

27 MARCH 2023

AVANI

So, I met this guy.

It's been an interesting Monday.

At 7.30 a.m., when I shuddered awake to the doorbell and sleep-walked to the door, I should have known that Raghu Kaka, our milkman, would have forgotten to leave the milk packet in the basket I'd suspended from the top of the door and left it on the floor instead. Again. And that our neighbour Mhatre Kaka's cat would have torn into the packet and licked the milk sloppily off the floor. AGAIN.

Clearly Shanta Tai was running late, or it was usually her shrill '*Didi, uth jao*' sharp at 7.20 a.m. that worked as my morning alarm.

I slammed the door shut and headed into the shower. Slightly refreshed, I made chai (black, just like I hate it), decided to have breakfast at work, snatched up my book from the bedside table and tote off the wardrobe knob, and dashed out the door.

Traffic was crazier than usual as I flagged down a reluctant taxi. An unexpected off-season shower the night before had turned the city to mush and citizens were now left to deal with it. I loved how surprised and underprepared Mumbai always was for the rains. It was like, every year when the first rain clouds threw their dark shadows over the terrain, the government responded with, 'Waterlogging? Oh, but that *never* happens here. Let's decide on MAP (Monsoon Action Plan) 10000.0.' This was followed by lousy attempts to remedy the situation by digging the city inside out and hastily filling it back, only so that the rainwater could find new ways to clog it up good and proper the next time around. Every year the city struggled with floods, potholes and waterlogging, and yet we romanticized the first rains the following year like nothing better ever existed.

I don't know if you can tell, but I've never been a fan of the rains. Especially untimely ones, the ones I don't have the chance to mentally prepare for—or have my gumboots ready for. *Deep breaths, Avani. Everything gets better when you get to your favourite place in the whole world. The bookstore.* I paid the taxi driver and stepped out.

I remember Rhea laughing in my face when, a little over a year ago, I'd offered to work at the billing counter at her family's age-old bookstore,

gloriously named Bombay Bound, in the heart of south Mumbai. Part-time, I'd told her, before my classes began at uni in the afternoons.

'You're studying to be a lawyer, Ani. You already don't have a life. Why would you want to spend five hours every day selling books and counting cash when you could do literally anything else in that time? Or *anyone* else. Go have a life. Be free,' she'd said, waving her hands around in front of my face in her usual animated self.

But I'd fallen in love with the bookstore and the building that housed it from the day I walked in for the first time. It was like walking into 1903 (that's when it was constructed, as its founding stone claimed). Rhea's family had bought it right after Independence, but had not changed much about it since. It wasn't very big or very vintage-y in the fancy south Bombay way of things. If you ask me, it was humble and had a beautiful personality—which is more than I can say about a lot of people I know.

The bookstore was my safe space. I loved every bit of it. It had a rattly metal gate that opened on to a small veranda facing the street. One could leave a drenched umbrella there or wait for a cab if it was too sunny outside. A wooden twin door served as the entrance to the store. The wall on the left served as a gift shop of sorts. It had everything you'd get in a gift shop but hung on the wall on tiny pinheads—keychains, pens, stickers and other knick-knacks. My workstation was on the right, at the billing counter, directly opposite the gift-shop wall, and could be accessed through a swinging wooden door. I loved how perfectly placed the counter was. It had a view of almost every aisle in the store, it was right next to a window that opened out to the street outside and was just four steps away from the store's café, where Martin made the world's best cappuccinos.

I got to the bookstore just in time to greet a regular customer, Meera Aunty, who'd been bingeing on romance novels ever since I had nagged her into picking up her first one about a year ago. Twenty-three books later, Meera Aunty was the perfect companion to discuss all my favourite romance-novel tropes with. As she saw me, she told me in her sing-song voice how she hadn't thought she'd like the alpha-male billionaire in the book we were both reading, but in the end had succumbed to his charms, and there was no going back now. We chatted for a few minutes while I printed out the bill for her, and then packed the sequel neatly in a paper bag and handed it to her.

Most Mondays at the store were slow, which suited me fine. I caught up on my e-mails and assignments, worked out a schedule for the rest of the week and made my way to the café to grab a coffee and a croissant. Martin was surprisingly chirpy that day about the freshly baked eclairs (not a morning person, he's not), but I stuck to my demand for a croissant, just to piss him off.

Martin had moved to the city from Goa a couple of years ago and landed a job at the bookstore when Rhea had put out an inquiry on the store's Instagram page about wanting to start a small café there. He came for his first meeting dressed in a muscle tee and harem pants, with a box full of the flakiest croissants he'd baked as his résumé, and regaled Rhea with stories about his training as a pastry chef and his dreams of becoming a bartender someday. About ten minutes into the conversation, Rhea had decided he was it. Just as well, since the other two applicants didn't show up.

After lord knows how many croissants, Martin and I had become tight. I loved walking into work and seeing his scowling face every morning.

