

"So, Aadya will be taking commercial and economic studies, correct?" Mrs Mishra asked.

"Yes, here is your time table Aadya," the department head said, handing a piece of paper to Aadya.

Aadya looked at the sheet of paper given to her. It took a while for her to understand. She was to teach grades nine, ten and twelve. She had already purchased the textbooks and found the topics simple.

"I have gone through the textbook the topics are easy," she said confidently.

"Teaching is easy, what is difficult is handling these teenagers," said Mrs Mishra.

Aadya nodded.

Komal passed a bundle of sheets to her. The bold headings read new terms like syllabus planning, lesson plans, weekly schedules, term schedules, etc. She read them aloud. This irritated Mrs Mishra maybe because she was hearing this for the past 25 years. The other team members were cordial to her, especially Komal.

Day one went on well. Her subject knowledge was strong, and so was her communication skills. Her team admired the way she gave them a demo class. She was given the responsibility of the co-teacher of class twelve.

The latter half of the week Aadya used it to familiarise with the students of the class for which she was the co-teacher. They were sitting in a huge airy classroom. There were two sections of class twelve, depending upon the subject option. Student details of every child were maintained in a separate file. The class teacher suggested she begin there.

"My class strength is 32. Most of my children are good at sports and have taken up economics as their optional subject," she said as Aadya carried a huge pile of files and placed it on the table.

"Viren was the head boy, and Priyanka was the head girl last year. Since they are in grade twelve, it would be taken over by eleventh-grade students. Of course, they will be the class monitors. Both are hardworking, and Priyanka is the school topper followed by Viren," she said as Aadya scanned both the files.

Priyanka Gupta was the younger daughter of the town's well-known doctors. Mr Gupta was a cardiologist, and Mrs Gupta was a gynaecologist. Their elder daughter had already followed their footsteps and was in her final year of medicine. Priyanka always stood first in her class. She was bright and intelligent. Taking up medicine when she grew up came naturally to her.

"Her parents are doctors," said Aadya scanning the file.

"Yes, well-known."

"Viren is a good athlete," Aadya said, looking at the copies of certificates in Viren's file.

"Yes, well-behaved child. You will be teaching his sister Rashmi too. She is in grade nine. Almost all the kids are easy to handle except for one. I will not say he is troublesome, but he comes with huge baggage," said the class teacher concerned.

"What is his name?" asked Aadya.

"Look for Abhishek," she said.

Aadya searched for the file with the name. It was by far the thickest one. She retrieved it and began reading.

Abhishek was the son of a municipality worker. He was a huge fan of cricketer Sachin Tendulkar. He and his father had almost decided that he would be the next Sachin of India. As a child, his father used to pick him up from school, and they would both discuss nothing but cricket. His mother was always busy and hardly spoke to him. He had three younger sisters. When Abhishek was in class three, his father suffered a cardiac arrest and passed away. The burden of his family fell upon his mother. His father's job was offered to his mother. With three little ones and the youngest being only a few months old, it was difficult for her to manage alone. She called upon her mother, who lived in a village near Ratnagiri. The woman was old and grumpy like her daughter. Abhishek was now the head of the family and was constantly reminded by his mother and granny that it was his responsibility to see that his sisters were married off to good families. He studied in a municipality school, which was far away from his place.

Seeing his eagerness to study the headmistress of the school suggested that Abhishek enrol in Gurukul under the RTE act and that she would hand over a recommendation letter to the principal whom she knew very well.

Abhishek's mother was not very keen, but the prospects of him getting a good education meant they would get a better life, and her daughters would find a finer home. He was enrolled in Gurukul as a student of class four. Since his father passed away, Abhishek suddenly grew. He was not allowed to play or hang out with his friends. He was his mother's only hope. He was made to feel the whole purpose of his existence was to get his sisters married. For that to happen, he had to study and get a good job. He cursed himself for being the eldest.

Once when he was in class four, he was sent to a shop to bring groceries. On his way, back he saw his friends playing cricket. Unable to resist the temptation, he played for a while and lost track of time. When he reached home, his mother, as usual, was ready with a lecture in a similar setup, his little sisters on both sides and the youngest in her arms. The bed was occupied by the grumpy granny, and the lecture began with a list of his so-called responsibilities. Granny from the background added one or two about herself being a part of the family, which was ignored by her daughter. He never figured out why he was not counted as an individual too. He was never there in their plans. His role was as that of a provider. But being an obedient child, he never questioned.

