

VINOD NAIDU

CURVED ALONG THE PATH

PART 1 - KICK-FF



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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER 1

HOMEBOUND

In an almost-empty bedroom, an 11-year-old, skinny boy with messed up hair was busy packing the last of his contents hastily in a suitcase as he always kept looking at the wall clock in his room.

4.39 am.

“Vivaan, let’s go, we’re already late,” informed a man with a cleanly-shaved face, a few strands of white hair on his otherwise neatly-set black hair, and wearing a casual outfit standing by the bedroom door.

“Just a minute, almost done,” Vivaan replied without moving his gaze.

Looking at Vivaan, he smiled weakly and began to empty his pockets to check the contents. Once assured, he put them back and patiently waited by the door.

“All set, Ashish?” Another man entered the room. Unlike Ashish, who was fit and had retained his youthful looks, the other man was round-faced and slightly obese. He had a well-groomed beard, but his hair had begun to recede from the frontal area of his scalp.

“Yes, Ahmad, you wait by the car. We’ll be there in a couple of minutes,” Ashish nodded. As soon as Ahmad left, Ashish came closer to Vivaan and sat on the bed.

“I hope you understand, Vivaan. I know how much you love this place and your friends but given Sameer’s condition...”

“I understand, dad,” Vivaan indifferently replied as he began to zip up the chain of his suitcase. He tried to pick the bag up, but it proved to be too heavy for him.

“I’ll get that” Ashish picked up the suitcase and motioned for Vivaan to turn off the lights. “Did you wish your friends goodbye? What about Riya?”

“I didn’t,” Vivaan said, switched off the lights, and quickly strode ahead.

Descending the stairs of the building, Vivaan found himself incapable of stopping the tears flowing through his eyes. As much as he wanted to be at his brother’s side, it pained him to leave his home, neighborhood, friends, school, and above all, his best friend Riya behind so abruptly.

He then halted by the entrance of the building, wiped his tears, took a deep breath, and patiently waited for his dad to arrive.

It had been almost fifteen minutes since Vivaan ordered his cab. Standing outside the Pune Airport, Vivaan eagerly began to look at every single taxi that made its way into his line of view.

He looked at the dark evening sky and began to fidget restlessly. A few drops of rain had already started to fall as he continued to look out for his cab.

The cab arrived just in the nick of time. With the intensity of the rains increasing every second, Vivaan hurriedly pushed his two suitcases into the car’s trunk. He then made himself comfortable in the backseat of the vehicle.

As soon as the cab driver entered the OTP, he made his way out of the traffic. Vivaan stretched himself and let out a sigh of relief.

He began to gaze lazily at the city through the closed window and felt a sense of nostalgia. It took him six years to finally return to the town he happily once called *home*. The downpour increased, thus making his window foggy. Giving up on straining his eyeballs to see clearly, he took out his mobile to preoccupy himself.

He quickly texted his dad and uncle that he had arrived and was on his way to the Café. Once done, he began to browse through his mobile inattentively. Within a couple of minutes, even browsing began to feel tedious. Vivaan wasn’t a fanatic when it came to smartphones and apps.

His thumb began to hover over the Instagram App icon, but he chose not to access it. It had been ages since he last used Instagram. The secretive nature he'd developed over the years made him stay away from any interactions that required social media.

Once again, looking at the Instagram icon, he began questioning his decision, not informing Riya of his return. Apart from leaving Pune six years ago in haste and without proper goodbyes, he had zero contact with her, even on social media. Vivaan had long presumed that Riya might have changed and would be living her own life, with Vivaan being nothing more than a memory to her.

“Of course, she must have,” he began to convince himself. *“It was I who chose to stay away from her, and I know it was the wrong decision.”*

Still, Vivaan was hopeful and decided to visit her the following weekend after he settled in with his new life as an electrical engineering student.

As the cab began to cruise through *Moledina* Road, the rains started to slow down. Apart from the usual crowd, the Pune City he once knew appeared long gone. *“Hopefully, the important things are still the same,”* he thought as he began to notice the towering buildings, new malls, almost-constructed metro rail lines, and neatly widened roads.

His destination was, at last, just a turn away. With his eyes still peering through the passenger window, he noticed a girl who was having a hard time gaining control of her umbrella with one hand while dealing with a heavy bag in the other. Suddenly, Vivaan noticed a water puddle beside her, and his mind began to process the subsequent possible outcome.

Splash!

It happened. The cab drove past the girl over the water puddle, and Vivaan turned around to hear a water splash. Anxiously, he ordered his cab driver to halt the vehicle. Then, waiting for the driver to complete the transaction, Vivaan quickly pulled out his suitcases and set them aside by the nearby steps of a closed shop.

