



ACCIDENTAL
PROPOSAL

SHOBANA MAHADEVAN

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Evergreen Event Management Company

“Hello, good morning. This is Jhanvi here from the Evergreen Event Management company. How may I help you today?”

“Err... Can I talk to Naina please?” said the voice on the other end of the phone.

“Sure. Please stay on the line, Sir.”

Jhanvi placed the call on hold and screamed, “Naina! It is that idiot boyfriend of yours. Can’t you both use cell phones like normal people?”

“My phone died. I’ve kept it on charge,” replied Naina, as she came over.

“God! The first call in the morning! What a waste of energy,” complained Jhanvi.

“Janu, let others attend calls. You own this company, remember? Or at least shorten your goddamn message. It is so long. People fall asleep by the time you finish.”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes as she handed the phone to Naina.

“Hi Navit,” greeted Naina into the phone. “Sorry for the delay. It’s my boss. She does not have a social life and just does not like any of us having one too...”

Jhanvi threw up her hands in despair and stepped away from her cubicle.

Jhanvi Vasugi was of a medium height and build. But her beautiful curves more than compensated for her medium height. She wore her hair short and styled it to fall in neat layers. She always wore a slim, plain gold nose ring that somehow seemed to make her face a lot more attractive. Her oval face, sharp nose and full lips added elegance to her beauty.

What enhanced her beauty all the more, though, was her smile. When she smiled, her wide eyes always seemed to light

up with joy and her cute dimples made a special appearance. It worked for her that her attractive smile was quite a precious possession in her line of work. The joy and sincerity in her smile made people warm up to her quite quickly and easily. And that had always worked hugely in her favour. Her smiles made her a face that could be easily trusted.

Her eyes scanned the large hall as she waited for Naina to finish her call. There were a total of ten cubicles, although only eight of them were presently occupied. However, she did not worry about the extra cubicles going to a waste. A seven-member team was good enough to maintain and execute the workload for the volume of orders that the company was getting. There was a large conference room at the end of the hall where she held all her team meetings. She could have occupied that room but that would have cut her off from the rest of the team. She preferred to occupy a cubicle along with them and to be right in the middle of the action. Further, she did not believe in a divide between the team and herself. The conference room, therefore, was dedicated for meetings, brainstorming sessions, client meetings and their daily stand-ups.

Jhanvi smiled. Yes, she did own this company. An elation swept through her, as it always did when she stopped to think about her company. She was so proud of what she had created and of what she was doing. It was a job that she loved to do. She enjoyed it despite the huge demand that it made on her time and energy. She thought of it like a big, fun, happy ride.

Naina walked towards her. Naina was short and had curly hair. She was fair and her eyes constantly sparkled with mischief, which she claimed was just pure energy and nothing else. Naina was Jhanvi's classmate from college. When Jhanvi had floated the idea of starting an event management company, Naina had been only too happy to join her friend.

“Done with the call. Ready for the stand up?” asked Naina.

Jhanvi glared at her and mumbled. “I do have a social life.”

Naina grinned. “Oh, come on! Don't tell jokes and make me laugh so early in the morning.”

Jhanvi hit Naina playfully on her stomach before proceeding to the conference room. Jhanvi met her seven-member team for a brief stand-up meeting every working day. They started the day with a list of things that each of them was going to accomplish for the day and a status of their tasks from the previous day. That way, everyone was on the same page. Further, it was just much easier to track everything this way.

As the team filled into the meeting room, a helper brought in a tray with coffee and biscuits that usually accompanied the stand-up meetings. Everyone slowly started to settle down in their seats and helped themselves to coffee and biscuits.

Naina took a Britannia biscuit and dipped it into her coffee as she asked, “Janu, what happened to that girl who called the other day? Avantika, right?”

“Yeah. That is still in the enquiry phase. I have asked her to choose between Seaside Creek and Crystal Blue Ocean. Let’s see.”

“It is for a wedding?” asked Naina as she made a neat maneuverer to drop the coffee-soaked biscuit into her mouth.

“No. Only the reception. Avantika is throwing a wedding reception for her elder sister. I think the bride’s name is Anusha or Anisha...” Jhanvi frowned. “Something like that... But the reception is Avantika’s gift to her sister.”

Jhanvi opened her laptop. She opened the project management tool that the team used to track all the activities. Each event that they were currently handling was a separate project. For each project, they had numerous subdivisions like space, catering, communication, decorations etc. And inside each subdivision, there was a list of tasks that needed to be done, the person each of the tasks was assigned to and the due date.

The team started with their updates.

“Did you check with Rehana and Vijay? Are they aligned on the wedding customs?” asked Jhanvi, referring to one of the couples who were their clients.

“Yeah. I went over the entire list of customs and got it approved from both sides. I hired a *poojari* from their community for the wedding. He’ll bring all the necessary items for the *pooja*. However, there are a few things that he needs from us—like bricks and sand for the *homam* etc. That is a no brainer. I will take care of it.”

“Okay, make sure not a single item on that list gets missed.”

“Sure.”

Jhanvi updated the status for that task and moved on to the next.

“What about the invitation samples?”

“They have selected one. I have sent it for printing.”

“Did you print a sample and run it through them? I don’t want to print a thousand copies and then discover that a name has been misspelt.”

“They have verified the sample,” replied her teammate, nodding.

Several more finer points were discussed for Rehana’s wedding. People picked up new tasks and assigned dates. The completed tasks were checked off the list. Though Naina was in charge of the overall project, a number of her teammates were aiding her in various subdivisions of the project.

“Good. What about Janani’s wedding pictures? Did you post it on our social media?” asked Jhanvi.

“I am just finishing the editing of the video. I will upload it today.”

“Great. Remember to tag everyone and thank all the contributors.”

“Sure.”

“After you post the video, we can officially close that project. Team, you did an amazing job! Janani was more than happy. I think we all deserve a round of applause for that.”

Everyone looked around the room at everyone else, beamed and applauded themselves. Though it might seem like an

unnecessary thing to do to an outsider, applauding themselves made them feel good. It made them realize that they had worked as a team and made someone's special day even more special. This act of applauding themselves as a group also helped foster team spirit and was much better than being applauded individually.

“Great. Moving on to the next project. Athul's retirement party. Who is looking at the catering for this one?”

The discussion progressed. They thrashed out all the miscommunication and updated their tasks list. The task list that they had was almost like a sacred thing. The team worked hard every day to maintain it but they knew that it could never ever be completely ticked off. It was a never-ending list. A list that existed perpetually.

But it was a list that they loved. Because the list provided joy to so many people and took away their clients' stress during a significant time in their lives. It made lives so much easier for other people. The team always worked with this big picture in their minds.



It was evening. The sun was just setting. Jhanvi was standing with Avantika in the lawn of Seaside Creek, looking at the now barren stage. The lawn was at the edge of the resort running parallel to the backwaters.

Oars splashed against the water as a boat docked on the backwaters nearby. Birds chirped as they flew across the blue sky. A cat meowed and hid itself behind a bush near them.

“This could be the venue for the wedding reception,” declared Jhanvi, looking at the stage. She then turned to look at Avantika.

Avantika was frowning slightly as if she was not convinced. She was so tall that she towered over Jhanvi. Avantika was curvy and looked drop-dead gorgeous in the simple white t-shirt and skinny dark blue jeans that she was wearing. Her hair was swept to one side where it fell in beautiful, deep curls. Large hoops adorned her ears. Her makeup was so perfect that

she looked like a painting than a real person. It was no wonder that she was a highly successful model.

Avantika looked intimidating at first glance. But that intimidation lasted only till she smiled. When she smiled, it was so warm that it put everyone at ease. It sure put Jhanvi at ease.

“Are you sure this place can accommodate 150 people?”

Jhanvi nodded. “It only looks small. We have conducted receptions here and have accommodated up to 300 guests.”

“300!” exclaimed Avantika. “That’s hard to believe.”

“If we put chairs on the lawn, you will get a better perspective of the space. Let me pass on some photos of the past events to you.”

“Okay,” nodded Avantika, still looking unsure.

After a minute, she continued, “I really love this area though. It is perfect. On one side are the backwaters and on the other side is the swimming pool and the dining area. It looks lovely. But I think Anisha would prefer an indoor wedding.”

“Oh really? They have an indoor hall too. Come, I’ll show that to you.”

Avantika nodded and followed Jhanvi inside the resort through a long corridor.

Jhanvi was a little disappointed that Avantika would choose to go with an indoor hall when they could have an absolutely amazing set up outside. She looked at Avantika and tried, once again, to sell it to her. “I showed you the outdoors first because I thought you would like an outdoor wedding. The views around this resort are perfect. The bride and the groom can arrive in a boat for the reception. We can have a lot of floaters on the water. The walk from the boat to the stage will be beautifully decorated with lights and exotic flowers. It could look very magical.”

Avantika looked a bit dreamy as she conjured up the images that Jhanvi was drawing up for her. “Aww! That does sound magical. I wish I could have a... I mean, I will check with

Anisha and get back to you. I will send her the photos and the videos of this resort. If you have photos of previous weddings where the bride and groom arrive in a boat, can you please share those, too?”

Jhanvi nodded. “Sure.” Then, she asked, “Did I hear a hesitation? Are you next to get married?”

Avantika flushed. “Well...ha ha. You are very keen,” she said and shook her head. Her hair danced beautifully as she shook her head. “Actually...I...I am seeing someone.”

Jhanvi laughed. “Do you have a date set?”

“No, no,” exclaimed Avantika, her eyes widening as she shook her head. “Not even an engagement. Or a solid commitment. But...you never know, do you?”

“Yeah... Who is the lucky guy?”

“Hey! I wanted to ask you about that. Can I come again tomorrow with my boyfriend? I would like to show him this setting.”

Jhanvi nodded. “Yeah, yeah. Sure. Any number of times as you want.”

“Great. I will introduce you to him then. I can’t wait to show him this setting. It is so lovely.”

Jhanvi nodded. “I agree. And only if you see it in person can you feel the entire environment and the energy it exudes.”

Avantika nodded. Then, after a few moments, Avantika said, “Look, he has not yet committed to me. I am just thinking he might propose. Or he might not. We never know. So...don’t say anything in front of him, please.”

Jhanvi put her forefinger and her thumb together and drew them across her lips. “My lips are sealed.”

Avantika shrugged. “I am running way ahead. I am not even engaged or anything.”

“But you are hoping?”

Avantika laughed. “We are all always hoping, aren’t we?”

Jhanvi laughed too. “Yes. I guess we all are. Almost all the time.”

“Yeah. Fingers crossed.”

“I wish you the very best.”

“Thank you. I wish you the same.”

The girls smiled at one another.

“Where is Anisha, by the way?”

“She is working in Germany, currently. And she is getting married to a German. Daniel Schmidt.”

“Oh, really? That’s nice.”

“Yeah. She is planning to get married there. This reception is only for friends and family in India.”

“How sweet! Was there any opposition in your family to her marrying a German?” asked Jhanvi. She was too curious to not ask.

“Not one bit. I think we have all progressed as a society. To tell you the truth, we were absolutely shocked that our family accepted without much drama. I guess we are finding it hard to believe that we have progressed.”

“Well, it’s finally up to the people who are getting married. The opinions of others just do not matter. But still, it is always nice to do get married with everyone’s blessings.”

Avantika nodded. “Exactly. That is why this wedding reception.”

“Don’t worry. We will rock this event. We will put the ‘fun’ in function.”

“Yeah!! Party!!” shouted Avantika, throwing up her arms.

The girls laughed.

∞

Later that day, Jhanvi sighed deeply as she sat in her chair. It had been a long and exhausting day. Being an event manager was no piece of cake. After her meeting with

Avantika, she had to visit another resort where a wedding reception was to be held in the next two days. With limited budget, she had to make do with what she had. She had taken the iron rods that were available at the resort (which was constructing a new wing) and had them twisted to provide for a decorative light tunnel. It had worked out very well, and the client had been very pleased. But her workforce had not been. Bending iron rods was a tall order, especially because they had to twist them back to their original shape and return the rods to the resort. Jhanvi made a mental note to compensate her team for the extra workload.

She then spent the rest of the day working on the logistics with the resort manager and the transportation department at the resort. If she wanted to give a stress-free day to her clients, she had to sweat and figure out every little detail. Later, she barely made it back to her office in the evening to finish off a few calls and a last-minute budget change. It had indeed turned out to be a very long day.

Jhanvi switched off her laptop and looked at the clock in her office. It was ten o'clock in the night when she heard her stomach grumble. It was then that she wondered when she'd eaten last. After lunch, she had not had a bite. No wonder she was that hungry. What an idiot she was! She made a mental note to at least drink a juice the next time she was so swamped with work. Then, with a sigh, she realized that the next day with such a hectic schedule was probably the very next day as she was swamped with work every single day. She did not even have the luxury of taking Sundays off. In fact, there was no fixed time or day that she could take off. The biggest con of being an event manager was that she had to be available 24x7.

She picked up her bike keys and handbag. She closed her office and started home. One of the major benefits of having her own event management company was that not only was the work so very interesting, but she also made a decent amount of money. She smiled as she started her bike. Plus, the work was so fulfilling. Making someone's dream come true was not something just about anyone could do. But she could. And Jhanvi considered that a huge privilege.

She was just half a kilometre away from her apartment when her bike spluttered and came to a complete halt. She checked the fuel tank. It was empty. She cursed loudly. She was hungry and exhausted. Now was not the time for the bike to break down. And there was not a single petrol bunk on the rest of the way home. She cursed again.

She started to push her bike. Despite being one of the best event managers, she always spectacularly fell short when it came to arranging her own life and prioritizing her own health. She groaned as the thought entered her mind.

Jhanvi, don't beat yourself up! It happens to everyone. It is just half a kilometre to home. Thank your lucky stars it is not more.

Jhanvi turned into a deserted street. On catching sight of two drunk men on the side of the road, her heart hammered against her ribcage.

Everything is fine. Everything is fine. Keep walking and don't look at them.

She was almost near them when they caught sight of her. Or maybe they just sensed her fear. They started to catcall.

She ignored them and pushed her bike past them. They started to follow her, staggering.

"Need help?"

"We can push your bike."

"We can carry you too."

And then they both broke into loud guffaws.

Even with their staggering gait, they were able to keep up with Jhanvi pushing her bike. She gritted her teeth and reminded herself that her house was only two hundred meters away. She concentrated on pushing her bike.

"Need a place to stay?"

Again laughter.

She heard a bike coming up behind her. She quickened her pace. The bike started to slow down next to her.

Ignore them. Ignore them. They are not worth it.

She quickened her pace.

“Do you need any help?” asked the rider.

Anger was quick to raise its head. She glared at the person and was about to ask the stranger to mind his own business. But the words died on her lips when she saw the man’s face illuminated by a streetlight.

Jhanvi’s jaw dropped slightly as she stopped walking and just stared at him.

There was no doubt. It was him. *Him!* The eight years since she had last seen him had changed him a lot. He looked more muscular. His face was a bit broader. A neatly trimmed and styled beard accentuated his sharp jawline. His hair was styled in a quiff and was finger combed and messy. It made his broad forehead look even more so. But the one thing that remained unchanged were his eyes. They were the same intense eyes that perpetually seemed to radiate kindness.

“Vicky!” exclaimed Jhanvi.

She had dreamed about this exact moment a thousand times in her mind. She had believed that when she met him again, the earth would open up or it would start raining or at the very least, she had anticipated thunder and lightning. But nothing happened. All was quiet and normal. How strange!

Vicky’s eyes widened as recognition dawned on him too. He stopped his bike.

“Jhanvi?”

Jhanvi nodded. “You are here? How are you?”

Vicky smiled. “I am fine. I just moved back to India three months back.”

“Are you staying here in Chennai?”

“Yes. I was staying near that Shiva temple nearby...”

Jhanvi could not believe her ears. “Oh my God! I stay in Ashok Colony. That is just a kilometre away from the Shiva temple!”

She had been staying in the same neighbourhood as him for three whole months. Every time she opened her Facebook or Instagram account, she searched for him. Every time she met Niro, she hoped for some update on Vicky because she knew Niro was still in touch with Rathi. But she had been disappointed every single time. And all this time, he was right there! Right in her neighbourhood and within walking distance! How strange!

“Oh, really?” asked Vicky, surprised. “But I moved from here recently. I don’t stay here anymore.”

By then, the two drunk guys had stopped following her and had retreated. The helpless girl pushing the bike had help. It was no longer fun to taunt her. And so, they had moved on looking for new entertainment.

Vicky suggested, “Do one thing. Park your bike there. I will give you a ride back home. I will walk back and get your bike for you after that.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “No, no. It’s fine. No need to go through so much trouble.”

Vicky looked pointedly at the drunk guys who were still there at the end of the street. He tilted his head to one side and said, “I think it is safer.”

Jhanvi smiled in agreement. Then, she reluctantly nodded and parked her bike by the side of the road.

She turned to face Vicky. A thrill passed through her as she caught sight of Vicky starting his bike and waiting for her. She was going to ride with Vicky! She bit her lips to quell the intense excitement that was building inside her. She was going to ride with Vicky!

She looked away to make sure Vicky did not catch the expression on her face and alighted the bike. The bike was huge and muscular. What bike was that? She had never seen a bike like that before.

But before she could ask, the bike started with a jerk. Jhanvi caught Vicky’s shoulder for support and forgot all about the bike.

Jhanvi's heart rate accelerated. It had been more than eight years since she last saw Vicky. After the day, when she met Rathi, Vicky and Niro, she had not once laid eyes on Vicky. He had just disappeared from her life. Not that she could blame him after what she did to him.

The incidents when she was in her eleventh grade had left a deep impression on her. She could not forget about Vicky. He had been a part of her life for a only few days, but he had created a huge impact. It had taken her days for her to forget about the incident and move on. And it had taken quite a few years for her to forgive herself and forget about him. It had not been an easy task. Even now, she could not think about those incidents without an overwhelming feeling of guilt and shame.

And suddenly, out of the blue, Vicky was back. She was holding on to him. It was true. It was not a dream. She could feel the hard muscles of her shoulder under her palm. It was happening. She was not dreaming.

When she had gotten up that morning, never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined running into him. And never would she have anticipated that he would talk civilly to her.

But not only was he civil, he was helping her too. But why? Why was he helping her after all that she had done to him? Guilt and shame reared their heads once again in her heart. Was he really back in her life?

In a few minutes, they arrived at her apartment. Vicky dropped her, parked his bike and walked back to get hers.

She sat on one of the benches in her apartment complex and waited. There were a million questions shooting through her mind. Was he really back in her life? What was he doing now? Did he get in touch with Rathi later? Were they back together? Did he have a girlfriend? Had he forgotten about Jhanvi? And more importantly, had he forgiven her for what she had done to him?

As she thought back on those embarrassing incidents of the past, she realized that she could not sit still. She got up and paced around near the bench, waiting for him. She was yet to

get his verdict for her faults. And she hoped desperately that he would have forgiven her.

She thought about that day eight years back. Yikes! Her cheeks burned as she recollected the incident.

Vicky was back with her bike. He parked her vehicle and handed over the keys.

“Thank you very much, Vicky.”

“No problem, kid!”

Jhanvi flushed. He remembered! Thank God, he remembered!

“By the way, nice nose ring,” he remarked, flashing her a smile. Her heart summersaulted. She suddenly recollected what it was about him that had so attracted her to him eight years ago. It was his smile. And his smile was still doing its magic on her. His wonderful smile. His crowning attraction...

“Yeah...” Jhanvi flushed at the compliment.

He said, “See you around then.”

Jhanvi nodded. She did not dare ask for his number or propose to meet him again. Her guilt was standing like a huge mountain between them.

She was about to turn and walk away when he called out, “Hey, kid, can we catch up sometime?”

Jhanvi looked back at him, perplexed. *Really? He wanted to catch up with her? Was she dreaming?*

Vicky seemed to sense her thoughts. He rushed to clarify. “If you meet someone from your childhood days, you catch up. Isn’t that the right thing to do?”

Jhanvi blurted out, “We did not end on good terms.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she groaned inwardly. Did she really have to voluntarily remind him of the past?

Vicky frowned. “We didn’t?”

Jhanvi's heart sank. This was even worse. Had he really forgotten? Did those incidents mean nothing to him? Was it only her who had been wrecked with guilt about what had happened? Did he even know or guess how much suffering those incidents had caused her?

When she looked at him, he was frowning, as if trying to remember...

And Jhanvi wanted him to stop recollecting. If he had forgotten, it was awesome. Why did she have to remind him?

To stop him from pondering that statement of hers in depth, she said in an excited voice, "Dinner, tomorrow?"

Vicky was taken aback by her sudden change of heart. He grinned. "Okay. Your place or mine?"

Jhanvi flushed. The smile on his face faded slightly as he came forward and said, "I did not mean it like that. We can meet outside for dinner."

"No, no...it's fine...whatever..." She shook her head. "I mean...wherever."

He grinned. "We seem to have the knack of saying exactly the wrong things to each other."

She laughed in relief. It was funny when he said it like that. It was a different way of looking at situations that was deeply destressing to her. The words somehow lightened the impact of the past. A funny spin on their past—exactly what Jhanvi had needed. She relaxed. The incidents did not seem as destressing as they usually would.

He continued, "There is a Thai restaurant at the end of the road. Have you heard of it?"

"Petal Drums?"

"Yes. We can meet there. Say around seven?"

Jhanvi nodded. "Sure. I will see you there."

He grinned again. "Alright, kid. Good night."

"Good night."

Jhanvi loved that he still called her 'kid'. It was protective and endearing. It was lovely and enchanting. But then, it was also scary. Goddamn scary. What the hell was he doing to her?

Jhanvi turned and walked back to her home. In spite of her deep-seated conflicts, she was aware of the one emotion that had taken complete over her. Elation. Vicky really was back!



Jhanvi smiled into her pillow. She was having a really hard time sleeping that night. She was too excited. She had met him! She had met Vikranth Warriar! After eight long years.

He had been her first love. The guy who had come through the haze of the rain to rescue her when she had fallen down on the road. There was something romantic about it. Deeply romantic.

And he had once again come to her help after eight long years. As if he had never even been away... Aah! It was all so very romantic!

But the rational part of her chastised her for the excitement. She was being carried away. He probably had a girlfriend. Or maybe he was engaged. Or even married. A great disappointment washed over her when she thought of him being married to someone else. She could not bear even the idea. If he was married, then she'd know one thing for certain. God hated her. For to let her meet him when he was out of bounds would be nothing but a cruel twist of fate.

But then she shook her head. There was not a single chance he was married. God loved her. There was no reason for him to hate her. She had been a good girl. Right? Well, sometimes it was debatable...but overall, she was quite convinced. She was a good girl. God would never do this to her.

Slightly comforted but still terribly excited, she jumped out of bed. Sleep seemed to be unreachable that night. She sat at her desk and opened her laptop. She checked her calendar. Goodness gracious! She had a meeting with a client the next day at six. There was no way she was going to make it to Petal Drum at seven. She quickly shot an email to the client,

begging off the engagement claiming she was too sick. She also cancelled a meeting at five with her team. She needed to be home by then to get ready for her date.

Her eyes widened and she grinned. Date! It was a date! A date with Vikranth Warriar! She put her laptop away and quickly started to spin around in her room. There simply was no other way to dissipate the excess excitement that seemed to increase with every second in her body.

A date with Vikranth!

A date with Vikranth!

She jumped up and down in the room.

A date with Vikranth!

A date with Vikranth!

Then, when she was exhausted, she fell back on her bed. And this time, she was finally able to go to sleep.

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Jhanvi entered Seaside Creek Resort and looked at the waiting area. Avantika and her boyfriend were yet to arrive. Instead of wasting time, she turned and went into the office space behind the reception desk.

She met the resort's owner, Lavanya, and spent some time chatting with her. Lavanya told Jhanvi about her upcoming wedding. She showed Jhanvi pictures of her wedding dress and the wedding invite. Lavanya was very excited for her wedding. It was very visible on her face. Jhanvi found her excitement a bit endearing, and she spent a little longer than usual with Lavanya.

Most of Jhanvi's business was dependent upon the relationships she built with other people. Finally, it all boiled down to this—if there were no interpersonal skills, there was no business.

After chatting with Lavanya, Jhanvi stepped out of the office room. The waiting area was still empty. Avantika was late. Instead of sitting in the waiting area, Jhanvi decided to go

near the backwaters and wait for Avantika there. It was much more pleasant there. She shot a message to Avantika telling her where she would be and sat down in one of the chairs, under the canopy of the trees.

She looked out at the waters. Every time she visited Seaside Creek, it was always on work. She never really had the time to sit near the backwaters and enjoy the view, until that day. It was a sunny day. She watched as sunlight danced on the water's surface. A few fishes jumped out of the water and made a small plop as they fell back into the water.

Jhanvi smiled to herself. It was so very peaceful at the resort. Except for a couple of people swimming in the pool behind her, there was absolute silence. And the entire atmosphere was lulling her to sleep.

Her eyelids had almost drooped when she heard Avantika call out from behind. "Jhanvi!"

She was wide awake. With a wide smile on her face, she got up and turned.

She gasped. Her eyes widened and her smile dropped from her face. For right behind Avantika, was her boyfriend. Vicky.



Jhanvi stepped back in shock. Vicky looked equally surprised.

"Jhanvi, this is my boyfriend, Vikranth Warriar. This is the event planner for Anisha's reception, Jhanvi Vasugi." Avantika made the introductions.

"You!" Jhanvi said before she could think her reaction through.

Avantika looked from Jhanvi to Vicky and back again.

Vicky asked, "*You* are the event planner?"

"You guys know each other?"

"No!" said Jhanvi. At the same time, Vicky nodded and answered, "Yes."

“What?” asked Avantika again, looking from one to the other.

“No, no, we don’t know each other,” insisted Jhanvi, shaking her head.

“That’s not true...we do know each other,” insisted Vicky.

Jhanvi looked at Avantika and explained, “Very, very briefly...a long time ago. It was very brief...only a few days, that’s it. I think we just met at a party. And it was very long. Almost an eon back...like...it was in my school days. We don’t know each other at all, in my opinion. And I don’t even remember him much.”

Vicky cleared his throat. “We also met yesterday,” piped in Vicky, grinning at Jhanvi’s explanation.

The blood drained from Jhanvi’s face. “It was hardly a meeting. I just met him on the road...”

“Oh, really?” asked Avantika.

Vicky explained, “Yeah. I was going home after our dinner yesterday and I met her. She was being harassed by a couple of drunks.”

“Oh!” replied Avantika, looking curiously at Jhanvi.

“In fact, today...” started Vicky again.

Jhanvi interrupted him hurriedly, “Hey! Why don’t I show you both the wedding lawn? It looks beautiful now. After some time, it’ll get too hot, and we won’t be able to see it properly.”

“Yeah, sure,” replied Avantika. Jhanvi led them both to the lawn.

On seeing the lawn, Avantika seemed to forget about Jhanvi and Vicky’s past. She went to stand in the middle of the lawn and asked, “What do you think, Vicky?”

Vicky nodded as he went to stand next to her. “Very beautiful. And I think it is perfect for a very intimate wedding.” He then turned to Jhanvi and asked, “Can we book the whole resort for the wedding?”

“I will have to check up with the owner. You see that girl at the reception? Dressed in black? That’s her.”

Avantika’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh, that girl? She is the owner? I thought she was a manager or something.”

“No, no. She is the owner. If the reception date is confirmed, I can check availability with her.”

“We have a couple of dates. But we can go with whatever date this resort is available. Why don’t I go and check with her quickly? Will you show Vicky around in the meanwhile?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Great. Vicky, check the dining area. Check the seating capacity too. I think they will be serving desserts around the swimming pool area too. Right, Jhanvi?”

“Yes. We can have dessert stalls around the swimming pool. We can put some stalls near the backwaters too.”

“Super. Check it out, Vicky, and let me know,” said Avantika, as she walked away to meet Lavanya.

Vicky looked at Jhanvi and smiled. “So?”

Jhanvi looked back at him and sighed. “Let’s walk. Follow me.”

They started to walk across the swimming pool towards the dining room area.

Vicky smiled slightly as he said, “That was interesting. You did not want Avantika to know about us.”

Jhanvi stopped walking, turned to him and said, “Look! First of all, there is no ‘us’. We were not great friends and we are not going to be.”

Vicky looked genuinely surprised. “We are not?”

“Absolutely not. Second, it was just a minor thing.”

“Minor? Hmm...no. I would definitely not call it minor,” said Vicky, shaking his head slightly.

Jhanvi blushed. “Please, Vicky. Don’t tell her the details. I am begging you. This is business. She is a client. I want her to

feel very, very secure and happy with me. And if you tell her what happened between us, she will definitely not feel so.”

Vicky screwed his eyes slightly. “Well, what exactly happened?”

Jhanvi nodded. “Exactly. Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. So don’t tell her anything...”

“Hmm... I will think about it.”

“Just wait till Anisha’s wedding. After that, you can tell her anything...please. For me!” pleaded Jhanvi.

Vicky sighed. “So what about our dinner tonight? Should I not tell her that, too?”

Jhanvi was shocked. “What dinner? There is no dinner. I am not having dinner with you now.”

“Why not?” asked Vicky, genuinely surprised.

Jhanvi was taken aback. “What do you mean, why not? You have a girlfriend!”

“So? We are just catching up. Just because I have a girlfriend, can I not catch up with my friends?”

“Okay. First of all, I was never your friend. Let’s clear that first. I was never your friend. Do you agree?”

Vicky looked thoughtful, but finally, reluctantly, nodded.

“Good. Second, we are never going to be friends. Okay?”

Vicky frowned. “Why not?”

Jhanvi was exasperated. “Aargh! Because I don’t want to. I don’t think we have much in common, anyway.”

“What about after Anisha’s wedding? Would we have something in common by then?” asked Vicky, shrewdly.

“Well...sure. We will have Avantika as the common factor. Other than that, absolutely nothing. So, please. We are not going to be friends. I am just a wedding planner for Anisha’s wedding. And...and...that’s all.”

Vicky nodded. They started to walk back towards the dining area.

“What about yesterday? I saved you from those drunk guys, I helped you with your vehicle. I was your knight in shining armour yesterday.”

Jhanvi gritted her teeth. “Look. You...you...”

“Knight in shining armour,” prompted Vicky, grinning.

“No! You stranger! I know karate. And those guys were drunk. It would have been a cakewalk for me to put them down. And what help did you do with my bike? I pushed it for half a kilometre. I could easily have pushed it for the last two hundred metres. It was not actually hard.”

Vicky looked offended. “Oh, really? Then why did you take me up on my offer to help you?”

“Because I know how guys are. They need to feel wanted. So, I helped you feel wanted. You did nothing for me. Get it?” snapped back Jhanvi.

“Aah! I am hurt,” exclaimed Vicky, faking a hurt look.

“If I refused your help yesterday, you would have been hurt yesterday. That’s the only difference.”

“That really hurts. I don’t understand. So do I mean nothing to you?”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes. “You never meant anything to me, and you never will.”

Vicky glared at her for a minute. “Fine. Show me the dining room, Miss Wedding Planner.”

Jhanvi gave him an exasperated look. “You are standing in the dining room. Look around!”

Vicky glared at her again before he looked around.

Then he turned to look at her and asked, “So you are really serious about tonight’s dinner? No dinner?”

“No.”

“Aww! I was actually kind of looking forward to it.”

“Well...” she replied. *So was I. So was I.*

Avantika joined them.

“Vicky, how is the dining area? Will it accommodate 150 people?”

Vicky shrugged. “Sure. Moving crowd plus dessert stalls outside. I think this area will easily fit.”

“What do you think of the lawn?”

“It is lovely.”

“What about the couple’s entry?”

Vicky seemed taken aback. “What about it?”

“I mean...they come via the boat.” Avantika turned to Jhanvi. “Didn’t you tell him? What were you both talking about till now?”

Jhanvi blushed. “I am sorry. I left that part out. I was just telling him about the resort. Right?”

“Right,” replied Vicky, hardly able to smother the smile that kept rising to his lips.

Avantika frowned slightly as her gaze shifted from Vicky to Jhanvi.

“How exactly do you both know each other?” she asked, looking curiously at both of them.

“We don’t,” answered Jhanvi, shaking her head.

“Yeah. We don’t,” agreed Vicky. “We really don’t.”

Mehndi Ceremony

(8 years back)

The doorbell rang. Jhanvi ran down the stairs shouting, “I will get it! I will get it!”

She opened the door and without as much as a cursory ‘hi’, she shouted at her friend, Niro, “I cannot believe you are making me go to Rathi’s function. I don’t want to go.”

Nirosha looked at Jhanvi. Jhanvi was wearing an orange and yellow half saree. Her hair was perfectly combed and styled. It cascaded down her face beautifully. Very minimalistic gold jewellery adorned her neck and her hands. Her eyeliner, mascara and lipstick were very subtly applied and yet accentuated her beautiful features. Jhanvi looked resplendent.

Niro grinned. “And yet I see you are already dressed.”

Jhanvi moved to let Niro inside. “Only because you are making me. I don’t want to go.”

They moved up the stairs to Jhanvi’s room. They entered the room and locked the door behind them.

Niro was wearing a pink and mauve half saree. She was fair, tall and had a slightly long face. She was studying in the eleventh grade and was Jhanvi’s classmate. They had been classmates from kindergarten.

Niro sat on Jhanvi’s bed and said, “Look, we were invited to Aparna *Akka*’s mehendi function before Rathi backstabbed you. And we promised Aparna *Akka* and her parents that we would attend. So, we have to go.”

Jhanvi scowled. She did not like being forced into social gatherings. Especially at their so-called friend Rathi’s family function. The recent incident was still fresh in Jhanvi’s mind.

A couple of weeks ago, Jhanvi had worked elaborately on a school project on how to control pollution in the city. She had researched extensively, had poured over newspapers and spent nights coming up with several valid points. She had shared her final project with both Niro and Rathi to ask them for their

feedback. Both had been very impressed with the effort Jhanvi had put into the project and profusely praised her.

However, on the day of her presentation, Rathi had been called to present her project before Jhanvi. And Jhanvi was shocked to see Rathi present all of Jhanvi's materials. Rathi had stolen her project!

When it was Jhanvi's turn to present, she had shamefacedly asked the teacher for a couple of days of extra time as she could not present the same project as Rathi. Their teacher had scolded Jhanvi in front of the entire class on being lax and not giving the necessary importance to school projects. Jhanvi had burnt with embarrassment. And more than embarrassment, she was upset because of the unfairness of it all. Rathi was the one who should have been scolded. Not her. Not after she had spent days and nights working on the project. It was so unfair! And unable to control her emotions, Jhanvi had broken into tears in front of her entire class. Till date, it had been the most humiliating incident in her life. And it was all thanks to Rathi.

Jhanvi just could not forgive Rathi for what she had done to her. And on top of that, Rathi maintained that she had worked on the project independently. She insisted on that even though some of the points were word-to-word the same as Jhanvi's.

Jhanvi and Rathi had stopped talking to each other.

But Jhanvi was invited to Rathi's sister, Aparna's *mehandi* function way before their fight. And Niro had a good point. Her fight was with Rathi. Not with Aparna. Even though six years her senior, Aparna had helped Jhanvi so many times—she had given her her old guidebooks, she had given her tips for tackling school projects and once, she had even given her a ride back home on her cycle. And Aparna was getting married! Jhanvi had to go.

“Fine! But I am not talking to Rathi at all.”

“I am not going to talk to her either. That backstabbing bitch!” scowled Niro.

Jhanvi smiled, comforted by the fact that Niro was as angry at Rathi as she was. She sat next to Niro.

“Why are they having a *mehandi* function? That is not our Tamil culture,” wondered Jhanvi.

Niro shrugged. “I guess it was Rathi’s idea to have one.”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes. “She is now copying from the North Indian culture! Can’t she do a single thing without copying something from somewhere?”

They both burst into laughter.

Jhanvi was glad to have a good friend on her side. When one was betrayed, they needed like-minded people who supported them on their side. To bitch, to plan and to criticise. She was so grateful for Niro.

Jhanvi picked up her handbag and her cycle keys. “Come on, let’s go.”

On their way out, Niro said, “Look at the bright side. We might finally get to see Rathi’s boyfriend.”

Jhanvi scoffed as she followed Niro. “If he exists, that is.”

“Yeah. That remains to be seen. What was his name again?” asked Niro as she waited for Jhanvi at the threshold of the room.

“Vicky. It is always ‘Vicky this’, ‘Vicky that’...” replied Jhanvi, adjusting her slippers.

“I bet he does not exist. A guy cannot be all that she claims him to be.”

“Yeah. Handsome, smart, intelligent, rich and what not! The one thing I cannot believe is that he is a second-year engineering student but he is dating a girl from the eleventh grade. Couldn’t he find girls in his own college? If he is all she claims him to be, he should be able to find a girl better than Rathi.”

Niro shrugged. “I won’t mind dating college guys. They have bikes! And the best part, they don’t have to wear a uniform.”

“Yeah, good point! Do you really think Vicky is as great as Rathi claims?”

“A college going guy who is as sensitive and romantic as Rathi makes him to be? Very hard to believe. Anyway, we’ll meet him today and judge for ourselves.”

Jhanvi grinned. “If the guy exists...”

“Yes...if he exists.”

Jhanvi and Niro giggled as they descended the stairs.

“Mom...leaving!” called out Jhanvi as she neared the door.

“Wait, Janu,” replied her mother, Vasugi, rushing out of the kitchen. “Here. I made some *rava ladoos* for Rathi.”

Jhanvi was disappointed. “Mom, you didn’t have to take so much effort. She is not that great a friend.”

“Oh, come on! You both are friends from childhood. And her sister is getting married. You can’t go empty handed to their house.”

Jhanvi was exasperated. “Mom! You don’t have to gift anything for a *mehandi* function. We just have to put *mehandi* and come back home. That’s it. Why do you do all this?”

“It’s okay. And I am starting to my meeting now. I will be unreachable for about one hour. You have taken the house keys, right? And I am guessing you will have dinner at Rathi’s house. I have not prepared anything. If you don’t eat there, you have some money on hand, right?”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes. “Mom! I will manage. Don’t fuss. Yes, I have the house keys and I will let myself in. Don’t worry.”

Vasugi laughed. “I will always worry. Bye, girls. Have a good time.”

“Bye!”



Jhanvi and Niro cycled together to Rathi’s house, which was a twenty-minute ride. The climate was very pleasant and they were having a relaxed ride. They rode side-by-side, engaged in conversation, without bothering about occupying half the road.

Other motorists mumbled as they veered before overtaking them. But the girls were quite oblivious to them.

Suddenly, just when they were half a kilometre away from Rathi's house, it began to get cloudy. And in a few moments, the sky darkened and it started to drizzle.

“Oh my God! My makeup! My dress!” exclaimed Niro, as she pedalled faster.

Jhanvi, too, was worried about the exact same thing. They pedalled faster in their race to get to Rathi's house.

The faster they pedalled, the heavier the rain got too.

Niro went ahead. She turned into the street where Rathi's house was located. As Jhanvi made to follow her, Jhanvi's cycle slid on the muddy road. Her cycle hit the pavement and threw Jhanvi off. Relinquishing her control of the cycle, she tried to balance herself but was unable to do so. She fell hard on the road. A sharp pain shot through her leg and she gasped.

The rain was gathering speed, relentless in its pouring. Jhanvi, from the shooting pain in her leg, was unable to move. She looked around for Niro but her friend was nowhere to be seen. Niro, not realizing that Jhanvi had fallen down, had raced ahead to Rathi's house. With no one in sight, Jhanvi looked around with tears in her eyes. What was she to do?

She was sitting on the side of the road with her bike spawled nearby, when a bike came around the corner. It stopped near Jhanvi. Jhanvi watched as the rider parked the bike on the opposite side of the road, got down from it and came running towards her.

He took off his helmet as he sat next to her. And for a moment, Jhanvi forgot the pain in her leg. She forgot the rain. She gasped looking at the stranger's handsome face. She looked on as he looked at her with worried eyes.

The stranger was tall and muscular. His face was square with an angular jawline. His nose was long and sharp. His moustache was thick. A couple-days old stubble gave him a rough, handsome look. His hair was swept back. He had thick

eyebrows from under which his intense eyes looked at her. Intense eyes that were worried.

“Are you okay?” His voice was deep and manly. Jhanvi’s heart melted.

“Yes...I am fine...” she murmured.

When he frowned at that response, Jhanvi remembered that she was not fine.

“My leg...actually... I think I have twisted my ankle.”

He looked around as if trying to figure out what to do next. Then, he asked, “Where is your house?”

Pain shot afresh through her leg as she tried to move it. She stammered, “Very far. I just...I came here for a function.”

“Oh! You are here for Aparna’s ceremony?”

Jhanvi’s face cleared. “Oh! You are Aparna *Akka*’s friend?”

He nodded. “Come on, I will take you there. Can you make it to the bike?”

Jhanvi doubted it. She could not even move. As if sensing her plight, he held out his hand. Jhanvi grabbed it and tried to get up. But it was very difficult to balance herself on one leg.

She staggered and fell back. He immediately put his arms around her to support her.

Jhanvi blushed. He seemed a bit thrown off too as he looked into her eyes. He hesitantly asked, “Do you want me to carry you to the bike?”

Jhanvi eyes widened and she shook her head rapidly. Then, realizing, there was no other way, she slowly nodded.

In one swift movement, he lifted her off the ground. He carried her to his bike easily, as if she weighed nothing. He put her down near his bike. She balanced herself with one hand on the bike as he got on it and started it. She pulled herself atop the bike with great difficulty. She sat down on the bike but she slipped again. She steadied herself by hanging on to him.

“I am sorry. Sorry,” exclaimed Jhanvi, thoroughly ashamed and moving away from him after she had steadied herself.

“It’s fine,” he replied.

He started the bike. She held on to his shoulders for support. It was a short ride to Rathi’s house.

He stopped the vehicle when Niro came running out.

“Oh my God! What happened?”

“She fell down and twisted her ankle,” he replied as Jhanvi got down from the bike with Niro’s help.

“Goodness gracious. I thought you stopped somewhere because of the rain. It never occurred to me that you would have had an accident,” explained Niro, as she supported Jhanvi and led her inside the house.

“Get an ice pack for her,” called the guy from behind, as he parked his bike. “I will go get your cycle.”

Jhanvi nodded at him gratefully.

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Jhanvi was helped to a sofa in the guest bedroom.

Aparna had made sure Jhanvi was comfortable. She handed her the ice pack and went in search of Rathi.

Jhanvi tried to call her mother, but her mother’s phone was switched off. She then remembered that her mother had mentioned a meeting and that she was going to be unavailable for an hour. She reluctantly resigned herself to the fact that she may have to spend a couple of hours more in Rathi’s house.

Jhanvi peered to get a look at herself in the bedroom mirror. Her hair was in a complete disarray. Her half saree was torn at the bottom and was muddy. She was completely drenched, and her hair was sticking to her face. Her mascara had run. She looked hideous and burned with embarrassment. Was this how she looked when that guy had come to help her?

She didn’t want to ice her ankle; instead, she had the insane need to set herself right as much as she could. She wanted to

look presentable before he came again, maybe to check on her. But Niro did not listen to her repeated requests for a towel and concentrated on icing her injury.

Aparna walked in again and gave her a towel. “Here, Jhanvi, dry yourself up. Do we need to go to the hospital?” asked Aparna, worried.

“No, *akka*. I don’t think so. Looks like just a mild sprain. The ice pack should help,” replied Jhanvi, ashamed that she was putting the bride through so much trouble.

She immediately set to work, drying herself with the towel.

“I think we should atleast get someone to take a look at it,” said Aparna, half hesitating.

Jhanvi stopped drying herself. “No! I am perfectly okay. My mother is in a meeting. I will ask her to come here to pick me up. Just let me stay here a couple of hours...”

“Of course! I am just sorry this happened to you when you came for my function,” replied Aparna, clearly distraught over the incident.

“*Akka!* Please! You go ahead and carry on. Just forget about me. I am perfectly fine. Niro is here with me. I will be fine. Please go.”

Niro nodded. Aparna reluctantly agreed and left to receive her guests.

As soon as Aparna left, closing the door behind her, Jhanvi turned to Niro and asked, “Who is that guy?”

Niro looked equally excited. “I don’t have a clue. But he is so awesome.”

“He lifted me so easily. Like I was a matchstick! And so caring. Oh my God! He is awesome!”

“That’s what I said. We will have to find out more about him,” agreed Niro.

Jhanvi’s eyes were still shining with excitement when Niro asked, “How is the pain?”

As if pooh-poohing her pain, she brushed it aside and said, “It does not pain if I don’t move it. Now that is not important. Why don’t you go out and find out about him? But before that, can you please make me look presentable? I look like something the cat dragged in.”

Niro nodded and started to work on Jhanvi’s face. She had just wiped her face clean and had managed to straighten her hair when the handsome guy entered the room.

“Hey, kid! How are you doing?” he asked, smiling at Jhanvi.

Jhanvi gulped as she took him in. He was just as completely drenched as Jhanvi. His shirt was sticking to his body, giving the world a glimpse of his sculpted abs.

Jhanvi nodded. “I am fine.” She was a little disappointed to be called a ‘kid’ by him, but she brushed the concern aside.

“Did you get anyone to look at it?” he asked, moving towards her.

Jhanvi shook her head.

He sat down next to her and examined her leg. Despite the pain, Jhanvi’s heart rate accelerated, and she blushed.

“No bruising. No swelling. Looks fine...” he said. Then, very slightly, he twisted her foot.

“Does it pain?”

Jhanvi shook her head.

But when he bent her foot forward, Jhanvi winced.

He nodded. “Does not look like you’ve got any broken bones. Seems to be just a sprain. But you might want to get it checked by a doctor all the same.”

Jhanvi nodded.

Niro interrupted. “We called her mother. But she is in a meeting. She is not answering her phone.”

“Oh! Where do you stay?”

Jhanvi was intensely aware of his hand that was still on her foot. She wanted to respond, but the guy's presence had her tongue-tied.

When she did not reply, Niro answered for her, "Around three to four kilometres from here."

He nodded. "If you want, I can borrow a car and drop you home."

Jhanvi shook her head. "No, no. I am fine. My mom will come."

"All right. Let me know if you need anything then. And keep that ice pack on it."

Jhanvi nodded, desperate to learn his name and yet scared out of her life to ask him.

He stood up and ran his fingers through his wet hair. "Can I use that towel?" he asked, pointing to the one that Jhanvi had just used.

"Sure," she replied, handing him the towel. He dried his hair and patted his shirt.

"Sorry, you got drenched because of me," said Jhanvi, finally finding her voice.

He shook his head. "It's fine. It's just rain."

Niro had been waiting for Jhanvi to ask his name. When it did not look like that might happen, she went forward with the question. "What is your name?"

"Vikranth," he replied, smiling at Niro.

The smiles on both the girls' faces faded.

"Yours?"

"I am Niro, short for Nirosha. This is Jhanvi. Jhanvi Vasugi."

No sooner had Niro made the introductions that Rathi entered the room. She was elaborately dressed in a maroon and gold lehenga. Her hair was perfectly styled. Stylish and heavy accessories adorned her neck, hands and ears. She looked

perfect, especially in comparison to the three drenched people in the room.

“Oh my God! Jhanvi! How are you? Where does it hurt?” she asked, rushing to Jhanvi but coming to stop a few feet away from her.

Jhanvi explained the incident.

“Oh! Thank God Vicky was there. Did you call your mother?” she asked.

“She is not answering. I hope I can stay here for some time.”

“Of course. Do you even have to ask that? This is like your house. Do you need anything now?”

Jhanvi was a little taken aback by Rathi’s words. She seemed more caring and more loving. Was it because she was hurt? And yet, Rathi did not even come closer to her and maintained her distance. Jhanvi was confused by her conflicting words and actions.

Vicky answered for her, “Rathi, why don’t you give her a spare dress? We don’t want to add pneumonia to the sprain.”

“Of course!” replied Rathi, turning to face Vicky. “Thank you so much, Vicky, for helping my friend.”

“Hey, come on,” replied Vicky, brushing her thanks aside.

“You are drenched, too. I will get you a spare dress too. Come with me.”

Vicky nodded and started to follow Rathi. At the door, he turned and said, “Okay, kid. Change your dress and rest. Don’t put pressure on your leg. And keep that ice pack on.”

Jhanvi nodded as the door closed behind him.



“Shucks!” exclaimed Niro and Jhanvi in unison, facing each other as soon as the door closed behind Rathi and Vicky.

“That’s Rathi’s boyfriend?” asked Niro, coming to sit in a chair next to Jhanvi’s sofa. They were both devastated. They

remained silent for a few moments.

“You know what is really irritating? I am the same age as his girlfriend and yet he calls me ‘kid’. I am, in fact, taller than Rathi!”

“Maybe he did not realize it because he has not seen you standing. I still cannot digest the fact that he is Vikranth.”

Jhanvi was shocked and the friends stayed in silence for a while. For the last two months, almost everyone in their friend circle had been subjected to endless stories of how amazing Rathi’s boyfriend was. How wonderfully genuine and caring he was. How shockingly handsome he was. And how intelligent he was. And how he was the best guy a girl could ever find. The stories had gone on and on. And at one point, it started to become repetitive and the mention of Rathi’s boyfriend was a subject that most of them began to fear.

Jhanvi herself had endured her stories of him not once or twice, but so many times that she would recount them even if someone woke her up and asked her in the middle of the night. How he had won the Young Entrepreneur award at the national level, how he once saved an old man who had met with an accident, how he had collected money for a faculty in his college who was admitted in the hospital, how he won a bike race and gave the proceeds to charity and so on.

And it was hardly believable. Jhanvi could not imagine that someone like that could exist. How could one single person have so many good attributes? How could one person be so talented that he had done everything that Rathi claimed he had? And if it really was true, what the hell was he doing with Rathi?

Listening to Rathi’s repeated stories, however, an image of this guy formed in Jhanvi’s mind. It was of a young man who was exceedingly handsome and intelligent, but was also vain and insufferable. Pretty much like Rathi and her stories.

But now that Jhanvi had met Vicky, she knew that all the stories were true. All that she had thought to be unbelievable suddenly became believable. Her conceptions about him proved to be misconceptions. The image that she had created

of Rathi's boyfriend broke into a million pieces; just the warmth in his eyes was enough to break that image. And he was definitely not vain and insufferable. He was, like Rathi had said, caring and genuine.

The awe she felt for Vicky struck Jhanvi with such force that she had a hard time breathing. She closed her eyes and tried to control her raging emotions. But a few deep breaths hardly seemed to do the trick.

"So, he exists, eh?" asked Jhanvi, sighing deeply.

"Yeah. And worse than that, he seems to be everything that Rathi claimed him to be," replied Niro, equally sad.

Jhanvi was moved by the fact that her best friend had felt exactly what she had felt.

"How can a guy like him be with a girl like her? This is not fair!" complained Jhanvi.

The girls sighed in unison before they fell silent again, ruminating on their thoughts, before Rathi barged in.

This time, there was a significant change in her behaviour.

"Here," said Rathi, handing Jhanvi a t-shirt and a track pant. "You chose a great day to fall down!" she said in an accusing voice.

Jhanvi was irritated. She snapped back, "Well, next time, I will pick a better day. Or better still, I will check with you if it is a convenient day for you and then have an accident!"

"I mean...it is my sister's *mehandi* function. Do you really have to be the centre of attraction here? You've got everyone worrying about you and running around for you!"

"No one is running around for me. Only Niro is here with me. You carry on with your function. I don't need you here."

"Vicky's clothes were soiled too because of you. He is wearing my father's clothes now and looks so awkward. Today, I wanted to introduce him to all our friends. But he is looking all funny because of you!"

Jhanvi would not think of an answer to her unreasonable accusations. She just heaved in anger.

Rathi continued, “And just look at you! All muddy and drenched. You have spoilt my sofa! And you have occupied this entire room. No one can use it now!”

“Look, I will book a cab and leave, okay?” replied Jhanvi, getting angrier by the minute.

Rathi snapped back. “Well, you cannot leave now. Vicky will never allow it. He will insist on dropping you and I cannot have him missing from my sister’s *mehandi* function. Stay here. And I really hope your mother comes soon.”

Rathi then left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Niro and Jhanvi looked at one another, speechless.

“What an idiot!” exclaimed Niro after a few moments.

“She was just putting on an act earlier for her boyfriend’s benefit. Can you believe that?”

“Yeah. What an actress she is! Even I fell for it. I really thought she cared.”