Today's lecture would last a little longer, he thought. He looked up. He saw his neighbour drying clothes. There was a large water tank next to her. He wished he could hide behind the tank forever and watch his family from there; maybe even his father was doing the same. He laughed at the thought. Seeing him laugh, the lecture took a harsh turn with Abhishek being termed as disrespectful.

Just before the Christmas vacation, his teacher had asked the class to write a wish they would want Santa to grant them,

and the children wrote down eagerly. Later the teacher asked them to read it aloud. There were chocolates, stuffed toys, shoes, dresses and many more. The answer that stood out and had the class teasing Abhishek was his wish to be turned into a girl. He felt being a girl would solve all his problems, and he would be treated like how his sisters were. His teacher called him to her desk, smiled at the innocent boy knowingly. The class was quiet. She looked at him and said, "Don't worry, you will get through this. I understand how you feel." At least someone understood how he felt he thought.

When he was in class six, the sports teacher noticed this talented child and offered a place in the under-fourteen cricket team. In class eight, he was made the captain of the cricket team. He bought many laurels for the school. Every time they won a match, Abhishek became the hero of the class. The entire class would wait for his arrival the next day. They would gather around him and hear about the match excitedly.

Things changed considerably when he entered class eleven. The school tied up with a professional coaching academy so that professionals coached the students. It helped, as they could enter the state and national level teams. It was a good thought, but the drawback was the extra fees that the academy charged. His mother felt it was a waste of time and money and did not enrol him.

"I feel sorry for the child," Aadya said, closing the file.

"Save your sympathies, you will need it when you meet his mother," she said.

"So you have an athlete and a cricketer in your class?" Aadya said appreciating.

"Oh not to forget, Kunal. Sweet boy. He is the football captain but very mischievous," she said, smiling.

"I think I have had enough for a day. I am looking forward to seeing them all."

"Relax. You have a lot of time to get to know them."

Aadya nodded.

## June - The New Girl

The air was hot and humid, and the heat was not helping them in any way as Ananya sat in the back seat of the car along with her grandfather complaining. They were around fifty km from the destination. This was Mr Mahesh Vaidya's seventh transfer. He worked for a public sector bank, and transfers were a part of his job. His wife, Usha, loved transfers as it gave her a chance to live in a different place and learn a new language and culture. After an hour's travel, they reached a beautiful colony of independent houses. The layout was divided into three parts. The narrow lane was the first part where their car finally came to a halt. It was a part with neatly lined bungalows mostly belonging to bankers from different banks. The second part was houses of localities mostly into business, and the third part was a colony that belonged to employees of a power plant. Amid the three parts stood a huge school called Gurukul, which was almost ten years old. Mr Vaidya had already taken admission for Ananya in the school. It was one of the well-known schools known for academics, sports, and cultural activities. Ananya was to enter grade nine. She had everything, parents who adored her, a great lifestyle and boys who were smitten by her above-average looks. She got down from her car and surveyed the surroundings. It was neat with a row of trees planted on either side of the road. The driver removed the luggage from the car and placed them on the road. There was a sudden sound of the gate being opened from the house opposite theirs. The Hedge family lived there. A chubby looking lady along with a man came over and introduced themselves as their new neighbours. They insisted on having lunch with them.

After an hour of settling things in their new home, the Vaidyas along with their daughter and father, went over to the Hegdes. It was a beautiful house filled with artefacts. Mr Hegde worked for a well-known pharma company, and artefacts were a result of his frequent travel abroad. Their children were already by the table.

"This is Viren he is in grade twelve, and this is our daughter Rashmi she is in ninth," Mrs Hegde said.

Viren was tall and broad-shouldered with a warm and friendly smile and black wavy hair. Rashmi was a cheerful girl of medium height on the healthier side with long black hair pulled back and gathered into a ponytail.

"Oh our Ananya is also in grade nine," said Usha looking around happily for Ananya.

"Where is she?" asked Rashmi.

"I will look for her," Rashmi said, eager to know her new classmate.

She found Ananya playing with their dog Zooby.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey, He is nice. I love dogs," she said.

"I can see that. Normally our Zooby is not cordial to strangers, but he seems to have liked you," she said.

They bonded instantly.

"Come let us have lunch," she said, taking her hand and keeping her busy with chatter.