This morning, though, along with his 'perfectly baked eclairs'—induced effusiveness, it was clear he wanted to thrill me with details of his extravagant weekend adventures. But the enemies in the book I was reading were just about to become lovers and, as much as I found Martin's stories entertaining, I decided I wanted to be loyal to my book boyfriend instead. So I picked up my coffee and walked back to my desk after minimal chatter.

Apart from Meera Aunty, who had left, the store hadn't seen a single customer yet. Clearly this Monday was crawling at a snail's pace for everyone. I picked up my book, pencil ready in my hand to highlight my favourite lines as I read. Aaji—my grandmother—hated it when I did that in her books. She called it vandalism. That's one of the reasons I needed a job in the first place, so I could buy my own books to vandalize. What better luck than to land one at a bookstore?

I lost track of time as I followed the lives of the enemies-turned-lovers in the book, and next I looked at my watch, it was past 2 p.m. Almost time for Rhea to arrive. She'd been driving me to uni for my classes, and although she insisted she was doing it to practise her driving, I knew she really just wanted to meet Dhruv, my classmate—quite the cutie. Dhruv, too, pretended to forget her name every time she left after dropping me, but that look in his eyes when he saw her—yup, I knew that one. A full year,

and he still hadn't mustered up the courage to ask Rhea out, and I knew she was waiting for him to do just that. But I got free rides to uni, so I had no complaints.

I was about to walk over to Martin for another coffee when the quaint bell hung at the entrance dinged. Someone had entered the store.

Now, when I tell you to sit down for this, sit your ass down. When I tell you that I'm about to describe to you what could literally be a page out of a book titled 'Avani's Wet Dreams about Hot Boys', shut your mouth and listen. Pay. Attention.

He was tall, about 6'2 or 6'3. Not sure—I'm not a ruler—but tall enough for me to know that if I hugged him, I could listen to his heartbeat. He wore a navy blue suit. The kind men on the covers of spicy romance novels wear. Not a crease to be seen—crisp, clean and tailored to fit his broad shoulders and long legs. He wore leather shoes that didn't have a speck of dust on them. My first thought: Did he get airdropped into the store? Because, I'm sorry, you can't be living in Mumbai and be walking in from the street with no dust on your shoes. But I digress ...

As he walked towards the aisles and started browsing the Non-Fiction section, my eyes panned up to his face. His hair was dark and styled neatly away from his face, and he had a slight stubble along his cheeks and chin. He couldn't have brown eyes, could he, because if he did, I would have to surgically cut my heart out, pack it in a red box and hand it to him. But there it was.

Brown, like the cover of my favourite leather-bound notebook. Brown, like the colour of that singular dusty ray of light coming in through the top window just touching his hair and shining on to the floor. Brown, like the wooden shelves and floors of the bookstore. Brown, like the coffee in the mug I was holding. Brown, like the sand on Chowpatty at twilight. Brown, like the colour of my skin.

I stared for an alarmingly long time, waiting. What was I waiting for? I should look away before he ...

Fuck. Before I could avert my eyes, he did the one thing that I knew was going to be the death of me. He locked eyes with me and smiled, and—you've got to be kidding—DIMPLES.

And then I did what every girl would when a hot guy looked at her and smiled. I ducked. I ducked like I had something to hide. I ducked like I was in a water-balloon fight with him on Holi. I ducked like if he so much as

looked in my direction I would self-combust into a heap of Avani ashes. It took me a minute to tell myself: *Hello, you're twenty-three, almost a lawyer and you WORK at the bookstore. If there's anyone who has a reason to be there, it's you!*

I slowly stood back up. Thankfully he was browsing the opposite aisle, with his back to me. I straightened my kurta, quickly rubbed on some lip balm (my lips were chapped—no other reason whatsoever), slowly settled into my seat and went back to reading my book. From the corner of my eye, I tracked every step he took until he disappeared somewhere near the Self-Help aisle, one of the only places I couldn't see from my seat at the billing counter. Minutes ticked by. After reading the same line eight times, I finally moved to the next one. And caught a whiff of aftershave. I looked up to see God's favourite child looking straight at me, holding out a book.

'Hey, how much is this one?'

'I'm fine, thank you. How are you?'

Silence.

Wow, Avani.

Blood throbbed in my ears. I was the captain of my college moot court group. I'd won every elocution competition since I was ten. I'd toured the world and represented my school and country at international debating championships. Hell, I was also the only student in the history of Vasant Vihar High School to have spoken back to Mistry Sir, who was the strictest, most impossible teacher any student had ever had. And this ... *this* ... was when my brain decided to glitch?

I cleared my throat and put on a brave face. 'Sorry. I misheard you. That'll be 599. Would you like to donate a rupee for our girl education project?'

'Sure.'

'Please fill in your details at our customer register so you get a Gratitude Discount Coupon for your next purchase.'

