

I Had a Best Friend Too[®]

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CHAPTER 1



August, 2009

It was 6 a.m.—to begin with. The New Delhi railway station was already astir. Tea vendors shouted their wares, their kettles hissing like restless serpents. Coolies, clad in faded uniforms and red turbans, wove through the crowd with practiced ease, hoisting trunks and suitcases as if they weighed nothing. Passengers hurried along, some glancing at their watches, others peering at reservation charts with furrowed brows. The air carried the mingled scents of chai, sizzling snacks, damp newspapers, and iron tracks. A voice crackled over the speakers, droning about train arrivals and departures, but few paid any heed.

The frequent announcement —“May I have your attention please...” made the passengers quicken their steps, to board their train before it departed.

Pranav stood outside Shatabdi Coach C-8, the morning air cool against his face, as he leaned closer to the printed reservation chart. His eyes scanned the list until they stopped at a familiar name: ‘Aparna Mishra.’ He smiled.

Train charts, printed and pasted beside the coach door, were once reliable sources of surprises. In the days before apps and algorithms, a journey’s true companions were often revealed by ink on paper. And there it was—

Seat No: 58 | Name: Aparna Mishra | Age: 24 | Gender: F

Right beside his own.

He stepped back and adjusted the strap of his bag, the faint memory of childhood summers stirring somewhere deep within him. The train, meanwhile, waited patiently, its wheels humming with quiet anticipation as though it, too, sensed the reunion in the making.

The coach had exactly seventy-eight seats, arranged in a disciplined 3x2 fashion—three on one side, two on the other—repeating with unwavering regularity. But, like all things in life, there were exceptions. The first and last rows, for reasons best known to railway planners, had been granted a special 2x2 arrangement, as if to set them apart from the rest.

He did a quick mental calculation. “Seats 58 and 59 should be together. Fate has been kind today,” he mused before stepping aboard.

Pranav hesitated at the doorway, gripping the strap of his bag. A strange stillness settled in his chest, like the quiet pause before a storm. He inhaled slowly, steadying himself before stepping inside.

Inside, Aparna sat by the window, her chin propped on her palm as she gazed outside, absorbed in thought. A deep blue Kurti wrapped around her frame, its fabric catching the soft glow of morning light. Gold earrings glinted each time she shifted, reflecting fleeting sparks of brightness—like fireflies in motion... Her rimless spectacles rested lightly on her nose, an unassuming barrier between her and the world. He told himself they kept him safe, protecting him from drifting too far, from losing himself in depths he could never return from. Yet, a quiet thought lingered—if the spectacles were to slip, even for a moment, would he be able to resist the pull?

Pranav hesitated for a moment before taking the seat beside her.

There was something about her—something that tickled the edges of Pranav’s memory, like a tune half-remembered.

“Good morning,” she said, her voice calm, detached.

“Morning. Looks like we are travel companions,” he replied, lowering himself into his seat.

She nodded. “So, it seems.”

A blaring horn pierced the air as the train departed right on schedule—6:20 a.m.

The train rumbled forward, leaving the city behind. Inside the compartment, the rhythmic clatter of wheels, the rustle of newspapers, and the occasional murmur of conversations filled the air.

Pranav stole a few glances at his companion. The feeling of familiarity gnawed at him, but he couldn’t quite place it.

“May I sit by the window?” she asked suddenly, breaking his thoughts.

“Of course.” he switched seats without hesitation.

(Technically, she was asking—but since she was already sitting in his seat, it felt more like a soft takeover than a polite request!)

For a while, they sat in comfortable silence, the landscape outside changing from urban sprawl to open fields. Pranav finally found his voice. “Are you from Delhi?”

“No, Lucknow,” she answered. “I had an interview yesterday at a Bank in Connaught Place. Now I’m heading home.”

She paused before adding, “Father suggested I take the Lucknow Mail—said it would be the sensible thing to do. But I told him, why should I spend a whole night rattling in a train when I could sleep peacefully in a hotel and take the Shatabdi in the morning? He didn’t argue after that.”