As the girls entered, the others had already taken seats for lunch. It was love at first sight for Viren. He stared at Ananya as she removed her shoes and shook her head and pulled back her shoulder-length black tresses. Ananya was thin with a heart-shaped face and deep brown eyes. Her wheatish complexion, combined with high cheekbones made her look attractive.

"There she is," said her mother.

Rashmi sat next to Ananya and continued her chat. Viren sat across Ananya and felt his heart race every time she looked at him. After a sumptuous lunch, the families sat down and

got to know the new place. Rashmi took Ananya to her room, and by the time they were ready to leave, Ananya felt she had already been to the school.

It was the first week of June when the school reopened. Viren was in the senior-most class of the school. He was excited at the thought of meeting his friends. They were in touch and had known what each one was up to during the vacations but meeting them in person and sharing the stories all over again was something else. He was in a hurry to meet his close friends Kunal, Chintan, and Rishabh at their usual hang out.

The school was five minutes' walk from their home. Rashmi waited eagerly at the appointed time for Ananya. They walked the five-minute distance talking to each other like old friends. Viren had already left for school. It was the first day. Barring Ananya, every student was in neatly pressed uniform. Any other dress only meant she or he was a new student. They approached the school, climbed three steps, and entered the gigantic hall full of children talking eagerly to their friends. It was exciting to be back at school after vacations.

In a corner between the pillars, they saw Viren with a group of boys sitting on the stone column. One of his friends, Kunal, stared at Ananya and said something to the boys around him. They laughed. As Ananya came near them, he jumped off the seat and gave her a wide smile. Ananya found it strange and ignored him. She smiled at Viren, who smiled back. Kunal kept looking at her as she left. Something about her fascinated him.

"You know her?" Kunal asked.

"Yes."

"How?"

"She is my neighbour," Viren replied softly hoping he was unheard.

"Listen, dude. This sounds strange, but I think I may have fallen for her. Viren you got to introduce me to her," Kunal said completely smitten by Ananya.



Viren felt an invisible knife stabbed him several times. How could his best friend fall for a girl he had already fallen for? Though he had anticipated this but seeing it happen made him sick. All he did was give a small smile.

"Why are you smiling? I told you to introduce me to her," he said.

"I heard that. I don't know her except that she came over for lunch yesterday," he said truthfully.

"You... you had lunch with her. You lucky guy," he said, punching him.

"Is she in Rashmi's class?" asked Chintan.

"Yes," replied Viren.

"Great, What is her name?" asked Kunal.

"Ananya," he said softly.

"Hm Ananya .... Kunal, sounds perfect," he said.

Chintan laughed.

"How about an introduction at the end of the day?" Kunal asked.

"You sure move fast," said Rishabh smiling.

"That I do. What do you say, Viren?" said Kunal smiling.

"Sure."

"We still have six hours for that," he said sadly.

"This year is going to be interesting," said Rishabh looking at Kunal with a knowing smile.

Chintan was already imagining things.

The four were friends since grade one. It was as if they grew up together. Chintan was from a not-so-wealthy family. This did not hinder their friendship. He was short, dark and fat. He was a boy full of life and considered very lucky to hang out with the other three. They loved him too. Rishabh's father was into the furniture business and owned a furniture showroom. He was a tall, fair boy with altogether an impressive personality. He was quiet by nature and spoke only when he was spoken to, or he found a person interesting.

“Who is that creep?” asked Ananya once they reached the narrow passage.

“It is Kunal, Viren’s best friend and the other two are Chintan and Rishabh,” she said.

“Oh, sorry. I mean,” she said.

“It is alright,” she said, not bothered.

They entered a class full of chatterers all talking about the summer holidays. Most of them had gone out and described their experiences with their friends. When Rashmi and Ananya entered the classroom, they had the attention of the class. They knew she was a new girl, and there were scattered whispers. Rathan one among the class topper who was busy sharing his trip details to Moscow suddenly stopped narrating and looked at Ananya tongue-tied as did his small audience. Rashmi introduced her to Racheal, who also happened to be her best friend since grade five. She was tall, pretty, and curvy. She looked more like an eighteen-year-old. Rashmi sat down with Ananya on the third bench of the middle row. Racheal was upset, but she masked it by calling over one of her classmates to sit next to her. She, a dull girl, was surprised at the sudden importance and hurried to sit next to her in haste before Racheal could change her mind. Rathan who sat on the next row third bench was thrilled to have Ananya sitting close to him and began a conversation with her. Others in the class joined them to hear more about the new girl. Rathan asked her about the place she came from. What was she good at?