'Sure.'

'Interesting choice, I have to say. Do you like cars?' I said as I looked up to give him his change, but ... The doorbell dinged and he was gone. He'd left. Without the change for the 2,000-rupee note he'd given me. I hurried to the door to see if I could catch him, but he had vanished.

I walked back to the counter, my head in a whirl.

Rude. Didn't even say bye.

You're not friends, Avani.

Yeah, but still. Greetings are courteous.

Why do you care?

I don't care.

You have a crush.

Balls.

You're thinking about him.

Yuck.

You can't stop thinking about his eyes.

Oh, what do you know? You're just a stupid voice in my head.

Do you think he'll come back to take his change?

Bye.

4 APRIL 2023

AVANI

What should I wear?

I've been alive for over twenty-three years now. Let's say that till I was about five, Mamma decided the clothes I wore. Most days, after school, I stayed home with my books, so till I was sixteen I was mainly in my school uniform, or in shorts and a T-shirt. Weekends were for tennis and swimming, so I would be in tracksuits and swimming gear. All through high school and undergrad law school, I was in the I-don't-care-how-I-look-I-am-more-than-my-looks phase, which, in hindsight, wasn't the greatest stand to take, because ... umm ... in all the group photos from college I look like a homeless child that my friends had adopted and sponsored.

The point is, I never once cared about what I wore to any place. Ever. Not once.

Why then, since the past one week, had I had just one thought: *Where's my black chikankari kurta?*

There are two things you should know about my black chikankari kurta:

1. It's the most expensive piece of clothing I own. I gifted it to myself when I took a trip to Lucknow with Aaji last year. Rs 3,499 for a kurta? That's worth at least ten books, if not more. But it was totally worth every penny because ...
2. Nobody, I repeat, NOBODY, looks hotter than Avani in her Black Chikankari Kurta.

A week had passed since Rude Hot Guy had walked into the bookstore and changed the face of every romance-novel hero I had ever imagined. Every day of this past week I'd tried searching for my Black Chikankari Kurta and failed. Today, I'd decided, I was going to look for it one last time and then let it go. Because I wasn't the girl who dressed up for hot strangers who might or might not walk into the bookstore I worked in. I wasn't the girl who spent a week hoping that said hot stranger would take time out of his obviously busy life to return for the change to their purchase. And I definitely *wasn't* the girl who spent twenty-five minutes in front of the mirror, unable to decide which shade of lipstick to wear.

I looked one last time in the customary places, hoping the Black Chikankari Kurta would magically appear in one of them, and gave up. I reached for my oversized Guns N' Roses tee, leggings and trusted Kolhapuri slippers, swung my tote bag over my shoulder, grabbed my water bottle and locked the door behind me as I stepped out. Since I didn't have classes to attend that day, I'd promised Rhea I'd stay a couple of extra hours at the bookstore while she went with Dhruv to look for which new car to buy. Lol.

I got to the bookstore just in time to get a cup of coffee with Rhea before she left for her date.

'It's not a date, Ani!' she yelled over her shoulder as she walked out. 'And don't forget to tally the stocklist.'

I groaned. Inventory was my least favourite part of this job. (Yes, I know I am studying to be a lawyer. Shut up.) I leafed lazily through the pages of the inventory register for a few minutes until the lines and numbers blurred into nothingness. I slapped it shut and threw it inside the drawer for next-week Avani to deal with, and headed over to two giggling young girls huddled over a book in the Romance aisle. It was H.D. Carlton's latest dark romance. Needless to say, I'd already read it and knew exactly what the pair was giggling about. I smiled and started talking to them about other romance books that might be a bit more suited to young reading. The girls seemed bewildered but warmed up to my suggestions after a bit. This must have gone on for about half an hour when I heard the doorbell ding. A familiar whiff of aftershave hit me.

'Hello ...' the voice called out.

I ducked.

Again?! WTF! He can't even see you from where he's standing! But the girls now staring at you sure can.

'Is anyone at the counter?'

Stand back up. Words. Use your words.

'Excuse me? Is anyone ...'

'She'll be right with you, sir,' I heard Martin's voice. 'Sorry, she's a little shy and awkward. Avani! Someone is looking for youuuu ...'

Fucking Martin. Remind me to buy eclairs from the neighbouring bakery tomorrow and tell him they were better than his.

Use. Legs. Walk. Now.

'Sorry, I was at the back. Didn't hear you. Hi!' I said cheerily. Maybe a little too cheerily.

Why were the words coming out all squeaky?

'Hi.' He was smiling.

'How can I help you?'

'I'm looking for a present for my niece.'

'Oh, how sweet. How old is she?'

'She's about to be four and already loves books. I'm worried that when she grows up, she's going to turn into a nerd who works at a bookstore or something.'

Wow. This man is suddenly five per cent less hot.

'I mean ... not like that's a bad thing ...' His face changed. He cleared his throat.