“So did I! That psycho! How can she get a guy like him? This really is not fair,” replied Jhanvi, shaking her head.

“And what the hell was she complaining about the sofa?! It has a plastic cover. All you have to do is rub the water off. Ungrateful little bitch!”

Jhanvi looked at the t-shirt and pants that Rathi had given her.

“Can you see what she has given me? A faded t-shirt and pair of old pants. Where the hell did she get these from? It looks like she rescued them from some garbage. That witch! She wants me to look bad!”

“You don’t have a choice. Change now. Vicky was right. We don’t want you to come down with a fever too.”

Jhanvi sighed and reluctantly nodded.

Jhanvi changed out of her muddy clothes and packed them in a plastic bag. She wore the clothes Rathi had given her and looked ruefully at herself in the mirror. She looked awful!

But still, she was grateful for the dry clothes. Even though they were old and faded, they provided Jhanvi with a much-needed relief. She was just happy not to be in those wet and dirty clothes. She was leaning on the sofa when Vicky entered the room again.

“Hey, kid. All okay?”

Jhanvi’s eyes narrowed. “My name is Jhanvi. Jhanvi Vasugi.”

Vicky grinned. “And Vasugi is?”

“My mother’s name,” replied Jhanvi, looking at him defiantly. She usually became defiant if anyone asked an explanation about her last name. But Vicky just smiled and nodded. He did not ask for an explanation. He just handed her the box of sweets her mother had given her when she was leaving home. She had completely forgotten about it after her fall.

She continued, “I am Rathi’s classmate. Don’t ‘kid’ me, please.”

“Fine. By the way, you look cute when you are angry. And I am not ‘kid’ding you.”

Jhanvi laughed, in spite of herself. It was a clever play of words. She was impressed.

He came and sat by her feet. “And what exactly do you want me to call you? Jhanu, Jaan?”

Jhanvi blushed. “Jhanvi is fine.”

“Nah! Too long, Jaan,” he replied, shaking his head.

Before Jhanvi could protest, he turned to Niro, “Why don’t you go and get your *mehandi* done? I will babysit her till then.”

“Babysit?” exclaimed Jhanvi, offended.

Niro smiled and, to Jhanvi’s great chagrin, she left.

“What about you? Don’t you want your *mehandi* done?” he asked.

“Well...not exactly a priority now.”

“You don’t have anything else to do but wait for your mother. Why don’t you get it done in the meantime?”

“How? Have you forgotten I can’t walk?”

“I can carry you.”

Jhanvi blushed. She shook her head as she felt an immense urge to remind him that he was Rathi’s boyfriend.

“Where is Rathi, by the way?”

Vicky shrugged. “She is very busy with a photo shoot.”

“Oh! How...how did you both meet?”

“At a party. Our parents had a common friend.”

“Oh!”

She is not a nice girl. Stay away from her! Far, far away!

But Jhanvi could not utter a single word.

“Do you want me to get you something to eat? You haven’t had anything since you came here,” he asked.

Jhanvi shook her head. She was hungry. But she was too angry with Rathi to eat at her house. Then, she remembered the sweets her mother had sent for Rathi. She did not want to give them to Rathi. So, she opened the box that was filled with *rava laddoos*.

“Want one?” she asked, extending the box to him.

He helped himself to one *laddoo*. Just as he was about to bite into it, he asked, “Does this have cashews?”

“No. Why?”

“I am allergic to cashews.”

“Really? I have never heard of anyone being allergic to cashews.”

“Well, it is not the face swelling type of allergy. It is allergic in the sense that I’d be continuously wheezing,” he replied, biting into the *laddoo*.

“Oh!”

“Wow! Tastes amazing.”

“Yeah. My mom is a great cook.”

“Hmm... What does she do?”

“She is heading the Sales division at Quest Corporation,” said Jhanvi, helping herself to a *laddoo*.

“Wow! And your dad?”

Jhanvi’s smile faded as she answered, “He is a General Manager at TKS. It is an IT company.”

“Wow! Big shots, eh?”

“Well, he...he does not stay with us.”

Vicky’s eyebrows shot up as he looked at her questioningly. “My parents are separated.”

His eyes softened as he looked at her with unbridled pity. He said softly, “Oh! I am sorry to hear that.”

Jhanvi shrugged, suddenly overcome with self-pity. She did not know why. Her parents had been separated for over two years and she had come to terms with it quite well. But talking about it to Vicky had somehow filled her with self-pity. Maybe the pity in his eyes caused it. Anyway, she did not like feeling so and tried to shake herself out of it.

“What about you? Where are you studying?” asked Jhanvi, trying to change the subject.

“Sagar Engineering College. Computer Science.”

“Oh! Interesting?”

He shrugged. “College life is good. What are you going to do after two years?”

“I don’t know. I am very interested in pursuing research in a field of biology, like neuroscience. But I don’t know if that is even possible here in India.”

“Well,” he replied, thoughtfully. Then, he frowned. “Really? That’s what you want to do?”

He looked disappointed by her answer and she was taken aback by his disappointment. She had thought her choice would impress him. Apparently not.

Jhanvi nodded. “Yeah. Why not?”

Vicky did not reply. “Well...if you have any passions, I think you stand a much better chance at winning at that than taking up something entirely new.”

“I... What about your parents? What do they do?” asked Jhanvi, quickly changing the subject. She still wasn’t clear about what she wanted to do in life; she had a new plan everyday. She would cross the bridge when she came to it.

“Mom is a Carnatic singer. Dad runs a music production company.”

“Oh, awesome! Siblings?”

“I have an elder sister. She works in Singapore.”

“Nice.”

“Can I ask you something?” asked Jhanvi, after a few moments passed in silence.

Vicky nodded. “Yeah?”

“Why are you hiding here?”

Vicky looked taken aback by the question. Then, he burst out laughing.

“You got me!” he said.

It was Jhanvi’s turn to look at him questioningly.

“It’s just that...there are too many people out there.”

Jhanvi frowned. “I would have sworn that you were a people’s person.”

Vicky smiled. “I am but... Okay, look. Rathi is a very, very sweet girl. You must know that, right? She is your friend after all. She is a very lovely girl.”

Jhanvi replied through gritted teeth. “Yes. Looovvvely girl.”

Vicky missed the sarcastic tone. “And I am very happy to be her boyfriend and all. But...she is introducing me as her boyfriend to everyone in her family and I...I...”

“You are finding it stressful.”

“Yes! Extremely!” replied Vicky, throwing up his hands and leaning back on the sofa.

Jhanvi smiled.

Vicky hurried to clarify. “It’s not that I don’t want that her to do that. I do. I do want to be her boyfriend and I intend to be that for the rest of our lives...”

Insane jealousy stabbed at Jhanvi’s heart and her smile faded.

“But...this is too early, don’t you think?”

Jhanvi nodded. “Very early.”

Vicky smiled. “I am glad you understand. But please don’t say anything to Rathi about this.”

Jhanvi put her thumb and forefinger together and drew it across her lips. “My lips are sealed.”

Vicky smiled. “Alright. Let me leave now. She must be looking for me.”

Jhanvi nodded as Vicky got up. Then he said, “Are you sure you don’t want to get the *mehandi* done?”

“Well, I want to. But I can’t walk there. Plus, I am dressed in practically rags. I cannot come out looking like this.”

Vicky’s eyes travelled down her dress. The look on his face told her that he agreed with her. “Well...compared to what you were wearing...”

Jhanvi nodded. “I know.”

“Alright. I will see you then. Thanks for the *laddoo*.”

And with that Vicky left.

For some strange reason, Jhanvi felt a deep sense of loss as the door closed behind him.

∞

Niro was back soon. She had applied *mehandi* on one hand, leaving the other free to help her friend.

“It looks lovely,” replied Jhanvi wistfully. The design was intricate and beautiful. It covered her entire hand, and it did indeed look lovely.

Jhanvi realized that she had unknowingly been looking forward to getting it done that day.

“It’s okay. I will do it for you next week. After your leg heals,” replied Niro, looking at Jhanvi’s reaction.

Jhanvi nodded, knowing fully well that whatever Niro tried, it won’t have the same output as a professional’s. She could, of course, go and get it done from a professional later, but it was not the same as applying *mehandi* along with your friends.

“I just called my mom. She is on her way,” said Jhanvi.

“Oh good,” replied Niro, looking relieved.

“You go and enjoy the party. I don’t want you to be stuck here with me.”

“Don’t be silly. I don’t know anyone. I am much happier being here with you.”

Jhanvi nodded. And then she sighed.

“What?” asked Niro.

“Vikranth,” replied Jhanvi, looking sad.

“I know,” replied Niro, sighing as well.

“Do you think we should tell him what a devil Rathi is?” asked Jhanvi, looking hopefully at her friend.

Niro shook her head. “Are you crazy? Of course not! And it is none of your business.”

“He is so sweet.”

“I know. But it is his fate. We cannot help it.”

“But we can!”

“Well, we are not going to,” replied Niro, firmly. “My God! What is wrong with you?”

Jhanvi was still not convinced. If there was a way to help Vicky get out of the relationship, she would do it.

Just then, Vicky entered the room along with a girl. At Jhanvi’s enquiring glance, he smiled and said, “She is here to apply *mehandi* for you.”

Jhanvi was elated.

Vicky continued, “Well, if Mohamed cannot go to the mountain, the mountain will come to Mohamed.”

“Oh! Thank you,” gushed Jhanvi.

Vicky pulled a chair closer to Jhanvi and the girl sat down.

“I need two pillows to rest my hand on,” she said.

Vicky got her a couple of pillows and the girl started to apply *mehandi* on Jhanvi’s hand.

Vicky nodded at Jhanvi and left.

Jhanvi looked at Niro in despair as if asking her if her stand was still the same.

Niro understood her friend’s unspoken question and shook her head. She ran her thumb across her forehead and mouthed, “Fate!”

Rathi opened the door and peered inside. “Niro, did you come for the *mehandi* function, or did you just come here to just be with Jhanvi? Come with me for dinner.”

Then, the head disappeared and the door closed.

Niro looked at Jhanvi and asked, “Should I tell her the truth? She should at least have waited for my answer.”

Jhanvi giggled. “Go and have your dinner.”

Niro nodded. “Yeah. How can I not go when I am being so courteously invited?” She smirked as she left the room.

When Niro came back after dinner, Jhanvi held her hands out to her.

“Wow! It looks beautiful,” replied Niro, gushing. “We should take a snap of our hands.”

Soon, numerous photos were taken, admired and the best were carefully selected and posted on social media.

“You have not noticed one thing,” Jhanvi said.

“Yeah?” asked Niro, her eyes still on her phone. She was refreshing her social media page to see if anyone had liked their photo yet.

“There is a name in my *mehandi*.”

Niro looked at her with a frown. “Really? Where?”

“Find it,” said Jhanvi holding out her hand.

Niro looked keenly at the design and gasped when she found it. “You idiot!”

Jhanvi flushed.

“Are you crazy? You have known him for less than two hours.”

“But he is so nice!”

“So? You will put his name in your *mehandi*, is it? What if that girl tells Rathi? Or what if Rathi looks at your hand and sees it? What if your mom saw it? Oh my God, I just posted it on social media. I will take it down right now.”

“You will do nothing of that sort. It’s not easy to figure it out. No one will find it. You found it only after I told you.”

“Still...you are nuts! What is wrong with you? He is Rathi’s boyfriend.”

“I think I am in love with him,” declared Jhanvi.

Niro looked at her in shock before she exclaimed, “Oh, my dear sweet God!”

Niro was looking exasperated when the object of their discussion entered the room.

Vicky said, "Hey, kid. I got you dinner."

"Oh, thank you."

Vicky placed the plate on her lap. "Got your *mehandi* done?"

"Yeah," replied Jhanvi, smiling, holding up her hand for him to see.

Jhanvi saw Niro tense up from the corner of her eye, but she did not care.

"Looks beautiful," replied Vicky. "Were you able to reach your mother?"

"Yes. She is on the way."

"Great. I will see you around then. By the way, Rathi is throwing a dinner tomorrow for Aparna. Will you both be joining?"

Jhanvi and Niro looked at each other. "Well...we have not been invited."

"Oh, but Rathi is sure to invite you. I will see you both tomorrow then."

Both the girls nodded. Vicky smiled at them and left.

The moment the door closed, Niro whacked Jhanvi's head.

"Ouch!"

"How dare you show him your hand? What if he found his name?"

"Well, he didn't, did he?"

"What's wrong with you?" asked Niro for the nth time that night.

"I told you...I am in love..."

"Oh, shut up! The fall has messed with your head."

"Do you think Rathi will invite us for tomorrow?"

"I don't know. But even if she does, we are not going."

“Oh, come on. We are going. Anyway, I think Vicky will make sure Rathi invites us.”

“Okay, let me clarify one thing to you. Vicky is in love with Rathi. Not you. Rathi.”

“She does not deserve him.”

“Well, you cannot judge. This is none of your business. Stay out of it.”

Jhanvi stared at Niro with a rebellious look on her face.

Niro sighed and buried her head in her hands. “Just eat, will you?”

Jhanvi started to eat, still looking like a stubborn child.

Dinner Party

The next day, Jhanvi and Niro entered the pub hesitatingly. Niro was dressed in a simple, cotton floral dress. Jhanvi was wearing a black dress that was neither revealing nor sexy; her mother had made sure of that. Her mother was very hesitant to allow her to go to a pub, but Aparna had promised to take care of Jhanvi and Niro. It was only on Aparna's word that Vasugi had agreed, albeit reluctantly. Jhanvi was made to promise that she would not touch alcohol and would be home by ten.

Jhanvi looked around the crowd gathered in the pub. It was still early in the evening and there were not many people in the pub yet. Groovy, dance songs were being played. A group of middle-aged people were on the floor. But other than that, only a few other people were in the pub.

This was the first time that Jhanvi and Niro were entering a pub. They did not know if Rathi had invited them of her will or if Vicky had asked her to do it. Either way, Jhanvi was exhilarant to be able to spend the evening in Vicky's company; Niro was upset for the exact same reason.

Niro caught sight of Aparna sitting at a table at the far end of the pub. She was waving at them. Rathi and Aparna's fiancé, Amish, were with her. Jhanvi and Niro made their way slowly to them; Jhanvi's leg had still not completely healed and she was walking with Niro's support.

The conversation started with enquiries about Jhanvi's leg. However, soon, Amish was telling them about the first time he met Aparna. Jhanvi was charmed by Amish. He was so clearly in love with Aparna. The way he narrated the story of when he met Aparna in their college lab for the first time tugged at Jhanvi's heart. It made her wonder if there would ever be a time when Vicky would describe meeting her for the first time in the rain and in the middle of the road. Would his eyes shine like Amish's were shining then? Would he ever be so much in love with her? Her heart warmed as these pleasurable thoughts filled her mind.

Jhanvi decided that if such a thing ever happened, she'd never need anything from her life again. That would be the pinnacle of her life. She would never be as happy before or since.

A couple of Aparna's friends joined them. Amish narrated the story again for them. Jhanvi had heard it before from Aparna, but Amish was telling it so much better. Jhanvi listened in silence and rapt attention while admiring the love that shone in Amish's eyes.

Later, a huge number of their friends joined them at around the same time, and the party got started. A few of Aparna's and Amish's cousins, neighbours and a couple of their colleagues joined them too. Everyone ordered their drinks. Rathi, Jhanvi and Niro were not allowed to drink, so they stuck to their mocktails. Rathi was made to; Jhanvi and Niro were happy to.

As drinks were consumed and more orders were placed, the party started to get louder. Jhanvi's eyes drifted to the entrance once every few seconds, eagerly waiting for Vicky.

Finally, after almost an hour, Vicky arrived. He was dressed in a black t-shirt and blue jeans. His hair was combed back and he looked even more handsome than the day before, if that was possible. He greeted everyone.

"Hey, Jaan! How is your leg?" he asked Jhanvi, taking a seat next to Rathi.

"It is much better. I am using a walker, though."

Niro leaned forward and explained, "By the way, I am the walker."

Jhanvi and Vicky grinned.

Rathi interjected, "Well, I am glad you were able to hop to our dinner."

The sarcastic comment had Niro glaring at Jhanvi. "*Did we really have to come?*" her glare seemed to ask. Jhanvi tried to ignore both, Rathi's comment and Niro's reaction.

Rathi moved closer to Vicky and whispered something in his ears. Vicky grinned, looking very happy to be with her. Jealousy settled in the bottom of her stomach and, for the first time since the day before, Jhanvi wondered if Niro was right. Should they have just missed the party?

Vicky's eyes seemed to shine with happiness. The happier he was, the more it made Jhanvi jealous. She fervently hoped that Vicky did not tell the story of how he met Rathi. She would definitely not be able to bear that!

But that conversation never went to Vicky's and Rathi's story. It continued to centre around Aparna and Amish, gratefully for Jhanvi.

"I am glad we took our time to get to really know each other as friends before I proposed," said Amish.

Aparna grinned. "To tell you the truth...if you had proposed just a month after our first meeting, I would have accepted."

Amish eyes widened. "What? Come on!"

Aparna shrugged. "I was pretty sure by then. There was really no need for the two years we spent dating. I was ready in a month."

Rathi intercepted. "I knew it! The way she'd talk about you... I knew she would have accepted way earlier. She was so in love with you already. It was so very apparent."

"Really?" asked Amish again, still trying to digest the information.

Aparna grinned back at him, a slight blush creeping up her cheeks.

Rathi turned to Vicky. "What do you think, Vicky? Do you think you can make such a big commitment so early in a relationship?"

"Well. I think we can. With some people, we just know."

Amish scoffed. "Oh, come on. You are hardly twenty. What would you know?"

“Well, age does not make a difference,” Aparna remarked before she turned to Vicky and asked, “Have you ever felt something like that for anyone?”

A couple of people looked meaningfully at Rathi, who blushed.

Vicky replied, “I have known love at first sight. I’ve been completely bowled over by a girl and have spent months obsessing over her, even though that girl did not even know I existed.”

Aparna shook her head. “No. We are not talking about love at first sight or obsession. Have you ever met anyone and, within a short span of time, knew for sure that that person was made for you? Like Amish and I?”

Vicky shook his head. “No, I have not. But I have heard that it does not take very long to figure it out when you meet your soul mate.”

“Oh, oh! Is there a proposal in the offing?” teased one of Aparna’s friends, laughing and jeering.

Vicky’s cheeks reddened. He shook his head and replied, “No... Like Amish said, I am hardly 20. I don’t think any girl will even accept my proposal as of now. I don’t know what I am or who I am going to be. How can I ask a girl to share my life without knowing that?”

“I am sure some girls will feel differently,” said Aparna’s friend.

Vicky shook his head. “I don’t mind proposing. But I am sure the girl will reject me.”

“You don’t know that!” said Rathi, her voice a little shrill from the excitement. Her eyes were shining in expectation.

“No, no... I will propose only when I know that the girl will accept me for sure. Else, I won’t risk it.”

“She might accept...” replied Rathi.

“Even then, it is too early. I am too young to propose and the girl, whoever she is, would be too young to accept.”

Jhanvi found it difficult to accept that statement. She had met Vicky only for a few minutes and she knew. She knew Vicky was her soulmate. Sometimes, you just know. It does not take years to know a person is your soul mate. Why was Vicky saying that? How could age matter? Just because she was only sixteen, did it mean that what she felt was wrong?

Jhanvi interrupted the conversation, “But you just said that a person knows when they meet their soulmate... How does this knowing depend on age?”

Vicky was taken aback. It was as if everyone at the table had ganged up on him. It looked like he had hoped Jhanvi would be on his side and was completely shocked when she started to question him.

After a moment, he said, “No. Whether I know or not...it does not matter. I strongly believe there is an age to take big life decisions. Twenty is not an age to take a such an important life decision. That is all I am saying.”

Jhanvi replied, “It takes only 30 minutes for a person to decide whether to marry another or not in an arranged marriage setting. I know people who go out and get to know each other for months but at the same time, I also know people who have accepted a marriage proposal in half an hour.”

Vicky said, “Then they would be very surprised with their married life.”

Aparna said, “Even if I know the guy like the back of my hand, he will continue to surprise me. I am sure Amish is still going to surprise me. And vice versa. I am going to surprise him, too. We do not get married to a robot who is going to be constant. We are going to get married to a human being. And humans are prone to change, evolution. They will keep changing, whether you like it or not. And in a marriage, or any relationship for that matter, you need to accept the changes. You even need to welcome them. I think that retains the excitement in the relationship. You may be married to one person for your entire life. But he is sure not the same person when you married him. Change is inevitable.”

Vicky nodded. "I completely agree. But I still think we need to take our time to know the person. I welcome change, but I should know the baseline of who they essentially are. If I am comfortable with that, I can take the change, or the evolution, in better words. I am not going to get into a marriage where I don't know the baseline at all."

"What is this baseline?" asked Aparna.

"The basic characteristics. Like...you know Amish is honest. That is a basic characteristic, which is not likely to change. I mean, it can. However, it is highly unlikely. It is important that the person is honest. What if the person I am dating is not honest? I can never accept that."

"But what if it is too late by the time you think you are ready? What if the girl moves on?" asked Jhanvi.

"If she is meant for me, she won't move on."

"But what if she does, tired of waiting for you to do something?"

Vicky replied, "Look, I am not going to propose just because I am scared that the girl will move on. I firmly believe that this is not the age for proposing. And I also firmly believe this is not the age for accepting a marriage proposal. And, therefore, there is no point in me proposing. Because even if I propose, I am sure that the girl won't accept."

"How can you be so sure of that?" asked Jhanvi.

Vicky rolled his eyes before he snapped at her, "Oh, come on! If I propose to you right now, will you accept?"

"I will. In a heartbeat," shot back Jhanvi, equally riled. But as soon as the words were out of her mouth, her eyes widened in shock.

A deathly silence descended on the table. Vicky was shocked. He looked into Jhanvi's eyes, and saw his shock reflected in her eyes. She had realized what she'd said after she'd said the words. Her lips quivered.

The silence stayed as Vicky and Jhanvi looked into each other's eyes.

“What the hell!” exclaimed Rathi.

Jhanvi looked at Rathi. Rathi was furious. Understandably. Jhanvi looked around the table. Everyone was shocked. Except, of course, Niro; the look on her face was of accusation and not shock. Jhanvi looked away, unable to meet the gazes of anyone at the table.

Vicky attempted to placate Rathi with an explanation. “She just said it for an argument’s sake. Don’t read too much into it.”

The explanation made Rathi even more furious. She got up and walked out of the pub. Vicky sighed, excused himself from the group and followed Rathi.

Jhanvi finally looked up. She was about to apologize when one of Aparna’s friends leaned closer and asked her, “Are you drunk?”

Jhanvi shook her head. She looked about to cry.

Amish said, “Maybe somebody mixed the drinks!” He turned to Aparna. “What was that girl drinking? Are you sure it was a mocktail? Maybe it got mixed with one of our drinks.”

Aparna shook her head silently, confirming that what Jhanvi was drinking was indeed a mocktail.

Niro got up from the table. “Aparna *Akka*, it’s late. Jhanvi’s mom would be worried. We have to get going.”

Amish said, “Yeah. School night, right?”

“Yeah,” replied Niro, helping Jhanvi stand up. Jhanvi did not know what to think or do.

“Wish you both a very happy married life!” Niro said to the couple and looked pointedly at Jhanvi.

Jhanvi was still dazed. She still did not look back at Niro. When Niro realized that Jhanvi was not going to wish the couple or even say goodbye, she was shocked.

Niro excused herself from the group and dragged Jhanvi out of the pub. Following Niro, Jhanvi limped out of the pub in a slow and shameful walk.

As stood outside the pub waiting for their cab, Niro looked at Jhanvi and hissed, “What were you thinking?”

Jhanvi was beginning to regain her senses. As realization of the true impact of what she’d done dawned on her, it opened a floodgate of repentance.

“I don’t know. Oh my God! I have to apologise to Rathi and Vicky. Look, let’s please go and find them.”

“No! You are not doing anything more tonight. We are going home and sleeping.”

“But why?”

“Are you crazy? Rathi is furious with you. She will kill you.”

“I’ll explain...” said Jhanvi, as she turned to walk away in search of Rathi and Vicky.

Niro caught her hand and pulled her back. As Jhanvi struggled to get away from Niro’s grasp, Niro asked, “What exactly will you explain? How will you explain what you did?”

“Leave me, Niro! I will tell her I was stupid...or that I’d lost my mind. That I did it just for an argument’s sake. I don’t want Vicky to get into trouble.”

Niro did not let go of her hold on Jhanvi. Jhanvi struggled to get away again but could not. Niro explained, “You know Rathi. She will never forgive you. But tonight, if she sees you, I am sure she will kill you. It is better to just disappear. Look, we can think about a suitable explanation and then talk to her tomorrow. If you do something in the heat of the moment, it will definitely go wrong and we will only end up making things worse for them.”

“But I can’t let them go on thinking that I...”

“I don’t care. Let them think what they want to think. If they are that firm in their opinion, it will not change whether you give an explanation or not. It will only make matters

worse. Trust me, Jhanvi. I am on your side. But we both are not in a state to think right now. And they are not in the state to listen to you with a calm head. We will only end up making more mistakes. Let's get some sleep and then decide. Give everyone some time and space. Give them a chance to cool down, too."

Jhanvi stopped struggling and, reluctantly, she agreed.



Jhanvi was unable to sleep that night. She burned with embarrassment as she thought of the evening, the entire episode playing on a loop in her mind. She thought about how differently the events could have played out if she'd watched her tongue. She imagined and replayed several versions of the event in which she said the correct things.

She made a mental list of all the mistakes she had done and went over them again and again. All she wanted out of the evening was to spend some time with Vicky. That had been her first mistake. She should not have wanted to spend time with someone else's boyfriend. Why should she?

Her second mistake had been to fall in love with a guy she hardly knew. She definitely should not have fallen in love with a guy knowing perfectly well that he was out of bounds. And on top of all that, he was not just anybody else's boyfriend, but her very close friend's boyfriend. She should not even have entertained thoughts of him, forget about falling in love with him.

Her third mistake had been to go to that dinner. She was injured. She had a very plausible explanation for her absence and yet she went. She went hopping, as Rathi had pointed out. She went against her best friend, Niro's warnings. What was the need to go there?

As the night passed, the list of her mistakes grew longer.

Jhanvi burned with embarrassment as she thought about what the others would have thought of her. Rathi would obviously be mad at her. And within reasons too. Jhanvi wanted to apologize to Rathi. She wanted to beg her for

forgiveness. She wanted to promise that she would do anything that Rathi asked her to...if only she could forgive her!

She thought about Vicky and what he would have thought of her; just the idea of it was unbearably painful. How cheaply she'd behaved! No, she did not have the guts to mull over what Vicky would have thought of her.

A small voice inside her told her that Vicky should not have asked her that question in the first place, even if the debate had heated up. Why did he ask that question? But she knew that it was only because he'd thought she would understand his reasons behind the question. He did not know that she was in love with him and would have married him if he asked. How was he to know? How was anyone to know she had fallen in love with him after meeting him for just a few minutes?

She recalled how shocked he had been at her response and burned.

It was a very, very fitful night for Jhanvi.



Even before Jhanvi opened her eyes the next morning, she felt her head pounding. The events of the previous evening rushed into her mind. A part of her had been hoping that the dinner party was a dream; the reality of it disappointed her. She wondered briefly that if everyone would forget the events of last evening if she never got out of bed.

Birds were chirping outside her window. The sound which normally made her happy, irritated her that day. What was the need for exhibiting such joy?

She slowly opened her eyes. It was a warm and sunny day. Golden rays of the sun streamed in through the windows and illuminated her room beautifully. The sight made her angry. The sun and the birds were behaving as if they did not care about Jhanvi's plight. As if they did not understand what she was going through. Irritated, she reluctantly sat up, knowing that it was going to be an extremely difficult day for her.

Of everything that tortured her, the one question that tortured her the most was what would Vicky be thinking of her? She had destroyed everything between them. Forget about anything happening between them, now they couldn't even be friends. They couldn't even casually see each other or greet each other. She wouldn't even have the pleasure of a one-sided love. She had successfully destroyed her own dreams.

Her eyes welled up. How stupid was she! She lay down on her bed again and cried some more. Her pillow was drenched anew that morning, mingling with the tears of last night.

Then, after a long time, mustering enough strength, she got up and got ready for school.

She sat at the dining table and opened the hot pack. Her mother had made *idlis* and *sambhar*. She glanced at the kitchen counter. Her lunch bag was packed and ready. And the house was deadly silent, which meant her mother had left for work. She sighed. It would have been nice to have someone to talk to when she was this sad. She may not have spoken to her mother about last evening, but she'd still have had a conversation. It would have been comforting just to have someone around. Just someone to talk to about something random that would have lightened her mood.

She did not have any appetite but she knew her mother would worry if Jhanvi did not finish her breakfast. So, she took a couple of *idlis* in her plate and poured a helping of the *sambhar*. She was halfway through her breakfast when the doorbell pealed. She looked at the clock. It was only seven forty-five. Who would come so early?

She opened the door and was surprised to see Niro. She moved past Jhanvi into the house, almost pushing her out of the way.

“What?” asked Jhanvi, her mouth half-filled with *idli*.

“Have you checked your Facebook account?”

Jhanvi shook her head.

“It has been hacked. And the hacker has posted something.”

Jhanvi was shocked. She imagined some gruesome morphed images of hers and shuddered. Who could do that? Why would they do that? Her heart beating extremely fast, Jhanvi asked, “What did they post?”

Niro unlocked her phone and showed her the post.

The post was from Jhanvi’s account. It had a few photos of Jhanvi with her various friends. There was one photo of just her and Niro.

Jhanvi frowned. It did not look that bad. The minute she heard of hacking, her mind assumed the worst. This did not seem that bad.

She took the phone from Niro and started to read the post.

“Hello, my dear friends and family. This might come as a shock to many of you, but I have hidden this for too long. I have lived a life of deceit for too long. I need to break free of this lie and deceit. I need to come clean to all of you. I need to be free. I need to be myself.

So here is the hard truth. I am a lesbian.

Please pour in your wishes and support. I really need it. Life is difficult for a lesbian, even more in a conservative city like Chennai. Thanks in advance for all your support.”

Jhanvi gasped as she looked up. “Rathi!”

“Well, we don’t know for sure...”

“She is the only one who knows my password.”

“@#@\$@#\$. Why the hell did you share your password with her?”

“I shared it with her when I thought she was my friend. I did not know her boyfriend was going to propose to me and that I was going to accept, okay?” shot back Jhanvi.

Niro gritted her teeth. “He did not propose! God! What is wrong with you?”

Jhanvi sobbed, but this time, they were not sad tears; they were angry tears.

She looked up at Niro, clueless. She did not know what to do next. She needed her friend to tell her that.

Niro seemed to guess Jhanvi's question perfectly. She said quietly. "Deactivate the account."

Jhanvi nodded. "Okay."

"Just post a couple of lines that your Facebook has been hacked. Ask them to ignore all posts from you since the last week. And to ignore all private messages posted since then."

"Private messages? Oh my God! I did not think of that."

She returned Niro's phone to her, picked up her phone and quickly checked the private messages, relieved when she saw the hacker had not sent any messages to her friends and family. With a sigh of relief, she posted as Niro had asked her to.

"Friends! It looks like my Facebook account has been hacked. Please ignore all my posts and messages since last week. I will create a new account and send you friend requests. Bye."

Jhanvi deactivated her account and then looked at Niro, her anger refreshed. "That crazy psycho! That...that...sick... psycho! I will kill her! She wants war?! That is what she wants, right? Then that is what she is going to get. It is so on."

Niro sighed and whispered, "I was afraid of that."

Then, picking up her bag, she asked, "Shall we go?"

Jhanvi did was not paying attention to her. She picked up her plate, dumped her half-eaten breakfast in the waste basket, washed her hands and came back to the living room.

As she took her bag, she looked at Niro and declared, "It is soooo on!"

∞

Jhanvi did not get a chance to talk to Rathi during the first two periods. It was only during their break that Rathi called Niro over to where she sat. They whispered to each other for a

few minutes, much to Jhanvi's chagrin, and Niro came back alone.

"She wants to talk to you," said Niro.

"So? Shall I notify the media? Probably a strategically placed article in the newspaper?"

"Oh, shut up, Jhanvi! Just apologise. What you did was wrong. You apologise first. After you apologise, she will apologise too. Just don't fight, okay?"

Jhanvi rolled her eyes. "I am not the one who is looking for a fight. But I can't back out of something that is being thrown at my face."

Niro glared at her and said through gritted teeth, "Apologize and close this chapter."

Seeing that Jhanvi had not moved from her place, Rathi seemed to have made up her mind to come over. When she was closer, Jhanvi got up from her desk.

Her eyes burning with anger, Rathi said, "How are you doing, you boyfriend stealer?!"

Jhanvi scoffed. "I am a lesbian *and* a boyfriend stealer too? Make up your mind!"

If Rathi had come prepared with any more comments and snide remarks, she seemed to have forgotten it all. Instead, she said, "How dare you say that to Vicky?"

Jhanvi pretended to look surprised. "Say what?"

"That you will marry him in a heartbeat."

Jhanvi shrugged. "I said it only because he asked me." She pretended to look like she was in deep thought before she said, "And I noticed that he did not ask you. Just me. Hmm... Why do you think that is?"

Rathi went red in the face. She spluttered, "H...How d... d...dare you?"

"You know, we have only known each other for less than a couple of days. But, like Vicky pointed out, when you meet

your life partner, your soulmate, you just know. It doesn't take too long then."

Rathi fumed. "He did not propose to you! It was a just something in the heat of the moment, for the sake of a silly argument," she shouted.

Jhanvi looked at her thoughtfully. "Hmmm... Then why are you so tensed?"

Rathi looked taken aback. "I... I am not tensed."

Jhanvi scoffed again. "Really? Is that why you called me a boyfriend stealer just now? If you ask me, it seems like you are really, really scared because you think Vicky would like me over you."

"He does not like you over me. He is my boyfriend. Mine!" Rathi's voice was getting louder and attracting unwanted attention from their classmates who were beginning to crowd around them.

"Then why did he spend so much time with me at your sister's *mehandi* function?"

"Because he is a decent human being. You were hurt and he was worried for you. That is all. That does not mean he loves you."

Jhanvi smiled. "By the way, can I tell you a little secret? He calls me 'Jaan'. So sweet, is it not? 'Jaan'. Do you know what it means? Looking at your face, I am sure you do. By the way, what does he call you? Oh yeah, right! He calls you 'Rathi'. I wonder what that means."

Rathi lost her control. She pushed Jhanvi, who staggered back. Niro caught her and steadied her. She put out her hand to stop Rathi.

"Rathi! Don't be an idiot! She has hurt her leg. You might end up doing some serious damage."

"I *want* to do some serious damage! I *want* to kill her!" cried out Rathi, in the throes of extreme anger.

"Stop it, both of you!" Niro came to stand in between them. "Back away before I inform the teacher."

As if on cue, the bell rang, signalling the end of the break.

Rathi tried to control herself as she backed away. Jhanvi, however, stood her ground, staring at Rathi, who stared back.

Niro looked from one to another and exclaimed, “Look at yourself. You both are fighting over a boy. Oh my God!”

Rathi almost spat out the words, “I am not fighting over a boy. He is my boyfriend. Mine! Ask your friend to keep her hands to herself.”

Jhanvi was about to retort when Niro turned and glared at her. Jhanvi swallowed her words under her stare.

∞

It was Saturday morning. Jhanvi was writing her record notebook when the doorbell rang. She pushed away her record notebook, irritated. She hated being disturbed. She hated talking to anyone. All she wanted to do was be alone. Cursing whoever was at the door, she went to the door.

It was Vicky.

“Hey, Jhanvi!” he said, grinning.

All of Jhanvi’s irritation vanished in thin air. Vicky looked extremely handsome in his dark blue t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans.

Jhanvi was elated on seeing him on her doorstep. He had come for her. He had searched for her, found her address and had come for her. Her heart started to race, and excitement filled her body and soul.

“Hey Vicky!”

“Can I come in?”

“Sure,” replied Jhanvi.

And just like that, she remembered the incident of last week. Her elation vanished and an extreme guilt took over. He had not come to meet her. He had come to chastise her. He had come to tell her what a horrible human being she was. He had come to accuse her of distressing his relationship with Rathi.

As the thoughts zipped through her mind, she stood transfixed at the doorstep, blocking his entry in.

“Can I?” he asked again, looking at her questioningly.

“Oops! Sorry,” she replied, blushing and moving to let him in.

Jhanvi usually prided herself to be extremely clear-headed. But Vicky confused her otherwise rational mind. She was not used to the feeling and it panicked her. She did not know what to think and what to say. And she definitely knew not how to behave.

Trying to calm herself down, she walked into the living room.

He followed her hesitatingly.

“Is your mom in?” he asked.

“Eh? No, she is at work. Do you want something to drink?”

“Well, water would be nice.”

“Sure. Please sit.”

Vicky took a seat while Jhanvi went to the kitchen. But when she was back, Vicky was not on the sofa. He was at the showcase, looking at her pictures.

“You look lovely in that photo,” he said, pointing to a photo that was taken at her *arangetram*. She was dressed in traditional Bharatanatyam attire, her face impeccably made up. She wore enormous earrings, necklace, bangles and *nethichutti*. It was one of her favourite photos.

“Thank you. It was at my *arangetram*,” she explained, handing him the glass of water.

“I hope you still dance.”

“Eh...yeah...sometimes,” she replied, still very much in the throes of the confusion that Vicky had thrown her in.

Vicky nodded and sipped the water.

“I heard about what happened between Rathi and you at school.”

Jhanvi blushed crimson. She had never expected the argument to reach Vicky. She might have expected it if she had thought about it, but she had not. After her confrontation with Rathi, she put everything and everyone out of her mind. She did not want to think about it. She had, in fact, hoped that the problems would just dissolve on their own. Apparently, they could not and had not. God! What she would give to just get this over with. She could not wait to put enough time and space between herself and these incidents and everyone involved in them. A few years should do the trick.

“I am sorry,” she said. “She hacked my FB account...”

“I know...” he replied, looking apologetic. “I am sorry for what she did.”

Jhanvi’s heart went out to him. He was apologizing for no fault of his, and it was enough for her to fall in love with him all over again.

“You had no hand in it,” she replied, shaking her head.

Vicky looked sad. “It was all because of me. I should not have let the argument at dinner stretch so much. I should not have asked you that question.”

“I should not have accepted, either,” Jhanvi thought. She wanted to say it aloud too but could not bring herself to it. Because, in her heart, she knew. She knew the truth. If he proposed again, she would say yes again; there was no doubt about it.

Vicky continued, “What I did was stupid. And then one thing led to another and, before I could realize, things just got out of hands.”

“I know. I am sorry, too.”

“I want to put this all behind us. Let us all just forget the entire incident and pretend it never happened. I would really like that very, very much.”

“I would like that very much, too.”

Vicky looked relieved. He sighed. “Good. I need your help then.”

“Anything. What do you want me to do?”

“Tell Rathi there is nothing between us.”

Jhanvi looked at him in surprise. “She thinks there is something between us?”

Vicky sipped his water and shrugged. “As you seemingly have pointed out to her...I call you Jaan.”

Jhanvi blushed. She wanted to disappear. Or move to another continent. Or another planet, preferably. Was Mars ready yet?

Vicky continued, “I did not mean anything by it. It was just short for Jhanvi. Nothing else.”

Jhanvi flushed and looked away. “I know... I know...”

“But I did spend an inordinate amount of time with you during the *mehandi* function. And I was fussing over you...”

“You did not fuss over me.”

“Rathi seems to think so.”

“Oh!”

“And truth be told, I did fuss a lot over you. But that was because I was really scared.”

“Scared?”

“I was scared about your leg. I knew it was not broken but I was still scared. I was hoping there was no long-term damage...because if something went wrong with your leg...it would be disastrous. You wouldn’t have been able to walk...or dance,” he said, pointing to the picture of her *arangetram*.

Jhanvi frowned. She hesitantly said, “I am perfectly fine now.”

“And thank God for it! I am relieved. But I was extremely worried about you that day, and Rathi seems to have misunderstood my concern. So, will you do it? Will you tell her there is nothing between us?”

Jhanvi’s heart pained at the thought. Was there nothing between them? Really? Nothing? Not even a hint of

something? Not even a small bud? It was hard for Jhanvi to accept it. And it was harder still to tell that to Rathi.

Vicky continued, “She seems to have lost all trust in me. She is not believing anything I say.”

Jhanvi burned. It was all her fault. And Vicky was getting punished for her mistakes. It was gross injustice, and she was ready to do anything to set it right.

She nodded. “Yes, I will tell her.”

Vicky looked relieved. “Thank you. I will arrange for a meeting outside. I will message you the time and the place. Rathi has your number, right? Okay then. Thank you again, Jhanvi. I am glad to see you have recovered well, too. So, I will see you later?”

Jhanvi nodded.

He placed his glass on the table and strode across the living room. Jhanvi followed him to the door.

Just as he was about to exit the door, he turned around. “Just one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Why exactly did you say yes in answer to my question?”

Jhanvi was shocked. She had not expected him to ask this question. And so blatantly.

And maybe because of its suddenness or its openness, Jhanvi found the courage to answer truthfully. “I... I have thought about it. In fact, I have thought about nothing else since the dinner party. And after scrutinizing it, analysing it and studying it from all possible angles, I have come to only one conclusion.”

“Which is?” asked Vicky, impatiently.

Jhanvi looked him in the eye and answered, “It was an honest answer. I answered truthfully. And if you ask me the question again, my answer will remain the same.”

Vicky was shocked. He stared at her for a few long moments, and Jhanvi didn't look away either.

“Why?” asked Vicky, his voice coming out in a whisper.

Jhanvi shrugged. “I don’t know. But that is how it is.”

He stammered. “I... I don’t know what to say...”

“Don’t say anything,” replied Jhanvi, shaking her head. “You are Rathi’s boyfriend. It does not matter one way or the other.”

Vicky looked as if he wanted to say something but changed his mind at the last moment.

He nodded and said, “I will see you around, Jhanvi.”

Jhanvi nodded back. And as soon as she closed the door behind him, the brave face she was sporting broke into a million pieces as she fell to the floor crying.

∞

The following Tuesday, Jhanvi stepped into Coffee House in her neighbourhood, Niro by her side. Rathi and Vicky were seated on a table in the far end of the café, sipping their drinks.

On seeing them, Vicky smiled broadly and waved them over. However, when Rathi glared at him for his exuberance, his smile disappeared.

Jhanvi sighed and the girls made her way to their table. Even though Rathi was quite aware of the fact that they had arrived, she did not look in their direction or acknowledge them in any way.

Jhanvi gritted her teeth. It was going to be a very difficult conversation.

“Hi Rathi,” said Jhanvi as she took the seat opposite Rathi.

Rathi did not answer but just glared at Jhanvi.

Jhanvi felt a fury slowly rise inside her.

Calm down. Calm down. Vicky needs you to do this. For Vicky. Just for Vicky.

“What will you have?” asked Vicky.

“Nothing,” replied Jhanvi and Niro in unison. They just wanted to get this over with.

Jhanvi turned to Rathi and said, “I just wanted to tell you that nothing happened between Vicky and me.”

Rathi shot back. “Of course, I know nothing happened between him and you. Why would he even look at you when I am his girlfriend?”

Vicky looked shocked. “Rathi! Please listen to what she has to say...”

Jhanvi’s gaze shifted to Vicky. She felt a surge of pity for him. He did not deserve Rathi. He so did not deserve this twisted female. He could do much better. Why couldn’t he see that?

Vicky’s entreaties seemed to have an effect on Rathi. But she looked extremely uncomfortable as she tried to control her emotions.

Jhanvi continued, “As I was saying, Vicky is in love with you. Not me. Why would he propose to me when he is in love with you?”

“Oh, cut the crap. Don’t patronize me,” shot back Rathi.

That response made Jhanvi so furious, it didn’t let her think straight. She sat back. She had done what she had committed to Vicky. It was up to Rathi and him now.

Rathi still glared at Jhanvi and asked slowly, as if measuring her words, “Why did you accept his proposal?”

Jhanvi wanted to scream. *“Because I am in love with him. I don’t know why. It does not make sense and yet that is how it is. I love him.”*

Instead, she just shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Rathi’s eyes narrowed at Jhanvi. “Well, I know. You are just insanely jealous of me. You have been for a long time. I always knew it...”

Niro took Jhanvi’s hand under the table. It was a gesture to calm her down.

Rathi continued, “You could not stand to see me with such a wonderful guy. You wanted to come in between us. You wanted to sow discord. You just wanted to do something to separate us...”

“That’s not true,” shot back Jhanvi, pulling her hand out of Niro’s grasp. Her temper was slowly rising.

“Oh, shut up! I know how jealous of me you have always been. I should never have been friends with the likes of you. I should have just stuck to my own class...”

“Rathi! Stop it!” said Vicky, sternly.

Rathi turned to Vicky. “No. You don’t understand. This girl is the worst. She is so unbearable that even her father left her. He ran away from her.”

Jhanvi got up swiftly. She placed her hands on the table to steady herself. Anger was rocking her body. She wanted to rip apart the girl sitting in front of her to shreds.

Niro got up too. She moved away and started to pull Jhanvi away. She knew things had already gone out of hand. The only way to stop them from worsening was to separate Rathi and Jhanvi.

Jhanvi was about to comply to Niro’s gesture when she heard Rathi say to Vicky, “This girl is jealous of everything—of my looks, of my class, of my parents, of my status, of my house...and now, of you. She wants everything that I have...”

Fury caused Jhanvi’s common sense to black out and she said, “Let me tell you one thing, Rathi...”

“Jhanvi, I apologize on her behalf...” interrupted Vicky.

But Jhanvi ignored him. It was as if she could not see anything or anyone. All she wanted to do was harm Rathi. She wanted to hurt her...bad.

“Jhanvi! Jhanvi!” cried out Vicky.

Jhanvi slowly turned towards him. He was saying something to her. He was worried. Her fury subsided some.

And suddenly Jhanvi smiled. It was a wicked smile. A smile that none of the others recognized.

She turned to Rathi and said, “You know, Rathi, I came here to apologize. I came to tell you one thing...”

Vicky interrupted her again, “Jhanvi, let it go. We can talk another time.”

“No! No! I already told her everything that I came here to say. Now, I just have something to add to that and I will tell her that before I leave,” replied Jhanvi.

She turned to Rathi and continued, “Nothing happened between me and Vicky. We did not fall in love at first sight. We did not have any interesting conversations that day. We did not fall more in love in between the time we first met and the dinner where he proposed. He did not call me ‘Jaan’. I did not put his name in my *mehandi*,” she put up her hand for Rathi to see her almost-faded *mehandi* and pointed out his name there. “Also, we did not kiss when he came over to my home to see me last Saturday...”

“Jhanvi!” exclaimed Vicky, shocked.

Jhanvi looked at him in mock surprise. “What? It did not happen, right? That is what I am telling her.”

Tears streamed down Rathi’s face. It was only then that Jhanvi felt slightly better. She had hurt her. Just like she wanted to. She was relieved to see her in tears.

Niro dragged Jhanvi out of the coffee shop and this time, Jhanvi let her.

Jhanvi heard Vicky explain something to Rathi as they were leaving the shop. She could not make out what he was saying. Just before she was to exit the coffee shop, she looked back. Rathi was still crying.

Niro was saying something to her, but she wasn’t paying attention. Jhanvi wasn’t paying attention to anything sensible, still letting her fury control her senses.

A week later, Jhanvi found it hard to concentrate on what her English teacher was saying. It had been like that for the entire week. She had not been able to do any work or study. She could not even dance or sing. Thoughts zipped through her mind at the speed of light and nothing made any sense.

She had ignored Rathi completely through the week. And Rathi had returned the favour.

When the class bell rang, Jhanvi got up and pulled Niro outside the class. It was lunch time. The students left the classes in groups.

Niro and Jhanvi went to stand in the shade of the trees near their school block.

“So?” asked Jhanvi. “Did you talk to Varsha?”

Niro nodded. “I talked to her today morning.”

“And? What did you learn?” asked Jhanvi.

“They broke up.”

It was expected and yet it was shocking. Jhanvi said, “I cannot believe that idiot did not trust Vicky. If he was my boyfriend, I would not have doubted him in the least.”

“Rathi did not break up with him. He broke up with her.”

Jhanvi looked up at her in shock. “He did?”

“Yes. Guess Rathi showed more of her true colours than she had intended to.”

“Oh,” replied Jhanvi, her mind filled with questions about Vicky’s decision.

When she looked at Niro, Jhanvi was taken aback by the accusation in her eyes.

Jhanvi answered, “It is not my fault.”

“It is,” whispered Niro.

“Look, she was pretending to be someone else. He thought she was sweet and innocent. And lovely! Well...surprise!”

Niro continued to glare at Jhanvi.

“I am not the reason for their breakup. If not for me, it would be something or someone else. She could not keep pretending to be that nice, sweet girl always. Their relationship was bound to break. Her mask was bound to slip. He would have gotten to know about her true self way or the other. And, above all, she did not deserve him. Come on, you have to accept that. He was too good for her. She just did not deserve him.”

Niro sighed and looked at her pityingly as she replied, “The way you behaved...you don’t deserve him, either.”

The unexpected remark from her friend drove a knife through Jhanvi’s heart. Tears welled up in her eyes and her lips quivered. Her tears were less from grief and more from the realization that her friend’s statement was only the horrid truth. Tears made their way down her face as Niro put her arms around her to comfort her.

A Dinner Date

(Present Day)

It was Friday evening. Jhanvi yawned as she entered Dance Room with Naina.

Naina glared when she saw Jhanvi yawning. “The night is yet to start!”

Jhanvi yawned again as she nodded her head.

The pub was sparsely populated.

Naina turned to Jhanvi and said in an accusing tone, “Oh my God! There is no one here. We are so early. So early that it is almost disgraceful. You can’t come this early to a pub, Janu. Let’s go back and come later.”

Jhanvi took hold of Naina’s arm and led her inside. “Naina, I just want to have a nice dinner and some mocktails. I want to listen to some nice music, watch people dance and have a nice conversation with you. I also want to go home at a reasonable time and go to bed so I am fresh for tomorrow morning.”

Naina grimaced. “Yuck. You talk like an old lady.”

Jhanvi glared at Naina. “Do you want dinner or not?”

That seemed to silence Naina. She meekly followed Jhanvi.

They were seated at a table at the far end of the pub, overlooking the road. And very soon, they were nursing their drinks. Jhanvi had ordered herself a mocktail and Naina, a cocktail.

“I love this name. Sex on the beach!” exclaimed Naina, as she sipped her drink.

“That is why they have named it like that. So that people like you will buy it.”

“Drop it! You are still an old lady. Drinking mocktails! Ugh!” mocked Naina.

“Well, excuse me for being concerned about my health. Even things like medicines, which are marketed as good for

us, are actually poisons. They market liquor as poison itself and still the line for buying it has not reduced.”

“Oh, excuse me for wanting to live my life!”

“No. You don’t want to live. If you did, you would not be guzzling this poison now.”

Naina looked defeated. She grumbled, “See, this is why I don’t come out with you! You suck the fun out of everything.”

Jhanvi grinned and shook her head. “Never go out with your boss. God! When will you ever learn?”

Naina laughed. “Well, unfortunately, she is also my best friend. What to do?!”

The smile on Jhanvi’s face faded. She tensed as she leaned back in her chair.

“What?” asked Naina, looking at Jhanvi in confusion.

“Vicky just walked in with his friends.”

“Who Vicky? Your old flame?”

“No,” replied Jhanvi sharply. “Avantika’s boyfriend. That Vicky.”

“Aah! So your old flame!” Naina whipped around and asked, “Which one? Which one? There are like ten guys there.”

“Will you stop gawking at them?”

“Which one is Vicky?”

“Black t-shirt with a picture of a bull on it. Now, will you please stop looking?”

“Oh my God! That guy? With rippling muscles?”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes. “Seems like he outgrew his t-shirt. Poor thing! Looks like he can’t even afford to buy a bigger t-shirt,” she mocked, trying to lessen the rate at which her heart was thudding. It did not work.

“God! He is damn handsome!” gushed Naina, turning to Jhanvi.

Jhanvi was irritated by Naina's enthusiasm. "Oh, shut up!"

"If you are not interested, can I have him?"

Jhanvi glared at Naina. "You already have a boyfriend."