Ananya spoke about her earlier school, and the small audience was genuinely impressed. Especially the boys who did not want to go back to their seats even when their class teacher arrived. Her classmates were warm and friendly as were the teachers. Lunch was in the school canteen. There were two canteens, one for the secondary and another for higher secondary.

Meanwhile, Kunal could not help but think about Ananya. He thought he would skip lunch and ask Viren to introduce him during the break. However, Viren was in no mood to do

that as they had a sports period in the latter half. Kunal sulked but the fact that he would meet Ananya by the end of the day cheered him.

Aadya took their last period. Children were already aware of the new teacher. They were looking forward to meeting her. Kunal was growing restless by the minute. Viren, who sat next to him, shook him. Kunal pulled away. Aadya saw this and asked them what was going on?

“Are you tired of this subject already?” she asked.

Others smiled. At the end of the class, they liked the way she taught. They found her intelligent and creative in her examples.

The second half of the day was as usual with Ananya having to introduce herself to every teacher. At the time of dispersal, she had a group of admirers in boys and a group that envied her among girls mostly Racheal. A club took shape. Rathan, along with Hemant an average student and another boy who was a topper from the last, formed it. They made a pact that they would try their luck with her and would lay the matter to rest if she happens to choose one of them. After a considerable discussion, the club was named as AAC (Ananya’s Admirers club).

At the end of the day, Ananya and Rashmi left the classroom, and in the corridor, they saw an impatient Kunal along with Viren.

“Hi,” said Viren with Kunal staring at Ananya with a wide smile.

“Ananya, this is my friend Kunal,” he said, trying to avoid seeing the happiness on Kunal’s face.

Kunal stood with his outstretched hand. There were few of Ananya’s classmates watching with curiosity. Everyone knew both Kunal and Viren and wondered what was happening here.

Ananya looked at Kunal for few seconds and slowly folded her hands in *Namaste*. His friends, who were witnessing

this new form of acquaintance, burst out laughing. Viren held himself from smiling. He tried to remain composed but could not help and burst out laughing. Rashmi laughed too. Ananya walked off, making a face at Kunal. He stared after her. He was never humiliated by anybody like this. Chintan put his hand on Kunal's shoulder and said tough luck and Rishabh who was ready to leave instead of waving; he joined his hands in a *Namaste*. Kunal pushed both the boys and walked away in anger. His driver was waiting for him. He got into the car and banged the door with a heavy thud.

Kunal came from a wealthy Gujarati family. His father was into the jewellery business and owned two large showrooms in the small town. He had an elder sister who was married. He was fair, of medium height with long deep brown hair, side part, and curled a bit around his ears. He was the captain of the school's football team. He had a decent female following. He flirted with almost all girls, and no girl had ever turned him down. If it had happened, it was never in public.

That night Kunal thought of Ananya. Rejection is something he had never experienced, and such an insult by a new girl was a little too much for him. He was not the one who would give up so easily. There are eight months, he thought smiling to himself.

He could not help but fall for this girl more. He smiled again. He loved the way she walked away with an air of confidence. He smiled again. Slowly the rejection began feeling sweet. He looked forward to the next day in school.

On Saturdays, the school worked for four hours, and students wore a T-shirt and shorts or skirts. It was a day spent in clubs they had signed up. Students were categorised into four houses, namely yellow, red, green and blue. Ananya being a new student, was to be allocated a house that day after the school assembly. Rashmi was not interested in sports. She hated to play, as it required going out in the sun; hence, she had registered for cultural activities.

Kunal was the captain of the blue house and Viren of the yellow house. He also was the sports captain of the school. Both secretly wished Ananya was in their house. After witnessing the incidents that occurred the previous day, the AA club knew that they had fierce competition. Rathan was in the blue house though he hated that Kunal was its captain he wished Ananya would be in his house.

New students assembled in the auditorium. There were fifty-seven students in all. The house captains were already there, and when Ananya entered the hall, both Viren and Kunal looked at each other and Kunal winked at him. Viren shook his head and smiled. One look at her and Kunal forgot the previous days' incident. Ananya was dressed in a blue T-shirt and white skirt, and incidentally, Kunal too was dressed in the same colour. She smiled at Viren and ignored Kunal. The principal, along with the class teachers and co-teachers, arrived a little later. The sorting was done according to the strength of the house. They tried to maintain equal strength in all houses. Names were called out, and the house was assigned to each one of them. When Ananya's name was called, there was a weird silence. The slip that had the house name fell from the announcer's hand, making the wait even more difficult. Kunal breathed hard. When he heard the blue house name called, a huge smile broke out on his face. He looked in Ananya's direction. She looked uninterested.