Was he nervous? I forced a smile and directed him to the Children's section.

'Lemme know if you need help.'

I walked back to the register. What an ass. Speaking of ... No, I hadn't checked him out. Broad shoulders. Sharp nose. Clean shave this time, no stubble. Whatever. I don't mind being The Nerd Who Works at a Bookstore. That's going to be the title of my autobiography, where a certain hot man mysteriously trips and falls and breaks his perfect nose in chapter twelve.

It was his tone. He had said it like it was a joke. Like it wasn't enough. Not good enough anyway, because you can't wear expensive suits and shoes and fancy watches to go to work at a bookstore.

I took my seat at the counter, opened the drawer and took out the inventory register. Might as well ruin my mood all the way since it was already halfway there.

A few minutes later, I caught a whiff of his aftershave again.

‘Do you like rock music?’ Rude Hot Guy was making small talk as he stood at the counter with the books he’d picked up.

‘You don’t have to make small talk to cover up the opinion you’ve already formed of me. I’m a nerd who works at a bookstore. There obviously can’t be more to me than just that. And that will be 1,499 total. You can add an extra picture book on my behalf. Happy birthday to your niece.’

‘That’s not what I meant. You’re—’

‘Is that all?’ I cut him off mid-sentence.

‘Er ... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.’

He waited for me to respond.

I glared at him.

‘I just like your—’

‘Here’s your change. Unless you want to walk away without collecting it this time too.’

Mid-sentence again. Boom. And I didn’t stop there. I left the change on the counter and walked to the café.

Fuck inventory, I raged within. And I’m so glad I didn’t waste my Black Chikankari Kurta on this guy. He barely even deserved the Guns N’ Roses tee ...

Oh ... My tee ... That’s what ...

‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.’ I jumped as Martin leaned over the coffee counter and whispered conspiratorially into my ear.

‘Tell anyone what, Martin?’ I asked sharply.

‘That you’re working very hard to make sure the store makes zero sales and people never come back.’

‘Shut up. He’s bought books both times he’s walked in.’

‘I see we’re tracking someone’s visits. Have a li’l crush on the hot suited guy, do we?’

‘Nonsense.’ I looked around the store, but Rude Hot Guy had left. I turned towards Martin and said, ‘I’m just hoping he comes back so I can apologize to him for being an ass today.’

‘My, my ... Look at Avani feeling remorse for snapping. You’re mean to me all the time, bitch.’

‘Takes one to know one.’

Rarely did Martin laugh the way he did just then. The foundation of our friendship was built on uninhibitedly roasting each other—and I wouldn't have it any other way. I spoilt him with Shanta Tai's famous puran polis and he spoilt me with the world's best croissants and cappuccinos. If I was being honest, everything baked and roasted and brewed by Martin was the best in the world. And snapping—that was my love language for *my* people. The people I loved.

As to why I was skulking around the store wrapped in my Guns N' Roses tee and guilt? Because I might not be the friendliest face in most rooms, but I generally wasn't mean to people I didn't know either. Especially to customers.

Now, how was I to find this guy and apologize to him? Was it that big a deal? Why did I even care?



7 APRIL 2023

AVANI

My professor broke her hip bone.

Now I know it's sad, but hear me out. Being a law student was tough and tedious, and as much as I loved it, I didn't like it as much on some days. I had swum through my bachelor's degree in law like a fish in the calmest pond. Easy. But my post-graduation dreams sometimes got me feeling like I was in a seafood restaurant's live fish tank. You know, the one everyone stares at before choosing the creature they want on their plate, cooked in butter garlic sauce? Exposed, nervous, strangely naked and constantly in fear of being picked up and put in boiling water.

Which is why when I woke up this morning and found our uni group chat had been renamed 'Ipsita broke her Hipsita', I chuckled, apologized to the universe for my instinctive response to our Intellectual Property professor's distress and then rejoiced at the thought that there would be no classes *and* that it was a Friday.

I loved Fridays at the bookstore. They were the designated days for a book club meet in the evenings and, though it almost always got cancelled every week, most of our regulars stopped by. The store buzzed with familiar faces and new ones. The café did great business from Friday through the weekend because we got many young college couples looking for a quiet corner to meet in. On these days, Martin brought out his big guns. Eclairs,

croissants, home-made mustard and ham sandwiches, and Friday faloodas. The whole show. And then, once we downed the shutters, there commenced a secret happy hour that nobody knew about. Not even Rhea's dad. Martin transitioned from baker to bartender and served up delicious cocktails named 'Bloody Mary Poppins' and 'Rudyard Tripling'. Maya, our friend who joined us at the bookstore whenever she got a break from her design studio, usually spent the Friday happy hour with us, and we rung the weekend in with music, crappy dancing and several drunken rounds of Cards against Humanity, the Hogwarts pack.

