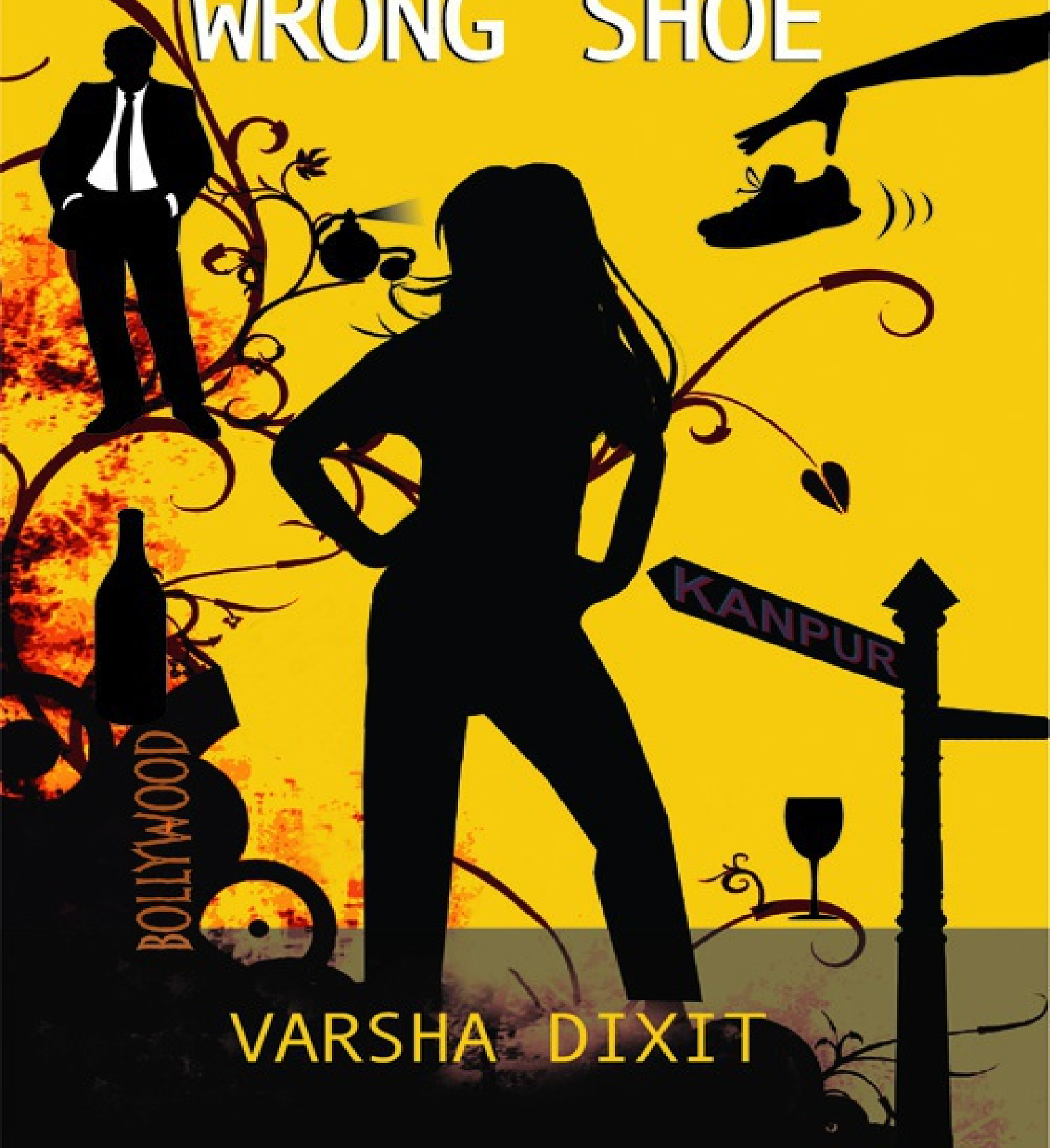
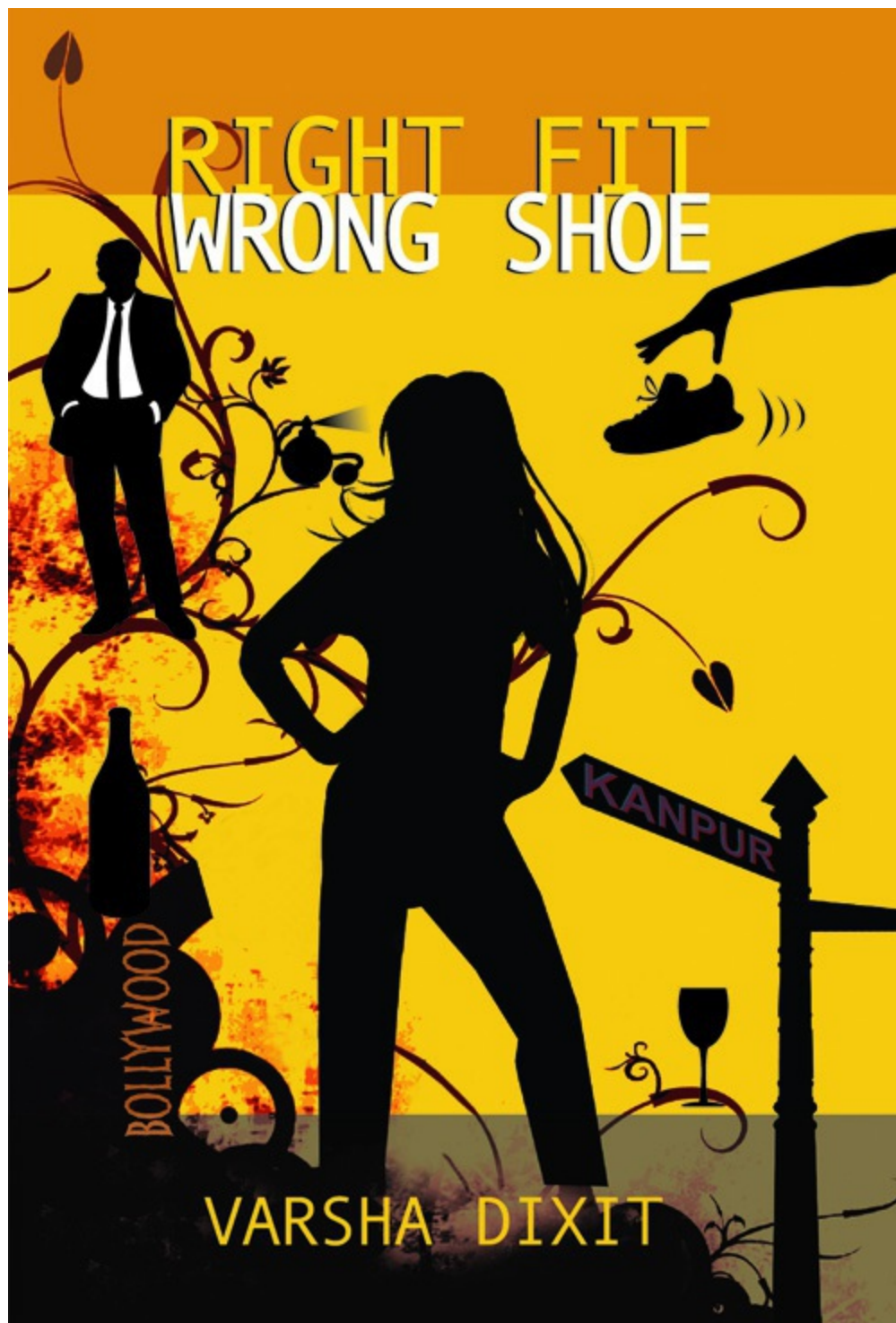


RIGHT FIT WRONG SHOE



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VARSHA DIXIT

**RIGHT FIT
WRONG SHOE**

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Varsha Dixit



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This book is dedicated, to the SPUNKIEST and the sweetest woman, I had the good fortune to be born to and raised by, my Mother, Mrs Shakun Dixit. She was the first, literary and literally, romantic I ever crossed paths with.

Also, I would like to dedicate this book and any other that I may ever write to my one-stop-shop of pure solace and love, my late father, Mr Suman Shankar Dixit. His limitless encouragement and unconditional love continues to warm and guide me even after his sad demise. I miss you so much every day Papa!

My love of reading and writing was honed and nurtured by these two wonderful people. They believed in me even when I did not.

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To my husband, Sumit. Life is so much love, fun and drama filled largely because of him. I also know him as the gentlest of my critics and the staunchest of my supporters.

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A few others jimmerwar

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My Sanjana (who's already a published author and she's not even nine), Pranav (both small and big), Raghav (the most untiring of my supporters), and finally, the occasional frown on my brow, the perpetual smile on my lips and the beat in my heart – Anvi.

And...

My heartfelt thank you to the city of Kanpur and its people for all the much cherished memories. The city shall always be home for me.

Also, a very sincere salute to the Indian film industry for making my heart feel and head think, innumerable times. Consider my work an ode to you!

Characters

Sharma Household

Nirbhay Sharma – Father

Shruti Sharma – Mother

Namit Sharma – Son

Meghna Mishra Sharma – Daughter-in-law

Nandini Sharma – Daughter

Sarin Household

Paresh Sarin – Father

Vibha Sarin – Mother

Ajit Sarin – Elder son

Seema Kashyap Sarin – Daughter-in-law

Aditya Sarin – Younger son

Verma Household

Ankit Verma – Husband

Sneha Roy Verma – Wife

Advey Roy Verma – Son

Villains

Rochak Chowdhury

Gayatri

Various

Mrs Mina Shukla – Owner of Ace Advertising Agency

Mrs Simone D’Souza – Personal assistant to Aditya Sarin

Ms Riya Pathak – Part of the design department

Mr Roy Sengupta – Part of the design department

Ms Tina Kashyap – Part of the design department

Aaj ki taaza khabar

'That's a pakka BTM! Bunty and Babli buying together? Hello... Uncle, buying for Auntie or Shanti?' Nandini went on labe;ling the people, coming in and out of the shop, across the street, from the conference room she sat in. Why has the shopkeeper written 'Hosiery' in English, and 'Lingerie' in Hindi? The latter sounds more like stri ling for langur, she wondered for the millionth time. Bored to the point of self-immolation, Nandini looked around, catching her reflection in the adjoining glass window.