Pranav nodded. “A wise decision.”

They sipped their complimentary tea in silence. Pranav turned her name over in his mind, fitting it against the puzzle of his memory. And then, it clicked.

He cleared his throat. “I’m Pranav Sharma.”

“Aparna Mishra,” she said, as if testing the name in her own voice.

Pranav felt a fleeting urge to say, “Yes, I know,” but, restrained by the polite conventions of the moment, he simply offered, “Nice to meet you, Ms. Aparna,” all the while amused by the irony of his own formality.

The confirmation sent a ripple through him. A name from the past, now seated beside him, unaware.

He hesitated before speaking again. “Hey, I used to be called Manu. Do you—?”

Aparna frowned, looking at him properly for the first time. “Excuse me, but why are you staring at me?”

Pranav flushed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. It’s just... you look familiar.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh? That’s the best line you’ve got?”

“No, no! I mean it. You really do look familiar.”

She crossed her arms, skeptical. “Alright, then. Prove it.”

Pranav leaned back, smiling. “And if I do?”

“Convince me, and you might get my number. Maybe even a coffee.”

“And if I fail?”

“No more talking until we reach Lucknow. Deal?”

Pranav grinned. “Deal.”

There was something thrilling about this moment—a playful game, a test of memory and fate.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said confidently. “But we do know each other.”

“How?” Her gaze settling on Pranav’s face with an intensity that carried both curiosity and quiet respect.

Aparna studied him, her fingers absently tracing the rim of her cup. A faint crease appeared between her brows, as if she too was trying to place him in some forgotten corner of her past.

Pranav, amused by her sudden scrutiny, ran his fingers over his cheeks, as if the answer might be hidden there. It had been two days since his last shave, and for a fleeting moment, he wondered if a rebellious stubble had emerged to betray him. But the smooth skin beneath his touch brought a sense of relief—at least, he thought, he appeared presentable for this unexpected examination.

“Shall I begin?” he asked, mischief dancing in his eyes.

She nodded, intrigued.

And so, as the train swayed gently along the tracks, Pranav prepared to bring the past rushing back, one memory at a time.

CHAPTER 2



Ding-dong...

The announcement crackled through the speakers—an invitation to pay attention—but the occupants of this particular compartment barely noticed. Announcements, after all, rarely told stories worth listening to.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the voice floated through the compartment, calm and unhurried, as if the speaker had all the time in the world. “Allow me to tell you a story—not of where we are, but of a place you may one day find yourself longing to visit. A place called Lucknow—a city that wears history as one wears an old, beloved shawl, soft and familiar.”

The train, steady and rhythmic—clickety-clack, clickety-clack—seemed to lean in, as if eager to hear the city’s tales.

“Lucknow, they say, has watched empires rise and fall—from the Delhi Sultanate to the grandeur of the Mughals, from the elegance of the Nawabs of Awadh to the stern footfalls of the British. And yet, through it all, the city remained itself—gracious, patient, and distinctly charming.”

“Now, if you ever stroll through its narrow lanes—and you should, though they may seem determined to let you lose your way—you’ll find the air richly seasoned. Spices, yes, but also stories. Here, even a cup of chai comes with a conversation, and every passerby seems to know a tale worth telling.”

“And speaking of tales—there is one you must remember. It is about Tunday ke Kabab, a name that carries both flavor and folklore. The story goes that Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula, a man of fine taste but failing teeth, yearned for a kebab so tender it would dissolve on the tongue. It was Haji Murad Ali—a man with only one arm but a heart full of culinary genius—who created a masterpiece. With a secret blend of spices known to him alone, he gave the Nawab his wish, and gave the world a legend.”

“In Lucknow, you see, even food comes with a backstory—and backstories often last longer than the meal.”

“But then, that is Lucknow for you: a city that never rushes, never boasts, but always lingers—on your tongue, in your heart, and most certainly, in your memory.”