"So? Vicky also has a girlfriend. I am just looking for a one-night stand."

Jhanvi gritted her teeth. "You will be looking at my knuckles soon if you don't shut up."

Naina looked at her curiously and then smiled slowly. "Oooh! Jealous. Still in love?"

Jhanvi blushed. "Just shut up!"

"Oooh! Blushing, too."

Jhanvi buried her face in her hands. "God!"

"Okay, okay. Let's talk about something else," said Naina.

Jhanvi nodded. "Okay."

Excitement shining in her eyes, Naina asked, "What exactly happened between you two?"

Jhanvi glared at Naina again. "Is that talking about something else?"

Naina shrugged. "Well, yeah. I am not talking about our one-night stand, am I?"

"What one-night stand?"

Naina looked dreamy. "Something that is going to happen in the future."

Jhanvi asked sarcastically, "Oh really? Not tonight?"

Naina looked sad. "Nah! I thought I was just hanging out with you, so I did not dress properly. I will have to dazzle him some other night."

"His girlfriend is a model. I have never seen a more beautiful girl than her."

"So? Maybe he will see more than just skin-deep beauty."

Jhanvi said sarcastically, “Yeah, right. That is what guys usually look for—our sterling souls.”

Naina laughed.

Their starters arrived and they started to dig in. There were mini *parottas*, broccoli and cheese and *valappu vada*. Naina soon forgot all about Vicky as she devoured the appetizers.

“Oh my God! This is like awesome,” exclaimed Naina, as she chewed on a mini *parotta*. Jhanvi was not listening. She was looking at her drink and trying very hard not to look at Vicky.

The waiter came by and placed a couple of drinks on the table. Jhanvi looked at the waiter, surprised.

“We did not order them,” she said to the waiter.

“They are from that gentleman,” said the waiter, pointing to the table where Vicky was sitting with his friends. When she looked at him, Vicky acknowledged her with a nod and a barely concealed smile on his lips.

“Take it back,” said Jhanvi sharply to the waiter.

“Wait, wait,” exclaimed Naina, looking at Vicky and waving. Vicky smiled broadly at Naina as he waved back slightly.

The waiter went on, “He asked me to tell you that these are the best drinks here. He just wanted you to taste them.”

“I don’t care. Just take them back,” snapped Jhanvi.

The waiter looked undecided between Jhanvi and Vicky. However, seeing Jhanvi’s anger, he took back the drinks.

“You are an idiot!” exclaimed Naina.

Jhanvi snapped at her too, “Oh, shut up! First, he will send drinks. Then what? He will send us the key to his room?”

“He will?” asked Naina, her eyes widening in surprise. Hope was shining in them.

“No, he won’t,” replied Jhanvi as she buried her head in her hands. “My god! You are hopeless. Just ask for the bill. Let’s

go.”

“Hey! I have not finished eating.”

Jhanvi bit her lips and nodded. She had to wait till Naina finished her dinner. It was only a fair ask. And she could wait. There was no problem. She absolutely could.

Jhanvi felt excitement and nervousness clash at the bottom of her stomach as she waited for Naina to finish her dinner. She can wait. She can.

The waiter took the drinks back to Vicky’s table, where they were lost among the tens of drinks already placed on the table. Vicky picked up the drink, nodded at Jhanvi and took a sip.

Jhanvi looked away, promising herself to not look in that direction for the rest of the evening.

But no sooner had ten seconds passed when she looked at Vicky again. There was chaos at Vicky’s table. Everyone was talking and laughing. And even in the middle of such chaos, Vicky’s eyes stayed on her.

Jhanvi blushed and lowered her eyes. She tried her best to ignore him. But now that she knew he was looking at her, it was impossible to ignore him. Her eyes kept darting back to him every few seconds and his eyes seemed to never move away from her.

A few minutes later, Vicky got up. He had got a call. He stepped out of the pub to attend it.

Naina was still having her dinner. Jhanvi immediately called the waiter. “Can you bring us the drinks that you just got for us? I mean, I am ordering the drinks. Me. Not that guy. Understood?”

The waiter understood. He nodded and disappeared.

Naina scoffed at Jhanvi, who sheepishly explained, “Just curious about the best drinks here.”

Jhanvi’s eyes moved to the entrance. She realized that she was waiting for him to come back. She forced herself to look away and talk to Naina.

But she was too excited to have a normal conversation. Naina was telling her something about her boyfriend's new job but it was all falling on deaf ears. Jhanvi pretended to listen to Naina as she nodded and made the necessary sounds and gestures, but her mind was completely focused on the pub's entrance.

The waiter brought them their drinks.

“What drink is this?” asked Jhanvi.

“Tender coconut coriander lime mocktail,” replied the waiter as he placed the glasses on the table.

Jhanvi took a sip and grudgingly admitted that it indeed was the best drink she'd ever had. She wanted to finish the drink before Vicky came back into the pub. And much to Naina's chagrin, she urged Naina to do the same.

They finished their drinks. Naina was still talking about her boyfriend as she ate the remnants of her dinner. In the middle of the conversation, some unknown force made Jhanvi look at the entrance. At that exact moment, Vicky walked in. And he looked straight at her.

On catching his eye, she blushed and looked away.

Then, she hurriedly asked for the bill, paid and rushed out of the pub.

∞

Jhanvi headed back to her cubicle after the stand-up meeting. She was in a good mood. Avantika had just confirmed the reception for February 12th. Further, Avantika had paid the advance and blocked the entire resort for two days to accommodate their local guests and a few friends who were coming from Germany for the reception.

Also, Jhanvi had just learnt in the stand-up meeting that another enquiry had also finally materialized—a large conference that was to be held in another three months. All this had put Jhanvi in good humour.

Just as she sat in her cubicle, her phone started to ring. It was Avantika.

“Hey, good morning.”

“Good morning, Avantika,” replied Jhanvi, smiling.

“Jhanvi, I want to decide on the dinner soon. How is the food at Seaside Creek?”

“It is pretty good.”

“Well, that simplifies it. But I still want to check the food there.”

“Yes, that makes sense. If you don’t like it, we can use another caterer. I can convince Lavanya for the same. After all, we have booked the entire resort for two days. She will bend backwards to accommodate us.”

“That’s true. But it will be much easier if we go with Seaside Creek. I want to sample all the dishes there. So, I am thinking of having dinner there two or three times this week to decide the menu for the reception.”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

“Great. Free for dinner tonight?”

Jhanvi laughed. “Yes, Avantika.”

“Does eight work for you?”

“It works just fine. I will see you at the resort at eight.”

“Great. See you then.”

Jhanvi disconnected the call. Avantika was a sweet girl. She had no haughtiness that usually seemed to accompany models. She was pretty and yet down to earth. Jhanvi always felt good talking to her.

But she realized that that had changed recently. After Jhanvi found that Avantika was Vicky’s girlfriend, something seemed to be amiss. The usual banter was missing. The once warm feeling she had for her was now marred. Jhanvi grudgingly admitted to herself that she was jealous. Slightly jealous, that’s all. But jealous, nonetheless.

And now, every time Jhanvi interacted with Avantika, she found her heart contracting. Slightly. In pain. Jhanvi thought

that being in love was horrible. It made one compare themselves with others and unnecessarily pit them against each other. There was no doubt about it. Jhanvi had recently started to compare herself with Avantika, from what she thought was Vicky's point of view. And it was quite unfair. Not to Avantika. Only to herself. What was it about love that made one do this? They said love brought out the best version of a person. It seemed to Jhanvi that, till now, it had only brought out her worst.

She sighed and tried to brush off her unwanted feelings. Well. Vicky was never meant for her. There was no use thinking about it. There was no use feeling about him or for him. Jhanvi quickly resolved to never think about Vicky again. She was only going to work with Avantika and talk only to her. There was no reason for her to interact with Vicky and she was going to keep it that way. Anyway, even the interaction with Avantika was only till February 12th. She opened her calendar and counted the days left till February 12th. There was five more months. 145 days.

She sighed as she thought of Vicky. Her strict resolution to never think of Vicky had only lasted for a few minutes.



Later that evening, when Jhanvi studied the menu card at Seaside Creek, she knew it would take three to four dinners to sample and then figure out the best ones. That was what she had agreed with Avantika earlier too. But later, after talking to Lavanya, she was wondering if she could finish the sampling in just two dinners. They only needed to sample the dishes that were already in the shortlist. She mentally drew up a plan for the next two dinners, listing the dishes that she would order at each dinner to cover everything sufficiently.

“Hey, kid!”

Jhanvi looked up from the menu card with a jerk. It was Vicky. He was wearing a simple white shirt, neatly tucked into a dark blue jean. A musky cologne surrounded him. He looked simply smashing.

Jhanvi's heart raced. "Hey! I did not know you were also joining us."

"There is no 'also'. I am the only one joining you," stated Vicky as he took the seat opposite to Jhanvi.

The blood drained from Jhanvi's face. "Why? Where's Avantika?"

Vicky opened the water bottle placed on the table and filled his glass. He took a leisurely sip before he answered, "She got called on a modelling assignment at the last minute. It was too late for her to cancel this dinner, so she asked me to substitute."

Jhanvi narrowed her eyes at him. "And you happily did?"

Vicky laughed. "Well, I actually did not tell you the truth. She did not ask me, as I mentioned earlier. She begged me to. And I don't like girls begging. I generally give them what they are asking for."

Vicky's eyes twinkled and she did not miss him suppressing a smile.

Jhanvi blushed. She mumbled, "You are an idiot."

Vicky smiled broadly now and Jhanvi's heart summersaulted. His smile reminded Jhanvi why she was so attracted to him. He had a boyish naughtiness on his face. He smiled like he really enjoyed her company and like there was no other place in the world he would rather be. He made her feel warm and special.

Jhanvi reminded herself that he most probably made everyone feel the same. And yet she could not deny that there was a definite charm. A charm she was finding increasingly hard to resist.

Jhanvi offered him the menu. "Okay, let's get this over with quickly. What would you like to have? Or shall I order for you?"

Vicky took the menu from her and set it on one side of the table.

"Hey!" exclaimed Jhanvi.

He waved a finger at her and said, “Just one minute. Before we start our dinner, I would like to talk to you.”

“We can order first and then talk.”

“No!” he replied sharply. “Stop! Just stop! Just...take a pause, okay?”

Jhanvi sighed. Then, she mumbled, “Okay.”

“Let’s address the elephant in the room, first. Why are you so scared of me?”

Jhanvi gasped. “Scared? You think I am scared of you?”

“Well, yes. First, you did not want to acknowledge that we know each other. Then, you are trying to be as unfriendly as possible. You sent my drink back yesterday. I mean, what was that? I just wanted you to try that drink because I knew it was absolutely awesome. Was that wrong?”

“Yes. There was no need for you to send me a drink.”

Vicky rolled his eyes. “Are you angry that I did not personally come over and talk to you? Is that what that was?”

“What? No!”

“I was with my friends. One of my friends is getting married...”

“I am not angry about that. I did not, most definitely did not, expect you to come and talk to me. I just thought that there was no need for you to send me the drink. We hardly know each other.”

Vicky sighed. “Well, that is the stance we have been maintaining. Or, to put it more accurately, the stance that you want to maintain and are forcing me to follow suit. But you know that is not true.”

Jhanvi blushed. “Okay, maybe we know each other a tad bit more than we are acknowledging.”

“We know each other a *lot* more. I helped you when you had that accident. Or are you going to dismiss that too, like you did the incident about the drunk guys?”

Guilt stabbed at her heart. She reluctantly shook her head and grudgingly admitted, “No, I am not. You really did help me that day.”

“Okay, good. Now we are making progress. We are agreeing on something. And what about the rest?”

“What rest?”

“I proposed to you. And if I remember correctly, you accepted. Twice.”

Jhanvi flushed. “I so did not!”

“You did. Once at the pub and then in your home.”

Jhanvi put up her hand to stop him. She took a deep breath and said, “Okay, I was just angry with Rathi...and...and I did it what I did only to get back at her. Else, I would never have done it.”

Vicky shook his head very slowly. “Nooo... I do not remember it like that.”

Jhanvi snapped, “I don’t care what you remember. It did not happen that way. It was wrong from the beginning to the end. Can’t we just forget it and put everything behind us?”

“I did that until I ran into you.”

“Good. Continue doing it now.”

“You acknowledge it, and I will let it go.”

Jhanvi looked at Vicky. The impish smile was back on his face. God! The man was killing her.

Jhanvi sighed. “You are insufferable. How did you ever land up with a girl like Avantika?”

“Don’t change the subject,” said Vicky sharply.

Jhanvi surrendered. “Fine. I acknowledge. Everything that happened. You rescued me that day. You proposed to me, even though it was for the sake of an argument. And I accepted it. Twice. Happy?”

Vicky grinned. “Extremely. Now that we have agreed on that... Can we also agree on having a nice dinner? Like friends

catching up?”

“There is no catching up. Let’s have dinner and leave.”

Vicky looked like he just could not believe her. “See? Again! You are scared again.”

Jhanvi gritted her teeth. “I am not scared. You have to understand. You are Avantika’s boyfriend—my client’s boyfriend. I don’t want to have anything to do with you.”

“Just because we are having dinner, it does not mean I am going to dump her and come to you.”

Jhanvi gasped. “I never said that! I did not mean it like that at all. You are twisting...”

“Shut up!” said Vicky sternly. “I am trying to prove a point here. We agreed on what happened. We both have put it behind us. Now, we are going to be friends. I am willing to be friends with you because I am very confident that nothing is going to happen between us. Are you confident? Or are you scared that you will fall in love with me again?”

“I was never...!” gasped Jhanvi as she looked at Vicky, completely shocked.

She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. Then, she opened her eyes and looked at him accusingly. “You know something? It was all your fault! You don’t know what to talk with whom. That was the root cause of everything...”

“You are changing the subject again. I asked you a question. Answer that first! Are you scared that you will fall in love with me if we became friends?”

“Not a chance in hell,” shouted Jhanvi.

Vicky gave her an amused look. Then, he said, “Great. Now, calm down. We are going to have dinner as friends. Agreed?”

Jhanvi was trying hard to control her oscillating emotions. It took a few minutes before she felt more in control and nodded. “Fine.”

“And you will behave as if you mean it. No sharp comments. No frowning. No grimaces. Nothing. You will

behave like we are good friends. Understood?”

Unbeknownst to Vicky, Jhanvi was emotionally in a conflict. Her sharp comments, frowns and grimaces were what she used to mask her love for Vicky. A mask that kept her sane. How could she give it up? However, looking at his expectant expression, she gave up and nodded. “Fine.”

Vicky sighed and leaned back. “Thank God! You should try to understand. It is really hard for me not to be friends with someone.”

What a strange statement! How can one be friends with everyone? But she sensed that the revelation was sincere. She tried to imagine someone that Vicky could not get along with—like a co-worker or an ex-girlfriend. But try as she might, it was tough to even imagine Vicky not getting along with someone. She knew Vicky was telling her the truth.

Jhanvi briefly wondered what his equation with his ex-girlfriends was like. He probably still sent them flowers or messages for their birthdays and maybe even their weddings. She would definitely not put it past him. The thought made her chuckle.

“Aah! Finally! A laugh. The things I have to do to make you smile even that little!”

Jhanvi’s smile remained on her face.

She lifted the menu card again and said, “Can we place the order now? Am I allowed to do that?”

“Yes, please do. Are we going to order a lot of dishes?”

“Yeah... I was just thinking about that when you arrived. I can request Lavanya to give us only sample sizes of the dishes. That way, with less quantity, we’ll be able to cover more dishes.”

“Great. Talk to her; see if she can accommodate this request.”

Jhanvi got up and went to talk to Lavanya. Lavanya was very amiable and replied that she’ll talk to the chef and see what could be done.

When Jhanvi came back, Vicky smiled at her and asked, “Done?”

“Yeah. She is talking to the chef about it. Should not be a problem. I’ve placed the order too.”

“Good.”

There was silence for a few minutes. With nothing to do, Jhanvi took her glass of water and sipped from it slowly.

“So…” said Vicky suddenly.

“So?”

“So…” said Vicky, looking into her eyes. “How are you, Jaan?”

Jhanvi’s heart summersaulted. It was going to be difficult to just be friends with him. Very difficult. She gave him a half-hearted smile. “Great. You?”

He nodded. “I am great, too.”

“So? What have you been up to since we met eight years ago?”

“Well, I finished my Engineering. Then, I went to the US for my Masters. Then, I founded a startup. I ran it for three years, sold it for a filthy amount of money and came back to India.”

Jhanvi was impressed. “Oh wow! So, you are rich!”

He nodded. “Filthy rich.”

She smiled. “Nice! So, that means you will pay for dinner, right?”

He laughed. “Sure!”

“So, what are you doing now?” asked Jhanvi.

Vicky shrugged. “Taking a break. Looking for an idea for my next startup.”

“So…nothing. You are actually doing nothing?”

Vicky laughed. “Exactly!” He looked extremely handsome when he laughed. Did he know that?

Jhanvi laughed too. “Wow! You are searching for the next pot of gold!”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

“I never would have guessed you were so rich. By the way, if you are filthy rich, like you put it, why are you driving around on a bike? No flashy cars?”

“Well, just because I am rich, it does not mean I need to spend money. I use my money to do what makes me happy. I don’t have to do what others think I should do because I am rich. I have no template to follow. I love riding a bike. And I am still young. There is no way I am trading the freedom of a bike for a crappy, stuffy car.”

Jhanvi was impressed. “Hmm...interesting.”

“What about you? What have you been doing?”

“Well, I did my Bachelors in Science and then realized that it was not my calling. I enrolled for my Masters but then decided not to take it up. Instead, I started this event management company, and it is doing on fine as of now.”

“Oh! I am disappointed.”

Jhanvi’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? Why? You thought I’d do something in neuroscience?”

Vicky laughed as he shook his head. “No, no. But it is very strange that you should remember what you said to me eight years ago.”

Jhanvi lifted an eyebrow. “It was my ambition; I do remember it. What is stranger, however, is that you remember what I said!”

Vicky laughed again. There was a tinge of red on his cheeks as he said, “I...I really thought you would pursue dancing.”

Jhanvi frowned. “Why did you think that? Because you saw that one photo of mine?”

Vicky stuttered. “You...you looked really good in that. So, I thought you’d pursue it. So...what...have you given up dancing altogether?”

Jhanvi shook her head. “Kind of. But that’s a long story. But I do dance now and then...whenever I get time.”

Vicky looked at her sadly. “Do you like your work?”

“Oh, I love it! In college, one of my friends asked me to arrange a birthday party for another friend. I did it as a favour and realized I loved every bit of it. Several guests at that party also acknowledged that I had a real knack for it and I started getting a lot of requests. Initially, I did events for free. But then, I ended up not having enough bandwidth. And then, to my enormous surprise, people were ready to pay me for it. That is how it began...”

“Hmm... Awesome. Which part of your job do you like the most?”

Jhanvi thought for a while before she said, “I guess I am partial towards weddings. I mean...every girl dreams of her wedding, right? I have the skills and the resources to make those dreams a reality.”

“Okay, I have a question...”

“Yes?”

“But you have to answer honestly.”

“I will try.”

“Do you cry at weddings?”

“What? No!” said Jhanvi in high-pitched voice. “I get a little emotional once in a while...but that’s the extent of it.”

Vicky gave her a mocking smile. “There is nothing wrong with crying.”

“You know what?” started Jhanvi, intending to yell at him. But then, she decided not to.

She shook her head. “Leave it!”

“You said you will try to be honest,” Vicky reminded her

Jhanvi glared at him. But her anger was not able to sustain when she looked into his mischievous eyes.

She surrendered. “Okay, I accept... I’ve cried once. Once. That’s it!”

Vicky laughed. His smile was so heart-warming that Jhanvi forgot her anger and smiled.

“Okay, I have one more question,” said Vicky.

“No, no. No more questions.”

“Come on, be a sport. Event management or dance—which one do you love the most?”

Jhanvi was taken aback. It was not a question she had ever considered. “Hmm...I don’t know. I love them both...”

“Pick one.”

“Well, event management pays...”

“Forget the pay! Which one do you love doing the most?”

Jhanvi looked at him for a minute and then said, “Dance.”

Vicky looked at her thoughtfully. His fingers brushed his moustache lightly as it always did when he was deep in thought. Then he said, “I thought so.”

They were silent for a few moments. Their food arrived—chicken soup, veg patty, masala corn, lamb *seekh* kebab, grilled basa, and tomato grilled paneer. Everything looked extremely appetizing. Jhanvi’s mouth watered and she realized that she was very hungry. Jhanvi looked up to ask Vicky to start and saw that Vicky’s eyes had never left her.

Her heart skipped a beat.

She murmured, “Let’s start. You will have to give Avantika your opinion...”

Vicky picked up a spoon and tasted the chicken soup. But he looked like he was thinking deeply about something. Jhanvi wanted to shake him up and bring him back to the present. He needed to be present to properly taste the food. How was he ever going to give his feedback to Avantika otherwise?

But before Jhanvi could say anything, Vicky said, “You know something? Till date, you are the only girl I have ever

proposed to.”

“Till date, you are the only guy whose proposal I have accepted,” Jhanvi blurted. She flushed. She had not meant to say that. How stupid of her! How incredibly stupid of her!

Then, recovering from her embarrassment, she continued, “Not that your proposal or my acceptance of the same has any meaning...”

“I know...I know...it meant nothing.”

“Absolutely nothing,” said Jhanvi, and looked at her plate.

Jhanvi bit her lip. Why was it that they always ended up saying exactly the things that they should not say to each other? What was going on between them?

As if to answer her own question, Jhanvi chided herself, reminding herself that he had a girlfriend. An absolutely awesome girlfriend. A girlfriend who Jhanvi was becoming increasingly jealous of.

“I should have told you this before... I have a boyfriend.”

“Yeah?” he asked, surprised.

Jhanvi nodded. “Yeah. He is amazing.”

“What does he do?”

“He is a pilot. Six foot two inches tall and very handsome.”

God! Is that all you could come up with? Tall and handsome? Very believable, Jhanvi! Very believable!

But it seemed to be believable to Vicky. He nodded. “Hmm... He sounds like a dream come true.”

“He is. He is,” replied Jhanvi, nodding vigorously.

There was silence for a few minutes. The main course arrived – *paneer butter masala*, *dal makhani*, chicken curry and butter *naan*.

They finished their dinner. The waiter came back with the bill and as promised, Vicky paid for the dinner.

“How was the food?” asked Jhanvi.

“Everything was absolutely smashing. I especially liked the lamb *seekh kebab* and tomato grilled *paneer*. *Paneer* butter *masala* is a given. You can’t have a wedding without *paneer* butter *masala* on the menu. The chicken curry was amazing too. I am assuming they will serve the same quality at the reception too. I mean...given that the quantity will be huge.”

“It will. I told Avantika that the food is awesome here. This is a new resort, right? Lavanya goes the extra mile to make sure everything is perfect.”

“I will give Avantika my feedback about the food. She’d definitely want to come back again for another dinner. I think there are a few more dishes that she wanted to try.”

“You know what? I will ask Lavanya to set up a candlelit dinner near the creek. You both can have a nice, romantic dinner here.”

Jhanvi’s heart contracted as she said the words. But she put on a brave, happy face for Vicky. She did not know if she managed to fool him because he looked at Jhanvi strangely. Jhanvi could not read into his expressions. What was he thinking?

He slowly nodded, “Okay.”

Jhanvi got up from the table.

“Shall we leave?” she asked when she Vicky was still seated and looked thoughtful.

Vicky nodded and got up. “Yeah, yeah. Sorry, I zoned out for a minute.”

They walked to the parking area together.

“Do you need company till you reach home?” asked Vicky, as she reached her bike.

“Why? Where are you staying? Are you still put up near my house?”

“No, no. I moved from there. I am currently in the opposite direction actually. Do you want to know where I live?” he asked smiling.

Jhanvi rolled her eyes. “Probably in a large castle, near the blue sea, rolling clouds in the sky, and surrounded by a large, pretentious garden and a big swimming pool.”

Vicky looked thoughtfully as he nodded. Then, he said, “Well, yeah! How did you know?”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes again. “Just a random guess.”

“I have a house on ECR. Facing the sea.”

“Of course. Where else will you be? But it is in the opposite direction. So, don’t strain yourself. I can manage.”

“It’s late. I don’t want drunks following you.” He was genuinely concerned. He was not faking it.

“It’s fine. I am not a child. I can manage on my own.”

Vicky smiled. “Also, you know karate.”

Jhanvi laughed. “Exactly. I can take care of myself. I will see you later. Bye.”

“Bye. Good night.”

“Good night,” called out Jhanvi as she started her bike. On her way back, she recalled their conversation several times over. She went over his expressions again and again. There was something missing. Something was not right. But try as she might, she could not put her finger on it. Maybe, it only appeared to her that way because she was becoming jealous of Avantika. Maybe it was because she could not help being possessive of Vicky. Jhanvi scoffed at herself. To be possessive, one must possess in the first place. What a waste of energy thinking about the entire situation!

Jhanvi was about to enter into her apartment complex, when she noticed a bike approximately a hundred meters behind her. She stopped her bike and turned. She would have sworn it was Vicky. But by the time, she could make out who it was, the bike took a U-turn and left.

Wedding Decorations

The standup over, Jhanvi waited till the team dispersed from the conference room and only Naina stayed behind.

Jhanvi sat in her chair with a big sigh.

“What’s with the sighing?” asked Naina, sitting in a chair next to Jhanvi.

“We have Gayathri’s wedding reception this Friday at Seaside Creek, right?”

“Yeah. And everything is ready. But if you are worrying about the photographer...”

“No, no. It’s not that. I am inviting Avantika to the reception. Just for her to get an idea of the decorations and the dinner service.”

“Okay. So? Why are you so sad?”

Jhanvi looked thoughtfully at her fingernails. They were perfectly painted in a deep maroon colour. Then, she looked up sadly at Naina and sighed again.

Naina was surprised to see Jhanvi in such a state. “What is the matter, Janu?” she asked with concern.

“She is insisting on Vicky accompanying her.”

“Okay. So?”

Jhanvi almost wailed. “Well, it’s not fair. I don’t want to see him. I don’t want to talk to him. I don’t want to have anything to do with him.”

Naina frowned. “Why not?”

“Oh, come on! I used to have some really serious feelings for this guy. It’s weird, okay?”

“Do you have to be so sad for ‘weird’?”

“It’s just that...I am trying very hard to prove to him that I am over him. That he means nothing to me. And that effort stresses me bad. Last week I had dinner with this guy...and...and...”

“It turned out to be horrible?”

Jhanvi shook her head and said softly, “No, it turned out to be fantastic.”

“Oh!”

“I didn’t want it to be fantastic. I’d promised myself that I was going to be miserable and make him miserable for good measure. But...but he has a way of disarming you. The guy is charming and sweet... Aaah! I hate that guy! Why couldn’t he be something other than what he is?”

Naina looked at Jhanvi sadly but did not say anything.

Jhanvi zoned out for a minute before she continued, “I mean, last week, I arranged a candlelight dinner for Avantika and Vicky at Seaside. You know that setting, right? Overlooking the backwaters?”

“Oh yeah! That is so damn romantic.”

“Exactly. I arranged it for them, and I kept imagining them there...where the moon shines on the water...where the lights are dim and marvellous...where a gentle music from the reception wafts in... Oh God! It is driving me crazy. Save me, Naina!”

“Oh, you poor, poor girl,” replied Naina, leaning over to give Jhanvi a hug.

Jhanvi sighed again in Naina’s arms.

Naina patted Jhanvi’s head. “These good-looking creatures have no idea what we go through. You cannot let loose a handsome boyfriend on us if we cannot have him.”

Jhanvi moved away from Naina and buried her face into her hands.

Naina said, “Come on, Jhanvi. Let it out of your system. Say it. Say everything that you are feeling deep down.”

Jhanvi looked at Naina and frowned. Then she said, “Deep down?”

Naina nodded looking at her expectantly.

“Okay. Okay, I will tell you. Vicky is smoking hot! So, so, so hot! And he is not just handsome...he is charming with a wonderful sense of humour. He is caring, thoughtful...and... and just Goddamn perfect! That guy has... What do you say? Half-hooded eyes...yes! That make him look like he can see deep inside a person’s soul. And that look is perpetually there. When he looks at me like that, I just cannot handle it. Like that time when we were in the pub. I saw him looking at me and I just lost it! Every time I sense his eyes on me, I flip. And it is even worse when I am with him. I don’t know what I am thinking. I don’t know how to behave. I forget to how a normal human being behaves. I forget everything when I am with him. I get so confused. And I cannot believe Avantika is unleashing him on me! Me! Me, a girl who already said yes to this handsome hunk when he fake-proposed to me! Twice! I said yes twice!”

Naina was silent for a few moments. Then, in a low voice, she said, “Oh wow! I did not expect there was so much stuff deep down. Are you feeling better now?”

Jhanvi winced as if in pain. “Not one tiny bit.”

Naina hesitatingly said, “Seems like you are still in love with him then.”

“I was not before I met him a couple of weeks back.”

“And now?”

Jhanvi looked at Naina and shook her head. “I don’t know. The most horrible thing is that Vicky insists we remain friends. It is sheer torture, you know? How can I be friends with a guy who looks like that?! How can I be friends when my heart flips every time I see him? How can I behave normally when I see Vicky and Avantika together? When I see them together, it breaks my heart all over again. Into tiny, tiny, little.... Aaargh!”

“Oh my God! Okay, look. I will handle Avantika from now on. Do yourself a favour and move away from this project. I will take it up from now on. You don’t have to meet either of them.”

Jhanvi, with a pained look on her face, shook her head. “She will never agree. Avantika will never agree to that. And what will Vicky think? He will guess what is happening and I don’t want that either. I don’t want him to know how he affects me.”

A few moments of silence later, Jhanvi sighed and leaned on Naina’s shoulder again. “Save me, Naina,” she whispered.

Naina sighed too and patted her on the head. Other than sighing with her, there was nothing else she could do.



It was a warm evening. Jhanvi was standing in the lawn looking over the crowd slowly trickling in. She was dressed in a simple maroon *kurta* over golden bottoms. She always picked clothes that were fancy and yet allowed easy movement. She had accessorized her outfit with long earrings, one of her guilty pleasures, a fancy nose ring with stones, and had tied her hair in a chic braid. As an event manager, she needed to dress up for the occasion but also get the job done.

The sun had set but daylight still lingered. The bride and groom were still getting ready.

The lights went up in the resort. A bright light lit up the stage. Red chairs with a golden backrest were arranged in rows in front of the stage. Roses, chrysanthemums, freesia and marigold were used to decorate the stage elaborately. Rose petals were strewn on the carpet leading from the edge of the lawn up to the stage.

A soft music played. There were a few stalls along the backwaters, giving out cotton candy, popcorn and ice lollies. Kids were lining up at the stalls as their parents, who were seated in the lawn, were served fresh juices and hot beverages.

But Jhanvi was not taking in any of this. Her mind was going over the things that needed to be done. But above all, she was thinking about Vicky and his imminent arrival with Avantika.

Naina, dressed in a pink dress, came over to her, grinning.

“Hey Janu!”

“How is Gayathri’s makeup coming along?”

Naina rolled her eyes. “Jeez! Will you just relax? I just checked on her ten minutes ago. Everything is on time. She will be ready on time.”

“What about the photographer? He said he wanted to get some shots before Gayathri and Vedanth came on stage.”

“The photographer is waiting outside their rooms. And furthermore, our entire team is here. Seriously Janu. Relax. Sit down for some time and enjoy the music.”

Naina pointed to a chair, but Jhanvi ignored her. Her eyes moved to the entrance.

Naina asked, “Who are you expecting?”

“No one,” she replied a little too quickly. Then, she said, “I will go and check up on dinner.”

“Can’t you stay still for a moment?”

Jhanvi shook her head. “Absolutely not. I will go crazy if I stand still.”

At just that moment, Vicky and Avantika walked in. Jhanvi forgot about checking on dinner. She stood frozen as she watched them cross the distance to where she was standing.

Vicky was dressed in a regal, dark blue *kurta* with beige pants. And Avantika was dressed in a long, dark blue *kurta* with an intricately designed golden dupatta.

“My God! Will you look at him?” hissed Naina.

“I know! Why the hell does he have to dress up like that to just check the decorations? He is dressed as if Gayathri is his sister.”

“They both look good together,” blurted Naina.

Jhanvi turned and looked at Naina with a shocked expression.

Naina looked embarrassed. “I am...I am kidding, of course. They look horrible together. Absolutely horrible.”

She was rescued from the faux pas as the objects of their observation reached them.

Avantika beamed at Jhanvi. “Hey, Jhanvi! The decor looks awesome.”

Jhanvi smiled at both of them. “I am glad. Did you take a look at the floaters on the backwaters?”

“Yes, we did. Looks really really good. Can I check on dinner now?”

Naina looked at Jhanvi’s pale face and stepped in. “Yes. Please come with me.”

Vicky said, “Actually, why don’t you just take Avantika? I want to talk to Jhanvi about something. Go ahead, Avantika. I will join you in ten minutes.”

Avantika nodded. Naina’s eyes moved to Jhanvi, who looked back at her. There was nothing either of them could do.

“Sure,” replied Naina, as she led Avantika away.

Vicky turned to Jhanvi and smiled at her. “You look good.”

Jhanvi flushed. “Thank you. I...I have some work to do.”

“Oh, come on. Hang around with me for a few minutes. And then, I will let you leave.”

Jhanvi nodded reluctantly.

Vicky asked, “I forgot to ask you the other day. Do you stay alone in Ashok Colony? Or are you staying with someone?”

“Alone. My mother has gone to the US for an assignment,” replied Jhanvi.

Vicky’s face brightened up. It was then that Jhanvi understood that what Vicky had really been checking on was if she was living in with that pilot boyfriend of hers. She had completely forgotten about that nice little lie she had fabricated for Vicky. She cursed herself. She should have told him she was staying with her boyfriend! What a missed opportunity!

Vicky asked, “Oh really? For how long?”

“Two years.”

“Two years?” asked Vicky, shocked.

“Hey, I am a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“No, no...it’s not that...”

“You believe that we both are the only two people in the family and so, we should stay together.”

“Well...yeah.”

“Don’t worry. We keep flying to and fro. In fact, we are closer than ever now.”

“Oh nice.”

“She’s started dating too, you know.”

“What?” asked Vicky, astonished.

“Yeah. Just after I started Evergreen, she began to date. It was like her responsibilities were over. She is enjoying her life.”

Vicky laughed. “Ha ha! That’s cool.”

“Yeah. When I was in school, she was this super strict mom. Once I started my own company, she just let go of me. We became good friends. She became cool after all her responsibilities were over.”

“But she still has one more major responsibility.”

“Yeah, I know. To get me married. But we are chilling right now. We are dating and exchanging horror stories... And we are more like sisters now. It’s fun. When mothers are fun, the mother-daughter relationship becomes fun.”

“Both dating? I thought you had a boyfriend...”

Jhanvi mentally kicked herself. “I mean...yeah, he is my boyfriend...but we are not steady yet.”

“You guys are not serious?”

“No, not serious.”

“So, you can date other people?”

“Not right now. But we are not committed or anything...”

“Oh!”

“What about your parents?” asked Jhanvi, eager to deflect the conversation away from her fake pilot boyfriend.

“Well, they have moved to a retirement community in Kodaikanal.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yeah... A lot of their friends moved, too. They are having a blast there.”

Jhanvi was amazed. “Really?”

“Yeah. And they don’t want to come back now. They do a lot of things together and with people their age group, so they are generally having a lot of fun.”

“Nice. Company makes all the difference.”

“Very true.”

Jhanvi looked at Vicky. The sun had set and lights in the lawn reflected beautifully on his face.

A popular, evergreen, peppy Tamil song played somewhere in the distance. “*Andha Arabic kadal oram...*” Jhanvi sighed. It was a perfect moment. What would she not give to be with him?

“I have to go now...”

Vicky fixed his gaze on her. Jhanvi’s heart flipped. But try as she might, she could not break eye contact. She wanted to look away but couldn’t...

He asked softly, “Do you?”

Jhanvi flushed. Goosebumps erupted on her hand. She whispered, “Yes. I am sorry. Will you be alright by yourself?”

Vicky looked deep into her eyes as he shook his head. “No, I won’t. Stay with me.”

Complete yearning took over her. What would she not give to stay with him? Not just now, but for ever and ever.

She looked at him helplessly. “Vicky...”

Vicky sighed and looked away, breaking eye contact. She felt like the ropes that were binding her to him were suddenly gone.

“Fine. Go!” he said, without looking at her.

Jhanvi turned and left, her heart thudding vehemently against her rib cage.

∞

Late at night, Jhanvi sat for a while near the backwaters. The reception was a grand success. There were some minor hiccups but nothing that Jhanvi and her team could not handle. She was relieved that it was finally over. All the guests had left.

She had avoided Vicky and Avantika for the rest of the evening. She left it to Naina to take care of Avantika. Anyway, she had too many things to look into for the reception.

She was hungry. She wanted to go and get her dinner, but her feet were hurting. She had been on her feet from three o'clock in the afternoon and the prolonged stress was now starting to take a toll on her. She pulled another chair, put her feet up and leaned back. God, she was tired.

“Dinner?”

Jhanvi's eyes shot open. It was Vicky and he was holding a plate. He put it on the table. “They were closing the counters. Naina told me you have not had your dinner yet.”

“Yeah...” replied Jhanvi, taking her feet off the chair and sitting properly. “Is this for me?”

“Yeah.”

Jhanvi was touched that he had thought of her. She was so moved that she was afraid she might cry. She mumbled, “Thank you. Did you have dinner?”

“Yeah. I had dinner earlier with Avantika.”

“Where is she?”

“She is with Naina. By the way, great show tonight.”

Jhanvi took a morsel of the *phulka*, dipped it in the *paneer* butter *masala* and put it into her mouth. It tasted amazing. She closed her eyes to savour the taste. “Tastes amazing...”

Vicky looked at her and nodded. “Looks like you are really hungry. You should eat a bit here and there. Maybe a dessert or a starter. Why do you have to starve like this?”

Jhanvi smiled. “This is the second time you are getting dinner for me.”

Vicky laughed. “I know. I remember it very well.”

Jhanvi spent the next few minutes concentrating on her dinner. Vicky sat nearby, looking out into the backwaters. Silence held the fort between the two.

After having finished her dinner, Jhanvi finally felt sated and happy. Pleasure shot through her body as she leaned back in her chair.

“Thank you again for getting me dinner.”

Vicky nodded, still looking at the backwaters. “You missed the cake. It was really good.”

“Yeah. A lot of people nowadays insist on cutting cake at weddings. It is not a part of our tradition, but I guess it is fun to do.”

Jhanvi found herself a lot more willing for a conversation, now that she had some food in her.

“What about our rituals? Are people following them or are we moving away from them?” asked Vicky.

“Oh! We are doing everything. Weddings are more of a family project. They all get together and do it, right? So, none of our rituals get missed. Only new ones like the cake cutting get added. Hardly any subtractions.”

“Hmm...”

“Most of our traditions are carried forward generation after generation. They become rituals that we have to do long after

the original purpose of why they are performed is lost. People insist on performing them despite that.”

Vicky nodded, looking at her thoughtfully. Then, he frowned and asked, “Like?”

“Ummm...like seeing the Arundhathi stars. You know that tradition, right? I think it is very common in South Indian tradition. After the wedding, the groom and the bride go outside to see the twin stars. They say it is because they both should circle each other like those stars. Our entire life should revolve around the other person...that we should work in tandem...always and forever.”

“It sounds pretty great. I think that should be continued.”

Jhanvi looked at him exasperated. “Oh, come on. Really? When it was started, weddings must have always been done at night, when the stars were actually visible. Just imagine... The bride and groom looking at the twin stars together in the night sky and promising to be with each other just like those stars. It must have been so romantic. But weddings are done in broad daylight now!”

Vicky laughed and shook his head. “I beg to differ. The tradition might be altered but it still carries a significant ritual...something very important to our society even now.”

Jhanvi gave him a sarcastic look. “Really? How is that?”

“The guy shows the girl stars during daylight. The girl pretends to see them too. It is a very important tradition. It is like the boy saying, ‘I can lie like hell and you have to agree with me. If I say I see stars during the day, you have to pretend to see them too.’ The girl agreeing is like saying, ‘Of course. I will always have your back. You go ahead and lie!’ The reverse is also true. Anyone can lie about anything in public and the other should always have their back.”

Jhanvi shook with laughter on hearing his observation.

Vicky grinned as he continued, “The tradition underlines the importance of one accepting everything that a spouse says. ‘There are a couple of stars visible in broad daylight.’ ‘Absolutely. I can see them very well.’ Now that is like

training. That marks the beginning of your life together as a married couple. Like I said...a very important ritual.”

Jhanvi couldn't control her laughter.

Vicky laughed too and said, “See? Traditional ritual, modern application. You cannot beat that!”

“My God! You are...you are...”

“Awesome?”

“Scared! You have given too much thought to the entire concept of marriage. You are scared of commitment.”

“Let me put you at ease there. I have no problems committing to a girl. No problems at all.”

“Oh really?” Jhanvi asked, not believing that declaration.

“Yes,” replied Vicky, seriously.

Jhanvi stopped laughing. “Oh!”

Vicky looked at Jhanvi. Jhanvi managed to smile and said, “Congrats. I am very happy for you.”

Vicky nodded. “Thank you.”

Later, Jhanvi could hardly recall how the rest of the evening went by.



When Jhanvi was finally back on her bed, she felt extremely uncomfortable. She felt an unease that was hard to define but felt like something huge had settled in the pit of her stomach.

“They both look good together.”

Jhanvi's unrest grew. It was as if she needed to put in a lot of effort to just breathe. She took deep breaths trying to control the uneasiness.

“I have no problems committing to a girl. No problems at all.”

She felt suffocated, so she began to pace the room. *Stop thinking about Vicky! Stop thinking about Avantika. Stop it! Save yourself!*

The image of both of them, dressed like a bride and a groom, walking towards her conjured up in her mind. She closed her eyes but unfortunately, she was able to see them even more clearly because of her closed eyes.

“Get lost! I hate you both!” she said aloud, not able to take her mind off of them.

She was reminded of when, earlier in the evening, Vicky laughed at something Avantika said as they made their way to her. Her eyes were gleaming. His laughter was mesmerizing. They did look like the perfect couple.

Unable to hold it in any longer, she ran to the bathroom and puked.

The Beach

Jhanvi was walking on the beach. She was alone. She was carrying her slippers in her hand as she walked over the waves. The sea breeze was abundant and was whipping her hair into a mess. But she was grateful for the breeze that felt like a balm on her heart. Her heart seemed to be in excruciating pain.

It took some time for her to acknowledge that her heart was hurting. It was not supposed to be in pain. She was unhappy with her heart for behaving the way it was. She was not supposed to be emotionally invested in Vicky. She was not supposed to fall in love with him yet again. She was not supposed to give him the power to break her heart all over again.

She sighed. It took great strength for her to accept that all these things had happened. She was unhappy about the way things had turned out. Why did she have to meet him again if he was not meant for her? Unconsciously, she had taken meeting him again as a sign from the heavens that Vicky was, indeed, made for her. But unfortunately, it was just a cruel twist of fate. Maybe a punishment for something she had done. What had she done to deserve such severe punishment? She could only think of one thing—her cruel behaviour towards Rathi.

Jhanvi burned with guilt. She had broken Rathi's heart. She broke Vicky's heart too. He had been genuinely in love with Rathi at that time. Maybe this was payback for her mistakes. Maybe she had to have her heart broken twice for she had broken two hearts then.

But she never expected the same person to break her heart twice. God! How much power did Vicky have over her? He had not done anything to encourage her and yet she had fallen so much in love with him. She had fallen in love with him knowing fully well that he had a girlfriend. What a lousy loser was she!

And now he was going to propose to Avantika. The thought burned in her head. The accompanying emotions raged in her heart.

Her phone rang. It was Avantika. And suddenly, she was seized by a terrible thought. What if Avantika was calling her to ask her to be the wedding planner for their wedding? Jhanvi trembled at the thought.

She would not be able to refuse, if that really was the case. And yet planning that wedding would be the death of her. She would kill herself before she could do that. *No! No! Oh God no!*

She closed her eyes and prayed for a few seconds that Avantika did not request her to do that.

“Oh God, please! I will do anything. Just not that!”

“Hey Avantika,” greeted Jhanvi, her voice shaking. She hoped Avantika did not notice how her voice was shaking.

“Hi Jhanvi. Anisha and the wedding entire party from Germany has booked their tickets. I have emailed them to you. A few of them are staying for a week. Can you see that they have accommodations as per their flight plans? I would like them to be put up at Seaside Creek only for the entire duration their stay.”

“Sure,” replied Jhanvi, relieved. “Of course.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure they don’t want to visit any other place during their stay?”

“Nah! They just want to visit Mahabalipuram, Chidambaram, Pichavaram and Pondicherry. They don’t have any other plans. Just these one-day trips. They can always come back to Chennai.”

“Okay.”

“Great. Thanks, Jhanvi. See you later.”

“Bye.”

As soon as Jhanvi disconnected the call, she realized she was exhausted. All this was depleting her mentally. She walked away from the waves and sat down on the sand.

She had hardly been there for a few minutes, when she got a call from Vicky.

Her heart raced yet again. A nervous excitement filled her system. She cursed herself.

“Hey Vicky!”

“Hey Jaan!”

Jhanvi flushed. How she hated him for the hold he had over her! One word and she was floored. How pathetic was she!

“Where are you? Are you busy?” he asked.

“I am actually on a break. I am at the beach.”

“Oh! Where exactly?”

“I don’t know... I parked at Neelankarai and started to walk...” Jhanvi looked around, trying to figure out where she was. “I don’t know. I just walked north.”

“Any buildings nearby?”

“There is an old, red building.”

“With an old man’s face painted on it?”

“Yeah! How did you know?”

“You are close to my house. Just wait there. I will be there in ten minutes.”

“Hey! Hold on, hold on. Why? Why are you coming here?”

“Why not? Are you with someone?”

“No...but...”

“Ten minutes then,” he said and disconnected the call.

Jhanvi swore.

Vikranth Warriar! The guy seemed to be perpetually coming up with new methods of torture for her. She cursed him again.

And yet, she was aware that her hands were trembling from the excitement and anticipation.



Jhanvi tried unsuccessfully to clean the sand sticking to her legs. Then, she quickly retrieved her compact from her purse and checked her face. Her hair was a complete mess. And her face was sunburnt and all her makeup was gone too.

She was about to pick up her comb when she reminded herself that there was no need for her to look good for him. Just because he was coming, why was she supposed to look presentable? He meant nothing to her. There was no need for her to take the pains to look good for him.

She sat for a few minutes without doing anything. She just waited, looking back every few seconds, wondering how long he would take.

There were hardly any people around. About a hundred metres away from her were a few boats shored up on the beach. A few kids were playing near the boats. There was a dog snoozing in the warm sand. Other than that, there was not a soul in sight.

Then, when she finally saw someone come towards her, her heart jumped. But it was someone else. She cursed Vicky as she took out her compact and did quickly fixed her hair and makeup.

She was just in time because she saw Vicky walking towards her the moment she was done. He waved at her before he plopped next to her.

“What are you doing here all alone?”

Jhanvi pointed to the dog. “I am keeping that dog company.”

Vicky laughed. Then, he stretched his legs and leaned on his hands. “Today is a nice day, isn’t it?”

“Why are you here?”

“Well, I was getting bored at home. I just wanted to spend some time with you. Why? Can’t I do that?”

“Well, no!” replied Jhanvi, frowning.

“Oh, come on. We are friends. And it was an easy choice. On one hand, getting bored at home. On the other hand, spending time with a beautiful girl on the beach. It is hardly a brain-teaser.”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes but did not reply. She looked at the sea for a few moments.

Then, she turned back to him. “Proposed to her yet?”

Vicky frowned. “Proposed? Whatever gave you the idea that I was going to do that?”

“But...but you said...”

Vicky shook his head. “I don’t know what I said but I have no intention of proposing.”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean ‘why not’? Do you think it is easy? Proposing is not easy. Girls will never know how difficult it is!”

“Girls propose, too.”

“A very low percentage. Have you proposed to anyone?”

“No, I have not. But you have. Very easily. I remember it very well.”

“I have never proposed marriage to a girl other than you.”

Jhanvi flushed and looked back at the water.

After a moment’s pause, Vicky continued, “It was so easy to propose to you. It kind of came naturally.”

Jhanvi smiled in spite of herself. “Hmm... Am I supposed to be flattered or insulted?”

Vicky shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Jhanvi nodded. “Both, I guess. Flattered because I am the only girl you have ever proposed to. And insulted because it

was a joke.”

“No. Flattered because you are the only girl it was so easy to propose to. And insulted because... Well, I can't think of any reason why you should be insulted.”

“Hmmm.”

“Yeah. In fact, I always wanted to ask you this. Why exactly did you accept my proposal?”

Jhanvi flushed. “Hey, look, it is not my fault. My father was missing. I yearned for a man's affection. You were there...you helped me, took care of me. I could not take it. I was a teenager with raging hormones, okay? And I...I fell in love with you. It was stupid, I know. But it was all because of daddy issues. You can check with my psychiatrist. She explained it all so well to me.”

Vicky looked at her, squinting slightly as the sunlight fell directly into his eyes. “You saw a psychiatrist?”

“Yes. A long time ago. But we are still in touch. I can give you her number. You can check.”

“You went to a psychiatrist because of me?”

“I did not go to her because of you! God! Talk about vanity!” she said, shaking her head. “I went only because I had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that I sabotaged my friend's relationship. That was all.”

Vicky was silent for a few minutes. Then, he shrugged. “Well, I was way too caring. I still am way too caring.”

“Yeah. Why the hell is that?” asked Jhanvi, glaring at him in accusation.

Vicky was taken aback. “Hey! Are you accusing me of being too caring?”

“No, but it is wrong to be so caring of an unknown girl. Especially when you have a girlfriend. Why the hell were you so caring? *Can I carry you? Can I bring your cycle back? Is your leg hurting? Here, I got dinner for you. I got that girl here so you can put on mehandi!* What the heck was all that?”

Vicky sat up straight and looked at Jhanvi. “Oh, I am sorry, I guess... I did not know I’d have to apologize for being too caring.”

“You know what I mean,” snapped Jhanvi, glaring at him again.

Vicky nodded with a reluctance. “I do. I don’t know why I was so bothered about you that day. You looked pretty. You looked like a lost kitten. You looked like you needed help. And I just wanted to make myself useful. That was all. Just male chivalry.”

“You and your stupid chivalry. I hope you have learnt your lesson. You cannot go and help some random girl without being asked, okay? Look what you did! You broke my heart.”

“Are you still...”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes and scoffed. “You wish!”

Vicky sighed. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Jhanvi looked away. Had he sighed? Had he just sighed? Why the hell would he do that? That idiot! He was playing with her heart. That was what he was doing.

And what was she doing? The horror. She was letting him. What was the need to tell him she’d fallen in love with him then? There was absolutely no need. All she had to do was maintain that she did it because she wanted to get back at Rathi. Was that so difficult?

She got up. “I am leaving.”

Vicky got up too. “Why?”

“I have some work to do. And you are not here with an agenda.”

“How do you know that?” he asked, as he got up and dusted off the sand.

“You have not been talking about anything specific.”

Vicky shook his head. “No, I have an agenda. And I learned something quite valuable today.”

“Really? Like what?”

“As of now, I would like to keep it to myself.”

They began to walk, silent for a few moments. Then, Jhanvi looked at him from the corner of her eyes. “Come on! Tell me what did you learn?”

Vicky laughed. “That you are brutally honest. And I like that.”

They had almost reached where Jhanvi’s bike was parked. Jhanvi waved at him. “Bye, Vicky.”

“I mean it. Thank you for talking to me. Actually, thank you for blurting out a lot of things to me,” he said.

“Bye.”

“It’s so easy with you. All I have to do is ask a few questions and you spill you heart out. Are you like that with just me or with everyone?”

Jhanvi got on to her bike and said, “Get lost, will you?”

“Aaw! You still look like a lost kitten to me. It’s so adorable.”

Jhanvi glared at him. “Do I look adorable even now?” she snapped.

Vicky grinned. “Extremely.”

“Go to hell! I am not talking to you.”

“You don’t have to. You already told me everything I wanted to know.”

“Bye. Just do me a favour. When you get married, don’t come to me.”