She addressed the empty conference room. 'Laddies and gentelman, for all those who don't know... my stats are 2666-96. Naari of 26, with pakau soch of 66 and living as if she's 96.' Her voice dropping a few notches, Nandini whispered the announcement, 'Me whela and my life—'

Whatever Nandini was about to say, hovered incomplete, as a girl, a few years younger than she was, entered the room. Reading off her cell, Riya, gushed, 'Nandini, did you hear? Aditya Sarin is coming to town!'

Let me rephrase – my life and me are now officially and *royally* screwed! Nandini panicked. The pencil slid from her hand, clattering onto the patterned mosaic floor. Immediately bending to retrieve it, Nandini let her long, black locks hide her distressed face – just enough time to reboot her expression.

'The international success story, is actually going to breathe the same air... as us?' Roy droned, strolling in behind Riya. His eyes, unlike his voice, not totally disinterested.

Who could blame him? Not every day did a bigwig of that proportion visit this sleepy town. Cawnpore, Kaunpur? Or KANPUR – that is what it was and is, before and after, the last of the least known elections.

'Not to forget his dishy looks... ooh! I could have him for just about every meal of my entire mortal life.' Coming in behind Roy, Tina simpered, fluttering her eyelashes. An effort totally wasted because of the perpetual no-nonsense shape of her mouth, further intensified by a makeup-free face and a painfully short haircut. There were whispers that she actually visited a naayi for the authentic touch.

The other person, amidst them (remember the girl who dropped the pencil), heard the ongoing conversation with something akin to shock. What interest now, could this place be to him? Nandini wondered.

‘People and the cars of this city need a better life, big time!’ In the past, the heir apparent to the Sarin business empire, had griped often enough to her.

Nandini’s conscience, or whatever that loud thing sitting inside her was, niggled, ‘You very well know, why he’s coming back! For revenge munchkins, and all of it from you... hahaha!’ Yup! Nandini’s conscience came with, tailor-made staccato villainous laughs, among other unbelievable features and upgrades.

‘Tina, take those damn ipod thingies out of your head. One would think you were born with it. Riya, please stop sms-ing. I am sure you’ve texted half of the country by now,’ Nandini rebuked.

‘Nah! Only half of the office!’ Riya replied, her tone, just like her face – impish.

Nandini shook her head. Her young face seemingly composed in front of the even younger designing team. ‘Enough guys! Can we get some work done here?’

‘Nandini this is big, it’s huge! Who knows? One of us may actually snare the country’s most eligible bachelor,’ Riya said, with dilated eyes. ‘I can see my favourite Mills & Boon coming to life in front of me. In which...’

‘In which, the girl kills the rich guy, gets all his money and then marries his best friend, only to find out the best friend is actually a woman, who has a sex change,’ Tina teased.

Riya made a face at her. ‘Very funny! As I was saying, my favourite kind of M&B is the one where, celebrity-meets-an-undiscovered-stunner-and-falls-head-and-*vast* material possessions intact-in-love-with-her. With, me essaying the role of the undiscovered stunner,’ Riya said.

‘Forget it! Aditya Sarin plays in a different league altogether. Regular girls like us could be a part of the toilet roll for all he cares, right Nandi?’ Tina glanced at her for support.

‘Wrong, completely wrong! Yeh saraasar jhooth hain melord!’ Nandini wanted to stand on her chair, and vigorously shout the done-to-death dialogue, from our good-ol-Bollywood. However, she concurred, dully, ‘Of course! Aditya wouldn’t notice us even if we stood stark naked.’

‘I would!’ Roy leered, mockingly. Instantaneously a few paper clips, launched by the women hit him smack on the face.

‘You would what?’ inquired a girl close to Nandini’s age, as she shouldered the door open, her hands laden with books and files.

Nandini hustled to her feet to help her peer manager, best friend and self-imposed guardian angel, since standard ten, Sneha Verma. In school, Sneha had once saved Nandini from the bullies and after that, she had vowed to protect Nandini for life; from everyone and everything—except herself.

Riya quickly filled her in. ‘Sneha, guess what? Aditya Sarin is coming to Cawnpore.’

‘I know,’ Sneha replied, casually, offloading some of her burden in her friend’s arms.

Nandini’s pretty mouth fell open. The files in her hand nearly met the pencil’s fate... nearly. ‘You know?’ Her tone and eyes were condemning.

‘Ya! Kit (short for Ankit, her husband) mentioned it today morning,’ Sneha said, sliding in an empty chair.

Gnawing her bottom lip, Nandini remained where she was. ‘Why do you look nervous Nandi, you owe Sarin money or what?’ Roy teased.

‘You are such a bag of laughs... Johnny Lever!’ Nandini retorted, avoiding Sneha’s eyes. She propelled her body to the conference table, even though her insides repeatedly screamed at her, ‘Bus addaa! Flee to the nearest bus addaa!’

‘Let’s get cracking guys! I am nervous about the presentation for that pen company, due soon. That account is colossal and Ace Advertising Agency, as in us, really needs it.’ Nandini’s rebuke was more for herself than others. Her thoughts were flying all over the place.

After some half-hearted protests, formally lodged by the three musketeers (Roy, Tina and Riya), the group got busy with work at hand, Aditya Sarin forgotten by all but two.

‘Gosh, it’s seven, can we wrap up now?’ Riya requested, stretching her arms over her shoulder.

‘Damn! Sorry to keep you guys so long. We’ll finish this tomorrow.’ Nandini rubbed her forehead. ‘Why didn’t you say something? Ms Stickler for leaving at six!’ she rounded at Sneha. The latter did have an irresistible reason to head home every day and once in a while at lunch too.

‘I just decided to make an exception today,’ Sneha replied, smiling enigmatically. Nandini gulped.

‘Puhlease, it’s no biggie! Chowdhury keeps his team till nine, almost every night,’ Tina assured.

‘Don’t you dare compare me to that jackass!’ Nandini pasted a scowl on her face.

‘God! Rochak Chowdhary repulses me. The other day I was alone with him in the elevator, and those were the longest and creepiest twenty seconds of my life,’ Riya shuddered, recalling.

‘Did Roach (company anointed Rochak’s unofficial but befitting nickname) try something?’ Sneha immediately demanded.

‘No! But he’s just so sleazy. Especially his eyes! It feels like he is stripping me,’ Riya replied.

‘You and just about every woman, unfortunate enough to cross his path,’ added Roy, slinging his satchel over the shoulder .

‘Mrs Shukla only tolerates Roach because of his contacts in and outside the industry. Actually Rochak is like periods!’ Tina said.

Roy visibly squirmed. Sneha goaded, ‘Explain!’

‘He’s smelly, dark and bothers women between fifteen–fifty,’ Tina replied, grinning.

‘Well said!’ Riya agreed.

‘Except there’s no Roach control pill that will make him go away for twenty-eight days, every month,’ laughing, Sneha added.

‘You’re on birth control?’ Nandini asked.

‘Just knowing about it doesn’t mean I’m taking—’

‘Do you women even realise there’s a man amongst you all?’ Roy’s tone was clearly exasperated.

‘Who?’ Tina and Riya chorused simultaneously.

Sneha and Nandini cackled. Roy opened his mouth but Sneha beat him to it. ‘Alright, see you guys tomorrow.’ She hastened the discussion to an end. However, witty and funny, any conversation about Rochak Chowdhury, the marketing head, still ruled as the least favourite or the most vehemently hated topic for Nandini.

A few minutes later, the three trooped out. Their bosses, the two chaddi-buddies, always stayed back at the end of the day to chat a bit.

Nandini gathering her stuff from the table, offered, ‘If you and Ankit have any plans tonight, I’m free to baby sit Advey.’ Sneha’s irresistible

reason to go home was her eighteen-month-old toddler. Nandini too obsessed over him.

‘All that later! Why is he coming back?’ Sneha grilled, honing straight to the point. There was no need to mention names between them. She and Nandini, 110% of the times were on the same wavelengths .

Sighing, Nandini said, ‘No clue Sneh! Just hope he’s forgotten all that happened between us.’

Sneha’s rude bark of laughter said it all, yet she voiced, ‘I doubt Aditya will ever forget. I merely wish he knew the *truth* .’

Nandini whipped her head up, the expression dank. ‘Sneha, don’t even go there. You gave me your word never to bring it up.’

The other girl’s face burst into a cheeky smile. ‘Nandi, you only call me Sneha when you are either mad at me or in hot soup. What’s it this time?’ Her brows bounced up and down, mischievous and suggestive.

Nandini in an answer further narrowed her eyes and pulled her lips back.

‘Fine! Spare me that pit-bull look. My lips are sealed. Tell me, Nandini what’s your POA in life?’

‘If you must know, I just want to live my life the way it is happening. I do not want to expect, plan or steer it in any direction.’

‘That’s lame Nandi. No one lives like that.’

‘Some do! Call my kind lazy, content or just spokes in the super demanding and ambitious wheel of life.’

‘Well you were never a phataka but I definitely remember a time when you were not so maara hua. C’mon Kulta, let go of the past.’

‘You are the oldest part of my past,’ Nandini countered.

‘The song for constipation, electricity of this city and your budhi is the same.’

‘Are you nuts? Why am I stating the obvious?’ Nandini picked up her things .