Utterly content at being gifted an extra free day, I decided to sleep in and get to work a little late that day. I took a longer shower, finished reading the novel I'd picked up earlier in the week, fantasized a little about the hero and called for breakfast from Anna's tapri downstairs. Shanta Tai and I worked on my compost pit and spent some time gardening and bitching about her sister-in-law. I'd never met her, but by the end of the conversation I was positive I hated her. And after *all* of this, I still had thirty minutes before I left for the bookstore. The store was a twenty-minute walk but a thirty-minute taxi ride from home. If that isn't Mumbai traffic in a nutshell, I don't know what is.

A happy morning came to a standstill when I found myself lounging on my balcony swing chair with Instagram open on my phone and my finger hovering over the search bar.

Hmm. How do you stalk people when you don't know their name? Hadn't my phone heard me talking to him? Why hadn't it suggested his Instagram account to me yet? Where was that creepy feature when you needed it?

Why are you trying to find him on Instagram, Avani?

I ... I want to apologize.

An Instagram apology? That's just lousy.

So should I apologize in person?

Yes. That way you get to sniff ... umm ... meet him again.

Isn't that too much?

I mean, you could invite him to tonight's happy hour at the bookstore.

I don't know his name, remember? How do I find him?

I have two words for you. CUSTOMER. REGISTER.

I hate how I make a convincing argument. I should be a lawyer.



About an hour later, I walked into the bookstore with a spring in my step and the voice in my head screaming, ‘*Stalker!*’

Martin sat at the billing counter while Rhea animatedly chatted with him with a croissant in her hand.

‘No crumbs on the counter, friends!’ I yelled.

‘Mom’s here!’ they yelled back in unison.

I went over to hug Rhea and paused when I noticed that she was wearing make-up.

‘Looks like we’re *accidentally* going to run into Dhruv at the happy hour later tonight.’ I puckered up my lips and kissed the air dramatically as Rhea made a face.

I threw my bag over the counter and headed to the coffee machine for a cappuccino. Martin was usually very strict about anyone touching the machine, but on Fridays he let us make our own coffees.

I was waiting for the mug to fill when ...

‘Hi.’

DON’T DUCK.

I turned around like I’d heard someone cock a gun behind my back. Slow and careful, taking in every inch of the café as my eyes panned across it to finally lock into a pair of gorgeous brown ones. Blue shirt, casual blazer and trousers, spotless shoes and a leather laptop case in one hand.

‘Oh, hey! It’s you. Who’s the poor customer?’ he said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Whose coffee did you just poison?’

I pursed my lips to hide a smile. So did he.

Hi, dimples.

‘I’m Avani.’ I held out my hand.

He took it. ‘Hi, Avani.’

Strong handshake. Long fingers. Warm hands. Soft palm. Skins touching. Still didn’t have a name ...

‘So you’re a barista too?’ he asked.

‘No. I just handle the billing counter. But I’ll get Martin for you. You can place your order with him.’ I felt a strange warmth on my cheeks.

‘Martin!’ I yelled, louder than I needed to, startling myself and cracking my voice a little.

Martin dragged himself over like his feet were chained to concrete blocks. After a hundred years, when he finally completed his long journey of five steps and arrived at the café counter, he stood playing eyeball tennis between Rude Hot Guy (I really need a name here) and me.

I cleared my throat and broke the silence.

‘So, coffee? What name should Martin write on your cup?’

Look at you being James Bond, Avani.

‘We’re not Starbucks. Calm down. And there is literally no other customer at the café.’

And look at Martin being annoying.

I turned to give Martin the most sinister I-will-remember-that smile, made a mental note to step on his new white Converse shoes the first chance I got and started walking towards my seat at the billing counter.

‘Aman.’

I stopped and turned. Again, slowly. *What’s with the theatrics?*

‘Sorry?’

‘I’m Aman.’ He smiled.

‘Aman ...’

‘Aman Raina.’

‘Nice to meet you, Aman Raina. See you around.’ I smiled, showing more teeth than I have in my mouth, turned around and continued walking.

Aman Raina.

Let the stalking begin.



AMAN

I’m an idiot.

Did I have to go to the bookstore three times in two weeks? No.

Did I have to try to be funny and piss her off? No.

Did I have a four-year-old niece who loved books? No.

Did I have to bunk my weekly evaluation meeting by faking a headache so I could sit in this café pretending to work? No.

But here I was. At 1 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. If any of my friends had spotted me sitting in that corner by myself sipping coffee, I’d have a lot of explaining to do.

Sometime over these past two weeks, my life seemed to have changed. I was driving down the street when I saw her walk into the bookstore close to my apartment. White kurta, blue jeans, silver jhumkas. She had a round face, bushy brows and brown hair that swung across her back every time she jerked her head to get the rogue strands out of her face. She had smiled at someone as she had stepped into the bookstore, and it was the most gorgeous smile I'd seen on any woman in a long time.