Once done with the payment, he quickly paced towards the girl, who was now down on the ground, totally wet, covered in mud and filth.

“I’m sorry, are you all right?” he inquired as he began to pick up the fallen belongings of the girl. “Books?” he mumbled as soon as he glanced over her bags to find the reason behind their significant weight.

As the girl began to stand up on her feet, her right heel gave out on her. Impulsively, Vivaan grabbed her, curling his hands below her chest, and let go of her bags in the process. He initially wanted to reach out for her hand but instinctively felt that gaining control of her torso would be a much better option. Then, for a split second, he felt something soft touch his hands.

“Be careful; your right heel is off. Are you ok?”

But the girl suddenly pushed him away. Amidst the messed-up hair and muddy face, the only thing he could make out as she was embarrassed about something.

“What?”

“Oh boy, damn....”

“I accidentally touched her there?” he understood as his eyes began to point at her breasts to indicate the correct answer. But, then, he suddenly turned his gaze upwards and composed himself.

“I’m.....sorry, h....here,” Vivaan stammered as he handed over her bags. The girl quietly took over her bags and continued to keep her gaze down.

“Do you want any help?” he asked with some hesitation.

“No, it’s fine,” the girl timidly answered.

“Take care.” Deciding not to make her feel more uncomfortable than he already had, Vivaan turned around and walked toward his luggage.

Though drenched from head to toe, he seemed to enjoy the rain. It had been a long time since he wanted the shower like an average kid. Most of his rainy experiences in the past few years were at the football pitches. As

much as he relished taking advantage of defenders slipping up during wet weather, he would often find himself compromised to some extent. Losing his footing while dribbling, mishitting set-pieces, and, most commonly, blurred vision due to the raindrops beating down his eyelids were some of the cons of rainy football.

CAFÉ LEO

Vivaan finally reached his destination after a walk that lasted no more than a couple of minutes. The signboard had changed, but not the name. Initially, the signboard was a rectangular football goal box with the title at the center, but now the sign had a half-risen football above the letter ‘C’ and had cocktail glasses just below ‘O.’

He entered through the main door, where a dark-skinned, buffed-up bouncer blocked his path.

“Look at you, all dripping wet.” Then, in a deep, scary voice, “You better get yourself dried fast,” said the bouncer. His smile, though, ultimately went against his rough, bearded face. “You should’ve gone home first.”

“I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I’d make a quick stop and meet Ronit and Ahmad Uncle,” Vivaan chuckled.

“I’ll take that,” the bouncer replied as he picked up his luggage. “Clean yourself up in the lounge.”

“That was the plan. Thanks, David” Vivaan smiled and then began to walk past a left door with a ‘*Restricted*’ signboard. Just past the door was a passage connecting the restrooms and the kitchen, but Vivaan walked to the end and opened the door.

The lounge was a dimly-lit, cozy, private leisure place for his brother Sameer and Mr. Ahmad Khan. Vivaan was visiting the café for the second time in his life, thanks to his high school and a football career that had kept him busy in Delhi.

The lounge had everything: A flat-screen TV, a mini-bar just on the right end of the TV with some of the most high-class, aged single-malt

scotch whiskey, a few wine bottles, and a couple of vodka and tequila bottles.

A semi-circular sofa with a tea table in front of it was facing the TV. Behind the sofa set was a small window with tinted glass. From the window, Vivaan got a clear view of the bar. Adjoining that window was a cabinet filled with photo frames. Taking a closer look at one of those pictures, Vivaan saw a handsome-looking young man with sparkling brown eyes and medium hair, smiling widely with an enormous golden trophy held in his hand, which had engraved 'IMFL' on it. He looked happy and proud, but his smile made him look like an innocent child.

"Sam," he smiled while looking at that photo.

The center-most photo frame looked like Vivaan had saved best for the last. The picture comprised two guys, one Sam and the other a smiling, skinny, cute kid, around ten years of age with messed up hair but the same eyes as Sam's. Behind them was a white horse busy grazing grass around the green pastures.

Vivaan then took that photo frame in his hand and proceeded toward a mirror in the room. He looked at the skinny kid in that picture and then began to look at himself in the mirror.

"Can't believe I've changed so much."

The guy facing the mirror was an 18-year-old lad with slightly growing facial hair. He looked rugged and bulkier, his arms and torso were mostly muscles, and his hair was spiky and clean-cut. Taking one last look at the photo, Vivaan gave a nostalgic smile and kept it on the shelf. *"I'm home,"* he thought with a smile. It seemed to Vivaan that his brother smiled back from the photo for a moment. Then, finally realizing he was still soaking wet, he began changing his clothes.