Sneha did a hip and shoulder shake, as she belted the number, ‘Aaati nahin, aaaati nahin. Teri yaad aati hein par tu aati nahin!’

‘Shuddup! Are you done making an ass of yourself? Will you please tell me if you want me to baby sit Advey or not?’ Nandini asked, gruffly.

‘No thanks, not tonight! Some silly cricket series is beginning somewhere, in some part of the world, between some countries and of course Kit has to watch it!’ Sneha wholeheartedly grumbled.

‘That bad, eh?’ Nandini teased, well aware that Ankit’s obsession for cricket drove Sneha batty (pun intended). Soon, the two girls headed out of the building.

‘Crap! It’s raining,’ Sneha whined, covering her head with a purse.

‘Shuddup, it’s just a drizzle, you won’t melt,’ Nandini, an ardent fan of the rains, ridiculed. Just the sweet smell of monsoon was enough to give a hop to her steps, a smile to her lips and crave for chilled Baileys.

Shooting her an annoyed look, Sneha shot ‘You are so perfect for Bollywood. All you lack is a transparent chiffon sari and gigantic fake boobs.’

‘Not anymore. In the name of reality, even Bollywood is downsizing!’

Sneha cracked up. ‘That was good! I’m going to dash to my car.’ Her expression sobered, ‘Promise me, you won’t think of him. No more than say... an hour at the most!’

‘Him... who?’ The smile did not quite reach Nandini’s eyes.

‘Whatever! Just call me. We’ll talk!’ Sneha shouted, sprinting to her vehicle.

Naraaz

Nandini, too, got in her car, waving to Sneha, pulling out of the parking lot.

'Do you want to grab a cup of coffee?' interrupted a smooth voice.

'Nandini did not answer, concentrating instead on fastening the seat belt. Finally, raising cold eyes and in a voice reeking of disgust, she replied, 'No thank you, Rochak.'

'Nandi, I have some interesting news. *You could be the first to hear it* ',Rochak cajoled. Playing pocket billiards, he had been lingering in the shadows for quite some time now.

'It's Nandini to you. Even more appropriate would be Ms Sharma. *And please nothing you say could ever be of any interest to Me !* ' Nandini noisily pushed the key in the ignition.

As few other employees sauntered in the car park,Nandini thanked her stars. She knew what this sleaze ball was capable of .

Rochak came closer to the window whispering, 'Men can't resist a tease and they say in bed—'

Nandini curtly and loudly interrupted, 'Watch it! I'm sure the statue of limitations is not over, charges can still be pressed.'

Rochak recoiled as if slapped. Nandini knew his aversion to her was temporary. Just as a fish can't live out of water, a shopaholic without credit cards, Rochak could not stay away from women. The wiring of his head was messed up; it was only dic-connected. Glaring at Nandini, he abruptly walked away; softly mouthing rude names. She overheard the words, 'frigid bitch'.

Calmly reversing the red Swift, Nandini joined the ongoing milieu of chaotic traffic on the main business street, Birhana Road. Flashing neon signs of various international brands, plastered on old crumbling buildings, loudly proclaimed global commercialisation.

For just about everything else the populace stands divided, from where we pray to the water we use, yet as consumers, all are *one* – empty brains with loaded wallets! Nandini, a novice cynic, mused.

She turned the steering hard, just in time to spare a cyclist who out of nowhere, appeared bang in front of the car. Driving in these streets was a nightmare, but Nandini always experienced a sense of peace when she got behind the wheel. Tonight, it was sorely missing!

What will I do when he actually gets here, she worried. ‘Take the next right... to the railway station!’ her conscience, suggested. ‘Shut up!’ Nandini retorted. Sometime later, having parked the car in the garage, Nandini stepped into the foyer of her house. She struggled to keep her expression pleasant .

‘Nandi, you are late again? Why didn’t you answer your cell, I called several times!’ Her mother, Mrs Shruti Sharma, the last of the Mohicans (a title lovingly bestowed by her husband of thirty-five years) demanded.

‘Sorry Ma, I didn’t hear it. Must have been busy,’ Nandini said, dropping her bag and laptop on the table.

‘Why are you always so busy at work? If you want, I’ll talk to that lady boss of yours,’ Shruti suggested. It sounded more like a threat.

‘Ma, one is supposed to be busy at work... that’s what you get paid for,’ Nandini replied.

‘Sarkari job kar lo! Manmohan Singh has increased salaries in the public sector.’

‘Ma, don’t you have something useful to do?’

‘Go sit with your dad. Tullu, get the tea and sandwiches ready for didi!’ wailed the mistress of the house, marching off towards the kitchen.

Her mother ran the house smoothly, in spite of the few rough edges she possessed, particularly for those, who in her I-know-it-all opinion did not treat her children right. That scope covered every known living organism.

‘I’m sure it’s always the mother who is the root cause of people turning psychos or brilliant successes. Both highly abnormal!’ muttered Nandini. She took refuge in the family room, with the only person besides Sneha, who got her from the word ‘Go’.

The first love of Nandini’s life, the only man she had, in all the wisdom of a five-year-old, publically proclaimed to marry... her father. Nirbhay Sharma. A retired CFO of a financial company, running his own business consultancy, was Nandini’s one-stop-shop of pure love and solace .

‘There you are Chotu, you look tired,’ Nirbhay observed her, over his beige rimmed glasses. He quickly went back to one of his three addictions – the Discovery channel. The second was Khana Khazana and the third,

sanjeevkapoor.com. No, he did not have a man-crush on the above-mentioned chef, just a plain, simple, Indian obsession with food. Why are Indian men so much into food? Even when, most of them cannot cook Maggi, which comes with written instructions.

‘What are you thinking Chotu?’

‘Papa, I have already lived around twenty-two percent of my life. I am no Chotu,’ Nandini quipped, collapsing in her favourite chair, right next to him.

Mr Sharma quickly did the math. ‘Eighty-five years or so! Not, if your mom lives hundred percent of her sixty-five years.’

‘Oh! You are mean!’ Nandini giggled.

Affectionately patting her knee, Mr Sharma then went on to repeat the age old, beaten to death cliché, ‘You will always remain a child—’

‘For your parents, no matter how old you get,’ finished her mother entering with Tullu and tea in tow.

‘How come you never think in similar terms when you want my room tidied or have me married off to any stranger, literally off the streets,’ Nandini retorted, directly to her mother.

‘You and your silly remarks! I have some good news,’ Mrs Sharma said handing her the cup.

Keeping her head bent, Nandini sipped the scalding liquid. Her body tautened anticipating the lightning strike.

‘Vibha Didi called; she and Aditya are coming here and guess when?’ Shruti didn’t wait for any response. ‘Day after tomorrow, by the afternoon flight!’

Nandini clutched the cup, lest it might meet the same fate as the pencil and nearly the files. So it was confirmed – her worst fear was about to come true, she even knew its ETA.

‘Arre say something, aren’t you happy? You will finally get to meet your Badi Maa, what after three years,’ Shruti said.

Three years, seven months and the number of days I am a little confused about, Nandini quietly deliberated.

Badi Maa! Aditya’s mom, Mrs Vibha Sarin was and is best friends with Nandini’s mother. They only refer to each other as sisters born of separate mothers.

Their husbands, Nirbhay Sharma and Paresh Sarin, as providence would have it, were childhood friends. In a strange coincidence, two best friends

married two best friends. Tragedy struck close *twice* ... just kidding!

‘No Maa, of course I’m happy.’ Nandini assured. ‘And anyway, I already know. I heard it in the office earlier today.’

‘Why didn’t you immediately call up and tell me?’ Shruti admonished.

Shrugging her shoulders, Nandini finished her tea in a gulp. ‘I’m a little tired, can I go upstairs and chill?’ She got to her feet. The excited plans her parents were laying out for the Sarins’ homecoming, pricked her ears.

‘Go ahead Nandi, do as you please, this is your house,’ Nirbhay replied watching his daughter with thoughtful eyes.

Nandini climbed the stairs to the three-bedroom apartment, on the first floor. Earlier occupied by her elder brother and his family, it had come to her once they had moved to Mumbai.

Elder to her by five years, Namit Sharma, an IMA Ahmedabad passout, was currently a financial head honcho of a leading infrastructure giant. He was married to an absolute sweetheart, Meghna aka Mugs. A pediatrician by profession and an adroit multi-tasker, who managed the job of a mother, doctor, wife, daughter and daughter-in-law in the best possible way known to mankind. They were blessed with two lovely twins, a six-year-old boy and girl, Piya and Piyush, cheesy names but adorable tots.

Wearily, Nandini flopped on the sofa, resting her head in her hands. She unconsciously massaged her scalp, vividly recalling Aditya’s painful grip on her hair, the blazing hatred in his eyes accompanying the vicious words, ‘You greedy back! I will come b#@!#! I promise... to destroy you and everything you ever held precious.’

Jab we met

But Pappu can't dance saala!' Her cell phone's blaring ring jolted Nandini, back to the present. Rummaging inside her bag, she grabbed the phone, 'Hello?'

'You are thinking about him, aren't you?' sounded Sneha's reproachful voice on the other end.

'No Sneh.' The lie, shuffled from tight lips.

Ensuing silence loudly proclaimed, 'Liar, liar, thongs on fire!'

Okay fine! Just like you, I, too, am a little concerned,' Nandini confessed, heavily.

'Honey, our concerns are totally different. It is not my hide that Aditya Sarin might be gunning for.' Sneha's words were blunt, not her tone.

A crooked smile teased Nandini's lips. 'I agree it's only mine he plans to skin.'

'Don't worry so much. Maybe it's all over and done between the two of you. We constantly read about his dating of some socialite, actress or model in an unending succession. Aditya always liked to play the field. I am sure he has forgotten all about you.'