“Where else will I go?”

“I don’t know. And I don’t care. If you let Avantika come to me for planning your wedding, I will make sure you both never get married.”

Vicky grinned. “I know you are quite capable of doing that. If only you had the sense to keep your mouth shut about it though.”

“I am serious! Don’t let her come to me,” she said starting her bike.

“You are the one who will be planning my wedding. There is absolutely no doubt about that.”

“I will kill you! I am warning you. Now, get lost. Bye,” said Jhanvi as she drove away.

Vicky grinned as he looked at Jhanvi driving away.

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Jhanvi was sitting in the reception area at Seaside Creek along with Lavanya, having a steaming cup of coffee. They were looking at some of the photos of a recent wedding held in the resort, when Vicky and Avantika walked in.

“Jhanvi! You are here?”

“Hey Avantika,” said Jhanvi. Her eyes moved to Vicky. He was looking at her with amusement. She nodded at him in greeting. “Vicky. Yes, I was just talking to Lavanya about a few arrangements. After that, we decided to hang out and have coffee.”

Lavanya had got up and shook both their hands.

“Vicky has come up with a marvellous suggestion. Tell them, Vicky,” gushed Avantika.

Jhanvi and Lavanya looked at him expectantly and he slightly smiled at them. “It’s actually nothing as big as Avantika is making it out to be. I felt that we should have at least one German dish in the menu, given that the groom is German. I asked around and I have found someone right here in Chennai who can source *Baumkuchen* for us. It’s a German cake. A lot of people use them at weddings there. We can have a *Baumkuchen* wedding cake. My contact has sent me images of the wedding cakes he has done in the past..”

“That’s amazing!” said Jhanvi, looking more impressed than she wanted to let on.

“Yeah, that’s a fantastic idea. We can work on that,” said Lavanya.

“Great! I will send the photos to Anisha today and get her opinion too.”

Jhanvi and Lavanya nodded.

“And another thing,” said Avantika. “I know we decided on *paneer* butter masala. But when I tried *paneer pasanda* the other day, I really liked it. I was thinking I’ll have Vicky try it today and get his opinion.”

“Oh sure. We can change the menu any time before Jan 31st. After that, it will be difficult,” said Jhanvi.

“I know. Why don’t you both join us for lunch?” asked Avantika.

“Sorry. I don’t eat lunch,” said Lavanya. “You guys carry on.”

Vicky and Avantika turned to Jhanvi. She had no other option than to agree.



After placing their order, they discussed the recent holidays they had taken. Avantika talked about her treks in Germany and Switzerland. Vicky talked about his trip to Bhutan and Jhanvi talked about her trip to Mangalore.

The discussion turned animated when they started to compare people’s attitudes in each place when their food arrived—*paneer pasanda* with butter *naan* and *Zafrani pulao*. The aroma was intoxicating and the three of them focused all their attention on the food.

“Ooh! Smells so good,” said Avantika, helping herself to the gravy and a piece of the *naan*. Jhanvi wondered how Avantika managed to stay thin in spite of being such a foodie. Then, she brushed it aside. She was just being jealous.

As soon as Avantika took the first bite, her face transformed. “Oh my God! This is awesome. We really need this at the reception. What do you guys think?”

Jhanvi laughed at Avantika’s reaction and served herself. Vicky followed.

Jhanvi took one bite and nodded enthusiastically. She more than agreed with Avantika. The flavours exploded in her mouth. It really was too good. But there was one flavour in particular that caught her attention.

Vicky was about to take a bite, when Jhanvi caught his wrist. "It has cashews."

Vicky's face cleared of the confusion he felt when Jhanvi held his hand. "Oh!"

Avantika looked at Jhanvi, then at Vicky. "So?"

Jhanvi looked at her and almost apologetically said, "He is allergic to cashews."

Somehow, Jhanvi felt ashamed to be aware of the fact when Avantika was not.

Avantika turned to Vicky and asked in surprise, "You are?"

Vicky nodded. "Yes."

"How come I did not know this?"

Vicky frowned. "I used to be very allergic. Now, not so much. But, to be safe, I try to avoid cashews."

"I did not know this at all."

Vicky grimaced. "Really? Have I never told you this? Very strange."

Avantika turned her full attention to Jhanvi. "How did you know about this?" Jhanvi sensed that Avantika's tone was more accusatory than curious.

Her cheeks burned. "He told me, when we met...eight years ago."

"And you remembered?" asked Avantika, surprised. The accusation was still there on her face.

Jhanvi looked embarrassed. Her gaze moved to Vicky, who was looking at her with the same question in his eyes. But there was no accusation in his eyes. Just a mild curiosity. Even a hint of humour.

Jhanvi tried to manage the situation. “I remembered it because I thought it was unusual. That’s all. I’ve never heard of someone wheezing after eating cashews...”

Avantika turned to Vicky in shock as she asked, “You used to wheeze?”

Jhanvi flushed, even more embarrassed. She bent her head and focused on her food. At least then, she would be able to shut her mouth!

Vicky explained to Avantika about how he used to wheeze a lot a long time back. He threw in a few incidents that had happened in his childhood and how he had suffered. He further explained some circumstances in which he might still get the allergy attack. They were very rare, but the probability still existed.

Jhanvi listened to his explanation, pretending to be only half-interested.

Vicky expertly navigated his conversation with Avantika to the food. Jhanvi knew that he was trying to distract her from an awkward situation.

Many minutes later, Jhanvi gathered enough courage to look up when Avantika asked her about the lighting arrangement for the reception. Jhanvi answered her. Satisfied, Avantika nodded at Jhanvi’s reply and continued eating.

Immediately, Jhanvi’s eyes fell on Vicky. She could not help it. It was more of an unconscious movement. Vicky caught her eye. And that made her blush. She looked away and concentrated only on her food for the rest of the time.

The Wedding Dress

Jhanvi drummed her fingers on the dining table, reading her book. A half-eaten packet of potato chips and an empty chocolate wrapper lay on the table. That had been the only food (if you could call it that) that she'd had that day. Not that she was complaining. After all, it was an unusually lazy Sunday.

She woke up later than usual and she spent the morning reading. She read the book lying on her bed for some time. Then, she sat in her balcony for some time, still reading the book and enjoying the morning sun. When it got too hot, she moved inside to the couch in her living room. Then, with an enormous effort, she took a bath and got dressed. Now, she was sitting on the table, still reading that book and eating the remnants of the chips.

Unwilling to cook, she had been more than happy to satisfy her hunger with potato chips and a bar of chocolate. It did seem like the perfect Sunday.

She glanced at the clock. It was three in the afternoon. Avantika was expected to arrive any moment. She wanted to pick up the wedding *lehenga* for Anisha that day and she had requested Jhanvi to accompany her.

Jhanvi was looking forward to getting a glimpse of the lehenga. The bride's wedding dress was the important element of the wedding preparations. It set the tone for everything else—the groom's attire, the stage decors and even the flowers. Jhanvi wanted to check out the dress in person to make sure everything was aligned with it.

Jhanvi's phone rang. She abandoned her book, grabbed her handbag, stuffed her purse into it and grabbed her house keys. She locked the door as she answered the phone, "I am on the way down."

Avantika replied, "Great. I am right in front of your building."

And with a spurt of energy she hadn't felt since morning, Jhanvi ran down the stairs to meet Avantika.



Avantika held up a peach *lehenga* and a maroon *lehenga*. Both the *lehengas* were exquisite. They were made from rich silk and were intricately embroidered. They were so beautiful that Jhanvi could hardly look away from them. But they both looked good. Equally.

“Which one?” she asked Jhanvi.

Jhanvi looked at the outfits, deep in thought.

Avantika continued, “Anisha prefers the peach one. She said it will blend well with the decor we have chosen for the background.”

“Avantika!” replied Jhanvi, shaking her head. “A bride is not supposed to blend. She is meant to stand out.”

“Exactly! That is why I prefer the maroon one.”

“I prefer the maroon one too. It will make her stand out against the backdrop. We can tweak the backdrop a bit to make sure it has a little bit of maroon. Maroon is easy. Red roses here and there...and viola!”

Avantika laughed. “You are quite the magician.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “No, no. A magician only uses the sleight of hand to deceive the audience. I do something way more complicated. I understand women and their dreams... And make them all come true.”

Avantika laughed. “Ha ha. That does sound significantly more complicated. So? Are you sure about the maroon one?”

“I am. But looks like you are still considering.”

It was Avantika's turn to be deep in thought. Then, she said, “Hmm...Anisha said her first preference was the peach *lehenga*. That is why I am hesitating. Let's do one thing. Let ask Vicky to decide.”

Jhanvi was taken aback. She was not expecting Vicky to accompany Avantika to pick up the bridal dress. That guy really needed a job!

“Is he coming here?” asked Jhanvi, with a barely perceptible sigh.

“There he is,” replied Avantika, pointing to the entrance of the shop with a tilt of her head.

Jhanvi turned. Vicky was entering the shop, wearing a dark green t-shirt and light blue jeans. He nodded at them. As Vicky made his way over to them, Jhanvi suddenly felt that Vicky was every so full of life and vitality. And more than that, he was enthusiastic! Enthusiastic about the wedding of the sister of the girl he was dating. As if it was his own wedding. He was there for everything. He was there for looking at the venues, for deciding the menu, for looking at the decorations and even for finalizing the bridal lehenga. It was very strange. Jhanvi wondered why Vicky was so involved in Anisha’s wedding.

“Hey!” He beamed at the girls.

Jhanvi was not feeling particularly enthusiastic about Vicky’s presence. She grudgingly wished him.

Avantika explained their dilemma to Vicky. “So help us select one, Vicky.”

Vicky seemed to be taken aback by the question. “Why are you asking me? Ask Anisha.”

“She prefers the peach one,” replied Avantika. “Maroon comes a close second. Actually, she was not able to decide, so she asked me to decide for her.”

“I don’t know,” shrugged Vicky.

“Hmm...” replied Avantika, still considering the two *lehengas* one after the other.

Suddenly she asked, “Would it help if we put it on?”

Jhanvi’s heart skipped a beat. She did not like the ‘we’ in that sentence. She did not like it one bit.

She groaned inwardly when Vicky grinned and said, “Sure.”

Avantika gave Jhanvi the maroon lehenga. “Let’s try it.”

Now Jhanvi was in a fix. She did not want to try the maroon lehenga as she suspected that Vicky would most likely go with that one. She knew how that would play. It would not look like he was picking the maroon *lehenga* over the peach one. It would look like he was picking her over Avantika. And she could not have that happening.

So, she quickly requested, “Let me try the peach one, please.”

Avantika shrugged. “Sure,” she replied, handing over the peach *lehenga* to Jhanvi and taking the maroon one.

Jhanvi entered the dressing room and started to undress. The things that she had to do as an event planner! But then she had done far worse. She sighed.

The one advantage that Jhanvi had over her competitors was that she was able to bond with her clients. Like she had bonded with Avantika. It was easy to be professional and impersonal, but Jhanvi did not want it like that. Jhanvi was involved in the entire process. She wanted to know the bride and the groom. She wanted to know what they liked and what they didn’t. She wanted to know about their dreams. She could not do that if she drew stringent boundaries.

But right now, she had a different kind of a problem to deal with. Jhanvi had to work closely with Avantika and Avantika always had Vicky around. Vicky’s presence was taking its toll on her. The more she had to be around with him, the more she was falling in love with him. And however she looked at it, she knew things would only end in one way—with her heart being broken.

She stepped out of the dressing room. Vicky’s eyes widened on seeing her and his jaw dropped. Jhanvi flushed. Her heartbeat accelerated and her palms grew sweaty. *Control yourself! Control yourself!*

Avantika stepped out too. Jhanvi looked at Vicky to see his reaction to Avantika. She was elated to note that his eyes did

not widen and his mouth with not open as they had done for her.

Biting her lips, she chided herself for the thought. It all started with just a thought. And then, it would snowball and end with her being the reason for Vicky's break up yet again. She couldn't have that happening. *Control yourself!*

Avantika grinned at Jhanvi and looked at Vicky for his feedback.

Vicky looked from one to another, appraising them very carefully.

He put his hands in his pockets and looked at Avantika. He said, "Hmm...the maroon is definitely more attractive. It looks beautiful. Like in-the-face beautiful, as if it is screaming for attention.

Then, he turned to Jhanvi and continued, "But the peach... It is more subtle. It is gentler. It looks sophisticated. Like it has a heart of gold and the beauty it exudes is just incidental."

Jhanvi suddenly wondered if he was talking about the dresses or the people wearing them. If he was talking about the person, she should really be flattered. But she should not allow her imagination to run amok. It would only do a u-turn and kick her in her gut.

Vicky continued, "Though maroon does have an extreme attractiveness in the beginning, I am not sure if I can keep looking at it for long. It kind of looks flashy. If I want to settle down, I would definitely settle down with something softer. Like the peach. The peach is definitely my choice."

And for no reason, Jhanvi blushed deeply.



Avantika finally decided to go with the peach *lehenga*. After all, it was Anisha's first choice, too.

As they walked out of the shop, Avantika turned to Jhanvi and asked, "You can work with the peach, right?"

Jhanvi nodded. "Oh! Most definitely."

“It might not stand out like the maroon.”

“I will make the background a little darker, so that the peach stands out.”

“See? Anyone can shine. They just need the right environment,” interjected Vicky.

“We are talking about the dress,” said Jhanvi.

Vicky looked at her and smiled. “So am I. Why? What did you think I was talking about?”

Jhanvi was spared from the need to reply when Avantika got a call. She excused herself to answer the call.

While Jhanvi and Vicky waited for Avantika to return, they looked over the railing at the busy floor of the mall. A toy train carrying numerous kids was making its way noisily across the floor. There was the usual crowd near the small kiosk that sold ice cream. People were sauntering around lazily, carrying heavy bags and yet looking at the attractive windows of the shops.

“You looked awesome in that dress,” said Vicky, softly.

Jhanvi tightened her grip on the railing to control her emotions. *Control yourself!*

She tried to look uninterested, and said nonchalantly, “Anyone would have looked good in that. The *dress* is really good.”

Vicky smiled. He had not missed Jhanvi’s emphasis on the word ‘dress’.

“Well, not everyone can carry it as you did. Have you ever tried modelling?” asked Vicky.

Jhanvi looked up. The naughty look was back on his face. His eyes were shining. And it angered Jhanvi.

“Have you ever tried to keep quiet?” snapped Jhanvi. She did not know why she was angry. She just was.

“Oh, oh!” replied Vicky, throwing his hands up in surrender. “I am backing off. God! You are hard! One day, you act one way and the next day, you act the exact opposite! What do you

do? Flip a coin every time you meet me? Heads, be an angel. Tails, be a devil. Is that what it is?”

Jhanvi closed her eyes in an attempt to control herself. Calmer, she realized why she had been angry. When Vicky had asked her if she had tried modelling, she thought he was comparing her to Avantika. And it had irritated her. She reminded herself that Vicky could have genuinely asked the question without the intention of a comparison.

Then, she opened her eyes, looked at him in the eye and said, “I am sorry. I did not sleep well last night. I was reading a book. And I have not had anything to eat since morning. Guess I am just hungry.”

Vicky looked at her for a few moments as if deliberating over something. “I made mushroom *biryani* today. Why don’t we all go to my home, and you can have some?”

The image of Vicky cooking put Jhanvi back in a good mood. She laughed. “You made it?”

Vicky nodded. “Yes. And it came out very well.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “Well, I don’t know...”

“Oh, come on. My house is pretty close from here. And it’s on the way to your home too. Let’s have dinner at my place. I have plenty of ice cream. And if you want to drink, I have a few Bacardi Breezers. I have red wine too. If you don’t drink, I have a bottle of *nanari sherbath*.”

“*Nanari sherbath*?”

“Aah! Of all the names I just rattled off, *nanari sherbath* is the one you are most excited for. Interesting!”

Jhanvi smiled. “I would have it every summer, when I visited my grandma’s place. *Nanari sherbath* always reminds me of my summer holidays.”

“So? Are we on?” asked Vicky.

Jhanvi nodded.

“Great! It’s a plan, then.”

Avantika joined them. “Hey, guys. I am sorry, I have some work to do. Vicky, about our dinner tonight...”

Vicky shook his head. “Not an issue. You go ahead.”

Avantika turned to Jhanvi, “I am sorry I have to leave. And I am going in the opposite direction. So, I won’t be able to drop you home.”

Jhanvi replied, “Hey! Not a problem. Don’t worry about it.”

“But Vicky can drop you. Can you, Vicky? Please! For me.”

Jhanvi interrupted, “No, no. It’s perfectly fine. I will get a cab.”

“No, no. I promised you a ride back,” said Avantika, looking at Vicky beseechingly.

“She is hungry. So, I am going to feed her first and then I will drop her. No problem,” offered Vicky.

“Great. I will see you both later,” replied Avantika. She quickly waved at them and left.

Vicky turned to Jhanvi and said, “Can you please wait for a few minutes? I have a personal thing I need to take care of.”

Jhanvi nodded. “Should I wait here?”

“No. Why don’t you go to the ground floor? There is a supermarket there. Can you get a packet of sugar for me and wait there? I will meet you there.”

Jhanvi looked uncomfortable. Now she was doing grocery shopping for Vicky? He was getting way too comfortable with her. But yet she nodded. She did not have a choice.

“Great.”

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Vicky waited for Jhanvi to leave before he quickly went to a man who was waiting behind a crowd to get on to the escalator. He was tall and dressed in a simple white shirt and dark brown pants. His cropped hair was jet black, but his skin gave away his true age. Vicky guessed the man must be around forty-five years of age.

Vicky went up to the man and asked, “Can I talk to you for a few minutes?”

The man looked at the escalator and then at Vicky, undecided. Then, he nodded. They moved to a dark corner near the staircase.

The man looked uncomfortable. “Do I know you?”

“I don’t know whether you know me or not. But I know you. I have seen you at Seaside Creek. I have also seen you in Ashok Colony a couple of times and even on the beach.”

The man shrugged. “Okay. So?”

Vicky took a step closer to the man. “So, I am thinking you don’t know me. But you seem to know Jhanvi.”

Understanding dawned in the man’s eyes. He slowly smiled and smirked, as if daring Vicky to question him. “So?”

“Why are you following her?”

The man looked at Vicky briefly before he asked, “What is it to you? Are you her boyfriend?”

“No. Just a friend. Why though? Should only a boyfriend look after a girl? A friend cannot?”

The man laughed mockingly. “So, I am to believe that you are just a friend who is looking out for her, is it?”

Vicky controlled his anger at the man’s insinuation. He could not let the man divert the conversation.

“Are you married?” asked Vicky.

The man shrugged. “Used to be. Long time ago.”

“What happened? Your wife found out what a pervert you were and left you?”

The man glared at Vicky. “Leave. Or you will repent...”

The words were hardly out of the man’s mouth when Vicky caught his neck and pinned him to the wall. The man screamed in pain. Vicky liked the fear in his eyes.

Vicky snarled. “You are the one who should leave. If I see you again ever after...near Jhanvi, I will hurt you. Badly. Do

you understand?”

“Yes. Yes,” said the man, trying to nod but failing because of Vicky’s iron grip on his neck.

“Good,” replied Vicky, letting go of his neck. “I don’t want to ever set my eyes on you again. If I do...”

“Let me go, you crazy fellow!” spat the man, as he rushed away from Vicky rubbing his neck.

Vicky looked at the retreating man thoughtfully. The man looked familiar. He could have sworn he had seen the man before. Somewhere else. Not just following Jhanvi. But where? Vicky racked his brains for a few minutes. When he failed to remember, he brushed the doubt aside.



Jhanvi alighted from Vicky’s bike in front of a huge house that stood majestically overlooking the vast ocean.

From the large, black gate, a pathway of cobblestone led to the big, white house. The building had two floors, with a balcony on the first floor extending over the entrance towards the beach. A large lawn, meticulously looked after and maintained, circled the house. There was a line of trees at one edge of the garden. A single hammock was tied under a couple of trees. A swimming pool was on the other side of the house and a few chairs were placed under white umbrellas along one side.

“Wow! You are rich!” exclaimed Jhanvi.

Vicky grinned as he parked his bike in front of the house. “I told you so.”

He opened the door. The security alarm beeped as they stepped in. Jhanvi took a look at his living room and was even more impressed. The interiors were rich and polished. The living room stretched out in front of her in shades of white and dark brown. An open kitchen stood at the far end of the space, with a round dining table in the middle.

A large stylish chandelier hung from the ceiling. White, posh sofas were placed in the living room facing an enormous

TV. Raja Ravi Verma's painting, 'The lady with the veena' adorned the wall above the sofa. It was softly illuminated by a spotlight, almost bringing the beautiful lady to life.

The wall on one side of the TV was adorned with pictures of Vicky. There was one of him with his parents, one in which he stood on a beach and another one in which he was giving a speech. Several more such pictures were arranged artistically on the wall.

Large curtains of white covered the wall-sized windows that overlooked the swimming pool. Just where the kitchen began, a large staircase led to the floor above.

"You did the décor?" asked Jhanvi, marvelling at the house.

"Yes. I like my creature comforts," replied Vicky, as he typed in his security code into the home alarm system.

"Hmm..." replied Jhanvi, as she glanced at the security number he was typing in. "That I can see. Your house looks downright fantastic."

Vicky grinned. "Thank you."

"It's awesome," reiterated Jhanvi, the sense of awe still in her voice.

"Coming from a wedding planner, that is high praise."

Jhanvi's eyes were still rapidly moving from one thing to another, trying to take a lot of things in at once.

"Coffee, tea, juice?" asked Vicky.

Jhanvi shook her head. "No, no. Can you please get me that *biryani*? I am starving," she said, depositing her handbag on the couch.

Vicky entered the open kitchen and served the mushroom *biryani* in a large bowl to heat it in the microwave.

Jhanvi followed him and sat at the island table. Vicky placed the bowl of *biryani* on the table and turned.

Its aroma filled the entire kitchen. It was so appetizing that Jhanvi was unable to hold back. She took a spoon from the table and started to eat the biriyani straight from the bowl.

When Vicky came back, he looked at Jhanvi and grinned. “I thought we can eat the more sophisticated way...using plates,” he said, showing the plates that he had got.

Jhanvi, whose hand was hoisted near her face, as she was about to pop in another spoon of *biryani* into her mouth, stopped and looked guiltily at Vicky.

“Sorry. I could not wait. It tastes amazing! It really does. I am not saying this just because I am hungry,” she replied and continued eating.

Vicky grabbed another spoon and sat in the chair next to hers. Placing the bowl in the center, now both of them ate straight from the bowl.

Halfway, Vicky stopped. “I am done.”

“Are you sure?” asked Jhanvi, unable to figure out if his hunger was satisfied or if he stopped eating to leave more for her.

“I am sure. Plus, it’s kind of fun watching you eat,” he replied, leaning back and smiling at her.

Jhanvi pursed her lips. “Like watching an animal in a zoo?”

Vicky laughed. “Like a person who really loves their food. My food. It’s heartwarming.”

Jhanvi grinned. “Actually, I am trying to act all sophisticated now. If you were not here, I would not be using the spoon at all.”

Vicky laughed.

The *biryani* devoured, Jhanvi sat back, sated and happy. “That was the best meal of my life. I am not just saying it. I mean it.”

“Yeah...mine, too,” replied Vicky, looking at Jhanvi with barely-concealed humour dancing in his eyes.

Jhanvi looked perplexed at the comment. But before she could ask him to clarify, he moved on. “Desserts? I have cake, ice cream, some *gulab jamun*...and...what else do I have?”

Jhanvi looked at him guiltily. “If you don’t mind...can I just have the *nanari sherbat*?”

“Sure. Lemon and ice?”

“Of course.”

“I will get it. You go up the stairs. Walk past the first two rooms and at the end, is my bedroom. Go to the balcony there. The view from there is amazing. It is the full moon today and it will be a real treat to chill there.”

Jhanvi smiled and nodded. She ascended the stairs but just as she crossed the two closed rooms, she hesitated. She was curious. She walked back a couple of steps and opened the first room. It was a gym. She closed it in a hurry. That was something that she had nothing to do with.

She tried to open the next door. It was locked. She briefly wondered about what was inside. Then, she looked across the corridor and her eyes fell on Vicky’s bedroom.

She forgot about the locked door and made her way to his bedroom. The door was open. A king-sized bed was made with white bedsheets and a dark blue comforter. On either side of the bed were cabinets on which rested a couple of huge lamps. Indoor plants added a dash of nature to the room. In front of the bed was an extremely comfortable looking couch, next to which was a full-sized mirror. The other side of the room opened to a large balcony overlooking the ocean.

She stood in the middle of the room and looked around.

She sighed deeply. She fervently wished she could call up Niro and tell her, “Do you know where I am right now? In Vikranth Warriar’s bedroom.”

Then, she grinned. Well, if she was imagining calling up people from her past, she decided she would call Rathi too. She stood in the middle of the room for a few minutes, wondering what their reaction would be.

She grinned at the thought. You can take the girl out of her teens, but you can never take the teens out of the girl. Some memories, feelings and emotions always remained.

She crossed the room, opened the sliding door to the terrace and stepped out. A big gust of air welcomed her. It was cool and pleasant. She smiled again, extremely happy at the sight.

The vast ocean stretched across in inky blue. The moon shone brightly, appearing larger than usual to Jhanvi. The reflection of the moon fell in the waters, making the area silvery—a fluid, glittering silvery. Faint shadows of ships were visible at the horizon. The beach between the house and the ocean was completely dark. There was not a single light. A dog howled somewhere.

Jhanvi sat on the couch placed in the balcony and sighed. She decided that being rich did have its advantages. She stretched out her tired limbs, leaned back and closed her eyes. It felt like heaven.

The couch was comfortable. Jhanvi wondered how it would be to sit with Vicky right next to her on that couch. How would it feel to have his hands around her shoulders? She closed her eyes and visualized the scene. It would be heaven on earth. She decided she would give up all her wealth to just sit with him, his hand over her shoulder, as his girlfriend and talk to him uninterrupted for an hour. That was all she wanted from this life. Just that one hour.

Vicky soon joined her. They sat in silence for a while, sipping the cold *nanari sherbath*. Jhanvi nodded her head appreciatively. *Nanari sherbath* was the best!

“You have a lovely home. But does it get lonely living here alone?”

“No, I have not had the chance to get lonely, truth be told. Avantika is here sometimes...” replied Vicky, suddenly looking at Jhanvi for her reaction.

Jhanvi noticed his quick appraising glance and wondered what he had seen on her face. She prayed that he should not have seen the truth.

Vicky’s eyes moved away as suddenly as they had landed on her. Maybe, a quick glance was all it took. Jhanvi squirmed uncomfortably on the couch.

“Why is that room locked?” asked Jhanvi, trying to change the subject.

Vicky was astonished. “You tried opening it?”

“Yeah.”

He looked taken aback. “What? You will just walk into another person’s house and go about opening all the doors, is it?”

Jhanvi frowned. “What is in there? Why are you getting so defensive?”

Vicky scoffed. “There is nothing in there. It’s private.”

“If there is nothing in there, why is it private?”

“Okay, there is something in there. But it is private.”

“Aah!”

Jhanvi looked out at the ocean again. “Avantika’s room?” she said after a brief pause.

Vicky looked embarrassed as he asked, “Why would she stay in another room at my house?”

Jhanvi blushed. “Yeah, of course. Stupid of me.”

Silence again.

“Has Avantika been inside that room?” asked Jhanvi.

Vicky shook his head. “No. She respects other people’s privacy,” he said, pointedly.

“Aah! It’s curious. ‘The mysterious case of the locked room.’”

Vicky laughed. “Are you always like this?”

“How? Curious?”

“No. A nosey parker.”

Jhanvi slowly nodded her head, thinking deeply. Then, she said, “Yeah. Pretty much.”

Vicky grinned. “You seemed like a sweet, innocent girl when I first met you.”

“When you first saw me, I was not exactly in my element. Remember, I had just had an accident?”

Vicky smiled. “I still remember that day vividly. It was raining. And just when I turned into Rathi’s street, thinking I would be able to get out of the rain soon, I saw you lying by the side of the road. You were dressed up so beautifully...in an orange and yellow half saree, if I am remembering correctly,” said Vicky, and looked at Jhanvi for confirmation. Jhanvi smiled as she nodded. Vicky continued, “You were completely drenched and your hair was sticking on the sides of your face. But above all, the one feature that I noticed about you were your eyes. Your large, beautiful eyes. There was a cry for help in them. Like a wounded deer. And I don’t think anyone would have found it in their heart to just leave you without helping. All I wanted to do at that time was take you in my... I mean, to protect you. To take you out of harm’s way.”

Jhanvi’s heart raced. She was reminded of the way Amish had described meeting Aparna. His narration had made Jhanvi wish that Vicky too should, one day in the future, narrate their first meeting similarly. And he had done just that now. With just the same emotion.

But what emotion? Was it love? It did seem like. Did Vicky like her? She berated herself mentally. *Don’t go in that direction. It is too dangerous.*

Jhanvi took her time before saying, “Thank you for helping me that day.”

Vicky nodded and looked away.

Jhanvi leaned closer and said, “Vicky... I know a lot of time has passed. It probably is too much water under the bridge. But I just want you know that I am truly sorry for what happened. For everything that I did...”

Vicky shrugged. “It’s fine. I think it all worked out for the good. If you had not done those things, I never would have known Rathi’s true nature.”

After a pause, Jhanvi asked, “Did you feel the same at that time?”

Vicky laughed. “Well, you caught me!”

He shook his head as he replied, “I was very angry. At you. At Rathi. At myself. But then, over the years, I have realized that it was all for our good. If not for you, I would probably still be with Rathi. And I don’t think that would have been good for me.”

“Yeah...she was really a...” said Jhanvi and stopped. There was no need to tarnish Rathi any more. She was in the past. It was best she stayed there.

But Vicky acknowledged her unsaid remark. “Yeah. She was.”

“Are you in touch with her?”

“No. You?”

Jhanvi’s eyes widened and she shook her head hurriedly. “No. Not at all.”

Her vehement denial of being in touch with Rathi made him laugh. Unable to resist, she laughed with him.

“But I am glad you are with Avantika now. She is a very nice girl.”

“I am glad you approve.”

Jhanvi laughed. “I know you are kidding but...”

Vicky looked at her seriously and shook his head. “No, no. I am not kidding. You did not approve of Rathi and that ended as a disaster. So, it means something to me that you approve of Avantika.”

“Well...you might have something there. A girl can spot a fake girl from a mile away. But guys can rarely do so. They are taken in by a girl’s good looks...and the way she treats them. The girls always put up an act for the guys and the guys fall for it. But she never puts up an act for her girlfriends. So, we always know what kind of girl she is. We always know.”

Vicky nodded, his fingers brushing his moustache. “Yeah. You have something there. The reverse is also true. When I see a good girl with an idiot of a guy, I always wonder why. Can’t

the girl see what is obvious for the rest of the guys? I feel like screaming, ‘Stay away from him. He is a psycho!’”

Jhanvi laughed. Then, she said, “Well, the truth is we cannot see what a person truly is. Like you, we also see only the looks and his manners. He puts up a show for us and we fall for it. And more than that, I think we are very eager to be fooled. And it is a risk that we take every time...so that we don’t end up losing the good guys.”

“Exactly. Which is why your opinion on Avantika matters a lot to me. If another girl approves of her...then I am not just bowled over by her beauty. There is something in her.”

“There really is,” replied Jhanvi, nodding. She was aware of a large pain shooting through her heart, but her mind was telling her the opposite. Avantika was good for Vicky. Her brain knew it. And this time, she was determined not to listen to her heart at all. It was only her brain that she was going to listen to, in spite of what she was feeling.

Jhanvi also knew she had to leave. But she did not want to. It was too peaceful on the balcony. But she wanted to know if Vicky felt the same.

“I should get going,” said Jhanvi. And yet she did not move an inch from her place.

“Stay for some time. I don’t know when I will see you next.”

Jhanvi was elated with his reply but tried to make a mild protestation. “Only the wedding dress has been finalized. There’s a lot that is to be finalized yet, the makeup, for example. So, we might meet sooner than you expect.”

“Hmmm... So what do you think about the makeup that the girls put on for their wedding day?”

Jhanvi looked at him. He was trying to prolong the conversation. He was trying to make her stay. His attempt was so sweet that she decided to play along. She shrugged. “We have to do what we can to look our best.”

“Oh, you do look your best.”

“Yeah...”

“You girls look so good that you cease to look like yourselves.”

Jhanvi smiled. “We have to look our best on the most important day of our lives. But there are a lot of makeup artists nowadays who don’t apply a lot of makeup; they just enhance the bride’s natural features.”

Vicky scoffed. “So much work to *look* natural? Come on! Can’t you come like that? Natural?”

Jhanvi looked at him and shook her head, disappointed. “You guys! You have no idea, do you?”

“What?”

“I mean...we do everything for the wedding. Every little detail is looked into by the bride. What do you think the groom does? Nothing. That is all he does. Mostly, he’ll just invite his friends and arrange for the drinks before his wedding. That’s it! That’s all his contribution is to the wedding. We girls plan every little detail. We plan every little thing well in advance and yet we stress about everything till the very last moment. It is bound to affect us. We might end up with puffed eyes from lack of sleep or dark circles from stress. Our hair is not as shiny as it is made to look. We are not perfect. We are quite far from it. Do you think we should live the most important day of our lives with dark circles, chapped lips, and frizzy hair?”

“Well...not really.”

“Then? We do everything else and we do this too. Just so we look our best for the groom. We think about everything.”

“Hmm...” said Vicky, pondering over her enthusiastic response. Then he turned to her and asked, “Okay, but have you really thought about how it will affect the groom?”

“What do you mean by ‘affect the groom’? Why should he be affected by anything? He is really in a sweet spot. He has no work. He can sleep and party with his friends. It is not so with the bride. The amount of planning we girls do! The amount of worrying and fretting we do for the wedding to go

well. The endless planning and the countless sleepless nights... You guys cannot even imagine that!”

“Yeah, yeah. I agree. You girls are more committed to the entire wedding process. We guys need only one thing...”

Jhanvi frowned slightly. “What is that?”

“The girl.”

Jhanvi was taken aback. “Oh!”

“We don’t care if the wedding is at a beachside resort or in a banquet hall. We don’t care if you choose to serve *biryani* or *jalebi* or *pav bhaji*. We don’t care how the girl is dressed. All we care about is marrying the girl we love.”

Jhanvi was taken aback. “Well. That’s...sweet.”

“Yeah. And when the girl comes all dressed up...like a fairy or a princess...”

“Yeah?”

“We get scared.”

“What?” asked Jhanvi, shocked.

“I mean...we wonder...is this our girl... Or some other girl? Who is really there under all that makeup? The mystery is too much.” Vicky shuddered.

Jhanvi laughed. “Well, it’s not really that bad.”

“Even if it is not that bad and we do end up recognizing the girl, she does look entirely different. It just gets scarier.”

Jhanvi’s eyes widened. “Why does it get scarier?”

“Well...we like imperfection. We like your crooked teeth, your unwashed hair, the mole on your chin and your little potbelly. We like all your imperfections. Imperfections are what make you human. ‘Human’ is what we can relate to. Because we know we are not perfect. And it is easier to relate to an imperfect human. But, when you get all dressed up and erase everything that makes you imperfect and human...it is kind of scary.”

Jhanvi laughed.

Vicky continued, “Really, Jaan. I am telling you. That is why guys cry at weddings. It is because they are thinking, ‘Oh my god! Who the hell is that woman walking towards the stage? Didn’t I agree to marry someone else? Oh my God! They have changed the bride! They have changed the bride! What do I do? What do I do? I did not sign up for this bride.’”

“Oh, come on,” laughed Jhanvi, her eyes tearing up.

“Yeah...listen to me. And then when the bride is close enough, we think, ‘Oh! It is the same girl. Thank God! Thank God! I can now recognize her from under the layers of her makeup. But why the hell is she so perfect? She has no flaws. How will I look next to her? An ordinary human next to a princess!’ And we choke under all that pressure.”

Jhanvi laughed, her eyes tearing.

Vicky continued, “We get so intimidated, there are tears in our eyes. But we have to manage the situation and explain our behaviour. So, we lie. We say that we are so moved by the bride’s beauty that we cannot hold back our tears. We cannot say anything else. But trust me! It is not the truth. We cry only because of two reasons – either we don’t recognize the girl or...the girl is intimidating.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks, as Jhanvi now laughed without abandon.

When she could finally regain some control, she quipped, “You should try stand-up comedy.”

Vicky looked as if considering it seriously. “Hmm...maybe I should. What is stand-up comedy? Just a different perspective of something we all know. But I was not joking now... I am serious. This is the guy’s perspective. Everyone knows only the bride’s perspective. This is the groom’s.”

Vicky sat back, looking exhausted from his monologue. Jhanvi laughed again and shook her head. He looked at her and laughed back at her reaction.

“Do you want another drink?” he asked after a brief pause.

Jhanvi was still laughing. She nodded and handed him her empty glass.

As she waited, Jhanvi looked at the sea. She felt her heart become light and happy.

She felt very happy. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed this hard. Maybe she should connect more with her mother and her friends.

She suddenly wondered if her mother had tried to contact her. It was her habit to call her every Sunday around that time. She got up and walked into the room in search of her phone. She reached for her handbag lying on the couch and pulled her phone. No. Her mother had not called. She sat on the couch to check her messages.

When she leaned on it, she gasped at how extremely comfortable the couch was. There were a couple of throw pillows on the couch that was now looking invitingly at Jhanvi. Unable to resist the invitation, she lay down. Wow, it was really comfortable! She convinced herself to rest for just a few minutes. Until Vicky came back. That was all. And she closed her eyes.



Her face was hot. She wondered why but she still did not have enough will power to open her eyes. She was too comfortable. She did not want to move. A few minutes later, however, unable to bear the heat and the curiosity, she slowly opened her eyes. The sun was shining right on her face that as soon as she opened her eyes, she closed them again. She shielded her eyes with her hand and turned to her side, balancing herself on her other hand and looked around. She was not in her room. Where was she?

It took her a few seconds to make sense. She was in Vicky's bedroom. On his couch. She had a very comfortable blanket covering her. She pushed it aside, sat up with a jerk and looked around. She caught sight of Vicky. He was sound asleep on his bed. Cursing herself for falling asleep on the couch, she buried her head in her hands.

Vicky was sleeping bare chested. His blanket was pulled up only till the middle of his chest. Her eyes rested on him for a

few seconds. He looked so handsome. Hesitatingly, she got up and, against her better judgement, took a few steps towards his bed to take a better look at him.

Jhanvi tilted her face slightly and looked at him. Yes, he was indeed very handsome. She thought back to the time when he was in college. The guy who had come to her help on that rainy day. How different he looked then!

The guy who rescued her eight years ago was a boy, just on the verge of manhood. He did not have a fully grown moustache, nor did he have the perfectly shaped goatee that he sported now. Now, even while sleeping, he looked like a man most women desired. She decided she liked him better now. If she was head over heels in love with the guy from eight years ago, she was far crazier about the man who was sleeping in front of her.

She sighed. Oh God! What a wonderful man he was! A handsome man with an amazing sense of humour. Not her man, though, she reminded herself.

She sighed wistfully before she tiptoed into the bathroom to freshen up.



Just as Jhanvi stepped out of the bathroom, Vicky groaned and sat up on the bed. The blanket covering him fell, exposing his chest. Jhanvi gasped and looked away.

Suddenly aware of Jhanvi in the room, Vicky grabbed the blanket and covered himself. “Whoa, whoa...I completely forgot about you!” His voice was still groggy.

Her eyes still averted, Jhanvi said, “Yeah, I am sorry I slept off yesterday. I was too tired...”

“That’s perfectly fine,” he mumbled.

“Okay. Get dressed and come down. Do you have coffee?”

“It’s in the cabinet below the stove.”

“Right. See you downstairs.”

Jhanvi did not see him nod. But she guessed he might have and went down.

What a complete idiot she was! To have slept over inadvertently not just at any place, but at Vicky's. She kicked herself.

But then, she grudgingly gave herself a slight leeway. She was tired and hungry yesterday when she arrived there. But that soon changed. The time spent with Vicky on his balcony had been nothing short of magical. The inky dark ocean, the glittering moon, the soft breeze... The handsome man, the delightful conversation and the magical connect between them. No matter how hard she tried, it would be very difficult to recreate such a wonderful, magical evening.

She opened the cabinet under the stove. It slid out like butter. She smiled. She knew a lot of fancy, rich houses that looked amazing but lacked utility. Especially in the kitchen. She wondered why so little thought was given to the kitchen, a space that was heavily utilized. But Vicky's kitchen was different. It was extremely pleasing to the eyes and ranked high in utility. She tried a few other cabinets. Everything slid out smoothly. Everything inside the cabinets was arranged properly and labelled. She nodded, deeply impressed.

As Vicky had mentioned, everything she needed for coffee was in the top cabinet. She put the coffee powder in the filter and poured hot water over it. Vicky also had instant coffee, but she hated it. It was either filter coffee or no coffee for her.

While she waited for the coffee to percolate, she checked out the rest of the kitchen. The kitchen was able to tell her a lot about Vicky, which she otherwise would not have known. For example, it told her that he preferred coffee over tea. A well-stocked, wide variety of nuts—raisins, pistachios, walnuts, almonds—told her that he preferred to snack healthy. It told her he cared about his health and took good care of himself. It told her that he liked dark chocolates, a wide variety of which was neatly arranged in a box. He even had the ones with raisins, the one that Jhanvi was extremely partial to. A wide variety of spices, in varying quantities, told her the kitchen was well used. He clearly was big on cooking.

She checked out the refrigerator. It told her that his favourite drinks were beer and *nanari sherbath*. The *nanari sherbath* reminded her of the previous evening. He was in his element on the terrace, looking out at the ocean. Maybe he did that every day. She imagined him sitting on his terrace at the end of the day, a drink in his hand. He probably unwound to the ocean and let the wind carry away his concerns. How lovely it was!

She was sure he loved the smell of the sea. Why else would he take a house near the ocean? Jhanvi breathed deeply. Yes, she was able to smell the sea too. And she loved it too.

After looking around in the kitchen thoroughly, she made some black coffee with dry ginger. She felt a lot closer to Vicky.

She had just settled with her coffee at the island table when Vicky walked in. He grinned at her, took his cup and sat down beside her.

“Wow. It’s perfect,” he said, taking a sip of the coffee.

“You have a lovely home. I am sorry I overstayed.”

“No biggie.”

“I will be out of your hair as soon as I can.”

“Take your time. By the way, I am sorry I took the bed in the same room. I should have moved to another room...but the thing is, I really prefer my own bed.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “No, no. I totally understand. You did not have to go anywhere else. It’s your house and your bed.”

“I hope it was not awkward. I mean...when you came out of the restroom...”

Jhanvi flushed. “No, no. Please! Don’t worry about it. I am the intruder here.”

After this, they enjoyed their coffee in silence.

The calling bell pealed.

Jhanvi sat up, shocked. “Who is it?”

“I think it’s Avantika,” replied Vicky, getting up.

“No! No, no, no, no,” exclaimed Jhanvi, horrified. “She can’t know I am here. If she sees me here, she’ll think I spent the night here.”

Vicky frowned. “Well, you did...”

Jhanvi was shocked Vicky did not get her concern. “She might think I spent it with you. Is there a backdoor? I will slip out. I will go to the end of the road and take a cab from there.”

The bell rang again.

Vicky frowned. “What are you so worried about? Nothing happened.”

Jhanvi, by this time, had grabbed her shoes from near the door. She picked up her shoes in one hand and her handbag in the other. “How do I get out?”

“Is this really necessary?” asked Vicky.

“Where is the backdoor?” insisted Jhanvi.

Shaking his head, Vicky led her to the backdoor.

“Bye,” said Jhanvi.

Vicky shook his head again. “You are overreacting. Avantika will understand.”

Jhanvi turned to him and begged. “Please, Vicky. I have been the reason of one of your relationships breaking. And that guilt has consumed me for so long. I don’t want to break another relationship of yours. I can’t bear it. Please! I can’t. I really can’t.”

“You were *not* the reason...,” started Vicky when the calling bell interrupted him.

“We will talk later. Please lie for me. Please, please, please,” she begged as she ran across the backyard.

Vicky rolled his eyes and shook his head again as he closed the backdoor.

Jhanvi waited in the backyard till she heard Vicky open the front door and Avantika entered.

Then, she bolted across the garden and let herself out.

She stood by the side of the road and slipped her shoes on. If anyone saw her, they would definitely think she had spent the night with Vicky. Luckily, no one was about.

She walked the entire stretch of road feeling as if it was the walk of shame. She knew there was no reason she should feel that way and yet she did. When she reached the main road, a bizarre feeling took over her. She took a minute to recognize it but when she did, she was shocked. She had just realized that she had never felt more lonelier in her entire life than she did just then.



As she waited for the cab at the end of the road, her eyes stung from the tears she was holding back.

'Nothing happened.' That is what Vicky had said.

'Nothing happened.'

Was that true? Did nothing really happen?

Jhanvi thought about the conversation they'd had, as they enjoyed their drinks. She could not recall a more fulfilling conversation that she had had in recent times. They had a connect. It was so easy to talk to him. She did not really have to think much about what she said. Like she did not have to filter her words. She was able to say what came to her mind. It was freeing. Everyone needed someone like that to talk to—a person you could tell your true feelings to, without worrying about the consequences; someone with whom conversation just flowed. Did all that really mean nothing to him? Did everything that happened yesterday mean nothing to Vicky?

'Nothing happened.'

The words stung her.

'Nothing happened.'

Really? What about the laughter they shared? Did that also mean nothing to Vicky?

Tears flowed freely from her eyes now. As she wiped away her tears, she realized that she was still in love with Vicky, that she'd never gotten over him. God help her!

∞

The Wedding Cake

Avantika and Jhanvi met at the cake shop to finalize the cake. Ordering a Baumkuchen cake for the wedding was indeed a terrific idea. They browsed through albums of the various Baumkuchen cakes that the shop offered and, after consulting with Anisha, selected one. After they had placed the order and paid the advance for the cake, they stepped out onto the pavement and started to walk towards Avantika's car that was parked some distance away.

Jhanvi was glad she was able to get the contact of the owner. She never knew about this shop before. She was glad Vicky had figured it out. It was going to be really useful for her.

“Do you think we can do the dance without Vicky?” asked Avantika, interrupting Jhanvi's thoughts.

Jhanvi was surprised. “Without Vicky? But he is your partner, right? How can you dance without him?”

“I mean...in case he is not able to make it. Do you think it would be okay if I do it alone or...”

Jhanvi frowned and looked at Avantika questioningly. The dance routine was to be performed by a twelve-member team of their family members. They were to dance in pairs as they entered the reception area, finally putting garlands around the bride's and the groom's neck. The cake was also to arrive at the exact moment they were to ascend the stairs. It was supposed to be a big surprise for the couple.

Looking at Jhanvi's reaction, Avantika sighed. “I think he is having an affair.”

Jhanvi's eyebrows shot up. “Who? Vicky?”

Avantika nodded sadly.

Jhanvi laughed out aloud. But seeing Avantika's reaction, she stopped. “You are joking, right?”

Avantika shook her head again.

Jhanvi stopped walking and turned to Avantika. “Are you listening to yourself? Come on! You actually don’t believe that, do you?”

“It is hard to believe. But I think...”

“Come on! This is Vicky we are talking about.”

“You don’t know him!” exclaimed Avantika.

Jhanvi, unable to argue with that point, conceded. “Well, it is true that I don’t know him like you do. But...it’s Vicky. He will never cheat. He cannot cheat. He does not have a rotten bone in his body.”

Avantika, looking unconvinced, was staring somewhere in the distance.

Jhanvi asked in a soft voice, “What exactly happened?”

“Do you remember that night when we shopped for Anisha’s dress?”

“Yes.”

“I think it was the next day... Or it could be a day later... I am not really sure. I went over to his house...”

“Yeah?”

“I saw two cups of coffee on the dining table.”

Drat!

Jhanvi murmured, “It could have meant anything. He probably needed two cups of coffee that morning or...”

“If you need two cups of coffee, you refill the cup you are already drinking out of. You don’t fill two cups with coffee for one person, do you?”

Jhanvi could not argue with that sane argument. She bit her lips. Should she tell her the truth? She analysed the pros and cons, and then decided against it. If she confessed to the truth, it would land Vicky and her in a soup. Like they had done something that needed to be hidden.

Why the hell was she not truthful that day? It would have been easier to convince Avantika that day.

She hated now that she had convinced Vicky to lie too. Jhanvi twirled her hair and she bit her lips. How was it that Jhanvi always managed to land Vicky in trouble?

“And when I went to his bedroom, there was a blanket on the couch,” said Avantika.

“Maybe, Vicky slept on the couch. It does not mean...”

“No. It looked like they cuddled on the couch first before moving to the bed. We’ve done that...it is an extremely comfortable couch...”

Jhanvi agreed to that. It was a wonderful couch. A good place for necking or cuddling. Or to start a steamy night.

Jhanvi shook her head to break out of the images that filled her head. This was not the time to indulge in her fantasies.

“Look, Avantika, I don’t know why the coffee or the blanket was there. There probably is a very innocent explanation for it. Probably, a friend just stopped by.”

“If it was just a friend, he would have mentioned it to me.”

“Maybe he forgot. Or maybe nobody stayed over. But someone just came for coffee. Maybe it was the newspaper guy who Vicky invited in on a whim. And forgot about it later. Or maybe, it was not important enough to mention it to you. Why don’t you just ask Vicky?”

Jhanvi felt guilty for letting Vicky take the rap. But she really had no other way out. She made a mental note to come up with a plausible explanation later and text it to Vicky. The newspaper guy story sounded credible enough. Yes, that would work. The guy asked for Vicky’s help for paying his child’s fees and Vicky invited him in. That story would definitely work.

“I don’t want to,” replied Avantika, breaking into Jhanvi’s thoughts.

Jhanvi took Avantika’s hand in hers. “Avantika, look, I know you and I know Vicky. Vicky is in love with you. I can see it in his eyes every time he looks at you. He loves you. I

can assure you of that. Besides...look in the mirror. Would anyone in his sane mind cheat on you?"

Avantika reluctantly smiled. "You think so?"

"Yes! Vicky will never cheat. If it was me, I would trust him with my life. I would trust him even if he himself said otherwise. He is a gem of a guy."

This time, Avantika smiled broadly. "I know."

"Good. So, perk up. Don't mention all this to him. He might get upset."

"I won't."

Jhanvi sighed. "Good."

She was glad that the storm was over, but she was also aware of the deep sadness that crept in her body. Vicky loved Avantika. Not her. Avantika. And Jhanvi fought against the sadness enveloping her heart as she walked and talked with Avantika, smiling and laughing.



Jhanvi took a kebab and popped it into her mouth. Paying no attention to the taste, Jhanvi chewed the kebab before she swallowed it. Naina was looking at her with concern.

"Snap out of it!" said Naina.

"What?" asked Jhanvi.

"Whatever you are thinking, snap out of it. You look like a gargoyle."

Jhanvi glared at her. "Thank you. I feel so much better now that I know I look like a gargoyle."

"You don't look like it. But the expression you were sporting...ugg! What the hell were you thinking of?"

Jhanvi sighed.

Naina threw her hands up in the air. "God! You and your Vicky! I am just waiting for Anisha's wedding. Just a few more weeks of this sad face and sighing. After that, you will

be back to normal, right? Right?” she asked, with a desperate expression.

“Hmm... I need a cocktail. Order one for me. I want to get drunk tonight.”

“Oh my God! You are never getting back to normal, are you?”

“Shut up! Order me a cocktail.”

Naina placed the order for a couple of cocktails.

“Remind me never to go out with friends who are suffering from the ‘one sided love’ syndrome. Their blabbering, their moaning, their sighs...”

Jhanvi sighed again.

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Naina, with a disgusted look on her face. “Why the hell are you mooning over a guy who is with someone else? Look around. There are a lot of guys. And I am sure we can find a few who are better than Vicky.”

Jhanvi frowned. “I hate it when friends act like my conscience and tell me who is out of bounds and what I should do. As if I don’t know it myself. I had a friend like you in school. *‘Don’t talk to him. He is someone else’s boyfriend.’ ‘Don’t love him. He is out of bounds.’* Such useless advice and such useless friends!”

Naina scoffed. “Oh, I am sorry. Let me reword it. Go ahead and confess your love to Vicky. I’d love to see that scene. If you are selling tickets for that show, I will invite all my friends too.”