The new entrants were directed to meet their house captains. Unnerved Ananya approached her house captain. As she walked towards him, Kunal felt as though a bouquet of white and blue lilies was hurled towards him. The blue house vice-captain was an eleventh-grader. Looking at the similar coloured clothes, he said, "Hey, you two, colour coordinated."

Kunal smiled and said, "Oh, yes." Ananya ignored the comment.

"Come let us go and meet our house inmates," Kunal said.

A classroom was allotted to a house where they were supposed to gather every Saturday. Looking at Ananya, Rathan was very happy. She sat next to him.

"Ananya is chosen for our house. So tell us what sport you play or are you just a pretty face that does not go out in the sun," Kunal said sure that Ananya would not be good at sports.

"I play tennis," she said loudly.

The class cheered specially Rathan.

"Where?" said Kunal.

"What do you mean where? I am a district level champion," she said with airs.

"Oh! Wow! Great! This time we will win 20 points in tennis for sure," said the house vice-captain.

"Which district is this?" said Kunal softly to her, trying his best to look unconvinced. But somewhere deep down, he was impressed.

"You don't trust me? Well, I will get all my certificates if that will convince you," she said.

"Oh, I don't need that. I was just asking," he said, smiling.

Ananya did not answer. Five more new entrants spoke of how they could contribute. The colour coordination somehow was struck in Kunal's mind. For the next three consecutive Saturdays, he wore a white t-shirt and carried a few coloured t-shirts in his bag. He would wait for Ananya to come and see the colour she would be wearing, and he would change over to the same. Soon there was leg-pulling happening, which Kunal enjoyed. Rathan too wanted to be a part of it. He tried guessing the T-shirt colour she would wear, but somehow it would be incorrect, and he wondered how Kunal always got it right. One of the Saturdays after the meeting, Ananya walked up to Kunal and said she wanted to speak to him.

"Me?" he asked, looking around the almost empty class.

"Yes," she said loudly.

"My pleasure," he said with his face gleaming with joy.

“What are you trying to do?” she asked.

He looked at her, confused.

“What did I do?” he asked.

“You wearing the same colour T-shirt cannot be a coincidence for three consecutive Saturdays,” she said.

“Oh that. You know I felt so too. I was wondering if you are stalking me,” he said, smiling.

She stared back at him.

“Listen, I don’t know how you are doing this, but I don’t like this. It looks stupid. Do you understand?” she said.

“If you say so,” he said.

“So this will not happen next week, I gather,” she asked.

“You have my word,” he said.

“Thanks,” she said.

From then on, he stopped doing that.

me every time you scored a goal. But I felt I would give it away if I cheered for you," she said regretting it almost immediately.

She got up suddenly and began to walk across the room to collect her bag. It took a moment for Kunal to absorb. When he did, he ran after her.

"What would you give away?"

"What do you mean?"

"What did you just say?" he asked all at once.

"Oh, it is nothing Kunal," she said, trying to look unfazed.

Kunal pushed her gently against the wall. She lurched backwards.

"For God's sake, Ananya don't do this to me. Complete what you have to say," he said.

"At this point, it does not matter," she said.

"Every word, every feeling, everything about you matters to me," he said.

"Not anymore."

"It will always be that way."

Kunal continued to look at her expectantly. Ananya took a deep breath and tried to shift her gaze elsewhere. Kunal was adamant. His grip on her hand increased. Ananya took a deep breath.

"I would give away that... that... I had feelings for you," she said softly.

Kunal loosened the grip and moved forward.

"So you admit it. You were in love with me," he whispered.

"I admit nothing," she said, trying to push his hand.

He held her and looked into her eyes and said, "Each time we quarrelled or you complained, all I wanted to do was to hold you and kiss you."

He moved his hand over her face, pushed back the black strands of her hair from her cheek, and bent down to kiss her.

"Kunal, no, I am not ready for this," she said struggling.

He pulled her closer and asked, "Ready?? Ten years, damn it! Ten years, was that not enough?" he managed to ask.



His mouth sought hers. She leaned against him though a part of her urged her to pull away from him, another part felt just right. He kissed her passionately.