'I hope you are right.' Another lie, the thought that Aditya might have forgotten her, struck in the artery closest to the pumping beats. 'Listen Mom is coming, I'll talk to you later... don't worry about me Sneh. Go and make your man happy.' Nandini hung up on the rude cackle. 'Maybe I should change the ringtone to Hanuman Chalisa. That might just keep him away!' Bad one, her conscience pointed.

'What a mess? Why did it have to be like this?' She whispered, tormented. After a long bath, and avoiding her parents, Nandini curled up in her bed. Sleep, unlike the memories, eluded her.

Flash back! (True Bollywood style)

Twenty-one-year-old Nandini, a fresh commerce graduate of Christchurch College, excitedly strode inside the Sarin mansion adjacent to her house.

‘Gosh it’s mind blowing!’ ambling through the driveway, she reflected for the millionth time.

Surrounded on either side by lush, green, beautifully landscaped gardens, lolled the majestic house. The two-storey spread was impeccably white in colour, its exterior shaped befittingly like a Rajasthani palace. Adding to the grandeur, a lofty several-tiered fountain sat at the entrance.

The senior Sarins, Vibha and Paresh, had flocked to Kanpur only a couple of years ago .

‘Ajit and Seema, overseeing the business, are constantly accumulating frequent flyer miles. Aditya, for the last eight years, has been living in one hostel after another. It is just Vibha and me most of the time. Sometimes it gets very lonely,’ Paresh had confided to Nandini’s father.

‘Yaar Paresh, then why are you sitting so far in Cochin? Come and live here. All of us will make sure that you and Vibhaji don’t get a single moment of peace,’ Nirbhay coaxed.

That is it. The decision for the Sarins to move was literally made overnight. Several properties next to the Sharma residence were bought, consolidated and in the next ten or twelve months, an army of workers, similar to the ones employed by Shah Jahan, had constructed the grand abode. The palatial house boasted of tennis and basketball courts, Japanese gardens, two swimming pools—outdoor and indoor, a state of the art gym, a media room, ten bedrooms and god knows how many bathrooms.

The Sarins were quickly becoming an essential part of Nandini’s life. In fact, Vibha insisted that she address her as ‘Badi Maa’; after all, she was a year older to Shruti. Nirbhay and Paresh shared a common dread at the thought of Nandini’s inevitable bidai.

The only person from the Sarin family, Nandini had never met was Aditya Sarin, the younger scion studying in America. Having completed his MBA, Adi had finally come to live with his parents and join the family business.

Yesterday, due to a close friend’s wedding, (no, not Sneha, she did have other friends) Nandini could not attend the lavish bash the Sarins had thrown to celebrate Adi’s homecoming. Almost all the city hotels and available farmhouses, legal or illegal, had been reserved to house the who’s who of the country and outside, in attendance for last night’s shindig.

Since morning, Nandini’s parents and the TV channels, had been broadcasting truckloads on Aditya and the lavish bash—some good and

some even better. Heightened curiosity and Badi Maa's phone call persuaded Nandini to overcome her stranger anxiety and show up to meet the 'man'.

Nandini waited in the humongous living room as one of the servants rushed to fetch Vibha. From the arched, stain glass windows of the living room, she could spy several workers milling about in the lawns, cleaning up after last night's revelry. 'Party for some, pain for others!' she declared softly.

'Who are you?' questioned a suave voice, echoing in the otherwise silent room.

Nandini got startled, and whirled around to see where this voice was coming from. She immediately recognised who stood in front of her. No sillies! No past-birth memories like in *Karz* or *Karrrrrrzzzzz* (did I miss a Z)?! Nandini recognised Aditya Sarin from his photographs.

Aditya was taller in person, definitely six feet or more. The thick, dark, crop of hair—well cut, and miraculously gel free, unlike the metro sexual men who in the disguise of being hip, have gone from *gole ka tael* to *tael ka gola*.

His black pupils framed with long curling eyelashes, studied her with no hint of recognition. After all, Nandini was no Paris Hilton or a child successfully rescued from a borewell. Aditya's face cradled a wide forehead, a Greek nose, and a sensual mouth with a hint of dimples in his chiselled cheeks. His broad shoulders and mouth watering body, was clad in a white, probably ridiculously priced, designer T-shirt, dark blue jeans and tan shoes. Aditya Sarin loomed large as an epitome of oozing masculinity.

Holy cow, he is bloody gorgeous, sprung the sudden thought in Nandini's mind. 'You are Aditya, right?' she stuttered, blushing furiously.

'And you are about to faint?' Aditya mocked, in a deep and cultured baritone. His eyes crinkled at the ends and his dimples deepened.

Humour served in arrogance, a typical trademark of children brought up by the philosophy: Spare the child and break the rod or better still, sell it to the raddiwala. Nandini's expression awkward, she asked, 'What do you mean?'

'Your face is redder than a beet root.'

The snub definitely ruffled, more than imaginary feathers.

'Were you pursuing an MBA or a cookery course?'

For a moment, Aditya's eyes narrowed and then he burst out in a full-throated laugh. At the sound, Nandini felt like curling her toes.

'Okay, Ms Smarty Pants, introduce yourself.'

'Nandini... Nandini Sharma,' she answered lifting her chin, unconsciously defiant.

'So, you are Nandini? My parents' adopted daughter.' A thorough gaze sized her up from head to toe. Aditya liked what he saw... who wouldn't?

Almond-shaped eyes perfectly sized, with a pert nose trailed by pouty pink lips, sat pretty in a heart-shaped fair face. Bereft of any make up, Nandini appeared to be a tall teenager, except, her body was that of woman. Her curves, clearly visible in a tight yin-yang, powder pink and silver coloured T-shirt and figure hugging jeans.

Aditya's amusement grew, as he noticed Nandini's flush become more pronounced, at his minute inspection. My stares are actually making her uncomfortable, he thought, surprised. In the circles Aditya moved, there was not one woman, married or single, who would not botox or lipo herself to her very bones just to emerge good enough to catch his eye. But Nandini, discomfited to the core, literally hopped from one foot to another.

Nandini, experienced strange tingles, as Aditya's eyes freely roamed over her. Even though thoroughly covered, she felt completely exposed. To break the eye contact, Nandini abruptly swung her face away, bringing the 'wow' feature to his notice.

Aditya, riveted, gazed at the poker straight, shiny black tresses, cascading down the shoulders, ending at the waist. Ms Dimple Kapadia and Demi Moore, your days are numbered! His hands twitched to touch the black velvet.

'So you've met Nandi?' Seema, Aditya's sister-in-law's voice broke the moment.

'Nandi? Isn't that the name of the bull a god rides on,' Aditya baited the spitfire.

'Yup! The one with the horns sharp enough to shred just about everyone, especially the lecherous kinds,' Nandini shot back. Damn! My comeback was super lame, I suck at this witty repartee a@#%, fretting she bit her lip.

Aditya was not backing down; he opened his mouth to fire another salvo. Nandini braced herself for the next zinger.

‘Hey Nandi, Maa is looking for you. She is in her room,’ Seema interrupted, giving them each a closer look.

‘Thanks Bhabhi, ’ Nandini murmured, quickly climbing the marble stairway, happy to escape the not so extinct T.Rex.

‘So what do you think of Nandini?’ Seema asked softly of Aditya, whose eyes remained pegged on the other girl.

‘Surprisingly, quite attractive and not my type at all. ’

‘Attractive and not your type? That doesn’t make any sense, dear brother-in-law.’ Aditya did have a certain reputation with women.

‘Dear sister-in-law, I like my women a lot more polished and sophisticated. My woman has to be the strong, independent kind, who sees my shoulder as something to rub against, rather than something to cry or lean on.’ Aditya now looked directly at Seema, as he flopped onto the adjoining sofa. A full-scale, head-to-head offensive was unleashed; Seema’s head versus his.

‘That’s it! An Amazon is your ideal woman?’ Seema retorted.

‘That’s not all! No saas-bahu serials for her, only CNN, ESPN and bang-bang... with only me, of course. She would stand out, not merely for her looks which is anyway something the parents should be blamed or credited for.’

‘Oh, so she could be butt ugly and you would be okay with that?’ Seema ridiculed.

Aditya shook his head. ‘She has to be nice to look at, but not necessarily a Gisele Bündchen. The way she carries herself and the way she speaks and thinks is much more important. She has to be what you see is what you get kind of gal! My qualifications and interests should thrill her more than my money.’

‘That doesn’t sound bad at all? But what if, she has *had* prior relationships? A colourful past... like someone in our family?’ Seema’s face danced with mischief.

Aditya broadly grinning, said, mildly, ‘Her past is only the past; with absolutely no bearing on the present. Relationships are important aspects of building one’s character and gaining experience, for both men and women. I won’t share her with anyone, but I am not interested in fighting ghosts.’

‘Well, well not an MCP after all? Wonders never cease!’ Seema said.

Smiling, Aditya continued, ‘There is more. I am not looking for the jeans-clad, English talking, gharulu kinds. Lassi served in a wine glass, is

still lassi. There should be no lies, no mind games and no excessive vanity. And unequivocally, she cannot be a gauche teenager who wears sneakers in the middle of the day!’ The last part was a dig at Nandini’s sport shoes.

‘Oh c’mon, Nandini is damn sweet and extremely nice,’ Seema defended, ‘And why are you so anal about women wearing sneakers?’

‘You can’t stand AB in transparent shirts and you yourself avoid certain colours. Similarly, a woman in sneakers totally puts me off, except when she is exercising.’ Aditya’s eccentricity made complete sense to him.

‘You are crazy! Nandi is wonderful.’

‘Eh tu brutus!’

Seema gave him a confounded look.

‘You too are a part of Nandini fan club? Weren’t mom and dad enough?’

‘AB is a part of it too,’ smirking, Seema shot back.

‘Well then I bid adieu to all you demented people.’ Standing up, Aditya, dramatically, clasped his head.