After changing his clothes, he let himself out of the door to the passage. Vivaan took a quick detour to the Men's room and noticed something peculiar while returning. *"Strange, they were not here a minute ago,"* he thought, looking at the mud stains on the floor.

Vivaan exited the passage to find himself in the main bar. Dim lights surrounded him. Above was a life-like digital ceiling, capable of changing and mixing colors with the music and the vibes. Sports and music memorabilia decorated the sidewalls, with TV screens hanging around. At the center of the left wall was the bar, housing all the brands of alcohol and liquor known or available. Two bartenders were busy filling up orders. In the center space, almost all the tables were full. Couples filled some of them while others were with groups enjoying, drinking, and eating. The crowd seemed to be in the perfect groove as the DJ made the public go wild with his music. Looking at the turnout tonight, Vivaan remembered the reason behind the changed sign outside.

His elder brother Sameer had initially started the establishment as a sports bar and named it ‘Café Leo,’ inspired by his zodiac sign. But the ambiance and food quality on non-sports days began to grow amongst the crowd. As the club began to flourish, Sam thought of ‘*Widening his Clientele,*’ and it worked. With a minor transformation, he became meticulous about his food standards, ambiance, and customer satisfaction, and it has been the same ever since.

“Hey, Ronit”

Vivaan came across a good-looking, cleanly-shaved person with a slender body frame and long hair, filling up a pitcher of beer. Ronit, best friend of Sam since middle school, had been working since the start of the establishment and was the chief bartender at Café Leo.

“So, the chicken cheeseburger and fries,” asked Ronit

“Yes”

“Yes”

“*Huh?*” Vivaan turned his gaze to check on the source of the second ‘Yes.’

“*Mud and broken heel; wait a minute.....*”

It was the same girl he’d helped about half an hour ago, although she’d cleaned herself up. Her face and hair were no longer covered in mud, thus allowing Vivaan to see her face for the first time.

She had a rosy complexion. Her pinkish lips pouted upon noticing Vivaan. She raised her naturally well-shaped eyebrows and began to stare him down with her twinkling round brown eyes. She had left her thick, slightly wavy black hair open to dry. Her casual attire of jeans and a white top supplemented her well-shaped lean physique. She was a natural beauty, and Vivaan found himself lost admiring her. Unfortunately, her dress still had stains of mud on them, and she'd somehow patched up her heel for the time being.

Ronit was the first to break the ice

“Ah, all cleaned up, Trisha?”

“Yes,” Trisha replied, “Thanks, Ronit, I owe you one.”

“No big deal,” answered Ronit and smiled back. “I’ll order the ‘Special Chicken Cheese Burger and Fries’ for both of you.”

“*Both of you,*” Vivaan thought with a perplexed look. Trisha wore the same expression as Vivaan.

“Remember how I always told you that you remind me of someone who likes the same dish; this is him. Well, I better get going.”

Saying this, Ronit turned back and headed for the kitchen.

“Areyobooksok?” Vivaan asked hurriedly.

“Huh?” she gasped.

“Sorry, books. I was asking about your books,” Vivaan asked again as he calmed himself.

Trisha replied with a nod, “It’s fine.”

Vivaan blushed a bit but, at the same time, felt like he must apologize for the *other* incident that had happened while saving her from falling. But, unfortunately, he couldn’t find the right words, for he was slightly mesmerized by looking at her.

In the end, he chose to smile.

At that moment, Ronit arrived back from the kitchen, beginning to help the other bartender.

“Ronit,” Trisha squeaked.

“Yes?” asked Ronit, turning towards her.

“I’d rather have my order as a parcel. My clothes are still wet and dirty, so I’d better get home and eat them after freshening up.”

“Maybe she’s still feeling uncomfortable about what happened. But then again, her clothes are still dirty and wet. Maybe she doesn’t want to hang around looking that messed up. I mean, who would, let alone a girl? So yeah, that may be it.”

“Sure thing, I’ll have it ASAP,” Ronit replied and began walking towards the kitchen again.

As soon as Ronit left, Vivaan spoke with a mixture of nervousness and embarrassment, “You don’t have to pay for that. I mean, as an apology for before.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. “I can’t ask you to pay for a mistake that was not yours, but thanks,” she said politely and smiled back.

Vivaan spoke nothing. He pretended to sit and wait while his eyes returned to meet hers. Finally, Ronit arrived with the parcel and handed it to her. She paid the bill and thanked Ronit before returning to the exit.