The fact that I remembered, or even noticed, these little things after just a glimpse of her baffled me. Most of my days were filled with looking at tailored suits and computer screens, sitting in boardrooms and attending formal lunches. Only the occasional birthday celebration or human resources' team-building offsite trips exposed me to colours beyond grey and navy blue. Don't get me wrong, I love my job. I've spent most of the thirty-one years of my life watching my father build and run a successful textile business, and from the time I was ten—or eight, I forget—I've wanted nothing more than to grow into his shoes and have a corner office like his. Well, I am there now. Not bragging. I was raised to be proud of anything my hard work produced and I've been taught never to forget that.

I had turned up at office every day at 10 a.m. sharp since I had turned eighteen. I'd been Papa's intern for the first year and then his third assistant for three years. On multiple occasions my parents had sat me down to ask if I wanted to explore something else—another workplace, a different career. They had told me repeatedly that I didn't have to get into the family business if I didn't want to. And as much as I appreciated being given the choice, I never once thought of doing anything else with my life. I grew up watching my parents love each day of building the company with dignity and pride, and I honestly couldn't wait to take on that responsibility.

When Papa turned fifty-five a year ago, he decided to take voluntary retirement and move with Ma to our home in Mussoorie. Since then, I'd loved every day of being CEO of Raina Textiles. In fact, I would've said I had been quite content with my life until just a few days ago, when I'd first seen Avani.

I always had things to do, places to be, people to meet. And when I didn't, I stayed home. But not over the past two weeks.

Now sitting in the bookstore with my second cup of coffee and laptop open to a random office e-mail, the clock's hands seemed to be crawling and I couldn't help but notice that Avani hadn't moved in about an hour.

She was sitting on a stool by the window near the billing counter and had her back to me. She seemed glued to her phone. I wondered whether I should walk over and initiate a conversation, or continue to pretend-type and wait for her to look in my direction ...

‘So, you like?’ The guy from the café, Martin, asked me from across the coffee counter. He must have seen me stealing glances in her direction over the past several minutes.

‘Excuse me?’ I feigned surprise.

‘The coffee. You like? I roast the beans myself, every day.’

‘It’s great. Thanks.’ I gave him a thumbs-up and went back to looking intently at my laptop.

‘Your office is in the neighbourhood, no?’

I looked up to see him watching me curiously.

‘I googled you. It’s not every day that we have a billionaire CEO stopping by for coffee, and, ah, views.’ He didn’t look in Avani’s direction, but his shoulders panned towards her, while his eyes stayed on me.

‘I was looking for some quiet close to office. Financial year end. I work better in silence. And the views aren’t unhelpful.’ I grinned.

A hint of a smile touched his face and he nodded faintly. ‘Can I get you anything else?’

‘I’ll take two more coffees.’

Martin raised his eyebrows and tilted his head in a knowing manner.

‘Coming right up, boss.’

I had a high-pressure job. Everyone around me was always waiting for me to falter so they could throw my father’s struggles in my face. Nepotism was a touchy topic with most people these days. I got up every day and brought my point to bear at every table I sat at. I’d stood up to people twice my age without batting an eyelid. I was relentless when it came to business. And yet, the idea of having a cup of coffee with a girl was making my chest tighter. This was new.

I shut my laptop, pocketed my phone, picked up the two mugs of coffee Martin set down on the table and made my way to the window by the billing counter. Avani must have sensed me approaching in whatever voodoo-telepathic way that women know and sense things, because she put her phone down on the windowsill and turned to face me.

‘Hey.’

‘Hi.’ She smiled and looked at the extra mug in my hand. ‘Martin didn’t tell me he had a new waiter.’

I chuckled and placed the mug on the windowsill. ‘Yes, I start today. He’s offered to pay me in unlimited eclairs and the chance to share one coffee with any employee of my choice. Given he’s busy, you were my next best option.’

‘Oh, I don’t have to be,’ she said, and before I could ask her what she meant, she yelled in the direction of the café, ‘Shambhu Kaka!’

I turned to see a man in a grey kurta and white pants walking out of the pantry behind the café, nodding gravely in her direction.

‘*Sir tumchya sathi coffee gheun aale aahe. Ya. Basaa.*’ Sir has got some coffee for you. Come, sit.

She gave me a fake smile, mischief brimming in her eyes, picked up her phone and her book, and skipped towards the coffee counter, looking back only when she got to the table I was seated at. She pulled out the chair I’d slid into place, sat down and called out to Martin.

‘Martin, I’ll have what he’s having.’ She bit her bottom lip to hide a smile as she seemed to turn her attention to the book.

This girl was going to be the death of me.



AVANI

This guy is fucking perfect.

It took a couple of minutes for my heartbeat to return to normal after I left Aman standing at the window with Shambhu Kaka while I took his seat at the café.

When did you become the female model in a men’s deodorant commercial, Avani? Since when do your eyes involuntarily shut halfway and your head tilt backwards at the scent of a man’s aftershave? Thank god you had your back to him.