‘Where are you off to?’ Seema inquired.

‘To meet my new conquest of course! I shall not be back for lunch,’ Aditya announced over his shoulder. He headed for the pristine, brand new, royal blue Mercedes SL-500, a gift from his parents, for completing his masters from Wharton with excellence. One of his father’s cardinal rules – gifts are big, only, if the endeavour and results exceed expectations. Only a few knew that Aditya, a meritorious student, could have accomplished a large chunk of his education through scholarships, but chose to pay, so someone not equally fortunate, could score a seat.

Aditya hid his humility with contrived arrogance. Humility was a concept better understood by the middle-class or Indian reality show winners. His friends only ‘got’ gizmos and complexes – the ones you live with or live in. One thing Aditya had picked up from his father at a very young age was success frees you to be yourself. And success is not inherited, it is achieved. Aditya was just bidding his time and turn. Time and turn, to co-manage the Sarin Empire.

Reversing out of the large iron wrought gates, Aditya’s head was full of a pair of almond-shaped eyes, flushed cheeks and raven hair, instead of his glamorous date: A socialite from out of town, he had just bumped into yesterday.

The subject of Aditya's thoughts was thinking of him, too, but not as favourably. 'Opinionated jackass! Haraamkhor!' grumbled Nandini, crossly. Nothing can be as cathartic, as a Hindi cuss word said with feeling. A single cuss alone can describe and relieve anger enough to go in the straitjacket.

Even though Seema and Aditya had been conversing softly, Nandini 'the beagle', as called by her brother, had overheard every single word spoken between them.

'Aditya Sarin who cares what you think? Unpolished, gauche, my foot! He probably thinks he's god's gift to women I'll show him!' declared Nandini, her usually pleasant expression, marred by a severe scowl.

'You look angry. Nandi, what happened?' questioned Vibha, emerging from her room .

Quickly, Nandini altered her frown to a smile. 'Everything is fine and it shall only get better, Badi Maa.' Gazing at her sneakers, Nandini's eyes sparkled with much malice, like the baddies of old movies. The ones who for the lack of props like machine guns, tongue-twisting contraptions or scantily clad molls and transvestites, relied heavily on the eyes, to portray character.

'Did you meet Adi?' Vibha inquired.

'Yup, he was on his way out somewhere.'

'And, what do you think?' Vibha probed.

Nandini's honest response would go something like this, 'Bada bhagwan, chota shaitan.' Therefore, out of affection for the Sarins, her lips remained interlocked as the brain put forth few more suggestions. 'Different!' was all she could spit out.

Vibha chuckled. 'I know Adi is a little spoilt, but his heart and head is in the right place. I am sure he will grow on you.'

Like a bloodsucking parasite, Nandini silently derided. 'Bhabhi said you were looking for me?' She changed the topic.

'Oh yes! I just received some saris and suit materials from Calcutta, beautiful *kantha* work. Choose as many pieces as you like.'

'Badi Maa please, you have given me way too many things already,' Nandini protested.

'I'm your Badi Maa. You can never say no to me, understand?' ordered the older woman, affectionately. 'We all missed you at the party yesterday,' Vibha said, launching into an immediate discourse about last night's party.

Andaz Apna Apna (Flashback continues...)

Next day, the Sarin clan, including Aditya, sat at the dining table and were about to begin breakfast. Nandini traipsed in, a smile on her face.

Aditya instantly was lost to the smile. In his eyes, it vaulted her from beautiful to stunning.

Unaware of his complimentary thoughts, Nandini briefly and disdainfully glanced at him. 'I do not care for you or your designer butt; see that in my eyes!' she telepathically tried sending Aditya that message.

Aditya grinning, wickedly thought, 'I know how to get you!' Catching Nandini's eye, his eyes at a leisurely pace, travelled all over her. Within seconds, a tell-tale blush crept up Nandini's cheeks .

'What would happen if I were to actually touch her?' The unbidden thought shot to his mind. Aditya immediately quelled it. Nandini was not his type. 'Moreover, god forbid, if I ever harm a hair on that lovely head, my own family will plunge the knife in my heart. Dad and AB (short for Ajit Bhaiya) will probably toss a coin, to see who gets the first stab,' he whispered to his libido.

'Jerk!' Nandini hissed. Today she had adorned a loose T-shirt and baggy jeans, yet Aditya's intimate examination made her want to pull burlap sack over her head. Nandini resisted the urge to tug at her clothes.

'What good timing Nandi, come join us for breakfast,' Paresh warmly invited.

'Thank you Uncle but I just ate. I only came to give you these. My notes are scribbled alongside the articles.' Nandini handed him some loose papers.

'What are those?' Aditya quizzed.

'These are the articles for our annual magazine which I had asked Nandi to proofread,' his father replied.

'She is an experienced proofreader or maybe, a qualified editor?' Aditya inquired. Nandini did not miss the veiled sarcasm.

‘Nandini is extremely creative and multi-talented. You should study last year’s corporate brochure and catalogue of our company. Page by page, line by line, it was all her work,’ Paresh praised.

‘Yes, that was done very well indeed,’ Ajit agreed taking a gulp of the juice next to him.

‘Nandini is awesome!’ Seema mouthed, pointedly looking at Aditya.

Aditya had seen the brochure under discussion. That was quite neat, he thought. However, he did not say it .

‘Please... that was no big D. Uncle and AB guided me all through.’ Nandini was more at ease being the backbencher, unnoticed, invisible.

‘Rubbish! Nandi, if you want to rise in life, learn to take praise as well as the brickbats for your work,’ Paresh advised. AB and Aditya slyly rolled their eyes. Their father’s penchant for dropping such pearls of wisdom was a great source of sneaky amusement for his family.

Nandini nodded, solemnly, absorbing Paresh’s words. Aditya on seeing her serious expression hid a wry grin.

‘Nandi, what kind of eggs would you like?’ inquired Vibha, emerging from the kitchen, followed by two servants carrying trays laden with breakfast. It was a tradition at the Sarin household, to prepare a variety of dishes at each meal, irrelevant of the number of people at the table.

They are probably making up for the drought forever present, in some part of the world, Nandini silently mocked, as she declined the invitation, ‘No, thank you Badi Maa, I just ate.’

‘Then sit and have a cup of coffee with us,’ Vibha directed, pointing at the empty chair next to Aditya, who accordingly pulled it out for her.

‘Sure!’ Nandini slid into the offered chair, purposely, stepping hard on Aditya’s foot. ‘Oh! I’m so sorry.’

‘No harm done,’ Aditya responded, trying to ignore the throbbing toe.

‘Are you sure? The sole of my sneaker is very hard.’

Seema took a large swig of her coffee; Aditya immediately glanced at Nandini’s feet.

‘Good god!’ Aditya scowled; today Nandini’s sneakers were gigantic. A thick layer of dried mud, caked on either side. What he did not know was that the ghastly, oversized, and psychedelic sneakers were bought yesterday from the most ghatiya dukaan of Arya nagar. The mud zealously applied and dried overnight with a hairdryer.

‘Aren’t they nice?’ asked Nandini, modelling her foot solely for Aditya’s viewing displeasure.

Aditya could not keep the sneer out of his voice, ‘Don’t you have any other footwear except sneakers? What are you... one of the William sisters?’

Bingo! Nandini clamped her lips tightly, holding on to the fake injured expression, hovering on her face.

Vibha immediately censured, ‘Aditya, that is not for you to say!’

‘Yes, your mother is right. Don’t tell Nandi what or what not to wear. Remember, your own yellow dungarees? Or those tight pink pants, which you lived in?’ Senior Mr Sarin, too, rose in Nandini’s defense.

A dull red covered Aditya’s face, as he shot back, ‘The dungarees were cream. And the maroon, *not* pink pants was something that mom got for me from one of the trips she went on.’

Just when Aditya assumed the worse was over, his mother confessed, ‘Adi, I didn’t say anything then as you really liked them but those pink pants from Harrods were actually a gift for Preeti bua’s elder daughter. She was quite plump at that time.’

For a second there was complete silence and then Ajit guffawed, his laugh loud and booming. Paresh followed suit and so did Seema and Nandini. The muscle working in Aditya’s jaw, only increased the mirth, overflowing, on the dining table.

This is way better... I practically lost control of my bladder, Nandini reflected, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. However, she could do nothing about the wide smile; it refused to budge from her face.

‘Thanks Mom!’ Aditya glowered at Vibha.

‘What did I do?’ Vibha replied in all innocence, trying to bite down her broadening grin.

‘Very funny!’ Aditya made a move to get up, his appetite gone.

Nandini leaning closer, whispered, ‘Much unpolished and what was that word... *gauche* of you to wear women’s clothing.’

Instantly, Aditya realised that Nandini had overheard his chatter with Seema yesterday. Now Nandini, had taken this to another level, and Aditya sure as hell was not the kind to turn the other cheek. ‘You little brat, apologise right away and I might forgive you.’ Aditya offered her a last chance of escape.

At Aditya’s look, Nandini felt a strange sense of excitement rush through her veins. Her face, like the rest of her body tingled. Tossing, the

glorious mane over her shoulder, she challengingly scoffed, 'Apologise? You must be out of your mind. This time you've messed with the wrong girl!'

'The intention was not to mess, Nandini Sharma. But now I promise... *you shall be thoroughly messed with !*' Aditya softly declared with a glint in his eyes. They both stared at each other, unable to look away.

Oddly breathless, Nandini stuttered a hushed, 'Bring it on!' Using every ounce of will power, she managed to glance away, breaking the hypnotic effect of the enemy's eyes.

The others at the table had stopped laughing. All their attention fixed on Nandini and Aditya, as they could not hear the soft exchange going on between the two .

'I'm done!' Aditya got to his feet.