“And here we are, one for you,” placing the burger and fries in front of Vivaan.

“Does she come here regularly? She seems rather around my age,” Vivaan asked at once. For some reason, he was intrigued to know more about her.

“She is,” replied Ronit. “For two years now. She came with her sister and brother-in-law once and continues to visit ever since,” he giggled.

“She comes here to enjoy the food, alone or eager to have a bite. She had grown quite fond of Sam, just seemed to open up with him,” he laughed.

“Yeah, there’s nothing new about that.”

“He’s always had a way with people, hadn’t he? They can’t seem to get enough of him,” Vivaan pouted, trying not to sound sulky.

“Still jealous?” Ronit laughed.

“No,....I mean..... I’m not jealous,” Vivaan stammered, “I just couldn’t figure out how he did it.”

“Haha, don’t worry about it. You were just a kid back then. You’ve grown now and have inherited his looks.”

“Really,” blushed Vivaan.

“You must have noticed that by now,” replied Ronit, sounding as if he’d stated an indisputable fact. Then, suddenly, his facial expression turned bleak.

“Speaking of Sameer, how are you doing?”

After Sam, Ronit was the closest person to Vivaan, so there was no way he could’ve escaped with a lie.

“Maybe now that I’m back, I shall be better than I’ve been in the past few weeks,” he replied earnestly.

“He’d be glad that you came back. It made him miserable that you had to leave Pune because of him all those years ago, yet you never complained.” Ronit continued to wear his grim expression, probably reminiscing about some memory. He then composed himself and poured soft drinks into a couple of glasses.

“Here’s a quick toast to Sam, his legacy, and a new start to your life as an IMFL player.” Ronit smiled, raising his glass high.

“To Sam,” Vivaan smiled back, raising his glass too. “I still have a year to qualify for the IMFL, you know.”

“Piece of cake for you,” Ronit beamed proudly. “So, your college starts on Monday. When are you shifting back home?”

“Just after this burger,” replied Vivaan. “Dad will be bringing Max with him tomorrow.”

“There he is,” yelled a round-faced, slightly obese, middle-aged man from behind with almost wholly bald from the front, “Enjoying the burger, are we?”

“Uncle, I thought you weren’t here,” replied Vivaan and placed his burger back on the plate.

Mr. Ahmad Khan and Vivaan’s dad, Ashish, had been friends since high school. Over the years, they even became business acquaintances. But unlike Ashish, who was constantly knee-deep in his business, Ahmad was a cheerful man who lived life to the fullest. He owned 30% of Café Leo, while the rest was Sam’s. So it was upon Ahmad’s assurance that Vivaan was allowed to return to Pune without any objections.

“Yeah, just went out for a bit,” he sighed and sat beside him. “So, when’s Ashish coming?”

“Tomorrow, he’ll be here.”

Ahmad looked at Vivaan with intrigued eyes but wore a grim smile. Ronit did the same.

“You haven’t been sleeping well. You look far too tired,” Ahmad said as both of them began to look at Vivaan with concerned eyes.

“Just the trip and rains.....” Vivaan held back his tongue, for he could see they wouldn’t buy in on his explanations.

“You don’t have to stay at that big house alone,” Ahmad continued, “There’s plenty of room at mine.”

“Thanks for everything, Uncle, but I’ll be fine,” Vivaan tried his best to keep a brave face.

“If you need anything, you have us” Ahmad smiled as he gave a pat on Vivaan’s back.

“For now, a lift,” Vivaan chuckled.

Ahmad laughed, “Finish this, and then we’ll head home.” He then turned to Ronit and handed him the car keys, “Ask one of the boys to put his luggage into the car.”

With a nod, Ronit left. Ahmad went on to take a quick look around as Vivaan resumed his dinner. It suddenly struck Vivaan that he had one more favor to ask of Ahmad.

Once done, he quickly took his leave from Café Leo and began to head home with Ahmad.

“Um, Khan Uncle,” Vivaan called out.

“Yes?”

“Would it be ok if I worked here part-time?”

“Only after college hours,” he smiled, “It’s all yours anyway. It’d be fun to have you and Max around.”



“Here we are.”

Gulmohar Apartments was a vast housing society just a ten-minute drive from the Café. Instilled with all the modern facilities, Vivaan was gazing at the entirety of the community for the first time. Ahmad parked the car in D-Wing and began to unbuckle his seatbelt.

“It’s fine, uncle. I’ll take it for here,” Vivaan responded while he was already out of the car. He quickly pulled out his luggage and greeted Ahmad as he drove away.