I stole a peek in his direction and saw him standing with Shambhu Kaka, his face slightly turned away from me. His eyes caught the afternoon light and were now a lighter brown, and his dark brown hair shone in loose waves. Friday hair, a little more casual than the first time he’d walked in.

How did I know these details without looking at him directly, you ask? Well, the bookstore was filled with mirrors. Great for making a small space open up and just as useful for staring at hot strangers whom you could later

stalk on Instagram. Speaking of Instagram, the man played a strong engagement game for someone with only thirty-odd posts on his feed.

Let's see what we've got to know so far ...

He was the CEO of a family-owned textile company. He travelled often to Mussoorie, where his parents lived with six adorable dogs, and he had a regular social life. A couple of photos with three other guys about his age, seemingly on some sort of vacation. There were also two girls who seemed consistently present in his party and vacation pictures. They weren't related to him. I'd checked. No signs of a romantic involvement with either of them, although one of the girls had commented 'cutie' on every photo; the other had a private profile.

The rest of his page was pretty regular. Exotic vacation pictures (in some of which he was shirtless and which I might or might not have scrolled past slightly slower than the other posts), smart formal pictures of handshakes with important-looking people. And sunsets.

I was about to click on his LinkedIn profile next when I heard loud laughter from the direction of the window and looked up to see Aman and Shambhu Kaka throwing their heads back, guffawing over something while they sipped on their coffees. Now, I'd worked at the bookstore for almost a year, cracked innumerable jokes and *not once* had I got this reaction from Shambhu Kaka. Martin and I turned to each other in sync and mouthed 'wow' in tandem, eyebrows raised. Shambhu Kaka could single-handedly bring gloom to any room by simply walking into it. Don't get me wrong, he was sweet, but lord knows the man was as dull as a hairpin. We'd hardly ever heard him speak a word, let alone laugh out loud. Most days we didn't even know if he'd come in to work until we found the books brushed dust-free and our lunchboxes cleaned spotless and drying upside down on the pantry counter.

What was so funny, I felt like asking out loud. Care to share with the class?

'There's something about that seat, it seems.' Martin had walked up to me and was now sitting on the chair opposite mine.

'Huh?'

'Whoever sits there,' he said, pointing to the chair I was sitting on, 'keeps staring in the direction of the window.' His smile told me I would soon be bombarded with questions I wouldn't have answers to.

'Was he staring at me?'

‘Don’t act like you don’t know. I saw you looking at him through the mirror, you creep!’

Right. It was silly trying to hide anything from Martin. Maya, Rhea and I might be BFFs, but Martin got me in ways the girls didn’t. There was something that tied us together in situations such as this one, where he saw right through me.

‘You have to see his Instagram,’ I said in a hushed tone, pushing my phone towards him. ‘This guy is fucking perfect. Textbook son, dog lover, successful, social, hot in a suit, hot in swimming trunks, hot in a T-shirt, hot without a T-shirt.’ I whispered the last two lines almost out of breath. Why was it so hot in here?

Martin snatched up my phone and scrolled through the profile while I kept an eye on Aman to make sure he couldn’t see what we were huddling over.

I had almost forgotten I was at work with all this teenage fun time I was allowing myself to have, when Meera Aunty walked in.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded when she spotted Aman, who had moved to the billing counter by now, reading the back cover of a book I had left on the counter. ‘This is Avani’s seat ... although you do look immensely better than she does on that stool. So I won’t complain. You can call me Meera.’

Classic Meera Aunty.

‘Hi, Meera,’ I heard him saying. ‘I should’ve taken this seat much earlier today if I’d known you would walk through that door. You have a very beautiful smile. All the women I’ve met lately scowl at most things I say.’

Idiot.

Shambhu Kaka nodded in greeting at Meera Aunty, took the empty coffee mugs and walked past me into the pantry. *Traitor. I’ll deal with you later.*

I walked up to the counter and smiled at Meera Aunty as she wiggled her brows at me and walked away to the Romance section.

I turned to Aman. ‘Could I get my seat back, Aman? We don’t usually let customers go behind the counter, so playtime’s over. Some of us have jobs.’

‘Of course.’ He threw his hands up in submission and hopped off the stool. The swing door that gave us access to the counter was narrow and

allowed only one person at a time to pass through. Aman waited for me to go in before he sidled past me on tiptoe. His arms brushed against my hips as he took one slow step after another until he was out. I felt the hair on my arms stand up.

He turned to me and winked as he walked over to the café. He winked. The guy *winked*. At *me*. My stomach flipped and my cheeks turned hot as a sudden urge to duck and crawl under the counter arose from deep within. Thankfully, my limbs protested and instead of the habitual duck, I stood there looking at him like a doe caught in the headlights. Then, before my brain and heart could form a well-discussed way forward, my tongue went rogue and blurted out, 'Do you like happy hours?'