“Shut up!”

“No, I am serious. If you are so much in love with him, tell him. If he rejects, deal with it. But what if he is also in love with you?”

“Yeah, right,” replied Jhanvi, smirking. “He is not in love with me. I know that...but sometimes when he is talking to me, he says something which is not exactly flirting but it does give the impression that he likes me. Also, the way he looks at me...”

Naina sat up. "He likes you?"

"I get that feeling, a lot. Just an instinct. I mean..."

"Tell him then."

Jhanvi shook her head. "I told you what happened. I cannot be the reason Vicky has to go through one more breakup. You might think that I am extremely evil, but I am hoping and praying his relationship with Avantika fails. I am really hoping. There is only one condition. It should not fail because of me. I want their breakup to be organic, the reason not even loosely associated with me. I cannot bear the guilt anymore."

"God! You really are evil."

"Naina. This is Jhanvi. Me. I am your friend. Avantika is not your friend. Support me!"

After a moment Jhanvi scowled and said, "And I am not evil. Praying for things to work out for me does not make me evil. It makes me human. By your definition, everyone on this planet is evil."

Naina was not listening. She looked thoughtful. Then, she suddenly laughed. "What do you pray? I am trying to imagine it but I am not getting it. Do you say, '*God! Let Vicky's relationship with Avantika fail. But...but it should not fail because of me. Please let it fail for some other reason.*' Haha. I am sure God too is confused on what to do."

Their cocktails arrived. Jhanvi abandoned talking to Naina and sipped her cocktail. Warmth flooded her body. She finished her drink in a few minutes. Yes, she felt better after having the cocktail. Friends were useless. She should just stick to cocktails.

"So what have you decided to do?" asked Naina.

Jhanvi looked at Naina. "I have decided that friends are useless. I am sticking to cocktails." Then she raised her glass and said, "For all emotional problems. Cocktails!"

Naina laughed. "Don't tell me you are already drunk."

"I need more drinks."

“Enough. Start slow.”

“Drinks!” snapped Jhanvi, banging the table.

Naina looked at her friend in amazement. She had never seen Jhanvi like that.

“My dear darling. Like I said...enough! We are leaving now.”

Jhanvi put her hand on the table and slowly placed her head in the nook of her elbow. “Cocktails...” she murmured as she closed her eyes.

Naina rolled her eyes, wondering how she was going to get Jhanvi home. It was easier to transport a drunk friend, but a lovesick, drunk person? Now, Naina sighed.

∞

Jhanvi was sitting at Seaside Creek overlooking the backwaters. It was mid-morning, and the sun was shining bright. The heat and the silence made her sleepy. It was with enormous effort that she kept her eyes open.

She expected Avantika any moment, who was coming with all her cousins. They were going to use the wedding lawn to practice their dance routines. Avantika had requested Jhanvi to arrange for a loudspeaker. Jhanvi had arranged for one and was now waiting for the group to arrive.

“Hey!”

Jhanvi’s heart sank. She turned around and greeted Vicky, half-heartedly. She really needed to get away from the guy but he seemed to be everywhere.

“How are you?” asked Vicky, sitting down on the chair next to her.

“I am fine. Just feeling a little low.”

“Why?”

Jhanvi shrugged. “No specific reason.”

“You are healthy, wealthy and wise. What more do you want?”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes at him. "I don't want anything. I am fine."

"You know...somehow I get the feeling that you are not grateful enough."

Jhanvi scoffed. "I am not grateful enough?"

"Yes. You have everything and yet you complain."

"I did not complain."

"You did. You just said you felt a little low."

"Oh! Just because I am healthy, wealthy and wise, I must always feel extraordinarily happy, is it? Who am I? A cartoon?"

"Well...at least be grateful."

"I am grateful!" insisted Jhanvi. "And for your kind information, no one can always be happy. There are ups and downs for everyone."

"Still..."

Jhanvi scoffed. "Still? Still?"

She got up and moved to stand next to him. "Okay, how is the scene in front of you?"

"What?"

"Describe the scene in front of you."

"The backwaters?"

"Yes. Describe it."

"Well, it is amazing. Nice breeze, lovely sunshine, the lovely blue water..."

Jhanvi put her hand in front of Vicky's face. "Now tell me. What does it look like now?"

"Move your hand!"

"No! Just tell me. What does the scene in front of you look like now?"

"It's okay. Your hand is blocking half of it."

“Oh! You have the lovely breeze, the lovely sunshine, the lovely blue water and you are still complaining that I have my hand in front of your face?”

“Well, it was blocking my view.”

“And yet the situation never changed. Same breeze, same sunshine and same water. You should have been grateful for all that. Instead you choose to complain about my hand. What an ungrateful guy you are!”

Vicky smiled. “Okay, fine, I got your point. Can you please move your hand now?”

Jhanvi sat back in her chair but she was far from done. “Sometimes, we have a temporary pessimistic view of life. It does not mean that one is not grateful. I may be healthy, wealthy and wise, but when I as much as stub my toe, it still hurts. And if someone asks me how I am, I am probably not going to tell that all is well and I am likely to complain about my pain. It does not mean I am ungrateful. It means, the pain is temporary but it is nonetheless blocking my view of life.”

“Okay, okay! I got it. Sorry.”

“I don’t like guys like you...”

Vicky grinned. “What? Nice guys?”

“No. Guys who are always optimistic. What the hell?! It’s like you don’t know the pleasure in being sad. If you don’t know, at least let the others be. Don’t try to alleviate our suffering with crappy optimism. Nobody wants that.”

“Wow! Bad day, eh?” said Vicky, checking his watch. “Where the hell is Avantika?” he said, pretending to be anxious for her arrival so as to escape from Jhanvi’s anger.

Jhanvi glared at him. “You know what you need?”

Vicky nodded. “I do. I need you to stop screaming at me.”

“You need a job!”

“I am on a break!”

“You need a job. Everyone needs one.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

Then, suddenly, Jhanvi asked, “Why did you sell your company? Do you ever feel you sold it a bit too soon?”

“No. I don’t think so. In everything, I think there is a sweet spot. I prefer to stay in that.”

Jhanvi scrunched her face. “Sweet spot? What is that?”

“I can tell you, but it is a rather lengthy explanation, and you will lose your cool and start screaming at me again.”

Jhanvi looked at him. He was right. She’d probably do exactly that. She took a few deep breaths and composed herself.

Then, she flashed him a smile and said, “I won’t. I promise. Please begin with your lengthy explanation. I cannot wait to hear that.”

Vicky grinned. “When you are starting a career, you are excited. You learn a lot of things. Everything is challenging. You earn little but your skills keep improving every day. That is the beginning stage. Then, comes the second stage, which I call the sweet spot. After some time at the job, you have learnt your skills pretty well. It is much easier to do the same job. Your earnings have also started to look good. You put in an average amount of work. Maybe around eight to ten hours a day. Now, that is the sweet spot. Next, comes the third stage. If you get too ambitious, you look for more profits or try to expand too much, you get into a space where everything else will get affected. Your health gets affected and your relationships suffer. You might earn recognition, but the relative increase in profits is less. Or you end up earning a lot and yet the joy you get from doing the job may have significantly reduced. This stage is not a nice place to be in. So, my mantra is that we should either remain in the sweet spot or get out before we move to the third stage.”

Jhanvi looked thoughtful. “Oh yeah...that’s true.”

“If you look closely, the sweet spot exists in everything. Parenting, physical health...anything and everything. For example, too little parenting means you are being a bad parent.

Too much means you are overprotective and hampering the child's growth. So, you need to stay within the sweet spot.”

“Okay. So, when you compare it with your physical health, it is like training. First, it is hard. Then, you adapt to your routine. It is not hard and yet it is rewarding. That is your sweet spot. The third stage is like running an extremely hard marathon and ending up needing knee surgery.”

“Excellent! You make an amazing student.”

Jhanvi, who had forgotten all about being angry and grumpy, grinned. “That’s really cool. There is a sweet spot in everything.”

“Exactly. And we should make sure all aspects of our lives are at their sweet spot. That is the aim, though I would say it is virtually impossible to attain and even more impossible to maintain. You have to have a balance between all aspects of your life—career, money, relationships, health, family and mental health. If you try the balance, you might come across as not being ambitious enough or rich enough. But you know that what you have is a balance and it is truly precious.”

Jhanvi nodded. “That makes a lot of sense.”

“Of course, it makes sense. I have been trying to be in the sweet spot for everything. And that is why I did not find it hard to leave the company and move on. I was not getting the same joy from working there any longer. So, I thought it was better to quit and try something else that gave me joy and satisfaction.”

“Did you find it?”

Vicky smirked at her. “Patience, girl. Everything takes times. Some things take a lot more time.”

Jhanvi narrowed her eyes as she looked at him. “Hmm... It just looks like you are lazing around.”

“Aah! To an untrained eye, I can look like I am lazing but to a trained eye...they know. I have too many thought processes going on at the same time. Considering, rejecting, parking thoughts for later...so many things are happening inside this amazing mechanism that is my brain.”

Jhanvi shook her head, displaying her scepticism. “What humility!”

Vicky continued, “One of the brightest minds in this century is hard at work...”

Jhanvi laughed. “Have some shame! Have a little shame!”

Vicky looked insulted. “What? You don’t agree? That’s pretty insulting. Really hurting. I am leaving. Bye. I know when I am not appreciated.”

Vicky started to get up when Jhanvi quipped, “I ordered some coffee.”

Vicky sat back. “Great minds need great food.”

Jhanvi laughed and wondered where her grumpy mood, which she was sporting just a few minutes earlier, had disappeared.

∞

Avantika greeted Jhanvi and Vicky. “Hey!”

Jhanvi got up. “Hey, Avantika! Ready? Shall we go?”

Avantika nodded. “Almost. A couple of my cousins are yet to come. They should be here in five minutes.”

Jhanvi nodded.

Vicky got up and handed over Avantika’s purse to her.

Avantika took it gratefully and said, “Thanks, Vicky. Cannot believe I forgot it at your place yesterday.”

“No problem. Hey, listen. Something has come up. I have to leave. Is that okay? I can’t stay for the practice.”

“Oh, that’s fine. We will manage.”

“Thank you. Okay then, see you later,” said Vicky. He waved to Jhanvi and left.

Avantika said, “Come on, I will introduce you to my cousins. They are in the reception area.”

Jhanvi nodded and they both walked towards the reception.

“I actually arrived a few minutes ago,” started Avantika.

“Hmm...”

“I saw you both were laughing over something. What were you talking about?” asked Avantika.

Jhanvi looked at her surprised. Then, she reminded herself that a girlfriend would obviously be curious if her boyfriend was laughing with someone else.

She replied, “Vicky was saying something about being in a sweet spot...”

“Oh yeah. He always talks about that.”

Jhanvi nodded.

“You both seem very friendly.”

Jhanvi flushed. “Yeah...it’s just that...”

It was Avantika’s turn to flush. “I am sorry. I did not mean for it to come out like that. I sound like a jealous cat. I guess I am just feeling very confused where Vicky is concerned. He has still not proposed, and I don’t know what to think...”

Jhanvi stopped walking and turned to Avantika. “Look, Vicky loves you. He will propose. Maybe he is just taking time to think about everything. I don’t think he is hesitating. I don’t think Vicky is afraid of commitment. He just likes to take his own time about everything, right? He thinks a lot before doing something...”

“You seem to know a lot about him,” said Avantika, in a low voice.

Jhanvi blushed. “It’s not like that. You are too close to see clearly. I am far off. Very, very far off.”

Avantika nodded, but still looked unconvinced. “Do you think he will propose?”

“I most assuredly do.”

Uncertainty flitted through Avantika’s face and Jhanvi was quick to notice. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that...he helped me, you know?”

“Helped you?”

“Yes. I was once in an extremely bad situation and there was no one who could help me. He came to my rescue. I don’t think anyone else could have done what he did.”

“What happened?”

Avantika shook her head. “Not important. But the fact is that he helped me and I am extremely grateful to him. In fact, I will spend the rest of my life thanking him. I will never ever break his heart...”

Jhanvi looked at her in wonder. Then, she asked softly, “Avantika, are you in love with him or are you just grateful for his help? The two are very different things...”

Avantika hesitated. “He helped me so much. I can’t hurt him. I’d break his trust if I don’t say yes his proposal, right?”

Jhanvi asked shrewdly, “Avantika! Are you hoping he will propose or are you scared that he will?”

Seeing Jhanvi’s expression, Avantika laughed and said, “Jhanvi, I love him. And I am sure he is in love with me. And only me. I am sorry to confuse you... Sometimes, I overthink things and it does not really go well. Let’s just forget about this conversation. Come on. My cousins are waiting.”

Avantika introduced Jhanvi to all her cousins. Later, in the middle of the rehearsal, Jhanvi noticed Avantika looking at her with a strange look in her eyes. As soon as Jhanvi caught her eye, Avantika averted her glance. But the incident scared Jhanvi. What had she been thinking?

Jhanvi is down

Jhanvi opened her eyes with difficulty. The moment she opened her eyes, she knew. She knew she was sick. Her head was aching. Her arms and legs felt too heavy to move. Her throat felt scratchy. And when she coughed, her stomach cramped with pain. It was a struggle even to cough. Her whole body was in enormous pain.

She grabbed her phone from the nightstand and dropped a message to Naina that she'd be unavailable for the day. Naina was her backup. Always. She knew exactly what was needed and would take care of it.

Then, Jhanvi dropped a message to her mother to get some much-needed pity. It was too late for a call but she knew her mother would call her the moment she woke up. Then, Jhanvi closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

A few hours later, the doorbell rang. She groaned and pulled the blanket over her head, wishing the person on the door would just go away. The bell rang again.

Cursing, Jhanvi pushed her blanket away and sat up on the bed. She glanced at the clock. It was well past noon. She had been sleeping for more than 16 hours.

She got up, pulled a shawl over her night dress and ambled to the door. She opened the door, ready to fling a string of curses. But they all died down when she saw who it was. Vicky.

Jhanvi suddenly became conscious of her appearance. Her hair and face, she guessed, were a mess. She wanted to disappear. She burned with embarrassment along with the fever.

“You?” she asked, pulling the shawl around her closer.

“Naina told me you are not well. Can I come in?”

She groaned.

“Do you really have to?”

Aloud she said, “And that idiot just gave away my house address, is it?”

Vicky walked inside. He took in her apartment in one slow, sweeping look and then he looked back at her. “No. I had to flirt a little with her for that. I already knew you stayed in this colony. Just didn’t know your flat number.”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes as she locked the door. Vicky had really played to his strength. She could very well imagine Vicky flirting and Naina blushing. Naina must have become putty in his hands.

“Don’t you have any scruples? You have a girlfriend.”

Vicky grinned. “It was just harmless flirting. And it is one of the chief pleasures of my life. Why the hell are you grudging me for that?”

“Take a seat,” murmured Jhanvi. She headed to the sofa and lay down on it.

Vicky felt her forehead before he took his seat. “You are burning. Have you taken a medicine?”

“No.”

“Do you want any?”

“No.”

“What do you want?”

“What I really want is for you to go away. I am not well.”

Vicky grinned. “I came here to offer help. I know how hard it is to be sick and alone. Where is your boyfriend, by the way?”

“He is flying over Europe somewhere.”

“Hmm... I got you some *rasam* rice,” he said, placing a lunch box on the table.

When Jhanvi heard ‘*rasam* rice’, she suddenly felt hungry. God bless Vicky!

“Should I get you a spoon?” asked Vicky.

“Okay,” answered Jhanvi. “That’s the kitchen.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” said Vicky. He was soon back with a spoon.

Jhanvi started to eat.

“Aah!” she exclaimed. It was simply pleasurable to eat that food. It was warm and felt extremely soothing. She realized she had been starving.

Vicky smiled mischievously. “Tastes okay?”

“Aaah! Yes. It tastes amazing.”

“If your sense of taste is working, you cannot be that sick.”

Jhanvi glared at him. “Then why do I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck?”

Vicky smiled. “You are working too much. You know that, right?”

“Not everyone can afford to laze around like you.”

Vicky laughed. “I agree. Laziness is a costly affair.”

Jhanvi finished her lunch and lay down on the sofa again.

“Do you want anything else?”

“No,” she murmured.

“Are you sure you don’t want to visit the doctor?”

“I am sure. A couple of days’ rest and I should be fine.”

“Okay. I got you a pack of bread. It’s on your dining table. And I will come back tonight with dinner.”

“You really don’t have to, Vicky.”

“I know I don’t have to. But I will. It’s okay.”

Jhanvi felt really grateful for his visit. She felt much better after she had lunch. And she knew it would really mean a lot to her if he visited her again. Even if he was there for only a few minutes, she knew it would make an enormous difference to her. If he could stay with her, that would be infinitely better. She was aware of a painful regret passing her heart and tried to put her thoughts away.

“Thank you, Vicky. You really are amazing. You know that, right?”

“Oh! I know. But I did not realize that you knew that. Always making snarky comments about me...”

Jhanvi felt guilty. “I am sorry. I know I can be a bitch sometimes. I am really grateful that you came over. Next time you come, I will be better dressed.”

Vicky laughed. “I don’t know what you are talking about. You look beautiful now.”

“I am sick,” groaned Jhanvi.

“Even when you are sick, you are beautiful...”

She smiled. “Don’t try to cheer me up. I know how I look! But really, thanks! For everything. You should remind me later to send your mother a thank you card.”

Vicky laughed. “Bye. See you later.” He started to walk towards the door.

Jhanvi went on. “No, seriously. She has done a great job raising you. You know, if I have a son, I want him to be like you.”

Vicky was halfway to the door. He stopped and walked back to Jhanvi. He looked into her eyes and smiled.

Jhanvi was taken aback. She could see the mischievous glint in his eyes. She asked, “What?”

“You realize that there is only one way for you to have a son like me, right?”

Jhanvi blushed. A deep red.

“I take it back. You are an idiot!” she exclaimed as she pulled her shawl over her face.

Vicky laughed.

When she removed the shawl from her face, Vicky was still looking at her.

“You look cute when you blush,” he answered to her questioning glance.

Jhanvi bit her lips. What was he doing? Why was he flirting with her? She knew that for sure now. This was him definitely flirting. But why? He already had a girlfriend. An amazing, awesome girlfriend. What the hell was he flirting with her for? Was he just trying to string her along? Just for fun? Was it fun for him to make her fall in love with him, a little more each time? Because it was impossible that he did not know by now that she was head over heels in love with him. It was impossible for him to not know that she was going to lose her heart to him all the more because of all this flirting. What the hell was he doing? Did he not care for her at all? Did he not care if she broke her heart all over again? Because that was a certainty, if this was going to continue. These thoughts made Jhanvi upset.

She scowled at him. “You have a girlfriend!”

“So?” he asked as he shrugged.

“So, flirt with her!”

“I was not flirting with you. I was just pointing out a scientific, biological reasoning for what you wanted.”

“It is flirting if the scientific, biological reasoning is sex.”

He shrugged. “Well, that was unavoidable.”

“It was completely avoidable. You are just...just...flirting without...without...worrying about the consequences. That is irresponsible flirting.”

Vicky frowned. “What consequences? Flirting is, by definition, irresponsible. Harmless...”

“Well, it may be harmless to you! Not to me,” shot back Jhanvi, her voice raising.

Vicky scowled. “How the hell is it harmful to you?” asked Vicky, his voice now as loud as hers.

“I don’t know... You know what? You should leave. I have had it with you. You are irresponsible and reckless...”

Vicky was shocked. “I have never ever been accused of that in my life!”

“Just because no one has ever said that to your face does not mean no one has thought about it.”

Vicky threw his hands in the air. “You are such a psycho. I came all the way to help you because I thought you were lonely and sick...and here you are...accusing me of imaginative things.”

“It was not imaginative. You flirted with me.”

“And you made sex noises when you ate my food!”

There was pindrop silence in the room for a few minutes.

In a low voice, Jhanvi said, “I so did not!”

“Aaah...aaah...! What the heck was that?” replied Vicky, imitating her.

“I loved the food. The food did me so much good! I was not making sex noises. I was not flirting...”

“Oh my God! I am really sorry for...for...doing anything for you. I really should get out of this habit. Because every time I do something good for you, I end up losing something.”

The comment seemed to find its mark. Jhanvi’s lips trembled as she glared at him. She was on the verge of breaking into tears.

Vicky, who did not notice Jhanvi’s reaction in his anger, continued, “And even if by a remote chance, it was flirting, then I should learn to reserve it for girls who have hearts!”

“Yes, I don’t have a heart... Then, why are you here?” said Jhanvi, her voice trembling.

Vicky missed that too.

“My mistake...” replied Vicky and moved towards the door. “Get well. Or don’t get well. I don’t give a damn!”

“Fine.”

“Fine!” replied Vicky, as he banged the door shut behind him.

Jhanvi broke into tears as soon as the door closed.

The next morning, Jhanvi woke up feeling much better. Just physically though. Mentally, she was far from okay. She was filled with regret and was extremely ashamed of herself.

She thought about the entire episode with Vicky. She should not have gotten angry. He went out of his way to visit her, to cook for her and take care of her. And how did she repay him? By getting angry and asking him to leave. What kind of a girl was she?

She spent her morning recalling every detail of their altercation. Everything that she had said and everything that he had done played on loop in her mind. With every passing minute, her regret became stronger.

She spent a miserable day tormenting herself and moping at home. In the evening, she finally decided to give herself the benefit of doubt and attempted to forgive herself.

It was not entirely her fault. She was head over heels in love with him. And he already had a girlfriend. Jhanvi knew he was completely out of her reach. All she wanted to do was to get over him. She did not want to be around him or talk to him. But managing Anisha's wedding was making it impossible for her to avoid him. And he was making things worse.

He was just not letting her get over him. He was always there. He was caring. He looked at her as if she was special. He spoke to her as if it was the most pleasurable thing in the world. He made her feel good about herself. He cared for her. He was always taking care of her.

How was a girl to resist that? How was a girl to get over a guy like that?

And on top of that, he flirted. Till then, it had not been explicit, and she was able to bear it. But now? He was openly flirting with her. Of course, it looked like he flirted with almost every girl he came in contact with and he was able to take them all in his stride. But why could he not understand that it was impossible for Jhanvi to brush it under the carpet.

She was in love with him, for God's sake! How was she to take it in her stride?

But in spite of it all, he was the only one who came when she was sick. The only one in the whole wide world who cared. And she had pushed him away.

She slept fitfully that night, still undecided on how to work it out with Vicky.



The next day, Jhanvi entered Vicky's compound. He was lying on a hammock and reading a book. He was wearing a sleeveless black t-shirt and red shorts. Jhanvi shook her head as she walked towards him. Talk about luxury!

She took her time in going to him. If he had noticed her, he did not react. He continued to read his book.

She stood over him and asked him, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Vicky put the book down on his chest and glared at her. "Why? Did you miss to scold me for something?"

Jhanvi nodded. Yes, she deserved that.

"I just wanted to tell you that I am sorry. I really am sorry. You came to help, and I fought with you."

Vicky looked at her for a minute, contemplating whether to forgive her or not. Then, he mumbled, "It's fine."

And yet, he looked aloof. Jhanvi said, "I was sick. My body was aching and my head was aching and I...I got upset over nothing."

"Hmm... Are you apologizing to me because I am your client's boyfriend or because you are really sorry?"

"I am really sorry."

"Are you sure? So, you are not angry with me anymore?"

"No," said Jhanvi, smiling.

"So, you are okay if I flirt with you?"

Jhanvi glowered at him. “No! You cannot flirt with me. I came here to apologize and have an adult conversation with you.”

Vicky smiled slowly. He looked meaningfully into her eyes and replied, “Oh! I would loooove to have an ‘adult’ conversation with you.”

Jhanvi glared at him. “I said no flirting!”

Vicky rolled his eyes, picked up his book and pretended to read. Jhanvi stood without moving.

A few seconds ticked by before Vicky turned to Jhanvi. “What are you still doing here? You are no fun.”

“I know. A lot of people have told me that. I am no fun.”

Vicky sighed. “Okay. Since you accept that, I forgive you.”

Jhanvi smiled. “Hmm...you are not scared that I will leave the arrangements for Anisha’s reception halfway and run away?”

Vicky shrugged. “Why would I care about that?”

“Because she is going to be your sister-in-law?”

“She is not going to be my sister-in-law.”

Jhanvi looked surprised. “She is not?”

“No.”

“But...but you are dating Avantika.”

“Yeah, so?”

Jhanvi frowned. “I don’t understand. You don’t want to marry her?”

Vicky hesitated. “I don’t know that yet.”

“Why not? I thought you were ready to commit...”

“Can I please request you to stay out of my personal life? You are being a nosey parker again.”

“Sorry. Your life...”

Vicky pretended to go back to his book.

Jhanvi stood for a few moments looking at him.

“How did you get a girl like Avantika?”

Vicky sighed and kept his book on his chest again. “You suck at apologizing.”

“No, I am just wondering...”

“You are suggesting that she is too good for me.”

“Well, yeah. She is an international model. You, on the other hand, seem to while away your time reading *One Up On Wall Street*.”

“Hey! Just because you don’t see me working does not mean I don’t work.”

“So, you work?”

Vicky hesitated. “Well...not right now.”

“See?”

“There is nothing to see. I am waiting for inspiration to strike.”

“While lying on a hammock by the sea?”

“Well, someone has to. Humans are squandering God’s precious gifts to us. I, on the other hand, am making the most of it.”

Jhanvi glared at him. “By lying on a hammock by the sea?”

“My house is beach facing. I can’t help it if my hammock faces the sea.”

“And who bought this house?”

Vicky glared at her.

Jhanvi grinned. “You seem to be so utterly relaxed that I am insanely jealous. You have no worries at all, do you?”

“What ever is worrying going to achieve?”

Jhanvi shook her head. “No work to do...completely satisfied with life...”

“I do have one issue.”

“You do? Do tell.”

“The satisfaction that you get when you while away your time when you have some meaningful work to do... I am actually not getting that satisfaction since I don't have any meaningful work to do.”

Jhanvi's jaw dropped. “Wow! What a burden! How do you live with it?”

Vicky shrugged. “I manage.”

Jhanvi gave the hammock a push, almost throwing him out of the hammock.

Taken aback, he tried to gain his balance and when he did, he glared at her. “What the hell do you want?”

“How did you meet Avantika?”

“My God! You crazy little...”

“I am not leaving till you tell me.”

Vicky's mouth opened in surprise. Then, he gave in to her blackmail. “I met her at a party.”

“And what? Was it love at first sight for both of you?”

“Well...not exactly.”

“Then?”

Vicky sighed. “Why the hell are you so curious?”

“I just want to know.”

“I will tell you. But no one else should know about this, okay? And you should never mention it to Avantika.”

“I promise.”

“She was in trouble. I rescued her. Let's just leave it at that.”

“What happened? She was physically in harm's way...”

“Well...” said Vicky, shrugging.

“Come on. Don't leave me in suspense. Oh wait! Did you rescue her the way you rescued me from those two drunks? Because I will never classify that as a rescue. It looks like you

think too much of yourself and imagine yourself was a knight in shining armour rescuing girls left, right and centre.”

“Oh shut up! It was nothing like those drunks. I really did rescue her.”

“From what?” asked Jhanvi, sceptically.

“You know the proverb, right? Curiosity kills the cat?”

“I am not a cat. Now tell me.”

Vicky sighed. “A topless picture of hers went up in a site. I helped her get it down.”

Jhanvi’s eyes widened. “Oh my God!”

“Yeah. Now you know. Happy?”

“Why the hell should I be happy? How did you get it down?”

“*That* is none of your business.”

“Hmm...”

“So? What is your verdict? Am I a knight in shining armour or not?”

Jhanvi grudgingly admitted. “Yeah, okay.”

Vicky looked at Jhanvi thoughtfully for a moment and then said, “You know something? I am going to ask you a question now. This is a question that I have never ever posed to a girl before. Especially, to a beautiful girl. But you are forcing me to ask you that question.”

“What question?” asked Jhanvi, curiously.

“Are you leaving now or what?”

Jhanvi was taken aback for a moment before she said, “Yeah, yeah. I am leaving.”

“Good. The book has just come to a very interesting part.”

Jhanvi glared at him, but the look was lost on him. He had already gone back to the book. Jhanvi slowly walked out of his house, more confused than before.

The Ocean

Only a week was left for Anisha's reception. Vicky, Avantika and Jhanvi were sitting near the backwaters in Seaside Creek and discussing the transportation details. Anisha and her beau were expected in another couple of days, and there were a few last-minute details that needed confirmations.

The lights in the lawn dimmed.

Jhanvi grinned. "I think Lavanya is asking us to get out."

Avantika looked at her watch and sighed. "She has a point. It is ten already. We should clear out."

Jhanvi asked, "Can you stay for another 15 minutes? I just want to go over the sightseeing arrangements. I need to book the transport tomorrow itself."

Avantika asked, "Can we continue the discussion at Vicky's house? It is closeby."

Jhanvi was slightly taken aback. Then, she remembered that Avantika did not know about Jhanvi's visit to Vicky's house.

"Oh, is it?" asked Jhanvi, looking at Vicky.

Vicky looked at her surprised. He too seemed to have forgotten that Avantika did not know of Jhanvi's visit. Looking at Jhanvi's face, he smiled mischievously and nodded.

"What? What?" asked Avantika, looking from Vicky to Jhanvi.

"Oh, nothing. I think he once mentioned where his house was. I just...forgot!" said Jhanvi, trying to manage the situation.

"Should we leave?" asked Vicky, getting up. "I have a new bottle of vodka," he said to Avantika. Then, he turned to Jhanvi and said, "And I have *nanari sherbath* for you."

Jhanvi flushed but managed to nod.

"You like that?" asked Avantika.

Jhanvi nodded. “Yeah.”

Avantika looked from Jhanvi to Vicky. “How the hell do you both know so much about each other? I thought you just met at a party or something.”

Vicky replied, “We did, we did. But I did not know that she likes it. I just guessed. She looks like a *nanari sherbath* kind of girl.”

Avantika nodded appreciatively at Vicky. “Oh! Good guess.”

Vicky grinned. Jhanvi glared at Vicky from behind Avantika.



The three of them sat in the balcony overlooking the ocean. They were done discussing the transportation arrangements but Vicky and Avantika had urged Jhanvi to stay back for longer. Jhanvi had reluctantly agreed.

“You have a nice house, Vicky,” said Jhanvi.

Vicky grinned. “Thank you. I am sure people who see it for the very first time are suitably impressed.”

Jhanvi hid her smile. “Yes, very beautiful. Though it is a little big for one person.”

“Well...I am one person...as of now,” said Vicky, looking at the ocean.

Jhanvi looked at Avantika surprised. Had there been a proposal that she was not aware of? Avantika, understanding the unasked question in Jhanvi’s eyes, shook her head, almost imperceptibly.

Vicky, still looking out at the ocean and lost in his own thoughts, missed this non-verbal exchange between the girls.

“When I built this house...I had kind of envisioned a life for me.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My wife and I...sitting here every evening and chatting till late in the night. Romantic walks on the beach at the night... Our kids running around on the beach in the day... building a sandcastle or playing frisbee...” replied Vicky, almost wistfully.

Jhanvi smiled. For a moment, she imagined living the life Vicky had just described.

Vicky looked at the girls and smiled. “Sorry. That was some unnecessary information.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “No, no. A person’s fondest memories and their greatest dreams are what make one unique and interesting. It’s the past and the future, more than the present.”

Vicky laughed. “That is true.”

Avantika excused herself and went down.

Jhanvi looked at Vicky mischievously and grinned. “So...I did not want to ask you in Avantika’s presence...”

“What?”

“How many girlfriends have you had?”

Vicky scowled and shook his head. “What? You really think I’ve counted?”

Jhanvi shrugged. “Well, yeah...”

“Come on! I would never do that.”

“Fine. Do it now.”

“What? Count?”

“Yes.”

“Noooo! What kind of a person do you think I am?”

Jhanvi focused her gaze on him. “Hmm... Scared that you will forget someone?”

Vicky grinned. “Yeah, terribly.”

Jhanvi laughed. “Come on. Just give me a ballpark number.”

Vicky shook his head. “Why are you so intent on it?”

“Just like that,” replied Jhanvi, shrugging.

Vicky looked at her curiously for a few moments and then asked, “Is it because you want to know if you are in the list?”

Jhanvi flushed. “Wh...What? No! Of course not! I mean...I was never...”

Vicky grinned. “You look cute when you’re flustered.”

Jhanvi scowled and gave up on that line of enquiry.

After a few minutes, Jhanvi said, “So?”

“Now what?” asked Vicky, looking at Jhanvi mischievously.

“Are you going to propose to Avantika?”

Vicky rolled his eyes. “Don’t you have any boundaries?”

“No. Boundaries make me uncomfortable.”

“I can see that. Moreover, what makes you think I will tell you?”

“Oh, come on. All those dreams you just spoke about... You were thinking about her, right?”

Vicky shrugged. “I would like to remind you that you are drinking *nanari sherbhath*. You cannot get drunk from that.”

“Oh, come on. Tell me...”

“I was not thinking about anyone. It was just what I said it was—a dream.”

Avantika returned and Jhanvi could not pursue that line of enquiry anymore either.

Vicky smiled at Avantika as she sat down with them. “All okay?”

“Yeah,” she nodded.

Jhanvi saw that Avantika looked a little pale. Before she could enquire about that, Vicky turned to Jhanvi and asked, “How is your boyfriend doing?”

“You have a boyfriend?” asked Avantika, surprised. “You’ve never told me!” she said with a pout.

“There is not much to tell. Trust me.”

“Has he proposed to you yet?” asked Vicky.

“Vicky!” exclaimed Avantika, shocked. “You can’t ask someone that!”

Jhanvi interrupted. “It’s fine. He’s just pulling my leg. No, he has not proposed to me.”

“Are you having second thoughts about him?” asked Vicky, cocking his head.

“Not at all. He is perfect. Very ideal.”

“How so?” asked Vicky.

“He is a pilot. So, he will never be around. He will leave me alone for most of the time. See? Ideal.”

Vicky laughed. “Funny.”

“What? Not everyone wants to sit with their spouse and watch the ocean every day. It’s the ocean. It’ll stay the same every day, vast and blue. Get over it!”

Vicky laughed. Jhanvi saw that Avantika did not smile. She was looking pale. Jhanvi felt that she had overstayed her welcome.

“Alright, I am leaving now,” said Jhanvi, getting up.

“I’ll drop you,” said Vicky, getting up.

“No, no. I will manage.”

“I know you can manage. But I insist.” He turned to Avantika, “Will you be okay?”

“I will be just fine,” she said, smiling at him.

With a quick nod, Vicky followed Jhanvi downstairs.



The next morning, Jhanvi was on a call when she caught sight of Avantika entering her office. Hesitating between

continuing with the call and talking to Avantika, she looked around for help. Everyone seemed to be busy.

Avantika, on seeing that Jhanvi was on a call, mouthed, “Need to talk to you. I’ll wait.”

Jhanvi nodded and pointed to the conference room. She quickly wrapped up her call and joined Avantika.

“Hey! I wasn’t expecting you to be here today. All okay?”

“Yeah, I just thought I will confirm the travel arrangements.”

Jhanvi frowned. “Are there any changes?”

“No, none.”

Jhanvi sat down, explaining, “If there is no change, then everything is A-OK. I’ve done the bookings like we discussed, Avantika.”

Avantika sighed. “Actually, I am not here for that. I wanted to talk to you about something else.”

“Yes?”

“This is kind of sensitive. I cannot discuss this with my friends and family as they are close to me and they’ll take it personally. And I don’t want to worry them unnecessarily. I need to discuss this with someone with an objective approach. And...you being a...a...you are a friend, obviously,” said Avantika, flushing before continuing, “But I’ve only recently known you...”

Jhanvi interrupted her, “Avantika, I get it. I am a stranger. But you can talk to me. I promise you I won’t take it to heart. Nor will anything go outside this room.”

Avantika looked relieved. “Thank you! I wanted to talk about yesterday.”

“Yes?”

“About your boyfriend... I was happy to learn that you are in a steady relationship. Are you happy with him?”

Jhanvi was taken aback. Whatever it was, she had not expected this. “Yes,” replied Jhanvi, uncomfortably.

“Soulmate?”

Jhanvi stirred uncomfortably. “I... am... not sure.”

“See? It’s a complicated question, right? How exactly do people know that they have met their soulmate?”

Jhanvi smiled. “I know the answer to that question. It is very easy and simple. If you know, you know. If you don’t know, then it is a no.”

“Do you remember what you said about your boyfriend yesterday?”

“What did I say?”

“You said it was ideal because he won’t be around all the time.”

Jhanvi laughed. “I was just kidding. I did not mean it.”

“You may have been joking but what you said was the truth. Not everyone wants to sit in the balcony and watch the ocean with their spouse.”

Jhanvi looked at Avantika curiously. “What are we talking about?”

“Vicky. I don’t want to be the spouse who sits with him in the balcony every evening and watches the ocean. Can you imagine how unbelievably boring that would be?”

Jhanvi looked at Avantika in surprise. When Vicky had described the scene, Jhanvi had wanted with all her heart to be the woman who got to sit with him on the terrace. She was shocked to learn that Avantika thought differently.

“You don’t want what he wants?” asked Jhanvi, not hiding the disbelief in her tone.

“No! I don’t. I am a model. I earn my bread and butter from networking. By going to parties...by having fun. Not sitting in a balcony. And kids?! He was talking about kids!” exclaimed Avantika, her voice rising to dangerous decibels.

“Calm down, Avantika. He was talking about the future. Not now.”

Avantika looked terrified. “Still. I can’t. I can’t. I’ll have to give up my career when we have kids, and I have only just started my career. I don’t even want to think about kids and stuff. When Vicky said all those things, all I wanted to do was run away from there... It is a lot of pressure. A lot of pressure.”

“Breathe, Avantika, breathe,” said Jhanvi, placing her hands gently on Avantika’s shoulders and willing her to calm down.

Avantika took a few deep breaths and tried to calm down. Unsuccessfully though. “I am going to break up with him. I have to. You realize that, right?”

Jhanvi was astounded even as Avantika continued, “You were right when you said that not everyone wants what Vicky wants. You were right on the dot.”

Jhanvi’s eyes went wide as she exclaimed, “No, no, no, no, no, no. You cannot break up over what I said. I was kidding. I did not mean it...”

“But you were right.”

“No, no, I was not. Look, Avantika, just talk to Vicky. Just talk to him. Maybe he also wants all these things much later in life and not now. Maybe he was talking about it like...like how we sometimes talk about our retired life. Something we foresee for the distant future... For the very distant future... Come on!”

Avantika began to look calmer. She looked away from Jhanvi to the floor and frowned. Jhanvi had never seen her as confused before this.

A few minutes later, much to Jhanvi’s relief, she nodded. “Yes, that is right. I will talk to him.”

“Yes, please. I would hate for you to lose someone as awesome as Vicky just because you couldn’t talk it out.”

Avantika nodded. “Yes...what you are saying is right.”

She still looked pale though, as she stared into the distance.

Jhanvi sighed. God! She should really learn to shut her mouth. What was it about Vicky's relationships and her? Anything she did or said seemed to drive a wedge between Vicky and his girlfriends. She should really get out of his life as soon as possible.

“Water?”

Avantika nodded, still looking at the floor.

Jhanvi left the room to get the water. As soon as she was out of the conference room, a new line of thought emerged. She could not blame herself if they broke up. Not everything was her fault, after all. The issue here was what Avantika wanted of her life. Of course, she was an amazing girl. But why was she thinking about breaking up because of an insignificant issue? Why had she not even considered talking to Vicky? For all she knew, this could be easily sorted.

Then, she wondered if Avantika and Vicky were really suited for each other. They seemed to have such different mentalities. Their expectations from life were so different from the other's. Were they really compatible in that sense? Did they really love each other?

She shook her head. Whether they were suited for each other or not was not for her to decide. Last time, when she decided that Vicky and Rathi were not suited for each other, it led to a disaster. This time, Jhanvi was determined that she was not going to interfere. She had no right. Their compatibility issues were their headache. Not hers!

Whether they wanted to break up or stay together and have kids, Jhanvi thought with a pang, it was none of her business. None!

As she returned with the glass of water, she reminded herself that she really only wanted one thing—that she should not be the reason for their breakup. Simple. That was all that mattered to her. Was it really too much?

The Sleep Over

Later that night, Jhanvi couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned in her bed. Her mind was arguing and counterarguing on one thing—were Avantika and Vicky really suited for each other? In spite of trying not to think about it or care about it, she knew it was almost an impossible task. She did care. Deeply. And it did affect her. Deeply. She could not stop herself from wondering if Vicky would be interested in her if Avantika was out of the picture. And every now and then, the confusion cleared and out popped a really rosy picture—of Vicky and Jhanvi together, sitting in his balcony looking out at the ocean. It was hard not to let her mind wander in the direction of that rosy picture.

Finally, she stopped attempting to sleep and sat up. She silently cursed Avantika as she got out of bed to get a banana. Why the hell did Avantika think it was okay to discuss her boyfriend issues with Jhanvi? As if there was no other person in the entire world! It was Avantika's fault that she was having trouble falling asleep.

Jhanvi had just finished eating her banana standing in her kitchen, when her phone started to ring. She glanced at the clock. It was eleven o'clock. Who the hell was calling her at this time? She took her phone and glanced at the readout. It was Avantika.

And in spite of thinking about Avantika, Vicky and their relationship issues through the day, the minute Jhanvi saw Avantika's name, all she felt was pure fear. Her heart raced. Why was she calling at this hour? If she was calling that late, something was seriously wrong. Was something wrong with Vicky? Was he ill? Had he met with an accident or something? She was always scared of the way he drove his bike. Why couldn't he get a car like a normal person? She went cold as gruesome images popped into her head.

“Hey! Everything alright?” asked Jhanvi, slightly breathlessly.

“No, it's not,” mumbled Avantika.

“What is the issue? Vicky alright?”

Avantika took a moment to answer. Jhanvi bit her lips in suspense as she waited. *Answer! Answer! Answer!*

Finally, Avantika said, “Yeah. Why won’t he be?”

Jhanvi sighed, relieved. She sat down at the dining table. “What is it?”

“I keep thinking over what you said...about soulmates. If you know, you know, right? Well, I don’t. And...and you were right about not everyone wanting the same thing as their spouse. I still think you are right. Look, I tried to talk to Vicky today and he clearly does not want to move from here. And ‘here’ is frankly suffocating. I am going to break up with him now. He is watching a football match now. As soon as it is over and as soon as I work up the courage, I am going to tell him of my decision. After the talk we had today, I thought it would be right to tell you this. I know you really want us to stay together but I don’t think it is going to work...”

Jhanvi was exasperated. This girl was driving her insane! Jhanvi checked her temper before she said, “Avantika, just don’t do anything tonight. We’ll talk about this tomorrow, okay?”

She hoped Avantika wouldn’t see through her calm façade. But Avantika seemed blissfully unaware of her irritation.

“There is another reason for this call. I just wanted to warn you that in the unlikely event that Vicky throws me out of his house, I may come over to your place to spend the night. My house is very far away...”

“Wait, Avantika...”

“I think he is coming. Bye!”

The line was disconnected.

Cursing, Jhanvi wondered if she should call her back. Then, she decided against it. It was hard to reason with such stubbornness on the phone. She needed to talk to that girl face-to-face.

Jhanvi got dressed. What idiots some girls were! Did she not realize that she was letting go of a gem? Psychotic, neurotic girl! Jhanvi would have been so happy to be in Avantika's place. She would have been so happy to sit with Vicky and watch the ocean. Every. Damn. Night.

She would have been so happy to walk with him on the beach. She would have been so happy to see her kids play in the water. Jhanvi stood in the middle of her dressing room with a dreamy look on her face, not realizing that she had stopped getting dressed.

Finally, she snapped herself out of the trance. Oh God! She was killing herself. But what would she not give to be Vicky's girlfriend?

In all honesty, Jhanvi was a little tempted to let Avantika break up with Vicky. Maybe it would drive Vicky into her arms then. Maybe all her dreams, starting from eight years, would finally come true.

Then, she shook her head. She'd carried the guilt of one break up for eight long years; she wasn't going to go down that route again. Not to mention that she yet had to atone for the sin she committed the last time.

There was no way Avantika was breaking up with Vicky over something that Jhanvi had said. She was filled with horror when she thought about Vicky discovering her role in his breakup. That would be the death of her.

Grudgingly and cursing Avantika copiously, she started for Vicky's house.

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Jhanvi bit her lips as she rang Vicky's doorbell. It was late. Too late. And Avantika was stupid. Really stupid!

Vicky opened the door, clearly shocked to see her. Jhanvi could hear the TV blaring in the living room. The football match was still playing. She was relieved. The match was not over. She had time.

“Jhanvi!”

Vicky looked very worried by her appearance on his doorstep so late in the night. Seeing the frown on his forehead, her heart caved. He belonged to her. Her! Jhanvi. Not Avantika. Why was he so stupid to not see that? Maybe she should just let Avantika break his heart. She could then pick up the pieces and heal him. She'd will heal him completely...

Vicky interrupted her thoughts. "Everything all right?"

Jhanvi sighed. Unfortunately, she was not a person to build her dreams by ruining someone else's. She had not been brought up by her mother like that. It was really unfortunate. But what could one do?

She reluctantly said, "I...I came to see Avantika."

"At this hour? What's up? Something's wrong...you don't look well."

"God damn you, Vicky! Can't you be a little less sensitive? Don't you realize how hard you are making this for me?"

"Nothing much... I...I... Is Avantika here?"

"She is upstairs," replied Vicky, stepping aside and letting her in.

He locked the door behind her and asked her again, "What's up, Jhanvi?"

"Did she talk to you?" asked Jhanvi, looking at him over her shoulder as she walked across the living room.

"Who? Avantika?"

"Yeah..."

"About what?"

Jhanvi shook her head as she ascended the stairs. "Oh, nothing. Nothing really. I really need to talk to her now..."

"Jhanvi! Tell me what is wrong," he said sternly.

Jhanvi stopped and turned to face him. She was halfway up the stairs. He was at the bottom of the stairs, looking at her.

"I...I broke up with my boyfriend...I just need to talk to someone."

“Oh God! That’s bad... Are you alright?” asked Vicky. His eyes and words were laced with concern.

Jhanvi shrugged. “Can I talk to her?” she asked, indicating his room.

“Of course. Go right ahead. I will get you something to drink.”

Jhanvi nodded and ran up the stairs.

Avantika was sitting in the balcony and looked extremely surprised to see Jhanvi.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, making to get up from her chair.

Seeing Avantika sitting in the balcony angered Jhanvi. “You look fine enough sitting in the balcony now!” she said in an accusing tone.

“What?” asked Avantika, frowning and sitting back in the chair.

Jhanvi took the chair next to hers and put her hand on her arm. “Look, please promise me you won’t break up with him tonight. We can talk about it tomorrow. Promise me.”

Avantika looked taken aback. She frowned. “Why are you so concerned?”

“How do you think I’ll feel if you break up with him over something I said?”

“Look, it has nothing to do with you.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care if you break up with him. But I do care if I am the cause.”

“You are not...”

“I don’t want to be the cause or the trigger for your break up. I don’t want to come between you and him. Just promise me you won’t break up with him over what I said. Please. Just don’t break up tonight. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

Avantika rolled her eyes. “Fine. But only because you came all the way over here.”

Vicky entered the room with the drinks.

Jhanvi looked at him apologetically as she got up. “Sorry to barge this late, Vicky. I am actually done. I will see you both tomorrow.”

“Wait! You said you wanted to talk...” said Vicky, surprised.

“I... Yes, that is what I came here for. But...but I now see I should not have come. It’s too late. I will leave.”

“No, no. There is no way I am letting you drive back this late. Let’s talk for some time. You can sleep here. You can go home tomorrow morning.”

“No, no, no. I cannot impose.”

“Look, there is no way I am letting you go when you have just had a breakup,” he said, as he handed a drink to her and another to Avantika.

“You broke up?” asked Avantika, surprised.

Jhanvi looked at her, imploring with her eyes for her to understand. But Avantika didn’t.

“Yes... I broke up with my boyfriend earlier today. And I thought I should come and talk to someone about it...but clearly, I’ve come at a wrong time...I will leave you guys alone.”

“No way! Come and sit with us,” said Vicky, holding her by her arm and leading her back to the chair next to Avantika.

Jhanvi realised she was fighting a losing battle. She sat down again and sipped her drink. She did not know what the drink was but it was nice and relaxing. It tasted of lemon and fizz.

“Nice drink,” murmured Jhanvi.

“So, what happened?” asked Vicky, taking the chair opposite to them.

Jhanvi’s fought the urge to slap her forehead. She had to come up with a breakup story now. But it was too late in the

day for racking up her imagination. And she was too high-strung to come up with a tragic love story.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she replied, hoping against hope that Vicky would not insist on her talking.

Vicky nodded. “I understand. Let’s talk about something else.”

Jhanvi sighed with relief.

They spoke about relationships in general and moved to weddings and married life. Vicky’s unusual take on the everyday, simple things in life was as refreshing as it was humorous. And by the end of the hour, Jhanvi was laughing.

Avantika sat sour faced throughout, however. Jhanvi did not know if Avantika was more upset because Jhanvi showed up or because she was unable to breakup with Vicky. Not after long, Avantika excused herself and went to bed.

Vicky offered to make her another drink, but Jhanvi declined. She realized that Vicky was going the extra mile to make her happy. He thought she was sad and was trying hard to cheer her up. She knew she had to put a stop to it. Though thrilled that Vicky was taking these efforts for her, she did not want him to when she was lying.

Torn between basking in the heaven of Vicky’s undivided attention and doing the right thing, it was too much of an effort for her to decline the drink.

Vicky asked, “Are you okay now? Shall we go to bed?”

Jhanvi’s heart skipped a beat. *Go to bed?* Wild images filled her head. Finally, gathering herself, she smiled and nodded. “Yes. I will take the couch in the living room.”

Vicky got up from his chair and said, “You will do no such thing. I want you on the same floor as me.”

Jhanvi was surprised. “Why? Do you think I will try to kill myself or something?” she asked as she followed him.

Vicky stopped walking, turned and glared at her. “Really? Do you really think that is a joking matter?”

“Sorry. But really... I am fine.”

“Come with me.”

Jhanvi was surprised when Vicky took her to the locked room and unlocked the door.

Jhanvi stepped in after him and looked around the room curiously. It was more of a study than a bedroom. There was a large desk in one corner. A laptop sat in the middle of the desk, connected to various paraphernalia—mic, speaker, camera, mouse and a large monitor.

On the wall against which the desk was resting, a large pin-up board was hung. Mathematical formulas, printouts of lots of data, random photos of people, maps of various towns and cities across the world were all put up on it.

There was a single bed opposite the desk. But Jhanvi’s eyes were fixed on the board as she tried to make sense of it.

“Will this work?” asked Vicky.

Jhanvi turned and looked at the bed. Just above the bed, a large white board was hung on the wall. Vicky had scribbled a few things on it. But none of it made any sense to her.

She asked curiously. “What exactly do you do, Vicky?”

Vicky smiled. “That is a long discussion. Go to sleep now. If you need me, just holler. I will be with you in a few seconds.”

“I thought you were waiting for an idea for your next start-up.”

Vicky ignored her comment as he adjusted the bedspread. “You can use this blanket here. And you will find the AC remote on the nightstand. There is also a bottle of water there. Do you need anything else?”

Jhanvi sat on the bed and shook her head.

“Do you want me to sit with you and hold your hand till you fall asleep?”

Jhanvi looked at him. She was unsure if he was joking or serious in that suggestion. “It’s ok. I am fine.”

Vicky shrugged. At the door, he paused with his hand on the light switch. “Do you want me to leave the light on?”

Jhanvi frowned. “How old do you think I am? Ten?”

Vicky laughed and shrugged. “I don’t know. In fact, I would very much prefer it if you get into bed so that I can tuck you in. I can wait till you fall asleep.”

Jhanvi scowled. This time, she knew for sure that he was joking. “Get out!” she snapped.

Vicky chuckled. “Sleep well. And sleep long. I don’t want to see your stupid face before nine in the morning. Understood?”

Jhanvi laughed in spite of herself. “Alright. Get lost now. And leave the light on. I want to snoop around a bit before I go to sleep.”

This time Vicky glared at her. “Why? Looking for clues on what I do?”