Vivaan made his way to the 25th floor, unlocked the door, pulled himself and his luggage in, locked the door behind him, and fell on the sofa in the living room.

For the first time in more than a month, Vivaan felt genuinely happy. Even though he was back in his hometown, the sense of gearing up for a

new start made Vivaan feel content.

Now that he was happy to be back, he noticed his tiredness. Too tired to even move his eyelids, Vivaan fell asleep on the sofa within minutes.



CHAPTER 2

A NEW START

“Why haven’t I ever seen you play football?” Sam asked Vivaan with a mixed look of disbelief and awe.

Vivaan had just finished playing football, scoring a brace against the kids of his new neighborhood when he noticed that Sam had been watching his game from a secluded spot the whole time.

Vivaan had difficulty answering Sam’s question as he felt a bit embarrassed, but it also proved impossible for him to think of a convincing lie.

“I don’t know……. I felt maybe I’m just embarrassing compared to you,” Vivaan bashfully replied with his gaze fixed on the ground.

Sam joyfully laughed as he pulled Vivaan closer. He then began to walk towards a nearby bench. Sam sat down, but Vivaan chose to stand.

“I laughed because that was a stupid reason. You are pretty good,” Sam chuckled, but his expression soon contorted to a serious one, “Tell me, do you like playing football?”

“I love it, but……” Vivaan halted midway and began to fidget nervously.

“Sit,” Sam smiled and made Vivaan sit by his side. “Now, tell me, what’s your target?”

“I want to learn before I start to play,” Vivaan replied readily. “I mean, professionally.”

The happiness was visible on Sam’s face, “Professionally, huh? Do you want me to train you?”

“You would?” Vivaan looked utterly startled.

“To be honest, I always felt that you never were interested in football” Sam chuckled and gave a pat on Vivaan’s back. He took off his sweater and his hand gloves. He then began to tighten his shoes and roll up his shirt sleeves. Vivaan looked confused.

“Let’s see what you got” Sam smiled as he began to stretch himself. “Dribble past me, score a goal, and I will train you.”

“But your health.....”

“I’m excellent, bro,” Sam laughed. “This is the first real action I’m about to get in months. So, are you getting up or not?”

Vivaan quickly got up with a determined look in his eyes. Vivaan looked so focused that it made Sam smile serenely.

“You start,” he passed the ball to Vivaan.

Vivaan couldn’t understand the feelings that had begun to ignite inside him. He was nervous knowing whom he was up against, excited because his brother, one of the best strikers ever to grace the IFA and IMFL, had proposed to train him and on-guard to keep his eyes steady on Sam’s movements.

While taking the run toward Sam with possession of the ball, Vivaan figured out how he would outsmart his brother. He quickly began to change his course to the left, however,

Even before he could blink, he lost possession, and Sam played with the ball. He then passed the ball back to Vivaan and began to patiently for his next move with a smile on his face.

Vivaan looked dumbstruck. He still was trying to process when and how Sam managed to gain possession of the ball.

“All right, full speed now,” he thought and began to charge at Sam at a comparatively fast pace. He noticed a gap between Sam’s legs and decided to go for nutmeg, but Sam intercepted the ball with ridiculous speed before he could try that.

“How does he do that so fast?” Vivaan was fuming as Sam passed the ball back to him again.

And so it went on: Sam thwarted every attempt that Vivaan tried to make past him, but this didn't stop him from trying again. Even the tiniest of success would've meant immortality to Vivaan, and that sole reason led him to discover an energy reserve he never knew had it in him.

In time, his legs began to feel as if they were jelly. His heart and lungs began to cry for a pause, and his brain made him scratch his head in confusion. But there were two things he had figured out: First, Sam wasn't even trying to break a sweat, and second, Vivaan wasn't even close to catching up with the likes of him, let alone Sam himself.

“Ok, I've seen enough,” Sam said with the happiest of smiles as he scooped up the ball in his hands. “We train from Monday.”

“I don't.....understand,” Vivaan gasped in a confused tone. He was trying to catch his breath.

“For the first time in life, you've shown signs of our family's primary trait,” Sam beamed. “I had started to believe that you don't have it in you, that you were different.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Persistence, Vivaan, that's all I was looking for, and I found it” Sam rubbed Vivaan's hair and then placed his right arm around his shoulders. “Leave the rest to me.”



Vivaan woke up to notice that it was still 7.15 am on the clock. Realizing that he had slept for nearly ten hours for the first time in years, Vivaan felt much more energetic than he had been over the past few weeks. Vivaan decided to act on this momentum and finish settling in quickly. He unpacked his luggage and began to set them accordingly.