'I'll be off. Mom is waiting for me,' Nandini said. The two headed in opposite directions, both experiencing a sudden need to get away from the other.

'Damn! What was I thinking? I almost kissed a millennium behenji and that too in front of everyone,' Aditya breathed, shutting himself in the bathroom. 'On second thoughts, cancel the kiss. I wanted to shake her! I will do exactly that the next time she comes around,' Aditya promised his reflection, as he adjusted his shirt and something else. Women only fidget with their hair that much, and dogs with their tails.

'It's only the absolute joy of victory that is making my heart gallop like a horse on steroids,' Nandini muttered, speedily exiting the Sarin household.

Over the following year, the battle of wits between Nandini and Aditya ensued. Someday, Adi won and sometimes it was Nandini's chance to crow. Gradually the rest of the family just ignored their constant skirmishes, the only way Nandini and Aditya communicated with each other.

Eq hi Maqsad (2 the present)

'Dil haara re, dil daara haara...' The song from *Tashan* blared jarringly, startling Nandini from her fitful sleep. 'Gawd! Piya... you really need to get over this Saifeena fetish!' Nandini grumbled, struggling to escape the tangled bedcovers.

Managing to shut the alarm off, as Saif went down on his knee, for whatever reasons, Nandini hobbled to get the morning ablutions out of the way.

As she took a seat at the dining table, her mother noticed, 'Nandi, those are some dark circles under your eyes. Didn't you sleep well last night?'

'Kind of!'

'You might be coming down with something. Take the day off and rest at home,' Nirbhay suggested.

'I'm fine dad, just one of those nights.'

'Don't make any plans for tomorrow. Keep your day free,' Shruti ordered.

'Tomorrow is Saturday. Apart from going to the gym, I'm home the whole day mom.' Nandini heartily dug in her upma.

Her mother characteristically was about to grumble at Nandini's lack of complete social life other than work, but Nirbhay discouraged her with an imperceptible nod.

'So what are we doing tomorrow?' Nandini asked, observing the silent communication between her parents. Even though different in personality, Shruti and Nirbhay were never distant. North Pole and South Pole did meet outside the boudoir.

'We have to be at the airport tomorrow morning, to receive Vibha Di and Aditya,' her mother reminded.

Not wanting to gag, Nandini carefully swallowed the food in her mouth. Her first thought was throw herself in the bathroom, and remain barricaded

there for the next few weeks. Yet she causally answered, 'Sure! I'm going to work. See you in the evening.' Swiftly, Nandini got up.

'Nandi, finish your breakfast,' Shruti said.

'Nah! It's not made right today.' Nandini, already half out of the house, was doing some serious mental work. 'I have to get out and think of plan A, B... possible Z, to escape tomorrow's airport rendezvous.'

Nirbhay went back to reading his newspaper. At appropriate intervals, he continued to nod at his continuously chattering wife, even though he had stopped listening to her quite some time back. The trick always worked. He was considering getting a patent for it.

Parking the car on the usual spot, flinging the half-eaten murku packet on the side and gripping her purse and files, Nandini got out. A loose paper fluttered to the ground. Tossing her hair out of the face, she squatted to pick it up. A frisson of awareness crept into her mind, as though, someone was watching; Nandini immediately glanced around and up but there was no one.

'Stupid jittery nerves! Get a hold of yourself, woman!' she muttered, self-consciously grinning. Seizing the errant paper, Nandini briskly headed inside the office building.

Unseen, the angry eyes bore into her, from the tinted window of his new office. *Once I am done with you Nandini, you will have nothing to smile about for a very, very long-time*, fumed Aditya Sarin.

Simone, the PA, standing next to her boss, observed him stare intently, at the girl in the white salwar kameez. Working for Aditya since the last two years, she understood his body language. Something about that girl filled Aditya with quiet cold rage – the kind she had never seen.

Clearing her throat, she took a few steps away. Aditya straightened from the window and lowered himself in the chair, behind the flimsy desk. 'Simone, please make sure new furniture is here by Monday, whatever the cost.'

'Aditya, that is already in works,' Simone replied, making her exit.

'Everything has gone as I planned,' Aditya murmured. He and his PA, Simone D'Souza had arrived at the agency at 5 a.m., signed the final papers, making Ace Advertising Agency, a part of the Sarin Empire.

As per his clear-cut orders, the entire take over had been extremely hush-hush. Paying Mrs Mina Shukla, twice of what she had demanded, had

insured her more than ample cooperation. At ten today, the ex-owner would hold a company meeting to introduce the new top dog .

Aditya punched the intercom on his phone. ‘Simone, have Nandini Sharma, the head of the design department, in my office, right away. Make sure she thinks it’s Mrs Shukla she is coming to meet.’

The intercom on Nandini’s phone buzzed. Recognising the extension, 1212, Nandini put down her Kurkure ka packet and immediately answered the phone. ‘Good morning Mrs Shukla.’

‘This is Simone, could you please come up? Boss wants to meet you ASAP!’ The PA hung up, before the girl on the other end, could react.

‘Simone! Who the heck is Simone?’ Nandini called out loudly, but there was no answer. Only losers and carpool folks come to work at seven and, sadly, I am not carpooling, Nandini reflected. She quickly made her way up to the third floor,

Mrs Shukla’s office.

As she stepped out of the elevator, a waiting Simone won the bet with herself; the girl in the white salwaar kameez, after all.

Nandini saw the elderly plump woman, dressed in an expensive powder blue business suit and sporting a trendy salt and pepper bob, come towards her. What is this chic-aunty doing here? Nandini wondered, feeling dowdy in her simple clothes.

‘Simone?’ she politely offered her hand.

‘Yes, and you must be Nandini.’ Simone shook the young girl’s hand, her expression bland.

‘Yup! Nandini Sharma. Is something the matter? Mrs Shukla never comes in before nine?’

The older woman ushered Nandini towards the cabin. ‘The boss is expecting you, please go in,’ she urged.

Aamne Samne

Feeling utterly hustled Nandini went inside. Simone immediately shut the door, closeting the two.

‘Weirdo!’ Nandini muttered, softly, keeping the expression pleasant as she glanced in Mrs Shukla’s—or so she thought—direction. ‘You!’ she whispered, rooted. Nandini’s eyes widened, the blood in her veins stopped for a nano second and then rushed to her face. Surprisingly, the earth did not heave.

On seeing Aditya after so many years, an unbidden and intense wave of pleasure rose inside Nandini. However, on noticing the searing anger in the narrowed eyes, it hastily roller-coasted into unease.

‘Yes, ME! Your, worst nightmare come true!’ Aditya spritely got to his feet. His magnetic presence towered the room.

‘I have to get out.’ Nandini panicked, blindly pirouetting for the doorknob .

Aditya pre-empted her. A strong hand forcefully twisted Nandini’s arm holding the knob. Pain shot through her hand and, reflexively, she let go. He swung Nandini around, pushing the hapless girl deeper into the room. Stumbling and off balance, she barely managed to stay at her feet. Stunned by the aggression, all Nandini could do was mutely gawk at him.

‘Not so fast. I am not done! Get used to this. Beginning this very second when I say jump you jump and sit when I say so!’ Aditya bit out, his lips and hips clenched.

‘And what if I don’t?’ Nandini huskily shot back, gingerly flexing her elbow. The words just slipping out, like a pair of startled feet on a banana peel.

Breathing invisible fire, Aditya came at her. Nandini speedily retreated, till her legs collided with the desk.

Aditya jerked to a halt mere inches away. Nandini, unsure, looked down as she contemplated her options and exit routes. Jumping off the window, behind the desk held the most appeal, currently.

In a pinching grip, Aditya grasped her averted face. Wincing, Nandini had no choice but to look into the dark hostile eyes. 'Because if you don't... your brother and his family's life, shall go down the gutter. *I guarantee that* !' he hissed, cruelly. Abruptly releasing her, Aditya strode to the briefcase at his desk.

'Leave my family out of this; they didn't do anything to you,' Nandini weakly asserted.

'Who cares?' Aditya retorted, his back to her. Damn, I thought the years would have dulled the hatred for the little cheat. This time she will pay her old debts, vouched Aditya. Grabbing a file, he turned around and threw it at the desk towards Nandini.

'Read it!' he insolently ordered, taking a seat .

Nandini stared at him for a few seconds and he glared right back. Finally, with shaking hands, she grasped the file turning one page after another.

Nandini's trembling hands gave Aditya some degree of satisfaction. Like a tiger studying its prey, or Batman watching Robin (oops! wrong emotion), like Batman watching the Joker, Aditya's eyes remained glued to her bent head.

Having read enough, Nandini felt outraged, and accused, 'This is BS big-time! You've cooked it all up!'

'I didn't have to. This was executed entirely by your brother, with no coercion on anyone's part. Maybe treachery runs in the family.'

The harsh word against her family stung. Indians like Italians are very gung ho about their families. The latter extended their families into mobs and us into politics – same game, different names. Blinking rapidly, Nandini looked away.

Aditya conceded. 'Unlike you, your brother has scruples. He did not sign the docs knowingly. The person, who master- minded the fraud, framed him. However, I am the only one who has the proof that could exonerate Namit. Eventually a deal of this size will garner all kinds of attention, media, political and public.'

Nothing I say or do will change his mind; I have been tried and sentenced, Nandini concluded. 'What do you want?' She gave in.

Aditya looked away. That was easy! In the past, she would have squabbled, argued and persisted until at least one of us had been driven to the ground, he recalled.

Bringing his eyes back to Nandini, Aditya said, 'I'm glad you realise that there is no point in fighting me. What? Are you ready to give up? '

Nandini kept her eyes downcast; she was at a loss of words. The hatred in his eyes pained her. These very eyes had once burned for her in a different way.

'Answer me dammit!' Aditya thundered. Nandini jerked. 'What are you willing to do? What are you ready to give up?' he repeated.