“Maybe.”

“I can assure you that you will never find that out. Go to sleep now. I will tell you everything in detail tomorrow.”

“Promise?”

Vicky laughed. “Promise.”

“Fine, good night,” replied Jhanvi, smiling.

Vicky had almost closed the door behind him when he opened it again and popped his head in. “Oh, I forgot. Do you want me check if there are monsters under your bed?”

Jhanvi threw a pillow across the room. But Vicky closed the door just in time. The pillow hit the door before it fell to the ground.

Laughing, Jhanvi retrieved the pillow and went back to the bed. She sighed in wistfulness. What a gem Vicky was! And what a fool Avantika was!

The next morning, Jhanvi woke up at seven o'clock. Hoping Vicky and Avantika were still asleep, she got ready in a hurry.

She opened the door and looked at Vicky's bedroom. It was still closed. She tiptoed down the stairs. But all her efforts were in vain. Vicky and Avantika were already at the dining table, having their coffee.

Groaning, Jhanvi climbed down the stairs.

Vicky grinned at her. "I told you I did not want to see you before nine."

"Oh come on! I need to get to work."

"Hmmm. Slept well?"

"Yes."

"Great. Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

Vicky moved to the other end of the kitchen for getting a cup when Avantika leaned over and whispered to Jhanvi. "Hey! Don't worry. I have changed my mind. I am not planning to break up with him before the wedding. I want to just focus on the wedding as of now. We will see about this later."

Jhanvi sighed in relief. "I am glad."

Vicky was back with her coffee when Avantika stood up. "I need to leave. See you later?"

Jhanvi said, "I better be leaving too."

"No, no. You finish your coffee first. I will see you both later."

Vicky nodded and Avantika grabbed her handbag and left.

"So? What else?" asked Vicky. "Are you fine?"

"I am perfectly fine. Don't worry about me."

"Hmm..."

Jhanvi was silent as she struggled to finish her coffee. It was too hot and she had to sip it slowly.

“So, what do you do?” asked Jhanvi.

“Aagh! I was hoping you’d have forgotten about it.”

“I haven’t. Tell me, what do you do?”

“I am a hacker. I belong to an online community of anonymous hackers. We help the police sometimes. Sometimes even governments. And rarely, but we also cater to private requests, strictly based on the purpose.”

“Is this legal?”

“Not at all. Strictly illegal. But we have a code of ethics. Anything and everything we do will be moderated by the admins. Requests will be voted on and only then action will be taken.”

“What kind of requests?”

“Anything and everything. There is nothing we cannot do. We can even topple entire governments.”

“Oh, come on,” said Jhanvi, crossing her arms over her chest and raising her eyebrows at him.

Vicky’s expression continued to be stoic.

“Really?” asked Jhanvi, feeling the weight of the truth finally settle over her.

“Yup. Only when necessary.”

“If what you are doing is illegal, why do the police and the government ask you for help?”

“Well...it is kind of a grey area. Anyway, this is only a hobby of mine.”

“Does Avantika know?”

“No one knows. Like I said...anonymous. Strictly illegal. So, I don’t discuss it with anyone. In fact, no one knows about it except you.”

Jhanvi was surprised. “Why are you telling me then?”

“Because I am scared that you will snoop around and find out about this as well as the other things that I don’t want you to find.”

Jhanvi laughed. "Don't worry. I won't tell a soul."

"I trust you." Then, Vicky looked at Jhanvi and said, "You look better now."

"I am."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," replied Jhanvi, shaking her head with more force than necessary.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Did you talk to your mom?"

"No."

"Miss your dad?"

Jhanvi looked at Vicky. She felt the familiar shooting pain in her heart as she nodded. "I always miss him. I try not to. But when something good or bad happens in my life, he is the first person I think of."

"Why don't you reach out to him?"

"He doesn't want me. Why should I want him?"

"But you do..."

"It's true. But he does not have to know that."

"Hmm..."

Jhanvi squirmed under Vicky's intense gaze on her. What was he reading on her face?

"Tell me, what do you really think of weddings today?"

Jhanvi frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Yeah, the way in which the wedding scene has evolved."

Vicky's intention was quite clear. He wanted to get her talking. He wanted to distract her. He wanted to make sure she was okay. And he had switched to a very random topic when he realized that it was distressing for her to talk about her dad. Jhanvi, however, decided that she was not going to take the bait. She did not want to talk.

Jhanvi shrugged. “I think it is great. Absolutely love it. I mean I have to.”

“So, there is nothing you would like to change?”

“No. Not a thing,” replied Jhanvi, non-committedly.

“So, if you want to plan a wedding for yourself, you will plan it just like Anisha’s wedding.”

“Well...not exactly.”

“What would you change? Name one thing at least.”

Jhanvi sighed before she said, “Well, for one...I’d have only one photographer. I sometimes feel that the number of photographers in a wedding is a smidge more than what I would prefer. Sometimes, I feel like if there was a way in which we can capture a wedding without a photographer, it would be absolutely great.”

“Really?” asked Vicky, frowning slightly.

“Yeah, I mean...” Jhanvi paused, “My grandma is very old. If I get married, I am sure she will come. But when she comes, I want to make sure she sees the wedding. She will, of course, sit in the first row...but nowadays there are so many photographers near the dais that hardly anyone is able to see the wedding. If I get married, there’ll be only one photographer and he too will have to stand out of my grandmother’s line of sight.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yes. Some weddings are so bad that I’ve seen that the number of photographers is more than the number of invitees. The photographers crowd around the dais, and they never let anyone else watch the wedding. That is senseless. People take the time and make an effort to be at your wedding. The least you can do is let them watch it.”

Vicky egged Jhanvi’s outburst. “So true. Especially the elders.”

“Exactly. I mean if I want my grandmother to watch my wedding on a screen, why would I even invite her? I

sometimes get so angry with the couple. If you invite people to your wedding, let them watch it.”

“Hmmm...what else?”

“I hate the recent tradition of dancing at our weddings.”

“Why not? It’s fun...”

“It’s not our tradition. Dance has always been a tradition belonging to North Indian weddings, and I wholly support it. But South Indians were never like that. We are the silent type.”

“There is nothing wrong with a little fun.”

“There is not. But sometimes the couple gets so carried away...they force people to dance. Sometimes even the older people. I don’t like it. You should let your guests choose how they want to have fun. Not make a big show out of the entire process.”

“What else?”

“People today are selfish. The bride and the groom think the entire day is about them. They want everything the way they want it to be. They are the prince and the princess. It’s almost like they want everyone to bow to them or something...”

“It is their day...”

“No, it’s not.”

“No?”

“No. It is all about celebrating the love they have for each other. Not them as individuals, but them as a couple. But sometimes I think they forget that part...”

“Especially the bride.”

Jhanvi wagged a finger at Vicky. “Yes! Especially the bride! So true. She behaves like a princess. Or the queen. Everyone should bow to the queen! Everything is about her! The colours she likes...the dress she likes...the people she likes...the songs...the photos...the entire rigmarole is about her. Sometimes, I feel it is so much about her that I suspect that if the groom misses to attend the wedding, he will not even be missed.”

Vicky laughed out aloud.

“No, it’s true. The way she arrives. The way she dresses... the way she smiles...the way she makes eye contact with everyone...everything becomes important. The groom is only an accessory. His costume should match hers. His height should match hers. Every goddamn thing is about her.”

Vicky laughed harder.

“The wedding is more a party than a traditional affair. But it cannot be treated like just any event. It is life changing.”

“I agree. And I think they care a lot more about the wedding than about the marriage.”

“Exactly! Exactly. My wedding will not be like that.”

“No?” asked Vicky.

“If I get married, it will be a celebration of our love. He will be the most important part of the ceremony. I will make sure he is comfortable. And happy.”

“Hmmm...”

“And I want my wedding to be about the invitees. I want them to feel comfortable. It will be less about me and more about taking a pledge with the man I love, to honour and cherish him always, in front of all the people who matter.”

“And your married life will be more important than the wedding.”

“A thousand times more important!”

Vicky smiled.

It was a good half hour before Jhanvi finally realized that Vicky got what he wanted. He had got her talking. As soon as she realised it, she quickly finished her coffee and the discussion, and left in a hurry.

Sunday Brunch

Sunday morning, Jhanvi entered the restaurant and glanced around. It was quite a big restaurant. Large windows on either side pleasantly illuminated the entire space. Marble counters on one side held a large selection of desserts. Wooden tables were surrounded alternatively by red and dark blue chairs adding a pleasant splash of color against the brown tiles.

A few of the tables were pulled together for a large family to sit in the centre of the restaurant. Avantika was in the centre and she was waving at her.

Still flustered about meeting Avantika's entire family, Jhanvi made her way over to them. She looked at the group. There were too many people at the table—Avantika, Vicky, Avantika's parents, her sister, and her would-be brother-in-law, who'd got a friend along. Her uncle and aunt were there too, but Jhanvi did not quite catch if they were Avantika's paternal relatives or maternal.

Jhanvi took her seat as the introductions were being made. In a few minutes, it was quite clear who was heading the discussion. It was Avantika's mother.

Avantika's mother was a huge, imposing lady, her hair fashionably cut short up to her shoulders. She sported curtain bangs that were peppered with streaks of grey. Her lips were painted a dark red. She was wearing a mauve blouse and dark red pants. A large, stylish chain hung from her fat neck.

"Avantika tells me you have been doing a fantastic job," she said, beaming at Jhanvi.

Jhanvi smiled and nodded. "Thank you."

"She gave us a tour of the resort earlier today. It looks fantastic."

"I am glad," replied Jhanvi, turning to look at Anisha, wondering if she shared her mother's opinion.

But Jhanvi did not get a chance to know Anisha's opinion. Anisha was about to answer to Jhanvi's look, when her mother

continued to talk to Jhanvi.

“And I really approve of everything else too.”

Jhanvi nodded, smiled and was about to turn back to Anisha when her mother said something again.

“Avantika has done a really good job coordinating with you. Actually, we were just discussing our dresses for the wedding. Vicky, you said you have already done your shopping, right?”

“Oh yeah.”

“You have?” asked Avantika, surprised.

“Yeah, I did. That day when we went to shop for Anisha. You left for some work, remember? I shopped with Jhanvi. Ask her.”

Jhanvi looked at Vicky. He was lying. But Jhanvi had no other choice. She nodded at Avantika and said, “Yes.”

Vicky nodded. “Yeah. She remembers. I got a golden sherwani with a maroon border. Remember, Jhanvi?”

“That’s right. It looked very good on you,” said Jhanvi flushing, as she lied blatantly.

The dinner party got talking about what each one was wearing, as Jhanvi’s eyes met Vicky’s across the table. He was hiding his smile even as his eyes shone with mischief. Jhanvi wanted to scold him for pulling her in without prior indication, but she could not get angry with him, how much ever she tried. Conceding, she returned a faint smile.

Avantika’s mom turned to Jhanvi suddenly and asked, “Will you be a doll and check with the waiters on our appetizers? We’ve been waiting for a long time now.”

Jhanvi was taken aback at the request.

“Mom!” started Avantika.

“What? I have been asking them for over ten minutes!”

“It’s fine.” Jhanvi nodded and rose. She talked to a waiter near the kitchen. The appetizers almost immediately followed her.

“See? What did I tell you? They understand each other’s language,” explained Avantika’s mother.

Jhanvi bit a lip. She should not have come to the brunch. She generally did not go out to have meals with the families of her clients. But Avantika had insisted. Jhanvi had wondered all along why she was being invited. Now, she was even more confused.

After the appetizers were served, Jhanvi made to excuse herself and leave. She looked at her watch and said aloud, “You know what? I have another client I need to meet. It was really lovely meeting you all. Please enjoy your meal. I will see you all again soon.”

But she had underestimated Avantika’s mother. She resumed talking about their outfits, as if she hadn’t heard Jhanvi. She looked at Jhanvi and asked, “What will you be wearing?”

“Eh...,” said Jhanvi, thinking furiously. She still had not decided between a light green *Anarkali* suit and a pink lehenga. The question forced her to make up her mind in an instant. “A...A light green *Anarkali* suit.”

Avantika’s mother looked disappointed. “Oh! I thought your team and you will be in uniforms.”

Jhanvi was taken aback at the remark. She shook her head and said, “I am sorry. We don’t have a uniform.”

“Then how will we know whom to approach if we need one of you?”

“I will be right there. Also, I will share my number with you. I will have my phone on my person. You can call me anytime. I don’t encourage the wedding parties to talk to my team directly. I am the only one who co-ordinates. That way, there will be fewer misunderstandings and miscommunications.”

Her mother looked flabbergasted. “What? Why is that? I will not be carrying a phone on my person the entire time and if there is a need during the ceremony...”

“Don’t worry. I will be around throughout...”

“I don’t understand. What is the big deal? See the waiters here. All of them wear one. Take the corporation workers, for instance...”

At this point, Vicky interrupted, “But she is neither a waiter nor a corporation worker, is she?”

“No, I am just suggesting...”

Vicky cut her short. “I know you are just suggesting. You made your suggestion and she declined it too. I don’t see a reason for you to force her.”

Avantika’s mother glared at Vicky. She snapped at him, “There is nothing wrong in asking her to wear something specific. All I am asking is for her to wear something that will make it easier for us to spot her and her team.”

“Do you also sign off on the dresses your invitees wear?”

“No. But she is just a...”

“A what?” asked Vicky. There was steel in his voice.

Avantika interrupted. “Vicky! I think Mom is just worried that Jhanvi will wear something too inappropriate. This is going to be a grand reception...”

Vicky transferred his steely glance to Avantika. “This is not the first event her team is hosting. Further, just look at her. She will look amazing in anything. Isn’t that right, Avantika?”

Avantika nodded, looking helpless. “Vicky...” she pleaded.

“Jhanvi is not your mother’s slave. Give respect to get respect.”

Vicky’s heated gaze turned back to her mother. “Just because she is taking money from you, does not mean you own her. She is providing you service...something that you are too lazy and inept to do yourself...and she is taking money in return. That’s all. The transaction ends there. You don’t get to dictate her wardrobe.”

Avantika’s mother turned red with fury. But before she could utter a word, Vicky got up. “I am not hungry. I will see

you all later. I am taking Jhanvi with me. I need her for something.”

Jhanvi looked around helplessly. Avantika’s mother was glaring at her, almost as if she expected Jhanvi to comply with her request over Vicky’s.

Jhanvi looked at Avantika and Anisha. They looked as helpless as her. So, Jhanvi decided to defy Avantika’s mother. She quietly got up and accompanied Vicky out of the restaurant.

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Vicky and Jhanvi stepped outside the restaurant and wordlessly, made their way to their bikes.

However, when Jhanvi reached her bike, she realized suddenly that Vicky was not by her side. She turned and saw him pacing in the parking lot. He looked angry. Extremely angry. He was running his hand through his hair repeatedly, muttering something to himself and shaking his head.

Jhanvi let him be for a few minutes. Then, she called out to him, “Vicky...”

Vicky ignored her and continued pacing.

“Vicky...”

This time, he turned and looked at her. She could see the anger blazing in his eyes.

“You are scaring me...” Jhanvi was able to see the effort that he took to control himself.

Vicky looked in her direction contemplatively before walked over to her. “Don’t worry. I am fine.”

Jhanvi acknowledged his unconvincing reply with a half-nod. It was only after Vicky had started his bike that he said, “I am starving. There is a restaurant nearby that I frequent that serves amazing food. Care for brunch?”

There was no anger in his voice. Jhanvi grinned in relief. “Absolutely! I am starving too. Lead the way.”

Not much later, they'd ordered and were sitting in front of plates brimming with food.

"You know what?" asked Vicky.

"Yeah?"

"You lied for me in public."

"Hmm... Yeah. So?"

"Nothing, nothing. Do you want to go out and watch the Arundathi stars? I am sure they'd be visible now."

Jhanvi grinned. "Are you proposing to me again?"

"Why? Are you accepting yet again?"

Jhanvi shook her head. "You are nuts!"

Vicky grinned and went back to his brunch.

"Well... I guess I have to thank you," said Jhanvi, eating a mouthful of fruit salad.

Vicky smiled. "You think?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It depends on how it turns out. If I get fired..."

"You won't. They cannot host a simple dinner without you, let alone a wedding reception."

"Alright then. Thank you."

"Why do you put up with all this?"

Jhanvi sensed the anger in his tone. She shrugged. "You meet different kinds of people. I just try to get along with everyone."

"Even if they insult you?"

"I think what happened tells more about them than me."

"Undoubtedly. I think it tells something not just about who meted out the treatment to you but also about all the others who sat at the table in silence. Their silence speaks mountains about them."

Jhanvi felt uncomfortable. “Yeah. I cannot believe Avantika kept quiet.”

“I can. She just wants to please her mom.”

“Hmmm...”

“And I have observed this before. If the parent is a snob and the child endeavours to please that parent, there is no doubt how the child will turn out. The child will turn into the exact snob the parent is, if not a bigger one.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “I don’t think it is like that here. I think Avantika was just uncomfortable and she did not want to fight with her mother in front of everyone.”

“So she threw you under the bus?”

“I am an outsider. Not a part of the family. It probably was just easier. Anyway, just forget the whole thing. I have a thick skin.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“They are just my clients. My relationship with them has an end date. I don’t really care. It’s not as if I am marrying into that family...” Jhanvi stopped talking and blushed. She had just realized that Vicky would more likely be marrying into that family.

Noticing her embarrassment, Vicky said, “It’s okay. I am not sure if things are working between Avantika and I.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got an idea for my startup. I built a prototype and sent it to a few investors. A VC liked it and would like to explore the idea. I may have to start working on that soon.”

“That’s amazing... You have found your next pot of gold!”

Vicky was silent for a few moments before saying, “It’s in Australia. I am leaving the day after the reception.”

Jhanvi paled. “Oh! For how long?”

“They want me to operate from there. If everything goes according to plan, I may not return for some years.”

“Oh! A...Avantika?”

“Well, I either have to propose to her and she can accompany me...which I very much doubt, seeing that all her modelling contracts are in Asia and Europe. Or, we call off the relationship and I leave.”

“Oh!”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Jhanvi would have been elated to hear about his issues with Avantika, any other time. But now, only one thing registered with her. Vicky was leaving. She felt as if the earth had just opened beneath her. And she was falling and falling. Vicky was going to leave. That was it. His second stint in her life was over. Just like that. And the helpless feeling turned into unreasonable anger.

“You know what I think?” asked Jhanvi.

“Yes?”

“I think you have commitment issues. You have always been with one girl or the other. It’s like you cannot be alone. And yet, you cannot commit to any of the girls. You were living with Avantika, for God’s sake! And you talk about breakup so easily.”

Vicky was silent for few moments, in deep contemplation. Then, he shrugged. “Do you really think it is a decision I took in a day or two? The chasm between us has been widening for a long time.”

“One day you talk about sitting with your spouse on the terrace and looking at the ocean every evening and then, in a few days you are talking about breaking up and leaving.”

“It’s not like that.”

“You cannot commit to work too. You have to keep changing. You have to keep moving. What is it with you?”

Vicky frowned. “Well, nobody is perfect. All of us makes plans but things don’t generally go according to our plan, do they? We have to change and adapt. And if I suffer from commitment issues, you suffer from over commitment.”

Jhanvi frowned. “What?”

“Yeah. Just because you set up an event management company, you are still crying over it...long after you have lost interest in it.”

Jhanvi was taken aback. “How dare you?”

Vicky nodded. “You have lost interest in it. I know that for sure. You can change, you know? It is not that big a deal. You don’t like it, quit! Pick up something that you are really passionate about. Pick up something you care about.”

“Oh yeah?! Like what? You think you know so much about me. Then, tell me what I should do after I quit event management.”

“You can take up dance! Bharatanatyam is an art. Why did you quit that?”

Jhanvi stared at him, shocked. He knew! How was that possible? How did he know what was deep down in her heart? How could he know when she had not voiced it out to anyone and rarely even acknowledged to herself?

She forgot her anger. She asked in surprise, “How? How did you know? I have never talked about it to you...”

“You did your *arangetram*. No one does that without passion.”

They were silent for a minute.

Then, Jhanvi explained, “I had a falling out with my dance teacher. She was a snob. She kept ill-treating me. After one very bad incident, I quit.”

“Who has commitment issues now? You should have trained with another teacher...”

“It’s not as easy as you think. The world of Bharatanatyam is very different...”

“I don’t care if it is hard. I know it is not impossible.”

Jhanvi was silent. After a few moments she said, “Well, I cannot take it up now. I am committed to my company...”

Vicky sighed. He said softly, "Actually, you don't have to choose."

"What?"

"Do both."

"How can I do both?"

"Figure it out. Don't leave something you are so passionate about. Don't be so scared to change your mind. It's okay. People are allowed to change their mind, you know?"

Jhanvi shrugged. "Well, I...I don't know how to."

Vicky nodded. "You will figure it out."

Looking into Vicky's eyes, Jhanvi nodded. "Anyway, you will not be here. You will be in Australia."

"Yeah."

Jhanvi sighed and pushed her plate away. All of a sudden, she felt nauseated.

Looking at her reaction, Vicky said, "Well, it may not work out. I may come back."

"Hmm..."

"How is company working out anyway? Is it profitable?"

Jhanvi hesitated. "Well...we are skirting by."

"Maybe if you give it up and try something else..."

"No!" replied Jhanvi, hurriedly.

Vicky looked at her surprised.

"Evergreen will flourish," stated Jhanvi, in a matter-of-fact tone. She had lost Vicky from her life. Or at least, she was going to lose him. She was not going to lose Evergreen too. It was going to work out. It had to.

He smiled. "How do you know?"

"What?"

"How do you know it will work out? What? Is it an intuition?"

“No...I just know. It will work out.”

“How? How do you know? It has to be based on some facts, right? It should be because of some logic that has probably been embedded in your subconscious...”

“Wait! What?” asked Jhanvi, frowning. “It will work out because I know it will. Everything in my life has worked out and this will too.”

“But not everything in your life has worked out, right?”

“What are you talking about? Everything has worked out perfectly.”

“Well...from the top of my head...what about your dad?”

“Well, that is not my fault. It’s his. His loss. Of course, it hurts once in a while but it’s something I can deal with. And after he left, everything did work out eventually, right? I grew much closer to my mom. Do you know we even got the same tattoos?” asked Jhanvi, pushing up her sleeve to show him the tattoo on her upper arm.

“What does that symbol mean?”

“New beginnings. And trust me...we both are happy now...”

“So, you think everything in your life will work out?”

“Definitely. I’ve always felt as if there is a guardian angel watching over me. I’ve always felt it. Whatever happens, I know it is going to work out. I don’t know how. It just will.”

“Guardian angel?” replied Vicky, smirking.

“Yeah!” replied Jhanvi, nodding vehemently.

Vicky laughed and shook his head.

“What?” asked Jhanvi. “Are you mocking my faith?”

Vicky looked at her for a moment before shook his head. “No. I am just stunned by your faith. I envy your faith. I wish I had that faith.”

Jhanvi frowned. “You don’t have faith?”

“I do. But my faith is always based on facts. On things I know. I don’t just randomly trust the universe to work in my favour.”

“The universe works in everyone’s favour. We just block all the good things that the universe wants to give us with negative thoughts, our disbelief and our impatience. Human beings were not created to be sad. We are supposed to be happy, to be wealthy and to live a meaningful life. We are supposed to look out for each other and help each other. There is just no other way to it.”

Vicky looked at her for long. “You really believe so?”

“I do. Everything works in our favour. Our body heals itself. You just should allow it and not stand in its way. Success will follow us. We just need to think we will get something, and we will. We just need to think that we deserve to be wealthy, and we will find a way to bring that about. There is nothing we cannot do. If we have the faith, that is. God is on our side. But we, with our negative thoughts of envy, jealousy, hatred and disbelief, alienate him. He wants to be on our side and help us.”

“God?” scoffed Vicky, smirking again.

“Call it God, subconscious or just the universe. Any name will do. But the higher power is on our side. We should not push it away. That is the only thing we need to do. And we can do anything we want.”

“Anything we want...” asked Vicky.

“Yes.”

“Hmmm...”

“You may not believe it but everything will work out for me.”

Vicky was silent for a few moments. Then, he said, “If you say so...”

Jhanvi looked at him. He was going to go away soon. Away from her...in less than a week’s time.

She gulped. No! She was not going to think about it. It was all going to work out eventually. Even her love life. She knew it in her heart.

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Anisha's Reception

The bright orange sun was about to set. It was slowly making its way to its bed. The lower horizon was splashed beautifully in colours of red, pink and yellow. The myriad of colours in the sky was reflected in the backwaters. White, fluffy clouds moved slowly across the sky.

A number of birds were flying by, in a hurry to get to their homes before dark. Large groups of white birds were flying in beautiful geometric patterns in the sky. Fishes were jumping in the backwaters, making a soft plopping sound as they landed back into the water.

The numerous trees in the resort and those on the opposite bank of the backwaters were dancing beautifully in the gentle breeze. The temperature was not too hot nor was it too moist. The evening was pleasant and cool.

When the sun finally set, the lights went up in Seaside Creek. Yellow lights gleamed all around the resort, making the entire resort glow and glitter. The lights reflected in the still water of the swimming pool added a magical touch to the ambience.

Bright white light lit up the large dais in the reception area. The dais was decorated with long satin sheets in maroon and gold, along with stylishly decorated bouquets of exotic flowers. A huge seat in deep marron was placed in the centre of the stage. The dais was empty. It was still waiting for the bride and groom to arrive.

Guests had started to arrive. Ladies dressed in expensive sarees, gorgeous *lehengas* added colour to the party. The men were mostly dressed in subtle, formal wear. A few of them stood out, opting to go with colourful ethnic wear. Kids shrieked and shouted as they chased each other around the lawn.

The guests greeted each other in enthusiasm as they all navigated through the quickly formed groups. Chairs, which were all facing the dais, were being dragged around to form circles as the guests all caught up with each other, laughing

and beaming. A few groups decided to stand along the swimming pool as they chatted with their friends and relatives. The dining area was brightly lit and abuzz with activity. The guests had not yet moved for dinner, but the preparations were in full swing.

In just half an hour, the entire lawn was occupied by the wedding crowd.

By then, dusk was fully upon the night. The reception lawn area in front of the large dais gleamed as the light reflected against the white satin-covered chairs. The grass underneath the chairs was neatly trimmed and provided an understated natural carpet. A popular Tamil song played from the discretely placed loudspeakers.

Saarattu vandiyila seerattoliyila

Orantherinjathu umugam

All of a sudden, floaters in the form of lit lamps started to flow down on the back waters. Rose petals were strewn on the water as they gently bobbed up and down along with the flow of the water.

There was a loud horn. Everyone in the reception area turned to see a rowboat slowly making its way up the backwaters. The guests dropped their conversation as they hurried to the bank of the backwaters and stood along the pavement looking at the boat.

The white boat was lit with a large lantern hung on a stick on the side of the boat. The boat was also decorated with fairy lights. The music playing in the reception area stopped completely and silence descended on the crowd. People stopped talking, pointing to the boat and grinning in anticipation. Kids were pushing the adults aside as they moved forward to get a glimpse of what they knew would be interesting but yet did not know what. The sound of the oars hitting the water was clearly audible.

The bride and groom were sitting in the boat. Anisha was dressed in a beautiful peach *lehenga*. Her jewellery glittered in the soft light. Her hair was beautifully made and she was

blushing at all the attention. The groom was dressed in a dark blue formal suit and talking to the bride about something. He was probably trying to put her at ease but Anisha was blushing all the more.

As the boat slowly made its way to the resort, guests had crowded around the disembarking area. As the boat anchored, the groom jumped out of the boat in one swift movement. He held out his hand for the bride. The bride took the groom's hand, lifted her *lehenga* with the other and stepped out of the boat. As the bride's feet touched the ground, fireworks lit up the sky.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Fireworks started to burst in the sky one after the other, their red, gold, blue and white sparkles reflecting on the surface of the river and making the entire spectacle even more enthralling. The crowd that stood in awe till that time, taken aback by the succession of fireworks bursting in the inky sky, burst into applause as the bride and the groom made their way to the dais. The newlyweds were blushing, grinning and greeting their friends and relatives as they walked holding hands.

Avantika was dressed in a long, maroon, off-shoulder gown and looked ravishing as she walked alongside Anisha.

Anisha and Daniel went up the dais and sat down on the maroon sofa. Jhanvi, who was near the dais, dressed in her light green *Anarkali* suit, breathed in relief. One of the hardest parts of the evening had been executed without a hitch.

Avantika settled Anisha on the sofa and walked hurriedly to the lawn. Jhanvi, noticing her hurry, smiled. Anisha was unaware of the dance sequence that Avantika and her cousins had planned. Jhanvi looked at Anisha, expecting to see her surprised.

No sooner had Avantika made her way to the other end of the reception hall, that *Nach Punjaban*, a popular Bollywood number began to blare from the speakers. Avantika, Vicky and her cousins entered the lawn dancing. The bride's and the

groom's eyes widened in surprise. And delight. Jhanvi grinned. Surprises were the best!

Vicky was dancing as Avantika's pair. He was dressed in a golden sherwani with a maroon border. Jhanvi could not take her eyes off Vicky. His movements were natural. There was grace in them. He looked like he was enjoying himself too much. Jhanvi smiled. She never once looked at anyone else.

*Arrey ladki beautiful, kar gayi chull
Chull chull...*

Dancing to the medley of songs, the group made their way to the dais. Two of the cousins picked up a pair of garlands and passed them to the newlyweds. Anisha and Daniel garlanded each other just as the medley ended.

A few helpers quickly set up a table and placed the Baumkuchen cake on it. Daniel laughed out aloud at the surprise. Genuine surprise and pleasure shone in both their eyes. They cut the cake as the group lifted Daniel on their shoulders and confetti was showered on the newlyweds. The crowd burst into applause.

Jhanvi was pleased with how the entire sequence had turned out. It had been fun. And the surprise in the newlyweds' eyes had been worth the hours that Avantika and her cousins put in to practice their moves. It had been worth the effort that had gone into ordering the cake.

When the group descended from the stage, Jhanvi was surprised to notice that Vicky was nowhere to be seen.

∞

Jhanvi checked the dining arrangements. Everything was done satisfactorily. A few of the guests had already started on their dinner. But just a few. The dining hall was still only sparsely populated. Jhanvi estimated that in another half hour, the dining room would be so crowded that it would be difficult to get a place to sit. But overall, it was all going according to plan.

“Yaaro Yaarodi unnoda purushan...”

Jhanvi smiled as one of her favourite songs began to play. She had just stepped out of the dining area when she ran into Vicky.

“Hey! Have you had your dinner yet?” asked Jhanvi.

“Nah! Not now. I just came to grab a glass of water.”

“Here,” said Jhanvi, handing over a water bottle that she had just picked up.

Vicky gulped the water and nodded his thanks. He was looking tense. Before Jhanvi could ask him about it, he turned around and walked back to the reception hall. Jhanvi had to rush to catch up with him.

“Why only A.R. Rehman songs today? Are you a fan?” asked Vicky as Jhanvi fell into step with him.

“Of course. Isn’t everyone?”

“Ha ha. Of course. But since the groom is German, I was wondering if there would be any German songs. Or some international songs. Or at least some English songs?”

Jhanvi shook her head. “Nah! There was no such special request. And so, I am sticking to Tamil songs. You host a reception in Chennai, you cannot expect anything else.”

Vicky laughed. “Don’t worry. I am not complaining. The arrangements are lovely.”

“So was your dance. Has anyone told you that you are a natural?”

“Ha ha. Really?”

“Yeah. By the way, where were you after that? You missed the cake cutting.”

Vicky shrugged. “Sorry, I had to go and get something.”

He pressed his hand against the pocket of his shirt and Jhanvi could see the outline of a ring. Her heart skipped a beat. She suddenly felt difficulty in breathing. Her heart raced, her palms turned sweaty, and tension filled her entire body.

No! No! Please don't propose to Avantika tonight. Don't! You guys are not meant for each other.

“Are you alright?” asked Vicky, looking at Jhanvi’s reaction. She was still looking at his pocket.

She dragged her eyes up to meet his. “I...I am fine. I have some work.”

“Go ahead. Have you seen Avantika around?”

Jhanvi shook her head and ran away.

∞

Jhanvi sat down a corner of the reception lawn. Her hands were shaking, and she was finding it difficult to form any rational thought in her head except one.

No, this cannot be happening! It just can't. I should stop it!

The thought played in a loop in her head. She could not think about anything else, no matter how hard she tried.

Someone put their hands on her shoulders and jerked her to reality. “Heelloooo!”

Jhanvi looked up. It was Naina. A handsome man was standing behind her. Jhanvi guessed him to be Naina’s boyfriend. He was smartly dressed in a light blue shirt and dark pants. He was of medium-height, well-built and had curly hair. He was sporting a small smile as he looked at Jhanvi.

“Hellloooo!” said Naina, waving her hand in front of Jhanvi’s face.

Jhanvi blinked and turned to face Naina. “Oh! Hi.”

“What’s up? Any issues?”

“No. Everything is fine.”

“My boyfriend just came to pick me up. Can I leave? Or do you need me to stick around for something?”

“Nah. You can leave,” said Jhanvi, in a hoarse whisper. She was still finding it difficult to breathe. “Everything is under control. Anyway, the rest of the team is here,” she said, breathlessly.

Naina did not notice. “Great. It is his birthday today and I think I already mentioned it to you last week that I’ll be leaving early...”

Jhanvi was not listening. This was the first time she was meeting Naina’s boyfriend and she was looking intently at him.

“Happy birthday!” wished Jhanvi as she got up, extending her hand.

He smiled his acknowledgement as he shook hands with Jhanvi. The smile transformed his face.

Jhanvi liked what she saw. *Not bad! He looks good. He looks really good.*

Jhanvi, without leaving his hand, turned to Naina. “Lend your boyfriend to me for a few minutes. You just wait here.”

Naina’s eyes widened. “What do you mean ‘lend’?” she asked, shocked.

“Oh, shut up! I will return him to you in a few minutes. You wait here,” said Jhanvi. She dropped his hand and took his arm. “You! Come with me.”

Amidst mild protestations from Naina and her boyfriend, Jhanvi managed to drag him along with her.

“What are you doing?” asked the boyfriend, even as he walked along Jhanvi.

“What is your name?”

“Navit.”

“Navit. Nice name. What do you do?”

“I am into research. I am working on...”

Jhanvi cut him short. “Okay, okay. Actually, I don’t really care. Today, you are a pilot.”

“I am?” he asked surprised.

“Yes. And for the next few minutes, I am your girlfriend.”

“Oh! I...I...I am okay with it. But I am not sure if Naina will see eye-to-eye with us on that.”

Jhanvi stopped, turned, and glared at him. “Just walk, will you?”

He seemed to have a few more questions but they ran into Vicky before he could ask them.

“Hi Vicky. I want to introduce you to someone important.”

Vicky looked into Navit’s eyes. Jhanvi looked at Vicky’s face wondering what his reaction might be. His face was devoid of all expression.

Jhanvi said, “This is my boyfriend. Navit.”

Jhanvi pulled Navit closer to her, hugged his arm and looked at Vicky. Still no reaction.

An uncomfortable silence descended on the group. Vicky’s eyes were studying Navit, who was squirming slightly.

“Hi!” said Vicky finally, extending his arm. “You guys are back together?”

“Yes. It was just a lover’s spat...” replied Jhanvi, grinning. It was hard to grin when one’s heart was so heavy. But if she managed to trick Vicky, nothing like it.

“Hey!” replied Navit, shaking Vicky’s hand. He was flushing as Jhanvi was still hanging on his arm as if her life depended on it. He understood that Jhanvi was putting up a show for the handsome guy they had just met but could not understand what she expected him to do.

Vicky’s eyes were still on Navit, appraising him. Studying him. He finally said softly, “She is a gem of a girl. You are very lucky. I just hope you realize how lucky you are.”

Jhanvi let go of Navit’s arm and straightened up, looking into Vicky’s eyes, shocked by what he had said. And finally, she was able to see the conflict in his eyes as he looked back into her eyes. She was glad. She had wanted that. She had wanted to see the conflict in his eyes. She wanted him to suffer as she was suffering.

Navit mumbled, “I...yes.”

“I have to go. Nice meeting you,” replied Vicky, as he backed away.

Jhanvi stepped away from Navit as they slowly walked back to Naina.

Navit said, “I have to tell you that I have kissed over four girls. So, I have quite a lot of experience in that. In case you want me to...”

Jhanvi’s glare stopped his speech. He grinned at her reaction.

She said, “No thanks. I will not be needing your services any longer.”

They resumed their walk back to Naina.

Navit continued, “Just out of curiosity... Do you use such services frequently? I mean, I can share my calendar with you...”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes. What a perfect match Navit was for Naina! God had probably sat down and worked on his specification very minutely to make Navit exactly suitable for Naina. Probably made them both from the same mould. What a made for each other couple!

She kept her silence as she returned Navit to Naina. She bade them both farewell and sat down in the same chair again.

Jhanvi did not know what to feel. She was shivering. What had she really achieved by doing what she had? She had thought she would be happy to introduce someone as her boyfriend to Vicky. It had been her last desperate attempt to save her face. She expected to be happier. She expected to be thrilled to see the conflict in Vicky’s eyes. She had expected at least something positive out of all that. But unfortunately, all she felt was bitter deep disappointment. And sadness. Sadness that was slowly overcoming her entire body and soul in harsh waves...

The Proposal

The reception had been a grand success. The guests had partied, chatted, laughed, danced, dined and finally retired for the night. The bride and the groom had retired to the honeymoon suite. A slew of workers was working all around the resort—putting away the chairs, bringing down the decorations, cleaning up the reception area and dismantling the music systems and light fixtures that had been put up especially for the party.

A few of the guests hung back around the swimming pool, talking and laughing. A few of them lay on the deck near the swimming pool looking up at the night sky.

Jhanvi was coordinating with Lavanya about the clean-up and the wrapping up of the party when she caught sight of Vicky and Avantika standing near the backwaters and looking into the darkness.

Panic hit her hard as she noticed that they were standing too close to each other. Her legs threatened to give away as she looked at them. Was Vicky proposing here? Now?

Jhanvi felt nauseated. She knew she should not interfere in anyone else's business. Vicky and Avantika's relationship was definitely no business of hers. Whatever and however it panned out, it should not affect Jhanvi in the least. But it did. Unfortunately, it did. And there was little Jhanvi could do about it.

Every cell in her body was screaming for her to do something. For her to stop the impending doom. It was not doom just for her but for the two of them as well. It was not just losing Vicky that made Jhanvi lose her senses, but she just could not stand on the side-lines allowing two people she cared about ruin their lives. Because if they got married, it would be nothing but a disaster. They were not suited for each other. Not one tiny bit. It wouldn't bode well for either them if Vicky proposed and Avantika said yes because she felt obligated to.

She knew Vicky believed there was an ever-expanding chasm that had developed between Avantika and him. He should not be proposing. Further, he had not even shared his life with Avantika as much as he had shared with her. She did not know his tastes, did not know his allergy and hell, she did not even know his hobby. If he was that invested in the relationship, should he not have shared these things with her?

And Avantika?! Her expectations from life did not align with Vicky's. Her relationship with Vicky was based on gratitude more than it was on love. She was always talking about breaking up with him, no wonder, looking for an excuse to end things with Vicky. But Jhanvi knew that despite all this, Avantika would say yes if Vicky proposed.

They did not belong with each other. And Jhanvi was the only person in the know. She was the only person who knew the truth. She had to do something. She just had to. No one knew the entire picture. Only her. It was up to her to stop this disaster!

Jhanvi watched with horror as Vicky reached into his pocket.

Oh my god! He was reaching for the ring!

Jhanvi shuddered. They didn't love each other. They shouldn't commit to each other. Without as much as a second thought, she ran towards them.

Vicky was just about to pass the ring to Avantika when Jhanvi reached them.

Vicky and Avantika turned together to look at her in surprise as she stood panting between them.

“Stop! Don't propose!” she said between breaths.

They both looked at her in shock. Then, Vicky smiled. “It's okay. I think we've got it.”

He turned to Avantika and was about to say something when Jhanvi intervened again.

“No! Stop! This is wrong!” she cried out. She was exasperated. Why couldn't they both see sense? They could

not do this. They do not love each other the way they were supposed to. Avantika did not love Vicky the way Jhanvi did. No one could love Vicky the way Jhanvi did. If anyone got to marry Vicky, it should be her! Not Avantika! Her!

Avantika asked, “What do you want, Jhanvi? I don’t understand.”

“What is wrong with you people? Haven’t you both realized that you are not made for each other?”

“Jhanvi...” interrupted Vicky, taking a step towards her. “It’s okay...”

“No! It’s not okay. You listen to me. You both should listen to me. I have to say this else my head will burst. Please! Let me talk or I will lose my line of thought. I will forget what needs to be said or I will lose the courage. And this is important. It needs to be said.”

Vicky reluctantly nodded at first but then he changed his mind. “Jhanvi, I think I should talk first...”

Jhanvi put up her hand to stop him. “No! You listen to me.”

She turned to Avantika, who was frowning at her.

“Look, Avantika...I know Vicky is leaving tomorrow. I know that. And maybe that wants to make you rush through things. But I cannot watch you both do this, knowing that you two are not suited for each other. I care about both of you and I don’t care what you think of me, but I have to say this...this is wrong! You cannot get married to each other.”

Avantika’s frown deepened.

Jhanvi continued, “I am sorry, Avantika. I know you told me this in confidence, but I had to say this to save you both from a disastrous relationship. It seems like you both have not spoken to each about what each of you truly feels in this relationship, which is why I have to intervene before you both do something that cannot be undone without hurting the other.”

She turned to Vicky then. “I am sorry to tell you this this, but Avantika feels stifled with you. And my own observation is that she is with you only because she does not want to hurt

you after everything you did for her. But I think she is confused herself. She is just grateful. She is not in love with you.”

Jhanvi addressed Avantika again. “Look, Avantika. I stayed quiet because I was insistent that you both should not break up because of me. But I don’t care about that anymore. I am sorry for saying this. But you cannot accept his proposal. You just cannot. This is wrong. You don’t even know what he does for a living. You don’t know anything about him. You don’t his tastes...you don’t know his hobbies...you know nothing. I do. You don’t know what he likes and what he doesn’t. I know him better than you do. Much better. And I am just a friend. It is okay to say no to him, break his heart and hurt him momentarily. That hurt will pass. He will get over it. You will get over it. But if you say yes, you will regret it for the rest of your life. You will resent Vicky for stunting your career. You deserve more than that. He deserves more than that.”

“Vicky, Avantika finds sitting on your terrace and looking at the ocean suffocating. But it is not like that with every girl. I am sure there’ll be so many girls who will be extremely grateful to spend their life with you. There must be a girl who will desperately want to go on romantic walks with you. I am sure that there must be some girl who wouldn’t want to do anything else in the world except be with you. Someone who will be with you even if it sounds boring to other people because there is nothing more exciting for her than to be with you. Someone who will keep you very, very happy. I am sure of that. Some other girl... Just not Avantika, okay?”

When she was done with her tirade, Vicky looked at her and whispered, “Are you done?”

Jhanvi was confounded to see him stifle a smile.

She was heaving. She could not think of anything else to say. She had just dumped everything that she had been feeling for so long on them and it felt freeing. There! She had done it. She had said what they should have said to each other. It was over. She had said it. She had done everything that she could do to kill this toxic thing that was between these two people she cared about.

Vicky continued, “Everything you said is correct...”

The realization hit her like a brick. She had done it again. She had interfered where she should not have. She had said things she should not have. This was the second time she had jeopardized Vicky’s relationship. He was never going to forgive her. He was going to ask her to get lost. He was going to ask her to never enter his life again. But then again, could you blame him? In his shoes, she would have done the same thing.

But why couldn’t he understand her? This was not something she could help. She just could not stop herself! She was not going to do nothing when Vicky’s happiness was on the line.

In fact, it was more than Vicky’s happiness. It was her happiness too. Vicky belonged to her! Just her. No one else.

She realized that, to a third person, she must come across as a girl obsessed with Vicky. They were quite entitled to their opinion. But they did not know the truth. They did not know that she had spent the best part of the last ten years of her life being in love with Vicky. They would not know that when she saw Vicky, it just clicked. And nothing else mattered. Vicky and she were made for each other. Sure, Vicky may not share her opinion yet. But it was only a matter of time. If he thought about it, even he would realize what a perfect couple they made.

And if she had done nothing, she never would have forgiven herself ever. The regret of speaking out was going to be considerably lesser than the regret of being silent. If she had stayed silent, it would come to haunt her. If Vicky’s marriage failed, it would kill her more than any amount of guilt could. She had to take a chance. She just had to.

Jhanvi looked at Vicky. He was going to literally banish her from his life. She knew that for sure. She closed her eyes and braced herself for the impact.

Vicky hesitated. And then, he said, “Actually...we...I was not proposing.”

Jhanvi opened her eyes and looked at him in shock. She then flushed as she looked at Avantika who was still looking at her with a weird expression on her face.

“You...you were not?” stammered Jhanvi.

Vicky explained softly, “No. We were, in fact, calling things off. I had her ring. I was just returning it.”

“Oh!” Jhanvi burned with embarrassment. “Oh!”

Avantika interrupted, “Do you love Vicky? Is that what this was all about?”

Her voice had a sternness that Jhanvi had not heard before.

“What? I...I...”

Jhanvi’s face expressed more than her words could. Avantika snapped, “Save it! The reception is over so you thought you could do anything you want, is it? You have been waiting for the reception to be over, isn’t it? Before you make a move on my boyfriend?”

“No, Avantika...”

“The minute you got your payment, you’ve revealed your true colours,” said Avantika, narrowing her eyes as she glared at Jhanvi.

Vicky said, “Avantika! Stop it. There was nothing wrong about what she said. Neither you nor I spoke honestly about the things that bothered us. Jhanvi spoke for the both of us. She stated exactly the reasons why we should break up, even when we didn’t.”

“She had no right to interfere.”

“Let it go,” replied Vicky, sharply.

“I will come over tomorrow and get my things from your house. Hope you both rot in hell!” replied Avantika, as she turned and left in a huff.

Jhanvi looked at Vicky in surprise. “I’ve... I’ve not had a change of heart just because the reception is done with. She is the one who seems to have changed. She was behaving like an angel...”

“You should not have interfered.”

Jhanvi looked at him shamefaced. “I know. I am sorry. But I couldn’t not do anything.”

“Seriously! You cannot keep interfering...”

Jhanvi cut him short, “I should not have. I agree. But it is not as if you are rolling on the floor crying. You just broke up with Avantika but you do not look the slightest bit upset.”

“I am upset.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “A girl like Avantika leaves you and you don’t even look sad. No tears, no nasty fights... What kind of a breakup is this? You guys would as well have been talking about the weather. It was quite understandable that I thought it was a proposal. It had no symptom of a breakup. Your break up is...is...very boring, actually.”

“Oh! I am sorry that it has not been more entertaining for you...”

“You know what I mean,” snapped Jhanvi.

Vicky looked at her for a moment and then sighed. “Anyway. Irrespective of whether your behaviour was abominable or not, I don’t think Avantika and I were compatible. I had begun to realize it in recent days.”

Jhanvi tensed up. “How recent?”

“Recent recent, okay? What are you? A reporter?”

“I just want to know what changed your mind.”

“Maybe I fell in love with another girl...”

Jhanvi gasped. She got all flustered and backed away, ready to leave. “I...I just remembered. I have to leave.”

She was about to leave when Vicky called out, “Wait, Jaan.”

Jhanvi stopped in her tracks and turned very slowly. “I...I have to go.”

“Wait! Why are you so scared?”

“S...Scared? Wh...what? I am not. I...I have to leave. I have some work I need to do.”

“It’s not you.”

Disappointment came crashing down on her. “Oh! Of course, I know that. Duh!”

“Then why are you running away?”

“I am not running...” replied Jhanvi.

Vicky sat in a chair and patted the chair next to his. “Sit.”

“Lavanya has given me a room here. 312. I am staying there tonight. In case you want to...”

Vicky shook his head and patted the chair next to his again. Jhanvi cursed. What the hell was she blabbering? Why the hell had she just told him her room number? Did she just invite him to her room? God! What a pathetic loser! *Get a grip on yourself, girl.*

Jhanvi reluctantly took the chair next to Vicky’s.

There was silence for several minutes as both of them stared at the backwaters.

“Your boyfriend is staying with you tonight?” asked Vicky.

Jhanvi was taken aback. She had not realized what was going on in Vicky’s mind till then. She had forgotten all about Navit.

She shook her head. “No...he left.”

“Hmm... Do you love him? What? You guys are made for each other?” he asked in a mocking tone. And yet the pain in his voice was very obvious. It hurt Jhanvi to hear that pain.

She shook her head. “No. I...I... Just forget about him, please. He doesn’t mean anything.”

“Then why are you with him?”

Jhanvi hesitated. She did not know what to say. She looked helpless as she shrugged.

Vicky continued, “Do you think that in a parallel universe... where there was no Navit, Avantika or Rathi in between us... would we have been together?”

Jhanvi's heart stopped beating for a moment. A huge lump formed in her throat. She gulped and shook her head. "I don't think we would have met if it had not been for Rathi."

"If we are made for each other, we would have met some other way."

Jhanvi was shocked. "Made for each other?"

Vicky smiled. "You don't think so?"

"I...I don't know. How will I know?"

"You have never thought about 'us'? You and me?"

Jhanvi flushed. Was he flirting or was he serious? She was unable to decide. "Are you drunk?"

Vicky laughed. "Do I need to be drunk to say the truth? Tell me the truth! Have you never thought about us?"

Jhanvi squirmed and shrugged. "I...I might have."

Vicky looked pleased. "Really? How did that go?"

"Let it go, Vicky."

"No, I want to know..."

There was silence. Neither spoke. Jhanvi glanced into Vicky's eyes, blushed and looked away. She focused on the plant in front of her. The leaves...the flower...the faint white colour of the flower...

Stop thinking about Vicky. He is playing with you. Don't fall into his trap. He is leading you on.

She looked into his eyes. He was still looking at her albeit with an unfathomable expression. She blushed and looked away again.

Finally, she shook her head. "There's nothing to know. Have you thought about us?"

"Yes. I think about us all the time," replied Vicky, in a matter-of-fact tone, as if he had expected her to already know this.

Jhanvi was shaken to the core. She looked into Vicky's eyes. He had to be kidding. He had to be. But there was only

sincerity in his eyes. No! She could not believe it.

Jhanvi said, “Don’t lie.”

“Why would I?”

“What do you mean ‘all the time’?”

“Right from the first time I laid eyes on you.”

Jhanvi thought back to the day that they met. In her head, she replayed the scene and saw things like an outsider, somebody other than the two of them, would have seen them as they happened.

She was lying on the road, muddy and drenched. Her hair was in a complete disarray. Her makeup had run. She was in pain and clutching on to her leg, wincing in pain. Vicky had found that attractive? It was downright impossible.

“Don’t lie,” insisted Jhanvi, shaking her head.

“I am not.”

“Vicky! Please don’t do this. You have just broken up with Avantika and you must feel this need to make yourself feel better. Please don’t use me for that.”

Vicky did not answer immediately and an uncomfortable silence descended on them.

Jhanvi glanced at Vicky only to realize that he was still looking at her. She let her gaze linger for a few moments and then broke eye contact.

“Why do you always do that?” he said softly.

“Do what?”

“You always break eye contact. Every time we look at each other, I feel something genuine starting to take shape. But every time, you look away and put an end to whatever was beginning to happen.”

Jhanvi flushed. “Nothing’s taking shape. It’s just your overactive imagination.”

“Really? Then, shut up and look at me.”

“I don’t want to.”

Vicky leaned over, put his finger under her chin and lifted her face toward his. “You have to. One last time and if you still feel nothing, I will let you go.”

“O...Okay,” replied Jhanvi, reluctantly.

They looked into each other’s eyes.

After a second, she asked, “Can I blink?”

“Yes, you can.”

A couple of moments later, Jhanvi asked, “Is anything taking shape now?”

“Shut up and it will.”

Jhanvi knew that if she did not speak, she’d lose herself in his eyes. And whatever Vicky had predicted would come true. Something would start to build up between them. Something that they both will feel. She did not want it to come true but could not think of anything else to say. Her heart was racing, and her breathing was shallow, and yet, she was unable to think of anything to say.