"If you loved me, why didn't you tell me so?" she asked, lifting her head to look at him.

"I wanted to, but somehow could not muster the courage required. It is easy for you to ask but then telling a girl how you feel for her, I think it is the most difficult thing. Also, I had a feeling you did not care for me, and I don't think I was capable of taking a 'no' for an answer. So I lived with the hope that maybe you loved me. I think, with the right person love lasts," he said, smiling into her mysterious deep brown eyes.

"What if something goes wrong? I am scared," she said still in doubt.

"Trust me. I will take care of it."

"You know when we were in school, you made me feel special like..uh.. like I was everything," she said looking at him.

"You are everything. In fact, everything I ever wanted in a woman. I always knew it was you and me. I have been praying for this moment for a long time. I don't want to go another day without you," he half-whispered as he continued to kiss her.

# The Finale

Only a week away for the competition to begin, and the school administration, along with all the volunteers were extremely busy. In between their busy schedules, Ananya and Kunal tried to spend some time with each other. They would sit speaking for hours after the evening practice was over. Sometimes Viren would be with them. The trio would talk about school memories. It was one of the best times. One evening when they were chatting, Viren's phone rang and it was Rashmi. Viren had told her everything. She was three months pregnant with her first child.

"Ananayaaa... so so happy to see you," Rashmi said, screaming and giving her a flying kiss.

"Me too. It has been such a long time," Ananya replied, returning her kiss.

Kunal waved at her from behind Ananya.

"My my! Kunal, I must say we have to learn from you how to pursue. Guys, I am so happy for you. You look wonderful together," she said, blurting out words excitedly.

"I want you to come over soon. I mean for the tournament and our big day," he said, kissing Ananya.

"I will have the doc's report soon. I will decide after that. Meanwhile, good luck. You have a week left, and I am sure you will not let our school down."

"We will do our best," replied Kunal.

Next, they called Rishabh and Chintan. Rishabh was a mechanical engineer working for an automobile company. He was unmarried. Kunal had told Rishabh about his participation as a mentor for football and his subsequent meeting with Ananya.

“Finally, dude, you made it. I just want the best for you guys,” Rishabh said, looking at the duo. Viren waved at him from behind. Rishabh waved back.

“I will be there for sure. There is so much to say,” he said.

Chintan worked for a private bank. He was shocked to see Ananya and Kunal in the same frame. He simply stared at them for a couple of seconds.

“Hi Chintan,” said Ananya smiling.

“Hi,” he said, looking hurt.

“I am sorry, Chintan,” she said.

“Does this count? I mean an apology after a decade,” he asked Kunal.

“Of course, it does,” he said, laughing.

“I am waiting to see you guys and hear what is going on?” he said.

The night before the event after the dinner, the participants gathered in groups and a much need pep talk was given by their mentors and coach for a morale boost. They slept early so that the players rested well. It was two days since the students of the school were back from vacation. They had known about the training by the alumni. Many were eager to meet the mentors who they had heard so much about.

The school wore a festive look. The ground was wet with a slight drizzle a day before, and earthy fragrance filled the place. Every alumnus of the school was aware of the event. It was a three-day event. Day one was all about athletics. Kunal and Ananya helped Viren and his team. Rishabh and Chintan had met the trio in the morning and now were cheering them from the stands. Rashmi joined them later. She had landed in Mumbai the previous day.

The tournament was telecasted live on the local channels of Mansar along with various social media handlers by a five-year young cyber club of Gurukul. The club members interviewed the mentors. It was an eventful day with Gurukul winning medals in various categories. The school

administration congratulated Viren, Samir and the coaches for the fabulous work.

The next day was reserved for team sports. It was a long night with Kunal and his team getting ready for their events along with the cricket team mentor Abhishek and volleyball mentor Sahil. Both games were played in another school. The crowd was split but not the enthusiasm. The football team performed well and won hands down with a score of 2-0. Kunal and his friends cheered the football team.

"It is fun to see you so excited. I mean this is what I wanted from you when I scored a goal," he said, looking at Ananya clapping whole-heartedly.

"But these are your boys," she said, smiling. Kunal kissed her. He had to admit she had an extra glow on her face.

By the end of the day, Gurukul had won both cricket and football but lost in the volleyball match. Team sports carried more points; hence losing volleyball was a huge setback.

At the first hint of sunlight, Ananya woke up the next day. She was nervous. Though she had her best friends with her, the anxiety did not die down. Meena was using the washroom. It was an important day for both of them. Viren and Kunal were waiting for them in the lobby.