The train wheels hummed a metallic lullaby as Aparna rested her head against the window, watching the countryside blur like a half-remembered dream. Fields of green and lone palm trees blurred into a fleeting canvas, and the golden sunlight, fractured by the glass, painted fleeting patterns on her face. She let the crackle of the overhead announcement drift past her ears—mere noise, unworthy of disturbing her reverie.

Beside her, Pranav reclined with an air of quiet mischief, his eyes alight with something unsaid. His smile held a story, carefully stowed away for just the right moment. Aparna felt it, the delicious weight of a secret begging for release.

“So,” she asked, her voice threading through the ambient hum, “when will you finally tell me?”

Pranav’s smile deepened, as though savoring his advantage. “Patience,” he replied, his tone rich with playful mystery. “Let’s wait for breakfast. That’s when the story will find its time.”

The attendant's cart rattled into view, the man neat and efficient in his movements. Pranav, his voice carrying a flourish, placed his order. "Bread cutlet and Bournvita—ah, no, let's have tea instead." His manner lent gravity to this minor indulgence, as if each choice were part of the unfolding tale.

Aparna, her eyes dancing, countered, "The same for me—only, coffee." Her words landed lightly, a thread in their unspoken game.

When breakfast arrived, the warm clink of cups and the aroma of tea and coffee seemed to mark the prelude to something more.

Aparna, leaning forward with an expectant smile, pressed him, "Now that breakfast is over, let's hear it."

Between them was a warmth, shaped by ease and memory, though Aparna felt something more—a tug at the edge of recollection. Pranav's manner teased familiarity, like a long-forgotten melody played from another room. She searched the corners of her mind—a classroom, a voice from a season gone by—just out of reach.

Pranav's expression shifted, like a storyteller gathering the first threads of his tale. "This is a story of two children," he began, his voice settling into the steady rhythm of memory. "A boy and a girl, much like us. It was the summer of 1992, in the heart of Lucknow..."

The train pressed on, steel and earth in quiet harmony. And within its cradle, two stories began their slow unravelling—one spoken, one remembered, each promising to meet at the same destination.

CHAPTER 3



Year 1992:

Aliganj, a vibrant quarter of Lucknow, woke each morning like an old storyteller—hesitant at first, then easing into familiar, bustling tales. The city clung to its past with one hand while reaching toward the future with the other. The streets were timeless. At dawn, water sprinkled on dusty lanes released an earthy fragrance that mingled with the sweet aroma of chai. The milkman, balancing shiny containers on his bicycle, announced his arrival with a rhythmic clang, while a vegetable vendor stretched and yawned, preparing for another day of spirited bargaining.

As the sun warmed the rooftops, the locality stirred with its usual energy. Scooters sputtered awake with their signature cough, rickshaws groaned as they ferried passengers, and bicycles wove like determined dragonflies through the traffic. Street vendors displayed their wares with theatrical flair: heaps of golden mangoes, bundles of coriander still damp from the fields, and toys that clicked and whirred when cranked. The sounds of morning blended into a familiar symphony: the metallic whir of the knife-sharpener's wheel, the rhythmic beat of a cobbler's hammer, and the crackling melody of an old Kishore Kumar song spilling from a paan shop's dusty radio.

By mid-morning, the streets had transformed into a living maze of purpose and chatter. Schoolchildren, shirts stained with ink and adventure, raced along the footpaths, their laughter mingling

with the sharp tring-tring of passing cycles. Office-goers, armed with steel tiffins and hurried expressions, navigated the chaos with practiced ease. From a shaded bench, an elderly man fiddled with his transistor radio, muttering about politics as crackling voices read out the morning headlines.

“Janab, the kebabs are fresh today,” called out a vendor, his voice blending with the sizzle of the grill. In Lucknow, even greetings came with poetry.

The air swirled with the rich scent of coal-fired kebabs, the citrus tang of freshly cut coriander, and the comforting warmth of chai bubbling on stoves. Street vendors gestured with theatrical flair, inviting passersby to admire golden mangoes and glossy bangles. And always, beneath the bustle, the city’s quiet rhythm endured—patient, poetic, and unmistakably Lucknow.