Vicky’s eyes lowered to her lips. Electricity coursed through her veins. Goosebumps broke on her arms. She closed her eyes. And waited. Then, suddenly realising what she was doing, she opened her eyes and pushed him away just when he was about to capture her lips.

“Enough,” she replied gasping. “This is wrong. Umm... I am going to my room, Vicky. Will you be alright?”

Vicky nodded.

“Good night,” said Jhanvi, avoiding eye contact.

“Good night.”



Jhanvi sat on her bed, shaking. What had just happened? Was Vicky telling the truth? Or was he just playing with her? Or was he trying to make himself feel better? She did not know. All she knew was how things had affected her. She was shivering. She was scared. The thing that she wanted the most

in her life, she dreamed that she had yearned for almost a decade had suddenly looked like it was going to come true. Only...she did not know if that entire conversation with Vicky, the things he'd said were real. After a long, long time of just sitting on the bed, unable to move, she finally forced herself to get up.

Jhanvi had just removed all her jewellery and packing it away when there was a knock on the door.

Her heart started to race anew. She shivered.

No! No, no! It could not be him. I cannot say no to him again...I just cannot.

Hesitantly, she moved towards the door. *Knock! Knock!*

Terrified, she opened the door, steeling herself. Just as she had feared, it was Vicky on the other side of the threshold.

She bit her lips as she looked up at him in confusion.

“The pilot’s here with you?” he asked.

Jhanvi shook her head hurriedly.

“I want to talk to you.”

“Now?” she asked, her voice coming out in a whisper.

He nodded.

Unable to do anything else, she moved to let him in. Why was he here? It was her mistake. She should not have given him her room number. Maybe he took it as an invitation...

“Break up with him!” declared Vicky.

“What?” asked Jhanvi in confusion. Then, she realized what he was talking about. “Oh... I... I cannot.”

“Come on!” replied Vicky, turning to look at her as she locked the door behind him. “He is pathetic. You guys look horrible together. You deserve better.”

Vicky trying to break her and her imaginary boyfriend gave her fresh hope. It was like a tonic and her state instantly improved.

“I deserve you?” asked Jhanvi sarcastically as she walked up to him.

Vicky nodded. “At the least. I don’t think you realize what a gem you are. I don’t think he does either. You should be with someone who realizes that.”

“You understood that he does not realize my worth after meeting him for less than a minute?”

Vicky threw up his hands in the air, and then went to sit in the chair near the bed. He pointed a finger at her as he explained, “A minute was enough to judge him. Just like you knew about Avantika, I got it about his guy. You told me about this, remember? A girl is a better judge of another girl. Likewise, a guy is a better judge of another guy. Take it from me. This guy is not... I don’t know... Something is off...”

Jhanvi laughed. “I cannot breakup with him.”

“Why not?” asked Vicky as he leaned back and put up his feet on the coffee table.

Jhanvi looked at him in confusion. Why was he there? Was he really thinking about the ‘us’ as he had mentioned before? A small hope peeped out from behind the dark clouds of despair and hopelessness. Did she really have a chance with Vicky? Hope was fighting against common sense and it was winning, hands down.

“He is with Naina...” replied Jhanvi, decidedly, as she sat on the opposite chair.

Vicky frowned. “What?”

“Given that he is her boyfriend, it is only right that he is with her.”

Vicky looked at her in shock for a couple of minutes. Then he burst into laughter. He shook his head, as he exclaimed, “Pathetic!”

Jhanvi laughed. “I know.”

“Really pathetic!” replied Vicky, still smiling and still sporting a shocked expression on his face.

“So, no pilot?” he asked, hopefully.

“I am sure there are many pilots. Just no pilot for me.”

“God!” replied Vicky, laughing.

Jhanvi was glad to see him relieved and happy. Seeing him like that made her feel light and happy, too.

“So, we both are single now, isn’t it?” asked Vicky. “I can’t believe it.”

“Yes,” replied Jhanvi, thoughtfully. “It is actually a novelty for me. I have never seen Vicky without a girlfriend. Actually, it is not just for me. Vicky being single is surely a novelty for everyone. We should put you out on display and charge money to let people see you single.”

Vicky laughed. “I’m known for my girlfriends...”

“String of girlfriends,” corrected Jhanvi. “It’s like you cannot exist on your own. You need a girlfriend all the time. Even now... It’s been just an hour since you broke up with Avantika and here you are, flirting with me.”

Vicky laughed as he looked at her in the way only he did. God! He was charming. No wonder he had no issues getting girlfriends. He was too charming! He had charisma. In fact, he was dripping charisma.

Vicky said, “It has always been you, you know?”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“It is the truth,” he said, sincerity dripping from his words.

Jhanvi raised her eyebrows. “It was always me even when you were with other girls?”

He nodded. “Yes. It was always you.”

She shook her head. It was hard not to fall into the trap. She knew it was a trap and yet she could not resist it. The trap did have a charm to it, after all.

“You are pathetic!” she replied, shaking her head and yet, unable to resist his charm.

Vicky laughed again. She looked at him. As they gazed into each other's eyes, the laughter slowly faded. The smiles left their faces. They were lost in each other for very many minutes.

Jhanvi was finally aware of something taking shape, in Vicky's words from earlier. Something large and powerful, like a magnetic force. It was making her heart race and her cheeks burn. It was making blood rush to her ears. Despite all that, she did not turn away this time.

After many minutes, Vicky said, "You know, I have a policy..."

His voice was groggy and it did things to her that she had never felt before.

"Yeah?" she whispered, prompting him to continue.

"I never make the first move."

Jhanvi had not seen that coming. "Never?"

He shook his head slightly. "Never."

She flushed. Then, she gulped and asked again in a whisper, "Why?"

"Because my mother raised a gentleman."

"Oh!" replied Jhanvi, looking away. What a lousy policy! And how inconvenient!

Then she gathered her courage and looked into his eyes. "Aren't you scared of wasted opportunities?"

Vicky smiled. "If the girl likes me enough, she will make the first move."

"Not if she is shy or brought up in a traditionally," shot back Jhanvi.

"Hmmm... But what if she rejects me?"

"What if she doesn't?"

He looked into her eyes for a moment and asked, "You think I should risk it?"

Jhanvi looked at him seriously and nodded. “Oh yeah, I think you should definitely risk it.”

He looked deep in Jhanvi’s eyes. Anticipation filled up the entire space between them. It started to raise and peak as if it was a living thing.

He asked slowly, “Do you think she likes me?”

Jhanvi flushed. Then she softly said, “I bet she is deeply in love with you...”

“You do?” asked Vicky, his eyes shining.

“Yeah. You should know. After all, you are the king when it comes to reading non-verbal cues. Or so I have been told.”

“Well, a girl once told me that if something was supposed to happen, it will. She said that the universe is my friend. And that if I just wish it, it will happen. Won’t this happen too if I just wish it?”

Jhanvi glared at him. “No. You can’t just sit on your ass and pray for things to go your way. If you really wish it, you will have to do something about it.”

“Aah! It’s like that.”

“Yes. And be warned, the girl might fast be changing her mind. She may not like all this dilly dallying...”

Vicky got up, walked to her, put his hands on the arms of her chair, leaned and kissed her on her cheek. It happened so fast and before she could realise what was happening, the kiss was over.

“Wow!” said Jhanvi, her eyes half closed. She met his questioning gaze and said, “I... I kind of expected more.”

Vicky’s smile slowly broadened. He pulled Jhanvi up from her chair and into his arms. As Jhanvi crashed into his chest, she descended into heaven. He was with her! Her! Finally! After so many years. A hug that she had been dreaming about for ten years. So, this was how it felt to be in his arms. This was how it felt to be with him...

Vicky hugged her and she hugged him back, unwilling to ever let him go. It was as if she was finally home. Her home! How could any girl want to move away from this? This happy place... Her happy place. This was where she belonged. In his arms.

Vicky dipped his head and grazed his lips on her shoulder. A shiver passed through her. He then dropped a kiss on her shoulder. Her heart raced as she went limp in his arms. She closed her eyes so as to fully feel his lips. He left a trail of kisses on her shoulder, up her neck, her ears, her cheeks.

And finally, he captured her lips. The kiss had the want of a very hungry man. Excitement pooled at the bottom of her stomach as she kissed him back. She wanted him. She wanted this. She wanted more. He put his arms around her hips and pulled her closer.

The kiss deepened. Jhanvi hung on to him as if her life depended on it. She ran her fingers through his hair as waves of electricity coursed through her body one after the other. It was heaven. Heaven right here in Seaside Creek.

Finally, he moved slightly away and looked at her. He was looking at her as if she was what he wanted the most in the world and nothing else. She realized that it could not be like that. But then why did she feel like that? Maybe that was how Vicky was. Maybe that was how he made all the girls feel...as if they were the only thing in the whole world that mattered to him. And nothing else. Jhanvi understood that it was extremely hard not to fall in love with someone like him...

He pulled her in for another deep kiss. All thoughts went out of her brain in record speed. She closed her eyes and all she could feel was him. Him. Kissing her...

He ended the kiss and rested his forehead against hers, running his thumb on her cheek. He moved back slightly and looked into her eyes and said, "You know you can ask me to stop anytime, right?"

Jhanvi nodded.

"Good."

He was about to kiss her again when Jhanvi said, “Wait!”

Vicky moved back, a horrified look on his face. Seeing his reaction, Jhanvi rushed to clarify, “I said wait. Not stop.”

She moved closer to him to prove her point.

“Oh!” replied Vicky, relieved, hugging her.

“Vicky, this is wrong. You think you need to always be committed to one girl or the other. You just broke up with Avantika. You cannot be with me already.”

Vicky hesitated.

Jhanvi’s eyes narrowed at his hesitation. “Or are you just looking for a one-night stand?”

He shook his head. “No, I am not.”

Jhanvi moved away from his embrace. “Of course, you are! You are leaving tomorrow. And I cannot come with you because of Evergreen. Neither can you stay here. The same reason why you broke up with Avantika holds true even for me. You cannot be actually thinking of a long-term relationship with me. You are just using me as a filler!”

He shook his head again in desperation. “You are not the same as her.”

Jhanvi looked at him astounded. “How? You were with her till an hour ago and you have fallen in love with me in an hour?”

Vicky was about to say something when Jhanvi stopped him. “No! This is doomed from all angles.”

“I have been in love with you forever. For years...”

Jhanvi moved away from him and sat down on the bed and looked up at him.

“You know, I want to believe you. Desperately. But come on, Vicky...”

“It is true.”

Jhanvi looked at him in astonishment. She shook her head as she said, “It looks like you will say anything to get me into

bed.”

Vicky sighed deeply. “What should I do for you to believe me?”

Jhanvi sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe this will help,” he said as he sat next to her and claimed her lips again. It was easy to get lost in the sensations. It was easy to forget about everything else and just live in the moment. It was easy to think that this moment was all that mattered and nothing else.

But Jhanvi wanted more. She knew that. She was too greedy when it came to Vicky. She did not want something. She wanted everything.

She pushed him away. “Stop, Vicky! Please stop.”

Vicky moved away and groaned. He ran his fingers through his hair, looking like a desperate man. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

Then, suddenly, his face wilted. Like he was tired. He moved to lie down on the bed. As his head sank into the white pillows, he sighed deeply.

“I am sorry,” said Jhanvi as she moved to lay down next to him, leaning on her elbow. “I need to know...”

Vicky turned to look at her. He looked so handsome. It took every fibre of Jhanvi’s willpower to not give everything up and belong to him for that night. Was she really doing this? Was she holding away what she desperately wanted?

He looked at her. His eyes had none of the lust that had consumed them a few minutes before. There was just pure love. He tucked a tendril of her hair behind her ears as he asked, “What do you want to know?”

There was no impatience in his voice, like Jhanvi had expected. It was soft, as if he was terribly in love with her and would do anything to ease her. As if there was nothing else he would rather be doing than talking to her...answering her questions.

“Will you be leaving for Australia as planned?”

“Yes.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“It is only for a few years. I will be back. Or else, you can come there.”

“I cannot go anywhere else. Evergreen is here.”

“Then, give me a few years. I will come back. A lot of people do this long distance thing...”

“Vicky! You want me to believe that you won’t date anyone there?”

Vicky looked at her as if she was insane. “Why would I need anyone else when I have you?”

Jhanvi shook her head. “You don’t believe that! You just broke up with Avantika and here you are with me. You cannot be single. It is hard for you. Accept it.”

“But I won’t be single in Australia. I will be with you.”

“I will not be physically there. That makes a world a difference.”

“Come on, Jhanvi. How shallow do you think I am? We can work it out.”

“Vicky, the reason you broke up with Avantika was because you believed long distance won’t work. How will it work for us? How is it any different with us?”

Vicky turned to his side, bent his elbow and rested his head on his palm. Just like Jhanvi. He looked into her eyes and said, “Because I am deeply in love with you.”

Jhanvi sighed. “Come on! You expect me to believe that?”

“What should I do for you to believe me?”

“I think you are with me only because you are hurt over your breakup with Avantika. You are looking at a one-night stand or just a filler before you move on to your next girlfriend.”

“I am not! How can I prove it?”

“If it is true, all that you are saying, we will pick up after you return from Australia.”

“But...but I don't know when I will be back!” replied Vicky, exasperated.

Jhanvi looked into his eyes and said, “I will wait. I will wait forever for you.”

Vicky groaned. “I cannot.”

Jhanvi sighed. “I know.”

“I have been in love with you since forever, Jhanvi. I will tell you everything...”

“You will say anything now. I won't believe you.”

“What should I do?”

“Wait for me. Wait for us.”

Vicky groaned as he lay down on the bed, exasperated. “You are killing me. I have waited enough.”

“Vicky, I have been in love with you for about ten years. I have been in love with you ever since I laid eyes on you. That is why I accepted your proposal even though you were still with Rathi. Trust me, I want this a million times more than you do. There is nothing in the world that I want more than you. But I have suffered, Vicky. I have spent a good deal of the last decade pining for you. No one has ever been good enough because I keep comparing them with you. But if we sleep together tonight and you ditch me...it will kill me. I will never get over something like that...”

“You've loved me all these years?” asked Vicky, shocked.

Jhanvi nodded. “I think my feelings for you have never changed. They've been constant. I have always been crazy about you and I always will.”

Vicky looked at her in disbelief. Then, he said, “Look! I have loved you for that long, too. Truth be told, I have moved from one girl to another, because I was too looking for a version of you. And obviously, I have never found her. I never

knew you felt the same. I cannot believe that we both have been in love with each other for a decade.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “Don’t say these things. Don’t do this to me. I cannot tolerate such lies...”

“I am not lying. You know what? Marry me! That’s a great idea. Let’s get married.”

Jhanvi looked at him stunned. “And then what? You will go to Australia and I will be stuck here?”

“We will work something out.”

Jhanvi shook her head. “Look, Vicky...”

“Argh! What should I say or do to make you believe me?”

“Give this a year. If you can stay single for a year, we can think of an ‘us’. That will prove to me that I am not just a rebound. But if we get carried away and get married...you might regret it. I don’t ever want that to happen.”

Vicky was silent for a moment. “After a year, will you believe what I say?”

“I will believe whatever you say.”

Vicky smiled. “Okay. I will wait for a year. I have waited for so many years. What is another year? But I am staying with you tonight.”

“Vicky...”

“What? I am leaving for Australia tomorrow. I want to spend tonight with you.”

“Vicky...” replied Jhanvi, shaking her head.

“Don’t worry. I won’t do anything. We’ll just talk. That’s it...”

“Just talk?”

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“But you can hug me,” said Jhanvi, moving closer to him and resting her head on his chest.

Vicky put his arms around her and rubbed his face against hers. He murmured, “Okay.”

They stayed like that for many minutes.

“What do you want to talk about?” asked Jhanvi, after some time.

“Anything.”

“What anything?”

“Hmm...say anything. Who is your favourite movie director?”

“Hmm... Mani Ratnam. I think he is a genius in bringing out even the minutest of expressions from his actors. A slight surprise. A mild shock. A small sarcastic smile.”

“Hmmm...” replied Vicky as he looked into her eyes and touched her cheek with the back of his hand. “I like his work, too.”

“I am sure you do. You do enjoy non-verbal communication more than anything.”

Vicky laughed. “I sure do.”

“What are my nonverbal expressions telling you right now?”

“That you are crazy about me.”

Jhanvi laughed. “Not bad. You are good.”

“But you are lousy in reading non-verbal cues. In fact, you are lousy even when it comes to verbal cues. Language might not even exist for you. It is completely useless for you...”

“Why?” asked Jhanvi surprised.

“Because you don’t seem to realize just how crazy I am about you...”

Jhanvi laughed. Then she hugged him. “Please don’t sleep tonight. Keep talking.”

“Okay.”

“And come back to me after a year. You will, right?”

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”



“Thank you for last night. It was the best night of my life,” said Vicky, smiling as he put on his watch.

Jhanvi panicked and sat up in the bed. She checked herself. Yes, she had her clothes on. She did not remember doing anything other than talking to Vicky through the night.

Vicky looked at her and laughed. “Don’t worry. Nothing happened. I did not drug you and rape you or anything.”

“Oh,” replied Jhanvi, feeling stupid for panicking. She smiled.

“I just loved spending the night with you. *Talking to you.*”

Jhanvi’s smile widened.

“I will call you after I land in Australia.”

“Are you sure you will be able to exist without a girlfriend?”

“But I do have a girlfriend. You.”

“Yeah...but...I don’t know.”

“You don’t trust me.”

Jhanvi looked at him guiltily. “It’s kind of hard to. All the time I have known you, you have been with one girl or the other.”

“All the time I have known you, you have been breaking up my relationships.”

“Oh, come on. Do you know how hard I try to not let that happen? Avantika wanted to break up with you because of something that I casually said. When I learned about it, I came

over to your house, pretending to be upset over a non-existent boyfriend just so that did not happen.”

Vicky’s eyebrows shot up. “Is that why you came over that night?”

“Yes. I was so hung up on not being the reason for your breakup that I did not realize that there was one thing I cared more about anything else in the whole wide world. Your happiness. That was what finally mattered. You should be happy in a relationship. That means more to me than anything else in the world. It means more than even my happiness. So, I realized...that I was wrong. I don’t care if I am the reason that you broke up or not. I want only the best to happen to you. That is why I came over yesterday. Because I knew you would not be happy with her. And I was willing to bear any amount of guilt...for any number of years...if only it brought your happiness.”

“Really?” asked Vicky, his eyes shining.

“And look! I know I told you before that I came between Rathi and you because of my issues with my dad. But it was not that. My psychiatrist was wrong. It was you. I loved you. I still do. I will always do. I cannot sit and just watch you with someone else when I know you are not happy with her. You are mine! No one will love you as much I do. Never ever. No one will treasure you as much as I will.”

“I know you won’t believe me...but I have to say it. No one will ever love you as much as I do.”

Jhanvi laughed. “You are right. I don’t believe you.”

Vicky rolled his eyes. “And I think you should know...you have been sabotaging all my relationships...”

Jhanvi scoffed. “What do you mean ‘all my relationships’? I spoiled things only with Rathi and Avantika... And I cannot even take the blame for Avantika...”

“Well, knowingly you have sabotaged only two. But there are many more that you sabotaged unknowingly.”

Jhanvi looked at him in disbelief and crossed her arms over her chest. “Oh really? How is that?”

“I was dating a girl and I told her that a girl I knew accepted my proposal in just three days.”

“Oh my God! You told her that? What happened then?”

“For some strange reason, she got angry. She asked me to go marry that girl and left me.”

“Hmm... I wonder what got her so upset,” said Jhanvi, laughing.

“Seriously. I don’t know,” replied Vicky, flabbergasted.

Jhanvi laughed. “So, I spoiled things even though I was not there.”

“Yeah. I think...it is kind of like...destiny.”

“Yeah. I think there is only one thing that we can do.”

“Yeah. I don’t think we have a choice,” replied Vicky, smiling.

Jhanvi looked hesitant. Then, she asked, “Are you sure? Why don’t we just pick up from here when you come back?”

Vicky threw up his arms in the air. “There you go again.”

Jhanvi said, “This long distance thing...if we talk, I will fall more and more in love with you... When you hurt me, I will find it extremely difficult...”

Vicky scowled. “*When* I hurt you? You have already decided I will hurt you, is it?”

“Is it likely you will like me after one year?”

Vicky shook his head. “You are unbelievable. Have you not been listening to me? Don’t you believe anything I say?”

“Actions speak louder than words, Vicky.”

“So, you won’t believe anything I say now?”

“It’s hard! You will say anything now. Let’s see after a year. I will believe anything and everything you say then.”

Vicky looked crestfallen. He shook his head. “I think I deserve it. God is punishing me for all the girlfriends I’ve had.”

“I am sorry. But you can see why I don’t trust you.”

“Trust me, Jhanvi. I have been in love with you from the first moment I laid eyes on you. Let me just tell you how I fell in love and maybe you will believe me. Just let me tell you.”

“No! No, no, no. Please don’t. Vicky, you don’t realize the impact it will have on me. I have been in love with you for ten years and you did not even do anything. If you tell me the story of how you fell in love with me, I will lap it all up. And I will hurt all the more...”

“Jaan! Stop it. I don’t know what I should do to make you trust me.”

“I will believe whatever you say after you come back. But how can I believe a guy who just broke up with a girl yesterday and is with me today?”

Anger flashed in Vicky’s eyes. “Fine. I will talk to you after I come back.”

“You will call me, right?” asked Jhanvi, afraid of his anger. She got up from the bed and came to stand near him.

“Why should I? You don’t believe anything I say.”

“Come on, Vicky,” pleaded Jhanvi.

Vicky did not answer. He put his wallet in his pocket and reached for his shoes. His urgency in gathering his things was a clear indicator of how angry and frustrated he was.

“Vicky! Please don’t do this.”

“You always say that the universe is our friend. And it will always help us...”

“Yes, that is true...”

“If it is true, then we will be together. I am going to blindly trust the universe to bring us together. Let’s see.”

“Come on, Vicky. Why expect the universe to do something that we ourselves can do?”

“No, you do not understand. We cannot be together if you don’t trust me. Where there is no trust, there is no love.”

“Don’t say that! There is love...”

“Love without trust will destroy us. I don’t want your lack of trust to destroy what we have. We better leave it as it is. Let me know when you trust me enough and we can pick up after that.”

Vicky opened the door. Jhanvi called out from behind him, “You will call me, right?”

Vicky looked back at her and shook his head. “No.”

“Then how will I keep in touch with you?”

“You know what? The universe is your friend. It will show you the way.”

Vicky shut the door behind him leaving a shocked Jhanvi behind. It took several minutes for the shock to wear off and for the sadness to set in. And when it did set in, it was a sadness unlike anything she had ever known.

Breaking and entering

It had been a month since Vicky had left for Australia. There was radio silence from his end. Jhanvi did not know what to do. He had ignored all her emails and she did not have his phone number.

She knew what she had done was wrong. For all her talk about being optimistic, she just could not bring herself to trust him. But she had a good reason. He was a guy who moved so easily from one girl to another. She was terrified to be one of the many girls in his list. She wanted him completely. For the rest of her life. She did not trust him to want her the same way she wanted him. She would gladly have settled if she was convinced that he returned even ten percent of her love. But she was not. How could she settle for something lower than that? She wanted Vicky. But she wanted him to love her. She was not going settle for anything less than that.

But he felt insulted. Insulted not to be trusted. And she just couldn't. If only he was more willing to give them a chance. A chance to get to know each other. Trust, like love, developed over time. It grows from small conversations, little opinions, small actions and even a few glances. Why had he not understood that? How could she learn to trust him if he is not even in the picture?

Her separation from Vicky was making her fall more and more in love with him. But it was not helping her trust him. Why could he not understand that?

She wanted to talk to him to tell him exactly that. But he was unreachable. All she knew of him was his beach house.

Every week, she made a trip to his house as a devotee visits a temple. She knew it was too early for him to have come back, but she did not know what else to do. She'd stand on the beach and stare at his house, as if that act had the power to bring him back.

On one such trip, she took Naina along with her to the beach.

Seeing her forlorn face, Naina said. "So? Have you heard from Vicky?"

Jhanvi sighed. "I think I made a mistake."

"Really? What?"

"I kind of told him I didn't trust him."

Naina shrugged. "Who cares if you trust him or don't trust him? What's it to him?"

Jhanvi winced. "He told me he loved me."

Naina was shocked. "What? Really? And you are telling me this now? When? How?"

"The night of the reception."

"This was after you arm-twisted Navit to pretend to be your boyfriend?"

Jhanvi scowled. "He did not need any arm twisting. Believe me!"

Naina laughed. "Yeah," she shrugged. "What to do? Anyway, what did you tell Vicky?"

"I told him I did not trust him."

Naina frowned. "Why did you say that?"

"Because I don't."

"Why?"

"Because it was all too good to be true. He is only proposing to me because he cannot stay single. It is not as if he loves me or even, likes me..."

Naina put up her hands. "Whoa...whoa... What is with all the negativity?"

Jhanvi sighed. "Just imagine, Naina. He had just broken up with Avantika. I was probably just a rebound..."

"What did he say?"

"He said he has loved me from the first time we met."

"Oh my God!" said Naina, her eyes going wide as saucers.

“Well, it’s not true...”

“How the hell do you know? What happened to all your philosophies? Is all that only lip service? Hard to implement, is it? What is that you say? Oh yeah... That things always go in our favour. That it is only us, with our negativity, jealousy, greed and envy, who blocks all good things from happening to us. And all that...”

“Well, yeah...”

“Then?”

Jhanvi looked helpless. “I don’t know. I could not believe him! It was too good, Naina. Too good!”

“What did you do then?”

“We...we kissed.”

“You both kissed?”

“No, I held him down and kissed him by force,” snapped Jhanvi. She looked at Naina and shook her head. “What do you think?”

Naina smiled. “You are so in love with him that I cannot put anything past you. Then what happened?”

“We spent the night together. But we were only talking. Nothing else happened.”

“You both kissed and spent the night together? Was it in each other’s arms?”

“Yes.”

“And yet you did not have sex?”

“We did not.”

“Even though you are crazy about him and he is crazy about you?”

Jhanvi sighed. “What are you trying to say? It was the right thing to do...”

Naina shook her head. “Nothing. I am not saying anything. Only that, it’s all crazy. Unbelievably freaking crazy.”

“Hmm...”

“Okay. What I am trying to say is that I would never have done that. I would have really been with him, you know? If I have been in love with a guy for over a decade and he comes and says he loves me too, I would not care about anything else. I would be with him. Period.”

“Well, I am not you,” shot back Jhanvi.

Naina shook her head, disapprovingly. “You know something? You may be more intelligent than me. You may be smarter. But despite that, I believe I am happier. I would not have over analysed so much. I would have just thought, ‘I am crazy about him. He is in love with me. I have an opportunity to sleep with him.’ And that’s it! My brain would have stopped at that. I would have slept with him. I would have been happy. Not like you! Moping around after wasting such a valuable opportunity! No wonder he left you and ran away to Australia. Good for him!”

“It is not... I did not want to spend just a night with him. I want him with me for all my life. For every single damn day. Not for a few hours of one night. Oh, you won’t understand,” replied Jhanvi, shaking her head.

“You are weird. If you are really that crazy about him, how could you stop after kissing him?”

“It’s called self-control.”

“Oh, really? You know what? I am glad I don’t have so much self-control. It seems to interfere with one’s happiness.”

“Naina!”

“Psycho!”

They glared at each other. After a moment, they both shook their heads and looked away, neither able or even willing to understand the other’s point of view.

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“Will there be a dog inside?”

Jhanvi looked at Naina infuriated. “Vicky has been gone for three months. And the house is locked. Do you think he would have left a dog inside? A dog that mysteriously stays alive for three months...”

“Okay! Okay! Got it! Jeez...I was just brainstorming.”

Jhanvi rolled her eyes at her. “Brainstorming involves using a brain.”

Naina glared at Jhanvi. “I am breaking and entering into a house for you. Mind your words.”

Jhanvi immediately cooled down. “I am sorry. I am just nervous, I guess.”

Naina nodded. She understood. She had never seen Jhanvi in such a terrible state. After Vicky left, she had been inconsolable. Her usual optimism had significantly waned. She constantly worried, fretted and seemed to always be on the edge. A little something was enough to push her over the edge. Her mental state was out in the open for everyone to see. Jhanvi was pathetic at faking a calm exterior.

Naina scaled the gate and jumped in. Jhanvi followed.

“No cameras,” said Naina as she studied the porch and the exterior of the house.

“I know.”

“Are you sure you know where the key is?”

“I once saw him leave a key in a pot of money plant,” recalled Jhanvi as she walked straight to the money plant. She moved the leaves around and found with the key.

“Got it!” she exclaimed, grinning in triumph as she held up the key.

Naina shook her head. “The guy has guts. He leaves the house for months...there are no cameras ...and the key is in a pot!”

“He has a home security system,” replied Jhanvi as she unlocked the door and it swung open.

The security alarm started to beep.

“I hope you know the code,” shouted Naina, in alarm.

“I know,” replied Jhanvi as she pushed in the code. The beeping stopped.

“He shared the code with you?” asked Naina in disbelief.

“Nah. I looked over his shoulder.”

Naina grinned. “I bet you did.”

“It’s 53920—the house number and street number put together. Easy to remember.”

Naina stepped in and studied the house. “Wow. This guy lives in style. No wonder he works from home. If I had a house like this, I’d not be getting out either. I’d get everything I needed home delivered. I’d live and finally decay in front of the TV...”

Jhanvi replied, “That is only because you have not seen his balcony. No one will watch TV if they stepped into his balcony.”

Naina moved through the living room and said, “I cannot believe he is this lax with security. No security cameras... allowing you to peep over his shoulder and all that...”

“Maybe he just does not care. He is rich.”

“So?” replied Naina as she turned around in the living room.

Jhanvi went straight to the wall where a number of photos of Vicky were put on display. She studied them for a few minutes and then buried her face into her hands in despair.

Naina put an arm around Jhanvi to console her.

“I am the most idiotic person in the whole world,” she wailed as she leaned into Naina’s arms.

“Well...not the whole world! Maybe just in India...or to be optimistic, maybe just in Tamil Nadu...”

Jhanvi pushed Naina away looking forlorn. “Get lost, idiot!”

Naina chuckled and took Jhanvi in her arms again.

Jhanvi explained, “I am hurt now. But if I had started something with him, it would have hurt me more.”

“You are convincing yourself, without any facts, that the relationship would have failed.”

“Vicky has never been without a girlfriend. The day he broke up with Avantika, he wanted to be with me in just an hour. How genuine do you think his feelings are? He is not a guy who’ll commit. He’ll just going around breaking hearts.”

Naina sighed. “You are right. You would have been devastated if he had broken up with you.”

“No. I would have been dead. I cannot imagine a life without him after he has been an intimate part of it. Look at how I am suffering now!” wailed Jhanvi.

“Hmm...why don’t you sit down and cry? I will take a look around the house.”

Jhanvi glared at her. But then the temptation to cry was overwhelming. She finally said, “Fine.”

She took a photograph from the display and put it in her handbag. Naina looked at her with enormous surprise. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I need a photo! Come on...I need it.”

“What if he comes back and notices it gone? He will know someone broke into his house.”

“It is a risk we have to take.”

“You take that risk. Not me! Put it back,” said Naina, trying to reach for Jhanvi’s bag.

Jhanvi moved her handbag out of Naina’s reach and put out a hand to stop her. “Look! I have an idea. I will take it now and I will put it back just before he comes.”

“How do you know when he’ll come?”

Jhanvi shook her head. “Maybe I will install a camera in the living room. Then, I will know when he comes. You only said that there were no security cameras in this house.”

Naina looked at her dumbfounded. “Yes, I said that. If Vicky puts a camera in this house, it is called ‘security’. If you put a camera in this house, it is called ‘creepy’.”

“Okay, okay. I will put it back.”

Naina moved away but Jhanvi made no move to put the photo back.

Looking at Naina’s gaze, she muttered, “In a week. Just give me a week. I will put it back next week.”

Naina threw up her hands in exasperation. “Whatever. I think am going to write a book and call it ‘Psychos in love’. You’ll be the heroine, by the way.”

“Shut up!”

Naina smiled as she ascended the stairs. “Where is that secret room? Upstairs, right?”

“First one on the right. It will be locked. Don’t bother.”

Naina climbed the stairs and opened the door. “It’s open!” she exclaimed in glee as she entered the room.

Jhanvi shook her head. She went to the kitchen and sat at the table. There was a layer of fine dust on the table as was on everything else in the house. She wrote Vicky’s name on the dust and sighed. She added her name under his and drew a large heart around their names. A few moments later, she got a cloth to wipe the table when she got distracted. The refrigerator caught her eye. She opened it and saw the *nanari sherbath*. She had a sudden deep yearning for the *sherbath*. She took out the *sherbath* and was in the middle of preparing it when she heard Naina scream.

She abandoned everything and ran up the stairs.

Naina was still screaming, “Jhaanvi! Jhaaaannnvvii!”

Jhanvi tripped as she ran up the stairs. What could have gone wrong? Was there something there that had spooked her? Was there someone staying at the house? Or had she caught a thief mid-action? If she did and if they miraculously got out of this somehow, how could they not involve the police? Or what if Naina had an accident and they had to call an ambulance? And if they needed to involve the police or the doctors, how could they possibly explain their presence in Vicky’s house without his knowledge? And what will Vicky think about her

when he gets to know what she had done? *Oh God! Please save me! Please get me out of this situation!*

All these thoughts rushed through her mind in the few seconds it took for her to get up and run again.

She opened the door and entered the room. There was no one in there apart from Naina. She was sitting on the floor. Spread around her were huge photos.

For a moment, Jhanvi did not understand what had happened. Why had Naina screamed?

Naina was looking at her with utter shock on her face. Not understanding her shock, Jhanvi refocused on the photos that Naina had spread around her.

Wait! The photos were familiar. They were photos of a girl striking different *Bharathanatyam* poses. Wait! The girl was familiar. Oh God! It was her! Those were her photos. These were large size photos of her taken during her *arangetram*. How had they ended up at Vicky's house?

The shock that had only been on Naina's face till then was reflected on Jhanvi's face too. The girls looked at each other, utterly bewildered and extremely shocked.

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It took a few minutes for the girls to get over their shock. Jhanvi kneeled down next to Naina to take a better look at the photos.

“What? Where? How?” said Jhanvi looking at Naina for an explanation. Try as she might, she could not come up with an explanation for those photographs.

Naina replied, “There was a secret compartment in the bookshelf. It immediately caught my eye as a friend had recently shown me how she architected secret panels and doors in houses. Why, it was only last week that she told me about it. It's called a trim or something like that. And as soon as I entered the room, that was what caught my eye. I saw that the topmost bookshelf was thicker than the others and so I just wondered... I never thought in a million years that it would

actually have a secret compartment. I pulled it out and viola! A secret compartment that had these photos”

Naina pointed to the shelf that was now open. It was a slim shelf under a regular shelf. If the slim shelf was pushed back, it would just appear as if the regular shelf was slightly thicker than the others. That was why Jhanvi had never noticed it when she stayed in that room.

“Why does he have your pictures?” asked Naina. “Did you give them to him and forgot to tell me?”

Jhanvi shook her head. “I never gave anyone these photos. These photos are more than ten years old. And I never even printed them. I don’t know how...”

“Not just the photos. The print of these photos is also old. Wait! Look, there is a faint marking on the back of this photo. Jaipal Studios. March 18th, 2004.”

“2004? That is the year of my *arangetram*. It was in January that year, two years before I met Vicky for the first time.”

“Then how?” asked Naina, astounded.

Jhanvi shook her head. “I have no clue.”

“Call him! Ask him!”

“And tell him what?” snapped Jhanvi. “That we broke into his house?”

“I don’t care about breaking and entering now. I am more curious about how he has these photos of you!”

Jhanvi shook her head. “Anyway, I have no way of reaching him. Put them back. Let’s leave. I am confused. Just...just leave.”

Naina nodded. “I agree. It’s spooky. Let’s get out of here.”

“No, wait. I actually need the photos. I will take them with me.”

Naina frowned at Jhanvi.

“I will put them back along with his photo that I pinched from downstairs. I will come next week and put everything

back.”

Naina reluctantly nodded. The shock was still on her face. She had been really spooked.

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Jhanvi lay on the bed and looked at the photos on the wall, the ones she had taken from Vicky’s house. She was admiring herself. She looked so beautiful in the yellow saree and maroon puffed blouse. In the half sitting-*aramandi* pose, the pleats of the saree had opened out beautifully in the front.

Her beautifully made eyebrows and eyes darkened with the heavy, dark lines made her look extremely beautiful. Jhanvi knew that more than aesthetics, the eyes needed to be highlighted as part of the dance. The eyes always moved beautifully along with the dance movements. She knew that though variations in the movements of the arms and legs formed the various *Bharathanatyam* poses, it was the eyes that gave soul to the dance.

Red dye had been applied to the tips of her toes, her fingers and even to the soles of her feet to emphasize the movements of the hands and the legs.

She was decked in temple jewellery that included her bangles, earrings, necklaces, wristlet and even her nose ring. They all were in a peacock design and looked beautiful. Her hair was plaited, pinned and adorned with white flowers. On her feet she wore anklets that were made of leather straps adorned with rows of small, metallic bells. How amazingly well her entire look had come together? And how exquisitely beautiful she looked!

Jhanvi reminisced about the days before her *arangetram*. What hard work it was! She had started to practice for her *arangetram* six months before the actual event. And it had been completely worth it. Her *arangetram* had been perfect. All her dance moves were perfect. She was able to keep the audience in complete rapture for three hours. She had aced everything. Of course, she got some breaks in the middle as

the invitees and her gurus talked about *Bharathanatyam* in between her dances.

She remembered that her parents had invited leading *Bharathanatyam* dancers from various other cities. They had come to felicitate the event and they had all gushed about her dancing skills. They had said that she was a force that one had to look out for. And how, in a society that was moving more towards passive forms of entertainment and was getting more westernized day by day, it was refreshing to see that a girl had learned an ancient form of dancing and had aced it. They had all loved her and praised her for choosing this beautiful dance form. They had hoped that she would lead many, many more along the same line while uplifting this ancient dance form. They had wished her very many successes in this field.

Their words had been like honey to her ears. She had really wanted to become a dancer. She had wanted to dedicate her entire life to *Bharathanatyam*. She wanted to do nothing else in her life other than dance.

But then, a few months after her *arangetram*, everything had collapsed. Her father had left her and her mother. It had been a devastating blow. It took them months to come to terms with the situation. And suddenly, dance did not seem that very important.

And yet, in spite of all that, she had gathered herself and went back to her dance. But unfortunately, one devastating incident put an end to her dance career.

After a break of several months, after her father left them, Jhanvi went back to her dance class. Her teacher had pitied her and had talked to her. She told Jhanvi that she would give whatever support she needed and she should never hesitate to ask her for anything. Jhanvi had been glad to hear her teacher talk to her like that.

After class, Jhanvi had started back home. Halfway to her home, she realized that she had forgotten her water bottle and went back to the dance class to get it.

When she reached her class, she overheard her teacher talking to some other teachers and students. She was talking

about Jhanvi's father. She was detailing about how everyone in town knew about his affair and only his family was unaware of the situation. She was explaining how it was expected by everyone. And the only ones surprised by the turn of events were his family.

Everyone had laughed. And it had broken Jhanvi's heart.

More than the words, Jhanvi had not been able to accept the way in which the words had been said. They were mocking, sarcastic and cruel. Her teacher's tone was in sharp contrast to the tone in which she had consoled Jhanvi earlier.

And Jhanvi's hatred that was reserved for her father alone, started to encompass her teacher and all the others who had laughed. And that was the last time Jhanvi had gone to her dance class. She had given it up. It had been just too hurtful.

Jhanvi sighed and looked at the photos. She was filled with regret. Why had she not confronted her teacher and the others? A confrontation would have ended things. It would have enabled her to continue with her dance. But she chose to run away and she had been the only one to have lost an opportunity.

She lost her dance. She lost the one thing that had provided her with such happiness. Why had she done that? Why had she not searched for another teacher? Why had she not even attempted it? What was the need to associate her dance with the shame her father had heaped on her family?

Nothing made sense. What she did was pathetic and stupid! But it had been her way of coping. There was nothing that she could do about it now.

She got up from the bed and tried to assume the pose on the photos. She was able to mimic it in a few moments. She caught her reflection in the mirror and her heart rate accelerated. She tried a simple dance step and felt an incredible thrill coursing through her body. She tried another step and she laughed out aloud with pleasure. Her eyes had teared up with the happiness that she had long missed.

She took her phone and played *Sri Ramachandra Kripalu*, a *bhajan* written by Saint Tulsidas. It was one of the songs she had performed on for her *arangetram*. She could almost hear her father's introductory speech for this dance of hers.

“The next piece Jhanvi will perform is a bhajan written by the revered Saint Tulsidas. It extols the greatness of Lord Rama. He is full of compassion. He vanquishes the evil. Rama's beauty is beyond a thousand Manmathas. He wears a bright Pitambara, contrasted beautifully by his dark body. He is adorned with a beautiful Kreedha and auspicious tilak. He is Aajhaanubhahu. Let us pray to lord Rama, the son of Dasharatha and the embodiment of joy born in the Raghuvamsa.”

The song began to play. She danced to the song with her heart and mind completely focused on Lord Rama. It was an elaborate dance with equal importance to *Nritta*, the dance movements and *Abhinaya*, the facial expressions. When the song was over, Jhanvi realized how out of touch she was. Her dance steps were clumsy and difficult. And her joints felt as if they had rusted. And yet, she realized that her soul was full of happiness. Uncontainable happiness. Why had she ever let this go? Dance was her passion. It was what she wanted to live for. How could she have forgotten it?

And above all, how could Vicky have known what dance meant for her? And how and why did he have those photos? How did he get his hands on them?



Jhanvi was getting more and more miserable as the days went by. The previous time when she had been separated from Vicky around ten years back, it had been so relatively easier when compared to this torture. That time, Vicky had not been hers. He had not been in love with her. They had not kissed. Nor had they spent an entire night in each other's arms.

This time, it was difficult. So very difficult. This time, Jhanvi was filled with regret and it was killing her. Had she been wrong? Should she have just shut up and accepted him? Or she could have at least pretended to trust him. Maybe the

trust would have developed eventually. Or was Vicky right? Love without trust might have torn them apart so badly they would never have gotten back together. That was what Vicky feared would happen to them. Was he right?

Did Vicky really love her? Was he saying the truth when he said he had loved her from the time they had met? Jhanvi thought it was pretty unlikely. But then, how could anyone explain her photos at his house? That did not make any sense. Those photos were from before they had met. Had he got those photos from someone? Niro? But Jhanvi rejected that idea. Niro would have told her. It was probably someone who would not tell her. But try as she might, she could not come up with a single name who could have given her photos to Vicky.

Would he have hacked the photos from her mail? After all, he was a hacker. But that did not explain how he printed them out before they had even met. Nothing seemed to make sense.

She needed to get in touch with him. But how?

She did not know. There were a bunch of things that she could try. The most hopeful and the least appetizing among them was calling Avantika.

Jhanvi burned at the thought. Avantika hated her. With good reason. How could she call her and ask her for information on Vicky?

But Jhanvi could not find any other way. She steeled her nerves and called Avantika.

“Hey, Avantika, Jhanvi here.”

“Hi Jhanvi,” replied Avantika.

Jhanvi noticed the reluctance in Avantika’s voice and it hurt her pride. She wanted to disconnect the call and be done with Avantika and her entire family. But she did not have an option right then. She swallowed her pride and continued, “How are you doing? How are Anisha and...”

“What do you want, Jhanvi?” snapped Avantika.

“I...I...I think I left a couple of my things at Vicky’s house when I stayed there. And...”

“Vicky is in Australia.”

“I know. I know.”

“Are you not in touch with him?”

Jhanvi felt a deep hurt in her soul. She swallowed and replied, “No. Anisha’s reception was the last time I saw him.”

There was silence.

“Do you have his number?” asked Jhanvi, gripping her phone so tightly that her hand started to hurt.

“No.”

All the hopes that she had entertained came crashing down. Avantika either did not have his contact number or she did not want to share it. But maybe she’d know about her photos. It was worth a try.

Jhanvi said, “I was wondering if you came across my things when you were there...”

“What things?”

Her tone this time was different, a little friendly. Jhanvi realized that the fact that she was not in touch with Vicky had agreed well with Avantika.

“I left a ring. And a couple of my photos.”

“Hmm... I have never seen your photos there. What kind of ring?”

Jhanvi’s heart sank. This had been a futile exercise. Avantika did not have his contact information. Neither did she know about the photos. How did Vicky get her photos? And why were they hidden? Nothing made sense.

But now that she had started this conversation, she had to manage the rest of it and see it to a proper conclusion. She described the red herring. “A gold ring with diamonds set in a flower pattern.”

“No. Never seen a ring like that.”

“Okay...I thought I should check,” replied Jhanvi, eager to disconnect the call.

Avantika sighed. “Well, there is place where Vicky keeps miscellaneous things. It is a chocolate box in the kitchen. It is deep violet in colour. He usually keeps it under the shelf where he stores his coffee things...under the stove. If anything is important, that is where he would keep it. But unfortunately, I think Vicky’s house is locked. I don’t think he has a housekeeper or gardener. But he might. You might want to check if anyone has access to his house. I don’t know what he does anymore.”

“Thank you. That really helps. By the way, Avantika...”

“Yes?”

“I am very sorry for everything. I tried very hard to not come in between you two...”

“I know. I know. And it’s okay,” said Avantika. Jhanvi knew Avantika had not been ‘okay’ when she had called. Her apology was the one which had made it okay. But she was glad that it had.

“It’s all my fault.”

“No, it not your fault, Jhanvi. We were broken long before you came along. Actually, we were on the verge of a breakup when you came into our lives. And then suddenly, things picked up. He was overtly nice to me, he was overtly considerate...he was so attentive. I believed it was going to change. But then... Well, he never touched me.”

“He didn’t?” asked Jhanvi surprised. They were even sleeping together in the same room. How? Why?

“Yeah. I don’t know why... We just didn’t. Anyway... I also wanted different things. I don’t know what to say. It changed. But the fact remains that we would have broken up irrespective of your presence. That is one thing you don’t have to trouble yourself with.”

“I am very glad to hear it. I hope we can continue to be friends...”

“Definitely.”

“I would hate to lose your friendship over this.”

“Yes, let’s stay in touch.”

“Sure. Bye.”

“Bye.”

When Jhanvi disconnected the call, she knew for sure that that was the last time she would ever talk to Avantika in her life.



It was almost six months since Vicky had left for Australia. Jhanvi decided that she had to return the photos that she took from Vicky’s house as he might return anytime then.

It was late at night when Jhanvi opened the door to Vicky’s house. She switched on the lights and typed in the security code. Even with the lights flooding the house, she wondered if she should have got Naina along with her. It was spooky. She locked the door behind her and double bolted it.

She headed upstairs and replaced the photos in the secret panel on the bookcase. And then she wondered for the millionth time how and why he had her photos.

Giving up on figuring out something that was out of her hands, she headed down the stairs.

She hesitated near the kitchen. Avantika had mentioned a chocolate box, right? Jhanvi had a strange curiosity overcome her. What was there in that box? She just had the overwhelming need to open the box and find out. She did not know why. And she was acting out on a hunch. That was all.

She entered the kitchen. *Violet chocolate box...violet chocolate box...* She chanted as she opened the drawers under the stove.

She found it behind a few large containers. She got it out, placed it on the kitchen counter and opened it. There were a few assorted things—Vicky’s passport-sized photos, a long chain, a key chain with no keys, some foreign currency, a newspaper cutting that talked about Vicky and his startup. And there was a letter.

She read through the newspaper article. The almost 2-year-old article was about some investment that Vicky's company had got. She then picked up the letter and opened it.

Jhanvi went numb when she saw who the letter was addressed to.

Hi Jaan,

I am about to leave for Australia in a few hours. I don't know why I am writing this letter. I guess it is my way of coping with the enormous pain in my heart right now. To not be trusted by the one you love is painful. Very. Trust me.

But I cannot blame you alone. I am equally to blame. If you cannot trust me, it is because my actions have not exactly been trustworthy. I know what that feels like. It feels like watching someone dance to songs that only they can hear. For others, it is comical for there is no music. I think that's what my behaviour has been like. You can see me dance but you don't hear the song I hear. This letter is to help you listen to that song. So that you understand why I've behaved the way I have.

Most people don't know the exact moment they fell in love. I am one of the very few lucky ones who do. I fell in love with a dancing girl. She had the brightest eyes that exploded with expressions. She had feet that moved impeccably to rhythm. Her hands expressed her emotions and kept up with her feet. She swayed across the dance floor gracefully, every part of her body moving in rhythm with her expressions.

She gave life to the songs she performed on. I fell in love that very instant. The moment my eyes landed on the girl dancing to Varnam. What a dance it was! What expressions! She was lost in her devotion to her nayaka, Lord Narayana. She even performed the aanandha thandavam of Lord Shiva. What a treat to the senses it was!

It was at your arangetram. My mother was the singer at your arangetram, and I was but a mere accomplice for her program. Little did I imagine that that evening will turn out to be the most important evening of my life. I never did in my wildest dreams imagine that that evening would end up encapsulating my entire life. An evening that not just changed

my life but is continuing to do so till this very instant. An evening that I will never forget in my life. An evening by the end of which I was in love.

But I have always been intellectual, a trait that I was, in fact, very proud of. I convinced myself that it was merely an infatuation. Even though I stayed through the concert lapping up your every moment of your performance. Everyone gets infatuated, right? I thought it was just a passing feeling. A momentary lapse of my usual better judgement. I always use my brains to take my decisions. My feelings mostly never matter. I always analyse everything in depth considering all the pros and cons. But when it came to you, my brain just stopped working. I just had these enormous feelings crashing like waves into my heart. I told myself it will pass. And I left your arangetram without even meeting you.

But for reasons I cannot explain, within a month, I secretly obtained photos of your arangetram from my mother, printed and pinned them on my wall. I did all that but still convinced myself that it meant nothing. That I was just indulging in a mere fantasy. Even when my parents ridiculed my obsession. I laughed at them saying it was the art form I was interested in and not the girl, even though I knew they did not believe a single word I said... I chanted to myself and to them that it was just an infatuation.

It was years later that I realized what a fateful mistake it was to put up your photos in my room. You were in my life, every day. I woke up to your face and I fell asleep looking at you. I told myself I'd take down the photos but I never did. I kept delaying it and before I knew it, it was two years. And I continued to be in love with the dancing girl.

Then, I realized that it was not healthy. I was just obsessed. And I indulged in my fantasy as a person indulged in drugs or drinks. I did not like it. I wanted to change it. I wanted to stop thinking about you and move on. I realized I had not given myself an opportunity to forget the fantasy as your photos were still up in my room. I needed to get rid of the obsession that was taking over my life.

So, one evening, angry with myself for being led by a fantasy for more than two years, I took down all your photos from my bedroom wall. I stashed them in my attic and vowed never to think of you again. I vowed I will never attend another Bharathanatyam performance again in my life. I wanted to rid my life of everything that was connected with my obsession.

I knew I needed to move on. But it was hard. Then, I told myself that all I needed was a substitute. If you want to break a bad habit, you need to replace it with something else, right? I told myself that if I had a girlfriend, then I would not obsess over an unknown girl. And I did just that. I got myself a girlfriend, convincing myself that one day I will fall in love with her as much as I was pretending to be in love with her. That girl was Rathi.

Rathi was good for me. She was my much-needed distraction. She took me to a number of parties and movies, and it did help me forget you for a while. But fate had cruel plans for me. Little did I know then that I was going to meet the girl of my dreams because of that very same girlfriend.

When I saw you hurt that day, looking at me with those same expressive eyes that had tormented my heart for so long, I knew I was lost.

I helped you that day and understood that I just could not keep away. Tormented by the possibility of something happening to your leg and affecting your dance, and by the possibility of me falling in love again, it was a very difficult day for me.

And much to my greatest chagrin, before long, I was totally in love with you. I told myself that it was stupid to fall in love with a girl I did not know. The intellectual in me just did not allow me to fall in love again with such rapidity and intensity with a girl I only barely knew. I talked myself into not thinking about you and chanting that it was all in my head. I did not believe in fate and did not believe that we were meant to be. That would be against everything I believed in and so I fooled myself that I was not in love with you and convinced myself that I will not let myself get infatuated again.