He looked at me as he reached the table he'd left his laptop on. 'I just had a happy hour and I don't hate it.'

'No ...' I shook my head, unable to stop chuckling. 'Do you like cocktails? We have happy hour here at the bookstore later this evening ... if you're interested.'

'I don't drink.'

Of course he didn't. This guy was the template that got lost when God did Her laundry without checking the pockets. Hence, the one and only piece.

'Oh. Never mind, then. See you soon.' I forced a smile.

'What time?'

'Sorry?'

'What time is "soon"? 8 p.m.?''

'You said you didn't drink.'

'I'm fun even without any alcohol in me.'

I'm sure you're more fun with alcohol in ME.

'We'll see about that,' I said as I made a show of getting busy with the cash register.

'We will. See you at 8.' He packed up his laptop, paid and walked out the door without looking back.

'See you,' I whispered as the door closed behind him. Then, finally, after what felt like hours, I breathed.

Who was this guy and what in the name of god was happening here?



Did I tell you Martin is freakishly strong?

Yeah, Martin is freakishly strong.

He simply walked over to me, scooped me up from behind the billing counter, carried me over to the café counter and set me down on it.

‘Talk, bitch.’

I know God has a sense of humour, because just then, like clockwork, the doorbell dinged and in came Rhea. ‘About what?’ she asked, taking off her jacket and skipping over to the interrogation zone.

Fuck my life.

‘About Avani’s new hot rod.’ Martin has a way with words, as you would have noticed.

I opened my mouth to protest, but no words came out.

‘Boy toy?’

I cringed.

‘Man muffin? Dick stick?’

‘Eww ... shut up!’ Rhea and I whined together.

‘You shut up! I saw you undressing him with your eyes. Now spill,’ Martin said.

‘You are SO extra.’ I ignored Rhea’s dancing eyebrows and drawn-out ‘Ooooooh, Avaneeee’ and continued in a monotone. ‘There was no undressing. He’s sweet. And I was feeling bad about snapping at him the other day, so I invited him to our happy hour. I’ll buy him a drink and say sorry and that’ll be it. Let’s not overreact here. And let’s please behave ourselves when he gets here in hopefully four hours and thirty ... three minutes.’ I glanced at the antique clock that hung on the gift shop wall.

Silence. I could feel Rhea muffling a snigger. My ears felt hot again.

‘Okay, fine,’ Martin said after a few beats, bobbing his head gently.

‘Won’t say a word. I agree, actually. Let’s not overreact. I like that you’re keeping it all under control by counting every minute down since he left, by the way. Good plan.’ He disappeared into the pantry.

Jerk.

Meera Auntie emerged from somewhere near the Romance aisle with a telling smile. ‘Okay, kids. I have to be off ... have a taash party to go to. Enjoy your raging hormones!’ she said, giving me a mischievous look. She had obviously heard our entire conversation.

‘Enjoy your trash party, Meera!’ Martin called out.

She rolled her eyes at Martin's words, hugged me goodbye and walked out of the bookstore.

I used this welcome distraction to get off the coffee counter and was walking to the billing area when I was yanked back like a coat on a hanger and dragged off to the staff bathroom.

'So? What did I miss?' Rhea asked with a twinkle in her eye. The kind of twinkle a child has in a candy store, a parent has at the gates of a daycare centre when they are dropping their kids off for the day—or the kind a crackhead has at a music festival.

I took my time replying, acutely aware that I had to choose my words carefully. Why? Because this was Rhea, the group leader of 'Romantics Anonymous'. Everything was a sign for her. Everything was dreamy. She would see this situation as so much more than it actually was and I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't ready to be told that the universe had sent Aman to be exactly where he should be so our paths would cross.

'Maybe the universe sent him—'

'NO.' I cut her off. 'Rhea. No. Please don't read more into the situation than needed. I would like to believe that the universe has more important things to take care of than making Aman appear out of the blue in my life. Like world peace or whatever else the girls on beauty-pageant stages talk about. Hell, I'll be pissed off if the universe had *anything* to do with this, because I've been praying for my skin to clear up for way too long now, and if this got prioritized over that, I'm done with writing my morning affirmations. It's just one drink and an apology. I don't want you to freak out about this, okay?'

'Mm-hmm.'

It must have seemed like a ramble to her, because for the first time in forever Rhea replied with a nod. No counter argument, no alternative explanation, no looking for the silver lining ... nothing. Just a nod. She hugged me, kissed me on my cheek and walked out. I looked at myself in the mirror, told myself to get it together and followed her out.

It was still only around 4 p.m., which meant I had four whole hours to get my heart to beat normally and my armpits to stop sweating. Martin was busy at the café with two new customers who had walked in and Shambhu Kaka was hovering gravely around the two tables of college kids working on some project who had ordered nothing more than a coffee close to ninety minutes ago.