The city existed on its own terms. Autorickshaws, black with yellow roofs, whizzed past, their radios crackling with old Bollywood hits. Children skipped by, singing the latest Kumar Sanu tune as if it were a nursery rhyme. Here, time moved not by the ticking of clocks but by the rhythms of daily life. The presence of black rotary telephones and Bush radios crackling with cricket commentary hinted at the era’s simplicity.

Among these lanes, hidden like a secret, was Mehndi Tola—a pocket of quiet amid the city’s commotion. It was a place of narrow lanes, shaded courtyards, and walls that bore the faded strokes of past festivals. In one of the houses, modest yet proud, lived a woman with her younger son. Her husband had passed on years ago, leaving behind a sepia-toned photograph and a legacy of stories. Her daughter lived in a government colony nearby, and her eldest son worked in Delhi. Yet the house never truly felt empty—especially during the summers.

That was when her eldest grandson, Pranav, seven years old and fresh from Delhi for his summer vacation, arrived, bringing with him the infectious energy of a squirrel in a fruit-laden tree. His arrival was always announced by the squeal of the iron gate and the delighted chatter of neighborhood children. The moment he stepped in, the scent of incense and the murmur of the morning prayer welcomed him, with the Gayatri Mantra floating softly in the air. The small temple in the corner stood like a vigilant guardian, and beside it, the guava tree leaned toward the veranda, as if curious to catch the stories unfolding below.

The house, with its sunlit courtyard and creaky wooden staircase, seemed to breathe along with its inhabitants. Its kitchen smelled of ghee, cardamom, and the occasional whiff of pickles fermenting on the window ledge. On the terrace, time stood still, interrupted only by cricket matches that ended with arguments about whether the ball was out or not.

The upper rooms were rented to a family, and among them was girl, seven years old, a sharp-eyed girl with a knack for challenging every statement. Her elder brother, nine years old, a quiet observer of their antics, often served as the umpire in their terrace matches. Summers were incomplete without her—they argued, laughed, and conspired with the intensity only childhood can muster.

Mornings began with a tilak on Pranav's forehead, a ritual as consistent as the jalebis and khasta kachoris that followed. Afternoons were spent in the old library, fingers tracing the cracked leather of forgotten books. Evenings were for cricket, carrom, and covert explorations of the attic, where mysteries surely hid in the shadows.

But time, indifferent to their escapades, moved on. The endless summers gave way to school schedules. By the late nineties, Pranav's visits grew sporadic. When he finally returned, the upstairs rooms

were empty; the girl and her family had moved, leaving only echoes behind. Life moved on.

Until, twelve years later, a train journey turned the clock backward. Beside him sat a girl with familiar eyes.

August, 2009: Back to train

He spoke of summer afternoons and cricket match on sun-warmed terraces, of stolen mangoes and sugarcane juice breaks. As he spoke, her brow furrowed, and her grip on the cup tightened.

She thought, “The house you describe... it sounds just like the one I lived in till 1997.”

Outside, the fields blurred past like fleeting memories on a forgotten film reel. Inside, the air thickened with something unspoken.

Pranav smiled and kept talking. As he described the garden with the guava tree that leaned conspiratorially toward the veranda, the crack of the cricket bat, and the shared victories over carrom matches, she froze.

Her heart raced. Her breath caught.

“No...” she whispered, eyes wide. “How do you know all this?”

Pranav leaned back, a familiar grin spreading across his face. “Because,” he said, extending his phone toward her, “you owe me a feast. And I need your number to remind you.”

Aparna gasped. Her heart fluttered like a sparrow startled into flight. Memories surged—of sunlit afternoons, of mango pulp smeared across faces, of whispered secrets beneath the stairs.

“Manu!” she shrieked, the name bursting from her like a child’s squeal at a magic trick.

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