It worked for a little bit. But then the strangest thing happened. I proposed to you. Truth be told, that proposal has been living in my heart since that day I saw you and the words leapt out the first chance they got. But I was dumbstruck when you said yes! Could it be true? Could my dream girl be in love with me? Could the girl I had obsessed over fall in love with me after just a few meetings between us? It was too good to be true. And I did not believe in it. I did not believe that it was fate, and I did not believe that we were meant to be, though every cell in my body was screaming to tell me.

I convinced myself that you said yes for the sake of winning that argument, that you did not actually mean it. That seemed like the only plausible explanation for a girl accepting a guy's marriage proposal after talking to him for less than an hour. Nothing else made sense.

But when I came to your house, you told me you'd accept my proposal all over again. I was dumbstruck. Here I was, not giving my feelings any importance and trying to make all important decisions in my life using only logic. But you?! You knew nothing about me. All you had to work with was a hunch. Or a feeling. And yet it was so strong. You were so convinced about me that you declared you would accept my proposal all over again. More than anything else, your sheer confidence shook me to my roots.

That was the last straw on the camel's back. I needed to get away from a world that I did not understand. I did not want to allow myself irrational feelings and utter hopelessness of being in love with you. I had already wasted two years of my life chasing a wild dream. I was not going to waste any more years. I was not going to let my unreasonable obsession decide my future.

I knew I had to get away. If I had to save myself, I had to get far away from you. Breaking up with my girlfriend and pushing my dream girl out of my head, I turned all my attention to my studies and other intellectual pursuits.

In a way, I guess I owe all my success to you because I don't think I would have had the drive otherwise. I ploughed on doggedly and tried to forget all about you.

And in the eight years that followed, I became a lot more emotionally mature. I began to wonder if there was something in what we had. I regretted not having the guts to explore that possibility. Because wherever I searched, whatever girl I was with, I was always comparing that girl with you. But you had a great advantage. I did not know you and so I could imagine you to be anyone I wanted you to be. And I caught myself doing that a lot. Comparing every girl I was with, with an ideal girl whom I did not even know properly to begin with. My regret grew too. Because I thought, if I had had the guts to know you, I may have learnt that you are not as ideal as I was assuming you out to be.

When I met you again after eight years, I was ready. More than ready, I was curious. Curious about the girl who had monopolised so much of my time. So, I wanted to know about you. I did not want to just run away. Because if I ran away without a reason, I would never be successful in convincing my brain that you were wrong for me. So, I wanted to know you and I wanted to find a reason why you were wrong for me. If I could find a reason, I could easily leave you and my obsession behind.

Unfortunately, it backfired. The more I knew you, I perceived that you were just right for me. In fact, I realised you were my exact match. You were better than the image I had created of you in my mind.

And that got me thinking. Did something called fate really exist? I started to question my beliefs. I started to question the rational side of me. What if there was not supposed to be a rational side in love? What if you were not supposed to think with your brain but live and feel with just your heart? What if I was wrong all along to have run away from you?

I wanted to know everything about the girl I had fallen so madly in love with. I wanted to know the girl who was the yardstick against whom all my other girlfriends were measured and against whom everyone fell short. I wanted to know the girl whom I knew was right in my heart and yet could not allow myself to accept the same. I wanted to know the girl who had accepted my proposal.

But I did not want to date you and find out about you. It would lead to unnecessary complications. I wanted to learn about you as a friend. I was on the verge of breaking up with Avantika when I met you. And I postponed breaking up with her because I wanted to use her as a shield for protecting my heart against you. I know it was wrong and I feel extremely ashamed of it. But there was no other way. I could not risk my heart yet again.

And to be fair to myself, I only maintained a platonic relationship with Avantika. I tried to emotionally distance myself from her and I guess she felt it, too. Because she reciprocated and the already huge chasm between us started to widen.

But I got to know you. It was an adventure getting to know you. A roller coaster ride. I realised what being in love truly felt like. What it meant to fully surrender your heart to someone else, giving them the ability to protect or break it.

There were many moments when I felt my love was being returned and it filled me up with euphoria. And there were times when you deliberately distanced yourself from me and it just simply crushed me. I got to know that love takes you to the heights of ecstasy and to the lows of despair. And sometimes, it makes the that journey in just a few seconds. When I met Navit, I wanted to kill him. I was so possessive that I wanted to kill any guy you liked or even looked at, for that matter. I experienced everything with you. I finally understood what it meant to be truly in love.

They also say that falling truly in love and having that love returned is the greatest gift a person can have. It is the greatest thing that can happen in a person's life. I have not been that fortunate. What relationship can survive without trust? But a person can hope, can he not?

You keep saying the universe is always looking out for us. Let me see if the universe is really looking out for us. Because if it does, the letter will reach you one way or the other. And if we are really meant to be, you will know how to reach me after reading this letter.

If you don't get this letter or if you don't know how to reach me... Well, I guess that is fate too, isn't it?

Jaan, you have influenced by life unlike anyone else. They say you have not truly lived if we have not loved. I have loved. I have lived. And both are only because of you.

Love,

-Vikranth Warriier

Jhanvi's was crying unabashedly by the time she finished reading the letter. She couldn't believe what she had read. Was it really true? Could this be happening? Could all this have already happened?

She reread the letter to see if there was something that she had misunderstood. But she only understood Vicky's words and feelings better. And then, she read it again. And then again.

Several hours had passed before it dawned on Jhanvi that she had spent the entire night reading the letter again and again.

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It was afternoon when Jhanvi opened her eyes. She had spent the night on Vicky's sofa. The contents of the letter came rushing back. But they no longer shook her. After a good night's sleep, she was in a much better position to process them.

She freshened up and made herself a cup of coffee. She had to reach Vicky. But she did not know how. As she had her coffee, her mind was churning the various possibilities of getting in touch with him. By the final sip, she knew exactly what she needed to do.

She remembered Naina's words.

"The guy has guts. He leaves the house for months...there are no cameras ...and the key is in a pot!"

Vicky could never be that lax. There had to be a camera. She started to search in the living room. She looked in the

kitchen, the porch, the garden and the bedroom. There were no cameras anywhere.

Then Jhanvi remembered. The study! If he was working as a hacker and had filled his board with sensitive information that he had to lock the door when he was in town, there was no way he would not have a camera there when he was out of town.

She ran into Vicky's study and searched. There it was! On top of the bookcase. A CCTV! It was a new addition to the room. It was not there when she had stayed over in that very same room.

Naina, who had discovered the hidden panel, had not seen the camera. But it was understandable. Neither was in a state to look for cameras after they had discovered her photos.

Jhanvi smiled. She used a black marker and wrote the words, "Call me! – Your Jaan" on the white board above the bed in huge letters. Then, she opened the letter that Vicky had written. She used a large magnet to stick the letter to the white board right below her message. Then, she took one of her photos and stuck it to the white board. She stepped back to admire her handiwork. Not bad.

She made sure that the camera in the room would be able to capture it. Then, she ran down and went out of the house. She closed the door behind her. Then, she used the key and entered the house again. The security system beeped for the access code. She let it. In one minute, the warning sounds started to ring. She closed her ears and waited.

In another couple of minutes, the warning sounds were switched off. She smiled. Vicky had seen her message. And then her phone started to ring.

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Jhanvi ran to pick up the phone. It was an unknown number. And yet she knew exactly who it was. "Hi Vicky!"

"My Jaan?"

Hearing his voice moved her to tears. Tears flowed down her cheeks. How long had she waited for this? To hear his voice. To be with him. Her throat chocked up.

“My Jaan?” asked Vicky again.

Jhanvi flushed. It was easy when she wrote it. But now that he was calling her out on that...

“Well...I...” stammered Jhanvi. Her throat was still closing up and she found it difficult to talk.

“You found my letter.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I cannot believe you did. How did you...”

“Long story. You are Srikala Ma’am’s son!”

“Yeah...”

“I saw you mother’s photo in your living room so many times. And yet I never realized...”

“You did not know her that well. She only came for your *arangetram*.”

“That’s true. I never met her before or after.”

There was silence for a few moments. Jhanvi took the time to compose herself.

“And?” he asked, finally.

“And...it was shocking. To say the least.”

“Good. That means you believe it.”

“Yeah. I do. Of course, I do.”

After a moment, Vicky asked, “What were you doing in my house? You know you are trespassing, right? That’s against the law.”

The tease warmed her heart. Her throat opened up as her heart became light.

Jhanvi grinned. “I know. What are you going to do? Have me arrested?”

“Probably. You have trespassed more than enough in my life.”

Jhanvi laughed. “I don’t have any plans of stopping.”

“Are you flirting with me?” he asked after a brief pause.

“Why? Do you hold the exclusive rights for flirting?”

Vicky laughed. Finally! Jhanvi relaxed.

“I don’t understand why you trust me now. Is it because you’ve read my letter? Does the written word inspire more faith than spoken words?”

“Maybe. Also because I found my photos in your study.”

“Yeah, I wanted to ask about that. How did you? They were in a secret panel!” exclaimed Vicky.

“Yeah. So?”

“You break into locked houses. You are curious about locked rooms. And you discover secret panels! Who are you? Indiana Jones?”

Jhanvi laughed. “I am glad you see me as Indiana Jones and not as a common thief.”

“Oh! You are that too.”

“I am a thief?”

“Yes.”

“What did I steal?” asked Jhanvi. Then, she blushed. She waited for his answer even though she knew it very well.

“I think you know,” replied Vicky softly.

“I know. That does not mean that I don’t want to hear it from you. Don’t ever underestimate a girl’s need to keep hearing the truth again and again and again.”

Vicky laughed. “You will hear it from me soon enough. What are you doing next week?”

“I am performing this weekend. So, I am completely free next week.”

“Wait, what? Performing? You mean you are dancing?”

“Yes. I’ve taken up dancing again.”

“Vicky?” Jhanvi was confused what to make of his unexpected silence.

“Yes, I am here. When exactly is your performance?”

“Saturday night. Seven o’clock.”

“Shucks!”

“Why? What happened?”

“I have an investor meeting on Saturday.”

“It’s okay. I am just starting to give dance performances. This is the first one. There will be many more. You can catch up.”

“Hmm... I will fly over next week. Will you have dinner with me?”

“I will be with you from the moment you land here till you have to fly again.”

“Promise?”

Jhanvi laughed. “Promise.”

“Good. See you next week.”

“Bye.”

But neither disconnected the call.

“You still there?” asked Jhanvi after staying on the line for a while.

“Yeah. I want to tell you something else.”

“Yes?” asked Jhanvi hopefully.

“I love you.”

Elation hit Jhanvi as she could barely contain her smiles. She answered, “I love you, too.”

And it was a couple of hours before they really disconnected the call.

The Dance Performance

Jhanvi was nervous. She paced around but stopped when she started running into people. She sat down in a corner.

She was wearing a dark blue saree with a maroon border. She was impeccably made up in elaborate make up and even more elaborate ornaments.

This was her first dance performance after more than ten years. She had not yet had enough practice to give a solo performance. She was one of the five dancers in a group dance. And yet she was tense. She wondered if she should call her mom for moral support when she caught sight of Naina.

“Naina! Here!” she said, waving.

Naina walked up to her grinning. “Thank God, you waved. All of you look the same.”

“And you had difficulty recognizing me?”

“No. I just wish I had more eyes to take it all in. My God, you girls are all looking fabulous. Now I want to be a dancer.”

Jhanvi smiled. “Do you want to really dance or only dress up like us?”

“Just dress up. I don’t think I can move like you do. It looks effortless but I believe it is very painful.”

“I love it.”

“Hmm...”

“Thanks for coming.”

“Won’t miss it for the world.”

They both sat down in a corner. Naina gawked at the other dancers in awe.

“Naina, I’ve wanted to ask you this for some time. Do you remember once when I was sick, you gave my address to Vicky?”

“Yes?”

“Did he flirt with you that day?”

“Flirt?” scoffed Naina. “That guy was wooden. I flirted. No response. I just got so damn irritated...”

“Why did you not tell me that before?”

“Well...you did not ask. And he gave me a nose cut. I am not exactly going to advertise it.”

“Well, he told me he flirted with you, and I believed him.”

“He told you so many things and you never believed him. He told you one lie and you believed him. What an idiot you are!” said Naina, shaking her head.

“I still cannot believe it. To think he really cares for me...”

“You still think, is it? Even after reading that letter? If it was me, I would have flown over to Australia and married him by now.”

Jhanvi laughed. “Okay. My dance is next. Go to the front and take a video. I want to send it to him.”

“Will do,” replied Naina as she stepped out from behind the stage.

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Jhanvi’s performance was a success. She had been a part of many performances. And though she had been on the stage for only five minutes for each dance, she had enjoyed it so much! She was floating in the air with happiness. She had done it! She had officially begun her *Bharatanatyam* journey again.

“Is there a Jhanvi Akka here?” asked a small voice.

Jhanvi turned around. It was a very small girl, hardly four or five years of age. She looked around curiously and her gaze finally stopped at Jhanvi.

“That’s me,” said Jhanvi.

“This is for you,” said the little girl as she handed her a large bouquet of red roses that was too big for her.

Jhanvi was surprised. Who could it be from? She looked for a card. There was none. Her first thought was of Vicky but he

had a meeting that day.

“Who is it from?” she asked the small girl.

“He is outside,” replied the little girl before she did an about turn and ran out.

Jhanvi looked hesitatingly around at her friends as if asking for help. She saw only smiles and a few looks of envy. Who could it be? She kept the bouquet on the table and stepped out from behind the stage.

Her heart stopped when she saw who was waiting for her. It was Vicky. He was dressed in a dark blue t-shirt and jeans. And he was wearing his usual self-confidence and smiling at her.

“You?!” exclaimed Jhanvi.

“Hi.”

“You are here!”

Vicky nodded. “So it seems.”

“What about your meeting?”

He shrugged and looked away before looking back at her. “I bunked it.”

Jhanvi was shocked. “Why?”

“I guess I just wanted to see you dance.”

“Will they reschedule?”

Vicky shook his head. “I will find something else to do.”

“You gave it all up? All your work for the last six months? But why?”

Vicky waved his hand as if dismissing something trivial. “It’s okay. There are many pots of gold lying around. Something else will work out.”

“So...so...no Australia? You are here for good?”

“Well, I will have to go back to wrap up a few things but on the whole, yeah, I am back for good.”

Jhanvi was euphoric and smiled broadly. She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and give him a tight hug. And never ever let go. Unfortunately, there were too many people around.

“Want to go out for dinner?” asked Vicky.

“Are you asking me out on a date?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay then. But only because you are begging so much.”

He laughed. “Okay.”

Jhanvi stepped toward him until she was only a couple of feet away from him. “Okay, I have to warn you. You should not have accepted my statement that you begged so easily. Aren’t you afraid that I might use that in all our future arguments. I might say ‘You begged me to get together.’ And I will win all arguments. You should be terrified about it. Aren’t you?”

Vicky laughed. “I should be terrified to lose all the arguments in my life to you? Hmm... not really. In fact, I think I am very much looking forward to losing them all.”

She laughed. “Keep talking like that and it may so happen that I won’t be that interested in fighting with you at all.”

“Isn’t that ideal?”

Jhanvi scrunched her face. “No! That is not ideal. Fights are the spice of a relationship. We fight, make up and grow.”

“Hmm...there is something in what you say.”

“How was my dance? Did it meet your expectations? After all, you had given up so much to be here...”

Vicky laughed. “Met my expectations and much much more.”

Jhanvi laughed. “I am glad. Just wait for a few minutes. I will change and we can go out for dinner.”

“Wait,” called out Vicky, catching her hand and pulling her to him.

“Yes?”

“Don’t change. Come like this.”

Jhanvi was surprised. “Like this? You want to take me out to dinner with me in full costume?”

“If that’s an issue, let’s go home. We can order in. Just...just stay dressed in that costume for a little longer.”

Jhanvi looked into his eyes and blushed.

“You are nuts,” she said, shaking her head. “Whose home are we going to?”

Vicky replied, “Ours.”

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Jhanvi entered Vicky’s house or as he called it ‘their house’. Vicky locked the door behind her, keyed in the security code and pulled her to him. She went crashing into his chest. He put his arms around her and held her tightly.

“Hey, dancing girl...” he whispered as he lifted her face up by her chin.

She looked into his eyes. He was looking at her with half-hooded eyes. He rubbed his thumb on her cheek. His touch was rough and titillating. She blushed deeply.

“You are finally mine...” he continued.

Jhanvi tried to talk but the words betrayed her. His thumb moved down and brushed over her lips.

“You are my soulmate. You know that, right?”

Jhanvi still could not speak. She nodded.

He cupped her face in his hands. “You are incredibly beautiful.”

Jhanvi bit her lips, trying to control her raging emotions.

“But I’ve suffered a lot in the last six months.”

Jhanvi inhaled deeply. “I...I am sorry. I...I didn’t know...”

“That’s right. You are going to be sorry. I am going to take my revenge tonight.”

Jhanvi smiled. “Is that right?”

“You bet. For making me wait for so many years.”

“I made you wait only for six months. You ran away. I am the one who should be taking revenge on you tonight.”

Vicky smirked. “Oh really? You are going to take revenge? What do you plan to do tonight?”

“I...I...I don’t know.”

“I know exactly what I am going to do tonight. Do you want me to tell you?”

Jhanvi grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer. “Don’t tell me. Show me.”

Vicky bent down and captured her lips. And the rest of the night was just pure ecstasy.



The next day, Jhanvi and Vicky were sitting on the balcony sipping coffee and watching the ocean. They were sitting on the couch, snuggling against each other.

It was a peaceful morning. The sun was up and yet the day was not bright. There was a slight chill in the air. There was abundant sea breeze. A few fishermen were taking their catamaran inside the ocean. A few people were walking on the beach. A few others were jogging.

It was a perfect morning. Sitting on his balcony, facing the ocean, with him by her side and a hot drink in her hand. It was something that Jhanvi had yearned for a long, long time.

Jhanvi looked at him. He was looking out at the ocean too. And he had the same peaceful look on his face. As if everything was perfect and as if everything was finally the way it should be.

“Just so you know...there was no need for you to miss your meeting.”

“Really? Why is that?”

“The dance was recorded.”

Vicky winced. “Yuck! How can you even compare the real thing to a mere shadow?”

Jhanvi grinned. “And there was really no need for you to ditch that pot of gold and relocate here.”

Vicky frowned. “Why? Are you having second thoughts?”

“No.”

“You are the biggest pot of gold that I am ever going to find in the entire world.”

“Aww! That’s so sweet.”

“Then?”

“Actually, I was ready to relocate to Australia.”

Vicky looked shocked. “What? What about Evergreen?”

“I made Naina a partner. She has taken over the entire operations. I am only contributing partially. Mostly consultation and on need-basis.”

“What? Why?”

“Maybe I was no longer getting the same joy out of it. Maybe it ceased to be in my ‘sweet spot’.”

Vicky smiled. “My God! I cannot believe it! Why?”

“What do you mean why? So that I can focus on the other important things in life. Like my dance. Like...you.”

Vicky looked into her eyes. Electricity shot through her body as she looked back into those intense eyes. Eyes that promised her everything in the world. Eyes that told her that she was his everything.

Vicky asked softly, “You were ready to relocate to Australia?”

“Yes.”

“How long have you been ready?”

“Very recently.”

“And when were you planning to tell me?”

“If you had given me your phone number, I would have told you sooner.”

Vicky grinned. “Touché.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes sipping their coffee.

“Jaan!”

“Hmmm...”

“Whenever I fail or face a setback, I try not to ask ‘Why me?’. Instead, I just ask, ‘Why?’. What is this trying to teach me? After all, there is no failure or setback from which one can learn nothing. Do you know what I learned when I was away from you?”

“Yeah?”

“These six months we were apart taught me that you are my soulmate. I can find a thousand pots of gold and yet be a loser if you are not with me. I missed you so much that it physically hurt.”

Jhanvi’s eyes watered slightly. After a few moments, she replied, “You need not have stopped talking for six months to learn that. I would have told you that.”

Vicky laughed. “I know. I guess it was a lesson that I needed to learn.”

“Yeah. You could have at least called,” said Jhanvi in an accusing tone.

“I know. Guess I was scared your lack of trust would ruin everything.”

“Hmm... You...who wasted ten years of our lives.”

“Eight.”

“Fine. Eight. Do you know how much I suffered during those eight years? What would you know? You were romancing some girl or the other.”

“I told you...”

“I know. I know.”

They were silent for a few more minutes.

“Jaan...”

“Hmmm...”

“Marry me.”

Jhanvi sat up and looked at him, elated. She had not expected a proposal this soon. But she nodded enthusiastically. “Okay.”

Vicky grinned as he pulled her into his arms and gave her a tight hug.

Jhanvi felt warm and safe in his arms. “I agreed to marry you eight years ago. You are way too late. I have been ready for so long.”

Vicky laughed. “I will make up for it. I promise.”

“There are a lot of other things you have to make up for. So many things I am angry with you about.”

“Really? What else?”

“Well, from of the top of head, romancing Avantika in front of me. What the hell?”

Vicky laughed. “I am sorry. In my defence, I did not know. You had a boyfriend...”

“A fake boyfriend. I made him up because I could not bear to see you both together.”

“How was I to know you made him up?”

“Well...You could have at least given me a clue that you liked me...”

“That I did. You were too stupid to take it.”

Jhanvi punched him on his chest. “How dare you? What clue did you give?”

Vicky laughed. “Well! What about the fact that I lied to Avantika about everything you asked me to? I hid the entire

episode about me proposing to you and you accepting it. I hid the fact that you spent the night with me here once...”

“Alright. Alright. But how are those clues?”

“That is the biggest clue. Have you ever paused to wonder why I lied to her for you? She was my girlfriend. I should not have lied to her and yet I did. For you.”

“Oh! I thought you did it because you did not want any trouble with her.”

“We both have been very open about our past relationships. There was nothing to hide. And yet I did. Because you asked me too. Why should I do what you requested instead of just being honest with my girlfriend? I chose you over her. Always.”

“Oh!”

“And when I told you about my dream of sitting on the terrace with my wife and looking at the ocean, I was thinking of you. Not her. You!”

“Oh!” replied Jhanvi, flushed.

“I was so tempted to tell you but you pretended that you wanted me to be with Avantika. You took significant pains to make sure we stayed together.”

“I was consumed entirely by not wanting to be the reason for your break up. And in that chaos, I did not realize you did not want to be with her. I did not realize that your relationship was not strong enough. But I did realize that in the end...”

“And tried to break us up!”

Jhanvi scoffed. “I so did not! You both had already broken up.”

“Yeah. No thanks to you.”

Jhanvi laughed. Vicky joined her.

In a companionable silence, Jhanvi and Vicky felt the unhappiness of that had taken shelter in their hearts for the last six months leave their hearts. They felt free. And happy. So, so very happy.

Jhanvi said, “By the way, I have never approved of love at first sight. You falling in love with me...”

Vicky rolled his eyes at her. “...was exactly the same as you falling in love with me when you met me.”

“I so did not fall in love with you like that. Rathi spoke nonstop about you and I knew you were all that...”

“Don’t lie. If I was Rathi’s boyfriend, it was all the more reason for you to stay away from me.”

“Fine. Anyway, you fell in love with me at first sight and I actually approve. I don’t generally approve. But I approve, in your case.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Good choice!”

Vicky laughed. “Your humility astounds me.”

Jhanvi smiled. “I learned about humility from the master. You.”

Vicky laughed.

“But I have to ask this. Did you hate me after what happened between Rathi and you because of me?”

“A little, yes.”

Jhanvi’s heart sank. But it was only what she deserved. “And what about when I accepted your proposal? Did you really think you made the wrong choice falling in love with me?”

“No. It was when you accepted my proposal that I knew I was right in falling in love with you.”

“Really? How is that?” asked Jhanvi in surprise.

“You said you wanted to marry me. Which meant you have an amazing sense of judgement and common sense...”

Jhanvi laughed. “You really are the king of humility!”

They both laughed. Vicky hugged her and kissed her cheek. Jhanvi sighed as she turned and kissed him on his lips. They looked into each other’s eyes.

“God! What a waste of ten years!” said Vicky.

Jhanvi sighed. “Absolutely. But if not for those years, we would never have known how much we were in love with each other.”

“Yeah, I guess... But still...”

“I know,” replied Jhanvi, sighing.

“Do you want to go inside?”

“What? We just came here. I want to look at the ocean for a few more minutes.”

Vicky glared at her. “It’s the ocean. It’s vast and blue. Get over it!

Jhanvi laughed. “Alright. But only if you carry me inside.”

“That...is the easiest thing in the world,” replied Vicky, as he tickled her, making her laugh some more before hoisting her up in his arms.

Wedding

It was the eve of their wedding. Jhanvi and Vicky preferred their wedding to be indoors. A large wedding hall had been booked and Jhanvi's team took over organising the wedding. Naina was co-ordinating everything, leaving Jhanvi nothing much to worry about. When Jhanvi asked if there was anything she could help with, Naina had replied, "Yeah, just get dressed and show up! That's all!"

The customary rituals including their engagement were done. Everything had gone beautifully well. Most of the guests had retired for the day. Only a few hung around in the wedding hall.

Vicky was chatting with his friends and Jhanvi was in her room when Vicky caught sight of a familiar face in the dispersing crowd.

"You? What are you doing here?" he snapped as he neared the man.

It was the same man that Vicky had seen following Jhanvi at the mall. The man that he had threatened to never come near Jhanvi ever again. Why was that pervert at their wedding?

The man looked at Vicky with a slight scorn. Then he said, "I am Devraj, the bride's father. What are you doing here?"

Vicky was shocked. Jhanvi's father! That was Jhanvi's father? Shucks! He realized why his face had felt familiar. Vicky had seen him at Jhanvi's *arangetram*. But obviously, other than Jhanvi, nothing had stayed with him that day.

Furthermore, Devraj looked very young for his age. There was a youthfulness in his face. And he probably dyed his hair, fooling Vicky about his true age.

"I am the groom," replied Vicky.

"Oh!" exclaimed Devraj. His eyes widened in shock. "You are Vikranth? Does my daughter know that you roughed me up?"

"I did not rough you up," insisted Vicky.

“So that means no. She does not know.”

Vicky took a deep breath. “No, she doesn’t.”

“Don’t you think she should know? I wonder who she will choose when she knows. You or me?”

“You don’t have to wonder about that. She will choose me.”

“Hmm...let’s see. Where is my daughter?”

“In the bride’s room. That way. Down the corridor. The room is marked.”

“Thank you.”

As Devraj walked away, Vicky called out, “For what it is worth, I am glad you came to the wedding.”

Devraj stopped walking, turned and looked at Vicky. “Let’s see if there is a wedding first.”

Vicky did not reply.

Devraj turned and walked away.

Vicky called out, “Well, I didn’t know you were her dad!”

Devraj ignored Vicky and kept walking. Vicky cursed under his breath.

∞

Vicky allowed a few minutes to pass. Then he ventured towards Jhanvi’s room. He was stopped by a few of his relatives, and he had to chat with them on the way. By the time he reached Jhanvi’s room, there was a huge commotion inside.

“What is happening here?” asked Vicky entering the room. There was quite a crowd inside the room. There was Jhanvi, her parents and a lot of her relatives.

Jhanvi replied, “Vicky, my dad is here...and he is saying something about you misbehaving with him up...”

Vicky looked around the room. Jhanvi’s relatives were looking at the scene unfolding before them with interest.

He gave them all a cursory glance, saying, “Can you please give us a few minutes?”

Everyone reluctantly filed out of the room. A lot of shuffling ensued. It was a slow process. Finally, only Vicky, Jhanvi and her parents were left in the room. Vicky closed the door.

“Jhanvi...I did not know he was your dad...”

Jhanvi said, “He is not my dad. He never was. He stopped being my dad when he left us.”

Jhanvi’s mother, Vasugi looked at her husband and said, “We don’t want you in our lives. How dare you come here uninvited?”

Vicky stepped between Vasugi and Devraj. He faced Vasugi and said, “He was invited. I invited him.”

“Vicky, you don’t know about him...”

“I don’t have to. He is Jhanvi’s father and he must attend his daughter’s wedding. No one can stop him from doing that.”

Jhanvi tugged at Vicky’s hand and said, “Vicky, please listen to us. We know him. You don’t.”

Vicky looked back at Jhanvi and said, “You are wrong. I do know a little about him too. I’ve seen him following you several times. You always say the universe is kind to you. I think that is because of a few guardian angels looking out for you. He is one of them.”

“You have been following my daughter? How dare you?” snarled Vasugi.

Vicky stopped her. “Please! Everyone please relax. Even though he was following her...not once did he approach her. Jhanvi did not even know about that till now.”

Then, Vicky turned to Jhanvi and said, “You said that once your bike was stalled in the middle of the road and some good Samaritan came and helped you. Who do you think send that good Samaritan there? And you told me about how you had a very tough time with the owner of the office space that you are leasing from...the problem that got miraculously solved. Who do you think solved it?”

Then, Vicky turned to Devraj and asked, “It was you, right?”

Devraj nodded. He looked crestfallen and hardly looked at Vicky as he answered. Vicky sighed with relief. His guesses had been right.

“That was you?” asked Jhanvi, incredulously.

“I have been a terrible father. I know that. Those were just some small ways of helping you...”

Vasugi said, “He is evil. He will try to do something to stop the wedding. Wasn’t he trying to do just that by poisoning my daughter’s ears against you?”

Vicky sighed and explained, “I did do that. I am sorry. When I saw him follow Jhanvi, I thought he was a pervert. I did rough him up.”

Vicky turned to Devraj and said, “I am really sorry about that. I did not know you were her dad.”

“He *is* a pervert...” said Vasugi.

“Enough!” said Vicky, holding up his hands. “I don’t want to know about your previous fights. I don’t want to know about the opinions you have of each other. Today is a good day. Tomorrow will even better. We are going to keep it that way. Jhanvi’s father is my guest. You both don’t have to talk to him or acknowledge him in any way. But I would very much like to have him here. We will all sit together and sort it out later...after the wedding is over. I am not going to let anything come and spoil the wedding. Am I clear?”

Jhanvi and Vasugi stared at Vicky for a few moments. Then, they looked at each other and reluctantly nodded.

“Come with me, please,” said Vicky to Devraj and led him outside.

As they walked back to the wedding hall, Devraj asked him, “How did you know I helped Jhanvi in all that?”

Vicky looked at him and grinned. “I did not. I just hoped that you would agree even if you did not do those things.”

Devraj smiled back. “I did do those things. I have always kept a tab on my girl.”

He then sighed and said, “I cannot believe my own daughter hates me so much. The hate on her face when she looked at me...”

“Uncle, if you don’t mind me saying...you left her.”

“Yes, but...”

“And you left her at a very impressionable age. She has been brought up by her mother who kept telling her how bad you were. You cannot expect Jhanvi to behave in any other way. It is only human.”

“One mistake. I did one mistake, and I lost my wife and my daughter...I lost...”

“Do you still love her?”

“Of course, I still love my daughter.”

“No. I meant your wife.”

“My wife?”

“Yes.”

Devraj was silent for a few minutes. “I never stopped loving her.”

“Then win her back. Win her mother and you will win Jhanvi back.”

“You think it is easy to win her? You saw the way she looked at me.”

Vicky smiled. “I never thought I’d say this...but recent events have changed my heart. What I want to say is this—if you both are meant to be, nothing can come between you two. Nothing. You can run and hide...but you can’t run and hide forever. One day, you have to face the truth. You have to face what is meant to be. It will be difficult to face but trust me, everything will work out. As Jhanvi says, the universe is our friend. I believe her now. You would never have walked into this wedding if you had not wanted to come back at some level. You would never have followed Jhanvi and helped her

so many times, if you did not love her. So please try. If you really love them, you will be shown a path to them. Take it! Just take it!”

Devraj’s eyes watered. “She hates me! My wife...”

“If she hates you so much, why did she never file for a divorce?”

“She is dating other men now...”

“And yet she never filed for divorce. I think you still have a chance. Repent and show them that you are you really are sorry for all that you have done, that you are honest and earnest in asking for a second chance. It will work out. I believe it will.”

Devraj nodded.

“Look, Uncle...I am sorry I behaved abominably with you. I know that I don’t meet your expectations. But this marriage is going to take place. We love each other too much and we have found each other after pining for each other for very long...”

“You do meet my expectations. You exceed them, if I am being honest. I don’t think even I can look after her the way you are looking after her.”

With a look of pride in his eyes, he patted Vicky on the back and continued, “I am glad Jhanvi is marrying you. I am very happy.”

Vicky sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

His disappointment after finding out he had roughed up Jhanvi’s dad vanished. He hoped there will soon come a day when the incident will be all but forgotten.

As of now, he just had to wait for that to happen.

He said to Devraj. “Come on, I will introduce you to my parents. And my sister.”

The wedding ceremony was about to begin. The stage was set. It was enormous with golden satin cloth providing the canvas for the decoration. Soft light illuminated the background from behind making it glow in a golden yellow color. The pillars were decorated with white jasmine flowers and red roses. *Nadaswaram* and *Thavil* were being played, reverberating the entire hall with their soulful music.

A lot of guests had arrived and were seated in the hall, waiting for the ceremonies to start. The ladies were dressed in resplendent silk sarees and a lot of jewellery. The men were in their shirts and *veshtis*.

Some of the guests were drowsy as it was still early in the morning. Some were running around in search of coffee and several others were chatting with each other, having already consumed several cups of coffee.

The bride and the groom were in their respective rooms, getting ready for the wedding. Devraj was sitting in the back, alone, when Vasugi came to sit next to him.

Without as much a cursory greeting, she asked, “Did you really help Jhanvi as Vicky said?”

He looked at her for a moment and then nodded.

“Why?”

“What do you mean why? She is our daughter.”

There was silence for a few moments.

Devraj said, “I am sorry for all the hurt I caused us. I promise you...I’ve not had a moment’s peace when I was away from you both. I made a mistake. I agree. But please forgive me...I have been more than punished for that.”

There was silence for a few more minutes.

Finally, Vasugi spoke. “My brother and his wife are supposed to sit as Jhanvi’s parents on the stage for all the ceremonies. But now that you are here...would you like to do it with me?”

Devraj looked at her in shock. Then, he gathered his wits and replied, “I would like nothing better.”

“Good,” replied Vasugi. “But keep in mind that this is not about getting back together. This is only about today.”

Jhanvi’s dad nodded. “I understand.”

“Good. I will tell my brother.”

Devraj sat stunned as he looked at Vasugi walking away and digested the new development.

Weddings are not just an opportunity for friends and relatives to get together. They are also an opportunity for enemies to come together. The outcome of such a forced proximity results, almost always, in a more definite judgement of what is more important—the love the hating parties once shared or the hatred?

Whatever it maybe, weddings are opportunities for people to explore their relationships better. They give people a chance to pick up the pieces of long-forgotten relationships. They give them a chance to forgive silly enmity, overcome their ego and mend broken relationships. Coming face-to-face with each other does that to people. Otherwise, it would have been easy to lose touch with such people. It would have been easy to hide behind busy schedule, long distance and plain nonchalance. But when coming face to face with the other person, what will finally triumph? Love or hate? It would be quite presumptuous to assume love would triumph. It depends. It depends on what is stronger between the people and how their relationship is. But weddings provide a stage and an opportunity for people to discover it.

And Vasugi found such a similar stage with her husband. Allowing her husband to take part in the ceremonies was not just a shock to other people, it was a shock to herself. But she knew she wanted him to be a part of it. And she did not think beyond that. Was that going to help in their relationship? Only time could tell.

The wedding ceremonies started. Jhanvi and Vicky were both shocked to see Jhanvi’s father on the stage. Vicky was delighted with the change though Jhanvi was still cautious and suspicious.

But then she took one look at Vicky and forgot all about her parents. He was dressed in a plain white silk shirt and a silk *veshti*. He had smeared some *vibhuthi* on his forehead. His hair was pulled back and he was sporting a thin, gold chain around his neck. Jhanvi had never laid eyes on a more handsome man in her entire life.

Jhanvi herself looked resplendent in her dark red saree embroidered all over with traditional motifs. She was exquisitely made up, her make up especially accentuating her large eyes and perfect lips. She was dressed up in elaborate, beautiful *kundan* jewellery—chunky *jhumkis*, a choker, a large *kasu malai*, tiers of chains with elaborate designs and big dollars, bangles reaching up to her elbow, a broad hip belt, and big nose ring. She was also wearing a traditional *thalaisaaman* in the parting between her head. She dazzled.

The day went by without a hitch. It was easy for everyone to see the love that Vicky and Jhanvi shared, how much ever they tried to hide it from the others.

When Vicky tied the *mangalsutra* around her neck and they officially became man and woman, Jhanvi had blushed deeply, unable to meet his eyes. And when she finally did, she found the ecstasy in her soul reflected on his face. It looked like dreams did come true.

Much to the confusion of the guests, Jhanvi and Vicky roared with laughter when they were asked to look at the *Arundhathi* stars.

After all the ceremonies were over for the day, they had their lunch and thanked all their relatives and friends for coming over. Only a few people were left in the hall when Vicky and Jhanvi finally sat down. They did not speak a word. They just looked at each other and smiled. There really was nothing more that they wanted from life. They were fulfilled. And their life was just beginning.

The End

A MESSAGE TO THE READERS

Thank you so much for taking the time out to read my book. I hope I have justified the time that you have invested in reading this.

If you have enjoyed this, please leave a review in Amazon and Goodreads. I would love to hear your thoughts.

Check out my other books available at [amazon](#). I am sure you would enjoy those too!

Also, please do note that most of my books have both ebook and paperback versions available.

If you would like to get in touch with me, here are some of the ways in which you can do that –

- Instagram: Shobana_mahadevan_author
- <http://www.shobanamahadevan.com/>
- www.facebook.com/shobana.mahadevan
- Email - shobanamahadevan34@gmail.com

Thank you!

Shobana

THE BEAST

EXCERPT

He is no hero. He is born to be a villain.

She wants to hate him. She wants to resist him. She wants nothing to do with him. But the question is - can she?

“I am so, so sorry, Manav,” exclaimed Sana, looking guilty and terribly ashamed.

Manav shrugged. “So, you cannot cook. Big deal!”

“But I can,” she almost wailed. “I am an absolutely great cook! I guess I was too tensed about cooking for you. I thought I was taking extra care but I ruined everything. There is a lesson to be learnt here—overly caring for something ruins it. It’s just so sad. Why does everything go wrong just when the stakes are high?”

“Hey! Relax. No big deal,” he said, as he took a bite of his *thepla*. His face brightened up considerably as he gushed, “Oh my God! This is amazing.”

Sana pointed a finger at his face and remarked, “This! This is exactly the reaction I wanted for the food I prepared.”

Manav shook his head, “Sorry. I am not that great an actor.”

Sana punched him on his arm with force.

“Ouch!” he exclaimed, pretending to be hurt. He winced and rubbed his arm. Seeing his reaction, Sana burst out into a reluctant laughter.

Then, she bit into her *thepla* as she watched him relish his. She could not believe the guy sitting on her kitchen ledge was a crime lord. He looked so handsome. Sometimes, when he laughed, his face almost looked angelic. And then, all she wanted to do was hold his face in her hands and kiss his forehead. He was adorable. How could he be a wicked man? How could he be the guy who had murdered someone in broad daylight? How could he be someone to whom so many murders in the UK were attributed to? It just did not make sense.

“I wish you were not Manav. I wish you’d be anyone else in the entire world except Manav,” blurted Sana.

He stopped chewing midway and looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“Just that...” she said, sighing deeply. “Why can’t you be someone else?”

Manav gulped. “Would you be willing to marry me if I was someone else?”

“In a second.”

[Read “The Beast” here.](#)

STARSTRUCK

EXCERPT

It is too late by the time she realizes that her stunningly handsome boss needs her to be more than just his manager.

Meghna seemed to be undergoing an internal struggle before she burst forth, “Well, you know... I can see this is not going to work.”

He looked surprised. “Why so?”

“Well... You look too good, for one.”

He chuckled as he said, “Don’t short sell yourself. You look beautiful.”

Meghna flushed and continued, “We are not exactly on the same level. You look...you look...gorgeous! And I can just see where this is going to go. If we do continue this, there is only a slim chance of it actually becoming a meaningful relationship. There is a bigger chance of me hurting myself. And, even if by some miracle, a relationship does form... Well, it is not going to work out. You are going to have a lot of girls interested in you. They’ll keep throwing themselves at you. And because I am not in the same league as you... I’d become extremely possessive. I will burn with jealousy and doubt all the time! How can I live peacefully if I can’t trust you? You obviously have to show the other girls a little bit of interest so as not to be rude and that would...”

He started to laugh. Uncontrollably. His body rocked as he laughed.

Meghna, who was taken aback by his laughter at first, noticed that the laugh had transformed his face. It made his already attractive face a thousand times more attractive, if that was even possible. She found herself unable to look away. “That is why I know it won’t work out. Let’s quit before wasting any more time and emotions on something that is doomed to fail.”

He was still laughing. It took him several moments to control his laughter while Meghna wondered what exactly was

funny. She tried to appear disinterested by looking at the menu card so as to encourage him to finish his laughter sooner.

He finally stopped laughing and just smiled broadly at her. “Wow. That was the best laugh I have had in a few months!”

Meghna looked at him. His eyes had filled up from all that laughing. What was that funny? She said sarcastically, “Yeah. I know. I am quite the stand-up comedian.”

“You are amazing!” he said and laughed again. “Let me take a wild guess. You have had a lot of failed relationships.”

She shrugged. “I have had my share and then some.”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “Hmm... And that’s got you scared of relationships. So now, what you do is that even before there is a faint symptom of a relationship, you set it up for failure. In fact, you even decide exactly how it is going to fail! I mean... I cannot even say that you are just running ahead of yourself. You are actually running light years ahead of yourself. Why be so negative?”

“You don’t think what I said was true?”

“No! I don’t decide how a relationship is going to fail before it even starts. I give it time. I give it energy. I give it my all. And then I can see for myself how it is going to fail. I don’t predict.”

“You said ‘how’ it was going to fail, not ‘if’. You seem to be in my league in the bad relationships matter.”

He shrugged. “At least I am not running light years ahead of myself. You are the queen!”

He put his hand slightly over hers. Her stomach did a double flip as the touch sent electric shocks through her body. The nerve of him to hold her hand on their first date! Before even the initial introduction was over! What did he think of himself? She fumed and yet her hand remained unmoved. She could not bring herself to remove her hand.

[Read “Starstruck” here.](#)

Nala Damayanti

EXCERPT

This is a modern-day adaptation of the most inspiring and epic love story of all time—the love story of Nala and Damayanti.

Sara entered Damayanti's cabin. Damayanti rushed out from behind the desk to talk to her. But looking at Sara, she grew concerned. There was a dazed look on Sara's face.

"Sara! What happened?"

"I proposed to him," replied Sara, with a vacant expression. Then, she moved to the couch and lay down on it.

"What?! You proposed to him?" asked Damayanti, sitting next to her.

Looking at the ceiling, Sara continued, "Yes. One moment I was telling him he was like a brother to me. No, actually I told him he was like a brother-in-law... And the next minute, I was proposing to him. I don't know how that happened."

Damayanti drew a deep breath. "Sara, snap out of it. What happened? Start at the beginning. Did he look like the picture? It was not just Shiva's imagination, right?"

Sara shook her head and mumbled, "Shiva does not draw that well. That picture does no justice to how he looks in real life. He is soooo sooo handsome."

Damayanti laughed. "And?"

"And I blabbered. Too much. Imagine your worst interview and square it. That is how the entire meeting went," replied Sara, closing her face with her hands.

"Tell me everything. But before that, what did he think of the gift? Did he ask, 'Why the hell is that girl giving me a gift for? I just helped her out on a cause. That's all. What is she? An idiot or something?'"

Sara groaned. "If you can hold back your imagination, I can tell you what really happened. He said nothing of that sort. But

he did seem surprised. And he gifted you a chain. Which has an amazing story behind it...”

“Okay. Start from the beginning,” said Damayanti, impatiently.

Slowly, Sara recounted everything that transpired between them. At the end of it, Damayanti stood up and started pacing the room.

Then she turned to Sara and shouted, “Thank God you are a good secretary! You are pretty useless otherwise!”

Sara buried her face in her hands. “I know. I am sorry.”

“You might as well have told him that I am in love with him!”

Sara looked up and frowned slightly. “I think I did...”

“Aaah! What will he think? That we are a couple of stupid girls who are drooling over him.”

“Well, to tell you the truth...that is not really far from reality,” said Sara, getting up and balancing herself on her elbows.

“Oh, shut up, you idiot!”

“Hey! It was completely your mistake!” said Sara, defending herself.

Damayanti stopped her pacing and turned to her with widened eyes. “My mistake? How is this my mistake?”

“You knew this guy looked like that and still you sent a poor, unsuspecting female for negotiation.”

“You saw the picture!”

“And so did you! You should have sent a guy. Not me. And you should also have expected this to happen. If Damayanti, who has not been charmed by any guy till now, has fallen head over heels in love with this guy, you should not have sent poor, helpless me to him! Like a lamb to a slaughterhouse!”

[Read “Nala Damayanti” here.](#)

One Day in Paris

EXCERPT

What would you do if you got a chance to spend one magical day in Paris with your high school crush?

They reached the crepe stand, and Rishi placed the order for two crepes. Aditi watched as the man behind the counter expertly made the crepes. He put a crepe on a plate and took it to large container of Nutella that he had on the counter. There was a press-button on the top, like something Aditi had usually seen on hand washes and shampoo bottles. He gave it a squeeze and Nutella flooded her plate as it drowned the crepe.

Her eyes widened with surprise as she took the plate from him. Rishi chuckled at her reaction. He took his order next, and they stepped away from the stall.

“So much Nutella? He poured it like we pour sambhar over our rice!” she said, still in shock.

Rishi laughed. “That’s how it is here. Nutella is kind of a staple here. They cannot live without it.”

“God! How are these people so thin then?” wondered Aditi.

“They use public transport. They walk a lot...”

“Yeah. That is true. They do seem to enjoy walking.”

“Look around you. See how beautiful the city is! The city will be affronted if you don’t walk around and enjoy it!”

Aditi laughed as she bit into her crepe. It was a tiny piece of heaven that flooded her mouth. The rich, creamy, warm chocolate warmed her heart. Her spirits lifted infinitely, and she closed her eyes to savor the miracle food.

“Ohhh my God!” she exclaimed as she chewed. “This is amazing! So, so amazing! I almost had an orgasm!” she blurted out. As soon as she realized what she’d said, Aditi was horrified. She couldn’t believe she’d said that out loud. And that too, to Rishi. She looked at Rishi with widened and shocked eyes.

Rishi laughed aloud. But looking at her reaction, he suppressed his laughter and rushed to pacify her. “I did not hear that at all. Not a single word.”

And he turned away from her and kept his gaze fixed on the oncoming traffic. She could, however, see his shoulders shaking. He was still laughing! Mortified, she finished the rest of her crepe in silence.

[Read “One day in Paris” here.](#)

A Marriage Knot

EXCERPT

But after an hour of silence, Arjun called her. “Neha...”

“Hmm...”

“Do you think that guy would still be upset because of how I behaved with him? Not that I care, but just asking.”

Neha smiled slightly. “No. He is probably snoring away. I did some damage control, so I think he was mollified a bit.”

“Yeah...”

“So, it is true what our ancestors said.”

Arjun turned to look at her. He lifted his eyebrows and asked, “What did your precious ancestors say now?”

“That it pays to be nice! And it is not for the benefit of others that you have to be nice, but for your own benefit. That man has probably forgotten all about it, but you are still obsessing over the incident.”

“Bullshit! I am not obsessing! By the way, are you advising me?”

“Of course not! I will never commit a crime of that grave a degree. I am just reminding myself that it pays to be nice.”

“That’s better...” Arjun turned to his computer. After a minute, he turned back and said, “What do you mean by obsessing? I was working until now. I just remembered, and I asked. God! Trust a female to twist a simple thing!”

“Yeah! We are the complicated ones...” said Neha sarcastically.

Arjun turned and stared at Neha for a few seconds. “What are you still doing in my room? Get out! Go and sleep!”

“Okay. Okay,” said Neha, getting up and yawning. “I am going to have a nice sleep because of my honey dripping sweetness. Unlike some other not-so-nice people. Good night.”

She left before Arjun could retort.

She had hardly gone into her room and locked the door when she heard a knock. She smiled. But she managed to straighten her face and open the door. She barked, “What?”

Arjun replied, “Nothing to do with our last conversation, okay? Just wanted to remind you about something...”

“Oh! What is it?” asked Neha, a bit mollified.

“Do you remember the scene in the movie today where the corpse comes out of the grave and haunts the girl who lived alone in her house? Do you remember how it looked, the way it moved noiselessly, and the way the girl screamed?”

“Yeah...” said Neha, frowning in recollection.

“Nothing... I just thought you might have forgotten it. Sleep tight, Ms. Honey Dripping Sweetie!” said Arjun, grinning devilishly.

“You! You...,” stammered Neha.

“Hope you have a nice sleep! See ya!” grinned Arjun as he turned back to go to his room.

“Idiot! Now, I have to sleep with a light on! It’s because of people like you that there are fewer trees on our planet,” shouted Neha, as Arjun closed his door.

He laughed as he made his way to his bed and settled down. “And now, I can have a nice sleep!” And with that, he drifted off to sleep.

[Read “A Marriage Knot” here.](#)

Entangled

EXCERPT

After dinner, Dhruv moved to leave. Vaishali thought it was cruel that he was leaving after spending just an hour with her.

“Wanna watch a scary movie?”

Dhruv hesitated. “Aren’t you sleepy? It’s late.”

Vaishali shook her head. “Come on. Just for an hour. Then you can leave.”

Dhruv nodded and together, they looked at their choices for a scary movie, before picking an old one.

Dhruv wondered why Vaishali wanted to watch a scary movie because she had her face covered with her hands and was watching—no, peering at the screen—from between her fingers. He smiled at her reactions. She could be so funny sometimes.

At one point, she snuggled up to him. He hesitatingly put an arm around her.

A few more minutes passed before she rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

Dhruv paused the movie and looked at her.

“What happened? Why did you pause?” asked Vaishali.

“Move over to the other side of the sofa. You can’t sit this close to me.”

Vaishali instinctively moved a little. “Why not?”

Dhruv hesitated before he replied, “I might kiss you and you can’t really blame a guy for that.”

“Really?” asked Vaishali, pleasure shooting through her.

“Yup. I must warn you that I have no self-control where you are concerned.”

Vaishali looked surprised, and she suppressed a smile that rose unwittingly to her lips.

“Really?” she asked, taunting him.

“Yup...”

Vaishali moved closer to him until they were just a few inches apart. She looked into his eyes and asked, “So, if I sit this close to you, you will kiss me?”

It was Dhruv’s turn to be taken aback. She continued to look at him, her gaze unflinching.

“Yes...” he said in a hoarse voice.

“You will kiss me?” she asked back.

“You can’t really blame me...”

“I...I won’t.”

Dhruv covered whatever was left of the distance between them and kissed her slowly and gently on her lips. Vaishali closed her eyes and kissed him back. What started as a gentle kiss turned into something more primitive as Dhruv came crashing down on her. Something exploded in her and everything except Dhruv ceased to exist.

[Read “Entangled” here.](#)

wedding plans

BLURB

She falls in love with the one man who is absolutely forbidden - her sister's fiancé. And what's worse? He reciprocates.

At twenty-seven years, the handsome and charming Viraj is on the verge of taking over the reins of Shakuntala Industries from his grandfather. Unfortunately for him, his grandfather imposes one last condition for him to do that - Viraj must marry Chaaya.

Chaaya Reddy is the beautiful heiress of the New-Tech Industries. Any person would be lucky to marry her as her spouse is expected to take over and run their business in the future. But Chaaya is hell-bent on marrying Viraj. The only problem is that Viraj is not willing to marry her.

With Viraj and his grandfather both adamant in their own viewpoints, another new complication arrives in the picture in the form of the beautiful Kayal. Kayal is smart, educated, and has a heart of gold. Unfortunately, she is also Chaaya's cousin.

Sparks fly between Viraj and Kayal. It soon snowballs into an intense chemistry that neither can deny.

Does Viraj marry Kayal and gives up his claim on Shakuntala Industries? Or does he marry Chaaya and inherits both the businesses?

As shocking secrets come tumbling out, the tale twists and turns through hilarious incidents.

[Read "Wedding Plans" here.](#)