'Anything!'

Aditya continued to watch her, coldly.

Nandini in a voice free of any drama, said, 'I'll type my resignation right away.'

'I don't want your friggin resignation. I could have had you fired any day, believe me.' A vicious smile hovered around Aditya's lips.

Nandini's legs were literally knocking against each other; brain had taken the easy way out... coma. Thankfully the mouth was still working, only enough to squeak out idiotic responses. 'What did you have in mind then?' she asked.

'That is for me to know and you to keep dreading.'

Bada bhagwan, chota super shaitan! Nandini's mind was waking up.

'SIT. Let's start with this!' Aditya shot, pressing the intercom button. 'Simone, please get the memo I asked you to prepare.'

Nandini was tempted to make the cross sign... prayers for peaceful passing of one's soul.

A few muted sounds later, Simone entered the room. In her hand fluttered a single sheet of type-written paper. Wordlessly, she placed it in front of Aditya. Nandini glared at her, but the other woman avoided her eyes. Kamini budhiya or paapi paet ka sawal hain? Nandini mulled.

After quickly scanning, Aditya signed the document with a flourish. 'Perfect!' smiling, he praised his secretary. 'After the ten o' clock meeting, please make sure all the execs and above get a copy. And before you leave, let Ms Sharma read it.'

Nandini grasped the offered page and listlessly read the memo, 'Effective from Monday, Mr Rochak Chowdhury, apart from his current designation, will consolidate the design department of Ace Advertising Agency, under his experienced leadership.'

'Are you insane? Adi, you can't do this!' Nandini shrieked. Simone's eyes widened and Aditya's narrowed.

‘Thank you Simone, you may leave,’ Aditya ordered. Once alone, he shot to his feet, striding over to her side. Yanking a startled Nandini out of her chair, he threatened. ‘Don’t *ever* dare to act familiar with me. I will dish and you will take, get it!’ he barked pulling her even closer.

Nandini could not help but stare at him. Aditya was so close; she could even see the flecks in his eyes. His spicy scent swarmed her senses. The past remembered and lived as dearly as the present, slam-dunked Nandini. Her heart ached in sheer pain, and *au contraire* so did her fists glued to the sides. Fearful she might make a complete ass of herself, Nandini attempted to disentangle.

The strong hands continued to grip her. Nandini tipped her head to peek in Aditya’s veiled eyes. Few strands of her hair brushed his face. ‘Fine, you dish, I’ll take... *quietly*.’

‘Good! Now get out and do something useful,’ Aditya offensively ordered, virtually, pushing Nandini away. He walked back to his side of the desk.

Forcing her paralysed limbs into action, Nandini opened the door to exit, but then she stopped. Aditya watched her, his expression annoyed .

With the door open, and one foot out, Nandini said, ‘I thought you would have been over me by now.’

Fiercely Aditya moved towards her, but Nandini had fled. Startled, Simone remained at her desk, glancing intermittently at the fleeing girl and then Aditya. The latter stood there, gnashing his teeth.

‘Can I get you some coffee?’

‘Yes please. Make it strong and bitter!’ Aditya closed the door, somehow controlling the urge to slam it.

‘What the F*#% happened to the plan of being cold and in control. Few minutes with that wretched girl and everything goes sailing out of the window,’ Aditya cursed.

When were you ever in control around her? However, this physical aggression with a woman is a new low for you, his brain lobbed back at him.

‘Why the hell does she still wear that darn perfume?’ Aditya vented to his laptop. That is when he realised that he was still thinking of Nandini. Aditya gulped his coffee, welcoming the scorching liquid’s heat.

Raaz

Dodging the usual morning meet and greet, as the rest of the staff came in, Nandini fled to the sanctuary of her room. Shaking, she collapsed in the chair. ‘No big D!’ she chanted feverishly, pressing the cold steel of the stapler to her burning cheeks.

‘Didn’t know you had a thing for staplers!’ teased Sneha, sitting her oversized bag on the floor. Nandini continued squashing steel props against her face, eyes frantic but mouth silent.

Concerned, Sneha came over, ‘Nandi, are you alright?’

‘He’s back Sneh! He’s back and he wants to kill me !’ Nandini blurted out. Who knows, if everything else failed, Aditya might resort to the unthinkable.

Sneha instantly caught on. ‘Adi’s back! You met him?’

Nandini forcefully bobbed her head.

‘Where did you meet him?’

‘Just now! I met him in Mrs Shukla’s office. It was actually more of an ambush. He’s not working alone.’ Nandini’s fingers now strangled a miniature acupuncture ball.

‘What was he doing in Mrs Shukla’s office at this hour? Isn’t she a little too old for him.’

‘You’re not helping! Do you want to hear the rest or not?’ Nandini sailed a nasty glare in her friend’s direction.

‘Sorry, go on; tell me everything from the start! I am all ears.’

‘Adi!’ Nandi corrected herself, ‘Aditya Sarin has just bought AAA, as in us. He is our new president, CEO and god. His first kaali kurthuth of the day was to demote our friggin department and make Roach our boss!’

‘No kidding!’ Sneha breathed.

Nandini went on to regale the other girl with all that had occurred between Aditya and herself, sans the physical altercations. The memory of it still caused her heart to slam ferociously against the ribcage.

‘He can’t do that... no way missy, he can’t!’ Sneha was boiling. ‘Where does he get off being so mean? I’ll bloody set him right. Aditya should get

his facts straight.’ She headed for the cabin door.

‘Sneha!’ Nandini trotted, forcing herself between the door and her mulish friend. ‘You will do no such thing! You sit down right now! I MEAN IT!’

‘Are you going to be the martyr again? For these uncaring folks? Again, Nandi?’ Sneha’s expression and voice, gave a new meaning to the word ‘displeased’.

‘I gave my word!’ Nandini beseeched.

‘So now, even your family will take the brickbats; suffer consequences of a mistake you didn’t commit. What is wrong with you? At least think of poor Namit!’

‘Aditya will never harm Namit Dada. I am sure of that. He’s just baiting me,’ Nandini voiced, softly. She silently prayed; Bhagwanji, please *do not* let me be wrong about this.

‘Why won’t you tell him the truth? It’s time to come clean,’ Sneha said.

‘I disagree! No one needs to know anything.’ Nandini grabbed Sneha and propelled her away from the door. Sneha reluctantly let her.

‘I’m sure, in real life even Meena Kumari and Greta Garbo weren’t half as bad as you. Life has become a series of listless days, unlike the chain of one moment leading to another. Once upon a time, isn’t *that* what you considered it to be?’ Sneha rambled, even though she let Nandini sit her down.

‘Sneh!’ Nandini cooed, her tough as nails friend’s concern shining through.

‘You behave like a zombie! It hurts me to see you like this! Do you have any idea how many times your mom has called me, to find out why you behave the way you do. At one point, she even feared you were suicidal.’

‘Wow! And you still think I’m the Meena Kumari of the family?’ Nandini grinned.

‘Please Nandi! *For the last time, get rid of this blasted guilt* . Sort out this tangled, and idiotically complicated, mess of your own making.’

‘I know you mean well Sneh, but please give me some time. I promise if things get out of hand I, myself, shall puke the truth on the man.’

‘Pakka, swear on your dead cat?’ Sneha scorned, well aware that Nandini steered cleared of cats, dead or alive.

Nandini simply nodded. For a few seconds, the two friends stared at each other. Sneha capitulated. 'Fine! Have it your way. But for once, put yourself above the other mortals, you fool!'

'I hope that includes you also,' relaxing, Nandini teased. Sneha flipped her 'the bird'.

'Oh! So much drama in the morning, I need to calm myself,' Sneha said, groping inside her bag.

'Oh, please don't use this as an excuse to light up another cancer stick,' Nandini protested.

'Got it! One won't do any harm,' Sneha drawled on her way out.

'Try four... you crazy cow,' Nandini retorted, opening a Parle G packet as she slipped back in her chair.

'Don't exaggerate... old maid!' Sneha was a year older than Nandini.

Pronto, Sneha's head popped back in the room. Nandini glanced up, questioningly. 'Is he still that hunk-a-licious?'

Rolling tongue in her cheek, Nandini growled, 'Even better!'

'Ha!' Sneha exclaimed heading out. 'Maybe all is not lost with Aditya's coming back. 'After a long time, Nandi actually has some colour in her cheeks,' she voiced to her zippo.

8

Guru

S ometime later, an inert Nandini, suddenly, smacked her forehead, 'I am so pathetic! Adi's gunning for my neck and yet here I'm...'

Just then, there was a knock on the door. 'Come in!' She sat a little straighter.

'Hey did you see the email about the company meeting at ten? There are all kind of talks going on outside. Do you know what it's for?' asked Riya, holding the door open.

'Nope, not a clue!' Nandini evaded, no point handing out half-baked information.

'Wow it's almost that time, we should get going.' Nandini grabbed her notebook (the computer kind).

'It's in the hall upstairs,' said Tina, joining them.

Nandini changed her mind. The times were such that they called for security detail. 'Actually why don't you all go ahead, I'll come with Sneha.'

A few minutes later, Nandini and Sneha trotted up the stairs, amidst a cacophony of sneezes. Nandini fiercely whispered, 'Can you, please not douse so much perfume. You just caused an allergy endemic here!'

'I'm just trying to smell nice and not subject them to second hand smoke,' Sneha quipped, not a bit apologetic.

Abruptly Nandini stopped. 'What now?' Sneha asked.

'Maybe I should stay here! I know everything that I need to know.' Remembering Aditya's eyes, Nandini's feet weighed like cement blocks. The mental visual of Aditya pointing an accusing finger at her in front of everyone, and proclaiming in a loud booming voice, 'Nandini Sharma is the reason for all your suffering! Lynch her!' could possibly come true.