His new home was a penthouse on the 25th floor of D-Wing. The last he visited this house was over three years ago. Back then, it was still a work in progress. First, he witnessed a fully furnished living room. An L-shaped sofa was touching the left wall facing the Smart TV connected to a home theatre system. On one side of the rightmost corner of the room was a dining table, and on the other was a desk with an iMac. Various portraits were mounted on the walls, along with a large one of Vivaan's entire family when he was just a three-year-old. The showcase housed many showpieces along with numerous photos of Sam and Vivaan.

The main bedroom had a massive four-door wardrobe on the wall. To the adjacent wall was a king-sized recliner-cum-bed. There was a balcony joining the main bedroom.

The second bedroom was similarly furnished room like the main bedroom. The smallest room was a gaming room with a TV connected to a PS5, and just beside the TV was a shelf that housed various game CDs.

On the floor above was a well-equipped gym with everything Vivaan could need for his training: a treadmill, an exercise bike, an angled-leg press machine, a power squat rack cage, a couple of mats, a considerable selection of dumbbells and weight plates set around the left corner.

With still two more hours to go, Vivaan switched on the TV and began watching a show about the latest transfer activities in which football pundits were going. Monitoring the amount of money paid for the top transfers, Vivaan began to imagine a time when the biggest footballing clubs in the world would bid for him. Even with recent examples of Indian footballers who made it in the big leagues in Europe, Vivaan realized long ago that he had to work infinitely more to earn his place amongst the best in the world.

Ashish had even proposed to use his contacts in London and secure a place in one of the Premier League-based clubs' youth academies, but Sam intervened, stating that the best chance of Vivaan being a success was through IMFL. However, even Vivaan wasn't excited by the offer because he wanted to earn the opportunities.

Even though IMFL was new, major clubs began to take notice of the players who prevailed in this football format. Recent studies favored IMFL

footballers to be more disciplined, focused, and better team players. Even the top European leagues had begun to train their youth players for the IMFLs.

Still engrossed in watching TV, Vivaan's focus broke after hearing the doorbell and a familiar bark.

Vivaan paced in excitement, opened the door, and found a German shepherd wagging his tail excitedly. Noticing Vivaan in front of him, the German shepherd jumped on him and forced Vivaan to sit down on the floor.

"There's my Max" Vivaan grabbed Max in his arms while he was busy licking his face and wagging his tail.

"That tickles," Vivaan chuckled, "I missed you too, boy."

"Woof, woof."

Max was Sam's 3-year-old pet German shepherd. Max was just a month-old pup when Sam first brought him home. Max was a brilliant dog, even for its breed. But, at the same time, he was pretty rebellious during its infancy. Sam was the only one who could tame Max but never once yelled at him. "That's just puberty" he would laugh it off and then continue to pet Max.

As Max grew older and wiser, Sam trained him to be Vivaan's 'Coach.' Max would meticulously watch over Vivaan's training regime and wouldn't let him rest until Vivaan finished his routine for the day. Running with him during early morning jogs proved to be quite beneficial for Max as well. During those months, Max and Vivaan became close as a tag team rather than a master and a pet.

When Sam chose to return to Pune and start Café Leo, he took Max along with him, for his dad and Vivaan were too busy with their own lives to look after Max. So after Sam and Mr. Khan, Max was the second-in-command. Vivaan had heard that he had his spot where he'd supervise every employee and happenings around the bar.

"The more we came closer, the more his tail wagged," laughed Ashish as he pulled two large suitcases inside.

“Going somewhere?” Vivaan asked after noticing his dad in a corporate suit.

“Just some duty calls. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.” With this, Ashish pulled the door behind him while Vivaan sighed.

Vivaan turned back to notice that Max was already heading towards his rug set under the stairs that led to the gym room. With Max resting, Vivaan finished arranging all the stuff from the two large suitcases Ashish had brought. Even though cleaning up and tidiness weren’t Vivaan’s forte, he had a knack for finishing a task he dreaded as soon as possible to stop wasting time on procrastination.

Sensing that Vivaan would be in no mood for cooking today, Ashish had already arrived with food. So they quietly had their lunch, and Ashish attended some business calls while Vivaan began to wash the dishes.

“Pradeep has refilled the rations” Ashish entered the kitchen. “Wasn’t that hard for him; it’s almost the same as Sam’s menu. Still, you can visit stores outside our society if you need anything. We have a sedan and a moped parked in basement 1 with our flat number above the area. Use them with care and as per your convenience. Pradeep will clean them and the house after you leave for school. He has another key to the house. Every requirement for your college is in your wardrobe.”