"Why are you looking so dapper?" Kunal asked, looking at Ananya who was visibly nervous.

"To be honest I was, but not now," she said. Kunal hugged her.

Gurukul won badminton women singles and men's doubles, but they lost men's singles and women's doubles. Now all eyes were on tennis. Both the singles and doubles matches were scheduled for the day.

Guura was already in the stands of the tennis court. He sat diagonally opposite Ananya, who was in the first row along with her friends. After a long wait, they won the girls singles and lost in the boys' singles. A small break was given before the doubles match began. The trio had lunch and later joined the players

in the changing room. Ananya gave them the last-minute tips, and then the trio sat along with the crowd. Guura knew that he had to complete his task towards the end; otherwise, it would sabotage the matches and create more confusion.

They won the girls doubles, and after a break of an hour, the boy's doubles began. Wining it meant winning the championship trophy. There was a lot of stress on the players. It was an interesting match heading towards a nail-biting finish. Ananya was not only anxious but was extremely thirsty and wanted something to drink. Kunal offered to get a drink for her. He moved out of the court to the refreshments area. It was crowded. He could hear the cheering. Maybe the match was getting over, he thought. He asked the guy at the counter to hurry. He took the beverage, put the handful of loose change in his pockets, and hurried towards the court. He found out that they were serving for the match. As Kunal entered the court at a distance, he saw a man walking towards the row adjacent to Ananya. Kunal was far away. He felt uneasy.

Meanwhile, it was an ace a legal serve that was not touched by the receiving player's racket and their school won the match and hence the championship. The crowd stood up to applause. As the crowd was in disarray, he saw the man putting his hands into his pocket and removing a revolver.

"Ananya..." he shouted, suddenly terrified. His voice was lost in the deafening applause as the winning team was congratulated by the school administration. He had to stop the man. He pushed people aside and looked around. The man was nowhere to be seen. He had disappeared in the commotion. Some of them were leaving the court. Some continued applauding. At a distance, he saw the man again. He was close to Ananya. Before Kunal could stop him, the man fired three rounds. Kunal caught up and somehow grabbed the man. Ananya fell with blood oozing out of her body.

Seeing her, Kunal let go of the man and rushed towards her. He and Viren carried her to the ambulance, which was

ready for any kind of emergency. She was taken to Parekh hospital. Kunal's father was a trustee. Ananya had already lost a lot of blood. The doctor there did the necessary first aid and said it was an emergency, and surgery was inevitable. There were two surgeons, and the chief surgeon was on leave. He had gone abroad on holiday with his family, and another surgeon was down with Jaundice. The closest city was around two hundred kilometres from the place. He asked the doctors to check in the other city. Time was running out, and Kunal was on the verge of breaking down. He held Ananya's hand.

"If I let her go Viren, I will not be able to forgive myself," he said.

Viren was as devastated as Kunal.

Meanwhile, at the reception, there was an unpleasant meeting. A heavy-built man had arrived with a woman who looked like she was airlifted from a fashion show ramp. She was exceptionally beautiful and looked around the place curiously.

"I am an alumnus of the school and my teacher Aadya told me of the accident and that Ananya is injured and requires a surgeon to operate on her," he said with a slight American accent.

"Yes, sir, she is severely hurt," said the receptionist.

"Look, I am a surgeon from the US and Ananya is a dear friend of mine. I can email my credentials to you. But she needs to be operated upon soon."

"Sir, I need to ask our main doctor," the receptionist replied.

"Please do that," he said.

"What's the matter darling?" the woman asked as they sat down in the reception area.

The women at the reception met Kunal and the main doctor and told them about the stranger. He and Viren both rushed towards the reception.

“Oh, these two. I think I have changed my mind,” he said loudly as Viren and Kunal stared at him. He looked familiar.

“Ra.. Rathan,” said Viren.

“Yes.”

“Look I had no idea you guys were here. I had come last night to be a part of the tournament and Aadya Ma’am informed me about the accident. I am here to save Ananya,” he said hesitating.

“Oh thank you, Rathan. The lady says you can operate on Ananya. You are god sent. Please go ahead and speak to the main doctor,” Kunal said with his hopes rising every minute.

“Do you think I am crazy? For surgery, I need to touch her,” he said.

People around looked at him and thought he was crazy. Kunal and Viren knew what exactly he meant. The expression on their face began to change.