“Thanks, dad,” Vivaan smiled back.

“If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to call me, ok?”

“Don’t worry, dad. I can handle myself.” But Vivaan realized Ashish wasn’t looking at him anymore. Instead, he kept staring at the photo frame hanging just behind the left wall.

“If only they were here to look after you,” Ashish spoke mournfully.

Vivaan was just four when he lost his mom. He couldn’t remember much about her. Sam, who was seven years older than him, told some of the things he knew. When Max was too much to control, he would laugh and say, “You were just the same as a kid. Our mom would have a hard time getting you to stay put.”

“Ahmad has asked for you to reconsider his proposal to stay with him” Ashish looked at Vivaan expectantly.

“It’s not like I’m gonna throw a party every other night and become some reckless brat,” Vivaan sighed, “I am responsible. Before coming here, I lived alone in Delhi for the past two years.”

Ashish’s face fell, but he quickly composed himself and smiled, “Vivaan, I’ll get going now. I’ve got to reach Mumbai by night.”

“Huh, y.....yeah, ok, dad. Thanks for everything. I’ll call you if I need anything.” Vivaan replied and began to follow his father to the entrance.

“Max, where are you, boy?”

As soon as he heard his name, Max came running from the bedroom and stood right in front of Ashish.

“Take care of the house and Vivaan for me. Be a good boy now, ok?”

Max quickly understood that Ashish was about to leave, for he stopped wagging his tail and began to moan.

“Don’t worry, Max,” he went down on his knees and started to pet him. “I’ll come to meet you regularly, ok? You have Vivaan here with you. You’ll look after him, won’t you?”

Max gave out an obedient bark in reply. Ashish then stood up and faced Vivaan.

“Take care of him. You can leave him at Leo’s on your way to school. They know how to take care of him. Mr. Khan has kept two bags of dog food in the lounge. Just brush his fur and make him have a bath every two weeks. He’s a smart dog. Also, take him to the vet for his bi-monthly check-ups. I’ll text you the contact details later.”

“Sure, dad, I’ll look after him,” replied Vivaan earnestly.

“Well then, goodbye, son. Enjoy and take care of your health. And call me regularly.”

With these words, he left.

“So, it’s just you and me, buddy,” Vivaan said, still staring at the elevator door.

After settling in his new home, Vivaan fell on the beanbag in the gaming room and switched on the PS5 and TV in hopes of playing FIFA 24. But, just when he was about to start his game, Max barged into the room and settled his paw on the window.

“You wanna go out?”

“*Woof!*”

“*Humph,*” Vivaan sighed and smiled at Max, “If only I could make your paws handle a joystick. You win, boy. Let’s go, and we might as well take a stroll in our new neighborhood.”

Max began to wag his tail excitedly and hurried towards the door. Vivaan went to his room, changed his shirt, and made his way to the living room. He checked his pockets for his mobile, wallet, and keys and then closed the door behind him.

The society was quite enormous and spacious. The kids were playing around with some adults looking after them. Some were relaxing on the benches, and some were taking a stroll. The pathway housed many trees on both sides. A cool breeze flowed throughout the society, and unexpectedly, Vivaan began to enjoy himself.

On the other hand, Max was continuously running, probably to find someone familiar. Sam, never in his life, kept Max on a leash because he never needed one.

They were now in front of the clubhouse. “Hey Max, long time no see,” said a security guard, patting and rubbing Max.

“Never seen you here before. Are you a relative of Sameer?” he asked

“Yes, I’m his brother. I’ve just shifted here,” answered Vivaan.

“Ah, I see. Well, take the tour. But, Max, keep off the swimming pool.” Saying this, the guard let them both inside.

The clubhouse was quite vast. The ground floor had a swimming pool, alongside two enclosed rooms for table tennis and a pool each. Few middle-aged people filled the first-floor room, enjoying carom. On the other side of the room were a library and a reading room where people were filling up the reading chairs and enjoying their reading. The top floor housed a fully furnished, state-of-the-art gym with all facilities both a beginner and a pro could enjoy. For a moment, Vivaan did imagine coming here for his daily exercises only to check out the girls. But then again, he was used to working out with Max on watch and had his gym at his penthouse.

Adjacent to the clubhouse was a tennis court where four kids played badminton doubles. Behind the club seemed to be an enormous two-storeyed place with its well-maintained lawns. *“Probably used for parties and functions,”* he thought.

With no room for scouting within the society, Vivaan chose to head outwards and take a quick look at the neighborhood. Max had now restricted his movements only to walking alongside Vivaan on the pavement. *“Smart dog,”* he thought and again began to ponder over Max’s intellect. German shepherds generally were top-class breeds and highly intellectual, yet Max stood out in comparison. Even though he was just a 3-year-old dog, he could do many things and amazed people. It could have been because of Sam’s upbringing, or maybe Max was an intelligent dog from birth or both.

“Well, I just had a burger yesterday. What do you think, boy? Should I buy a pizza for tonight?” asked Vivaan, stopping outside a pizza joint.

“Woof, woof. Grrr....”

“Come on, don’t be like that; just one last bite. I’m resuming my regime from tomorrow. So just let me enjoy one last time.”

“Woof,” barked Max, with a strange look, probably indicating that he didn’t believe Vivaan would keep his word.

“Thank You!” replied Vivaan sarcastically.



After a well-enjoyed dinner, Vivaan put the utensils into the dishwasher and pushed the button. While waiting for the dishes to wash, Max came in with his water bowl between his jaws.

“I didn’t forget, you know,” Vivaan pouted.

It was routine to fill up Max’s bowl with fresh water before sleep in case he needed a quick sip during the night.

“*Woof, Woof,*” came out a muffled bark because of the bowl between his jaws. He then placed the bowl in Vivaan’s hands.

Vivaan filled the bowl with fresh water, went to the living room, and put the bowl just aside from Max’s sleeping rug. “Well, goodnight, Max. We’ll start tomorrow at 5 a.m.,” said Vivaan while patting his head. Max replied with a *woof* and began to get comfortable on his rug.

Vivaan finished settling everything in the kitchen, went to his room, and fell on the bed. He, however, found himself too excited to sleep. Even though he was back in his hometown, he felt he was in a new place. However, the anticipation of tomorrow made him change his sleeping position. Tomorrow marked a fresh start in his life. He had trained every day and patiently waited for six years to be eligible to participate in the Indian Football Association League. Still a month away from the actual competition, Vivaan was bound to meet his new teammates tomorrow, and the Pune City Football Club Captain Sayali Gawade, whom he had faced in the Under-18 Football National Championships two years ago. Eventually, his thoughts gave way to his weary body, and before he knew it, he was in dreamland.



Vivaan woke up to a loud ‘beep’ sound from his mobile phone. He picked up his mobile, switched off the alarm, got up, and entered his bathroom. A few seconds later, he heard a loud *Woof* outside his door.

“Yeah, buddy, I’m awake. I’ll be there in 10 minutes.” Vivaan gave a quick reply.

Before starting any cardio or weight training exercises, Vivaan led a two-hour running schedule with weight plates tied to his legs and the midriff area of his torso. Since this was the first actual exercise he was about to do in two weeks, he chose to keep the intensity low and started with 1 kg plates each. After that, it was his routine to gradually increase the weight plates to 3 kgs each every Friday.

Amidst this grueling run, Max was the key to Vivaan’s successful completion. Besides Max’s tinkle or poop break, Max never allowed Vivaan to rest as he continually pushed him with his rough barks.

After a fruitful two-hour run, Vivaan hit the gym. Today, Vivaan focused on regular cardio exercises while Max chose to sit quietly in a corner, for he had not much work to do when it came to Vivaan doing cardio. Instead, Max would push him with his barks during weight training exercises. If Max got too bored, it was in his nature to stand on the treadmill mat and wait until Vivaan was too free to switch it on. The same happened even today.

With just two hours left for his first day of college, Vivaan brushed Max’s fur while taking regular sips of his protein shake. He had packed his essentials and football gear last night. Vivaan found it amusing to brush Max’s hair, for it was the only time Max wouldn’t move a muscle, close his eyes and wear a peculiar expression on his face as if he was in some trance.

With the caretaker, Pradeep, scheduled to clean the house later, Vivaan took a quick shower and got ready in his school uniform. “*Quite fancy for a college uniform,*” he chuckled as he began to look in the mirror at himself, wearing blue pants, a white shirt, and a dark blue coat over it bearing the logo of Francis International. The jacket was voluntary, for there were bound to be days ahead when it would make a person sweat from head to toe. But, since it was his first day at Francis International, Vivaan chose to wear it. Oblivious to whether the school might have proper food in its cafeteria, Vivaan began to prep some lunch for himself and passed Max a bowl full of dog food. As Max chugged down, Vivaan hurriedly pushed a couple of toasts and two boiled eggs down his throat.

“Come on, Max. I want to check out the campus before the lectures start,” he gasped as he ran to and fro, collecting his moped keys, house keys, bag, and football bag.

“Are you ready, boy?”

“*Woof*”



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