“Rathan do you think this is the time to talk about the things that happened between us in the past,” asked Kunal angrily.

“Such wise words, but sadly I do. Rather I consider it to be perfect timing,” he said.

Kunal looked at him, stunned. Was he revengeful for the childhood incident that had happened a decade ago?

“You remember how you had insulted me for being the lead role in the play?” he asked.

“Oh! Is this the guy?” said the beautiful woman.

Kunal looked at her for the first time.

“She is my wife Mia, winner of a major beauty pageant. This is Viren and Kunal,” he said.

She looked at them as though Rathan had discussed them every day. Viren and Kunal nodded.

“Good grief, Rathan let go of what happened back then. You are the only one who can save her life. I know how much you cared for her,” he said pleading.

“Oh, do you? Well, that is a lot of pressure,” he said sarcastically.

“Listen Rathan, pointing fingers will not solve anything,” said Kunal despairingly.

“I can’t believe that it is again turning out to be my fault,” said Rathan making it increasingly evident how miffed he was with Kunal.

“We all make boneheaded mistakes, and at this point, you think that is more important? If it is, tell me what would make you forgive me?” said Kunal.

“Well, then apologise,” he said loudly looking at Kunal. Kunal went down on his knees.

“I am sorry,” said Kunal with evident sincerity.

Rathan looked around, satisfied and smiled at his wife, who looked happier than her husband.

“Now, this is a delight.”

Meanwhile, Rishabh, Chintan and Rashmi joined them. Rashmi recognised Rathan, and he walked up to her and hugged her.

“I can’t believe you are here,” Rashmi said.

“I reached here yesterday night. I wanted to be there on the previous day too, but you know prior commitments,” he said.

“Anyway, I am so glad to see you. This is my wife Mia,” he continued.

Rashmi hugged her.

“Oh wow,” said Rashmi, who could not help but admire Mia’s out of the world looks.

“Yes, I know,” he said, taking in the complement slowly.

“Oh, sweet lord,” said Kunal impatiently.

“I like it when he pleads. Alright, get the operation theatre ready before I change my mind.”

Some of the best doctors and nurses assisted Dr Rathan. After an hour and a half, he came out of the operation theatre, successful.



“Let her rest for some time. She should be alright soon,” said Rathan.

Kunal gave him a tight hug. Rathan patted him.

It was a reunion of a strange kind. When the police came over to take Ananya’s statement, she refused to name Ramakanth. This made Kunal and her friends angry. She had told them all about Ramakanth.

“I don’t want to file a case,” she said.

“Why? This man has ruined your life,” said Viren.

“But he saved my father from humiliation,” she said.

“I can’t believe you are saying this. You have paid a huge price for that,” said Viren.

“I have put all that behind Viren,” she said, smiling.

“She is here alive and happy. That is all that matters,” said Kunal.

Aadya visited Ananya and handed over a beautiful bouquet. Ananya took it gratefully. The hospital room looked full with Kunal sitting next to her and Rashmi at the other end of the bed. Viren, Chintan, Rishabh and Rathan were there too.

“Our grounds are saved, and so is Ananya,” said Aadya.

“Thank you for the timely intervention,” said Rathan.

Aadya knew Rathan was a well-established surgeon in the US and had requested him to see Ananya soon after the mishap.

“Remember, I spoke of an NGO who wanted to help us. It so happens that it was founded by an IT company from the US. They have been funding this NGO for three years now. You will be surprised to know who one of the co-founders of this company is,” she said, looking at Kunal and Viren who looked at her clueless.

“Namit,” she said.

“Namit?” they said in unison.

“Wow, this is great,” said Kunal.

“Unbelievable,” said Viren.

"I am proud and humbled by this gesture. It feels great when alumni of the school reach out to their alma mater," said Aadya appreciatively.

After a few minutes of niceties, Aadya left. Ananya's phone beeped. There was a new message. She read the message and smiled.

"Who is it?" asked Kunal.

Ananya showed the message to him. It was from Ramakanth thanking her for not filing the case and wishing her a bright future with Kunal. Kunal passed it to his friends.

"Forgiveness and goodness are still out there," said Viren.

Rathan declared that Ananya would be discharged in a couple of days. He kissed her on her forehead and whispered something to her. She laughed aloud.

"What did he say?" demanded Kunal.

"I said I am the only one who saw your heartbeat," Rathan replied, smiling.

Kunal shook his head. Others laughed.