Sneha understood. 'Don't be silly, he won't say a thing to you. There are so many of us there. The man has never had a public meltdown.'

'What if, he makes an exception today Sneha?' Nandini worried, stepping out of the way of oncoming human traffic.

'He won't! If it makes you feel better, you can hide behind me.'

‘I’m taller than you!’

‘Then just slouch or something Khali! C’mon, hurry! I do not want to miss a bit! We hardly ever get any excitement like this, around here.’ Grabbing Nandini’s elbow, Sneha tugged her inside the third floor. Their timing could not have been better or worse. The two women stepped smack in the path of Aditya and his entourage. Everyone halted.

‘Hello!’ Aditya sailed a terse greeting in Sneha’s direction. A knows B, B knows C, therefore A knows C, kind of funda. (A-Aditya, B-Nandini, C-Sneha)

He completely ignored Nandini, who anyway appeared captivated by a speck on the nearby chair. The important bandwagon thundered past them.

‘So the boy has actually become a man! Aditya looks every inch of the bona fide international celebrity he has become,’ Sneha whispered, impressed.

Nandini just shrugged her shoulders even though she agreed with her friend. In a matter of seconds, she had felt the raw power and masculinity the man exuded. His global entrepreneur prowess had exalted him to superlative success and fame. The kind you only read in books.

Head above most of the men in his group, Aditya sported a perfectly tailored dark blue suit (probably Brioni or Canali) with a pale blue silk shirt and dull silver tie. His attire, added the word ‘distinguished’ to his handsome physique. Sneha gave her a sympathetic look over.

‘If you are done leching, can we go inside?’ Nandini muttered.

The two friends, made their way, a safe distance behind Aditya and his posse, including Mrs Shukla. Squishing some toes, they snuck in the last rows of the placed chairs.

Loud murmurs rushed among the present, on noticing who had come amidst them. Everyone craned to get a better look, some actually climbed on chairs.

‘Holy cow it’s Aditya Sarin!’

‘What is a Sarin doing here?’

‘He’s so god-looking. Marry me!’

‘Who passed that stinker bomb?’

Now seated on the elongated dais set up at the last minute, Mrs Shukla and the other top brass motioned the employees to take their seats. The bedlam tapered .

Nandini's eyes remained pegged on the shoulder of the man immediately ahead, while she tightly gripped Sneha's hand.

'Aditya Sarin for sure looks important. I guess success does that to one,' whispered Roy, sitting next to her.

Because of the din, Nandini could barely hear him. She leaned closer, 'What did you say?'

That was the moment; Aditya chose to glance their way. He took in Nandini's head touching the other man's shoulder, as the two whispered to each other. The hand on Aditya's knee clenched even though his impassive expression remained unchanged. 'Can we please, get this circus started?' he hastened. Simone promptly shot out of her chair rushing to the key speaker's side, urging him to begin.

Mr Telang, the middle aged CFO forever clad in a 'gray safari suit', strutted toward the podium. Bang in front of the mike, he chose to clear his throat. The hall reverberated with sounds of phlegm gurgling in his windpipe. Just about every one flinched.

He began, 'Dear friends, on this day I have some momentous news to share with all of you!' Deliberate and dramatic pause. 'Any guesses?' Mr Telang, a true blue orator, headed straight for audience participation, regardless of the occasion – a formal company meeting. A committed presenter, with dreams of becoming the next Prabhu Chawla, sees no difference.

The agency staff, usually, extremely verbose to Mr T's antics, due to the exalted presence, remained silent. 'Speak up. Any guesses? Someone? Anyone?' Mr Telang, scanning the crowds heartily, persisted. The masses resolutely avoided his eyes.

'Don't do this to yourself, Telang!' Sneha snickered, softly. Nandini and she slumped even lower trying to stifle their giggles .

Is this a frigging company meeting or a children's birthday party, Aditya cursed, keeping the gracious smile glued on. Irritated he glanced away; across the hall, his eyes collided with Nandini. She immediately ate her smile.

For a second, everyone and everything else faded away. All Aditya saw was Nandini and all she felt was him. Scowling Aditya swivelled his head, breaking the eye contact. 'Mrs Shukla, can we do this quickly. I have a conference call in an hour.'

‘Of course!’ The older woman leaned forward signalling Mr Telang. She pointedly held her watch up.

‘Yes Mrs Shukla, yes, yes!’ Mr Telang literally doubled over. British raj was long gone but sycophancy continued to rule his spine. ‘Friends, Ace Advertising Agency is now a part of the giant, honourable and esteemed Sarin Empire of Industries,’ he declared reverently and speedily.

‘Honourable and esteemed, doesn’t it mean the same?’ Sneha giggled.

‘Sarin Empire of Industries, that sounds wrong,’ Nandini added.

‘Shush!’ Tina hissed.

Apart from them, the revelation had shocked the entire staff into silence. Most of them were contemplating possible pink slips. AAA was like *Echinocyamus Scaber* (smallest sea urchin) in the big ocean of Sarin conglomerates.

Urgent whispers broke out. Aditya stood up. ‘Now dear friends, let us hear our new boss, the man *India Today* hails as the businessman of the year. Please welcome Mr Aditya Sarin.’ The employees dutifully did as bid; giving him a loud ovation, most of them were anyway on their feet.

Resisting a Heimlich manoeuvre, Mr Telang settled for the congratulatory thump on Aditya’s back. Feeling important, he smugly took his seat .

‘Telangji, not *India Today* but *Time Magazine* of USA, awarded Mr Sarin the international business man of the year award,’ Rochak, sitting next, corrected.

Passing a hand, slickly over his heavily oiled hair, (gole ka tael!), Mr Telang replied, ‘Achha! Waise if *Times Magazine* gave Mr Sarin such an important award, toh *India Today* ne bhi kuch diya hoga.’

‘Thank you for such a complimentary introduction,’ began Aditya, bobbing his head duly in the other man’s direction.

Mr Telang proud, sneakily mouthed to Rochak and others, ‘Dekha! Impress kar diya!’

‘Dear peers! Just like my late father, I stand for expansion by adding to my existing strengths and resource optimisation. From this moment on, consider yourself an integral and valuable part of Sarin Industries. I assure you no drastic changes shall be implemented.’ His audience breathed easy. ‘I acquired this company because of a vision I had for all you.’ He paused scanning the crowds, all eyes and some mouths, too, were pegged on him.

‘AAA, like my own career, shall grow manifold and emerge as an advertising agency to reckon with, but not just in the city or state... how about we aim a little further? Next year, let’s bring home an ABBY. But that is only possible if each of you commits your 110 percent to my vision and I promise to give each of your dreams, my all.’

The employees sprightly burst out in motivated applause; seeming to stand a few inches taller, an enthralling chimera beckoned them.

Mrs Shukla repeated Telang’s earlier words, ‘Dekha! Impress kar diya!’

Bol Radha Bol

Aditya then went on to speak about his plans for the company, which were all good. He then invited Mrs Shukla to say a few words, which she did. That was an emotional moment; giving twenty-five years of her life, she had single-handedly grown, Ace Advertising Agency from her living room into an organisation, of over two hundred employees. At the end, she received a prolonged, thunderous applause.

Aditya again took over. 'I would request the department heads to stay back. Everyone else can kindly resume his or her work. One more thing – next week, we will start a cafeteria for the employees. Food and beverages will be provided to the employees at no cost to them.' That announcement got loud hoots. Free food is the best – like sex free from any threats of pregnancy, STDs and HIV.

Within minutes, the numbers dwindled to a handful. 'Listen Sneha, I am leaving. Just fill me in later about whatever is discussed here.' Nandini tripped over some chairs while making a hasty beeline for the door.

Her movement was noticed. Aditya glanced sharply at Simone; she got off the dais hurrying after the younger girl. 'Ms Sharma! Ms Sharma! Nandini, please stop!'

Already outside the hall, Nandini reluctantly paused. Still not turning around, she inquired of the PA, 'What's up?'

'All department heads have to be in there.'

Nandini turned to face the older woman. Hustling her most imperious tone, she said, 'My counterpart, Ms Sneha Verma is in there, so I thought...'

Simone cut her off, '*All department heads* have to be in there. Please follow me.'

Bandit Queen, where's your gun, Nandini stewed. She headed for the conference room, muttering a churlish, 'Fine!'

The assembled, including Aditya and his group, along with the department heads, sat in a circle.

Head bowed, Nandini stiffly slid in the empty chair next to Sneha. She peeked up to flash a strained smile at her colleagues. Super canary shit!

Opposite her, barely a couple of feet away, sat Aditya. His veiled eyes fixed on her. Within seconds, a familiar colour hovered on Nandini's cheeks.

Aditya looked away. 'Please introduce yourselves, your departments, and the number of open projects, giving a very brief status update,' he requested.

Nandini, promptly, opening her notebook scribbled, 'U do it... plsss.' Sneha imperceptibly nodded.

Aditya directed, 'We'll start from my right.'

'Crap! You'll have 2 do it now!' Sneha scribbled right back. Nandini literally trembled! Her hands went cold, and sweat glistened on her forehead. She felt dizzy and nauseous; the panic came on full swing.

Aditya spotted the tell-tale signs. So that has not changed, she is still petrified of it, he thought appeased. Feeling some heat on him, Aditya glanced around. Sneha glared at him.

Coolly, Aditya shifted to listen to the head of account management, Ms Preeti Kaushik – an attractive young woman saying her piece.

Preeti spoke, gazing, only at Aditya. One would think she was having an intimate conversation with him, her tone low, a bright smile drawing attention to her colour stained lips, gesturing hands showing the curve of her arm and torso. Having worked for big companies in the metro cities for the past several years, Preeti had recently joined the AAA. Her aged father's ailing health had forced her to come to this small town, which she openly and vocally disliked.

'Thank you Ms Kaushik. You speak very concisely, giving the big picture in a nutshell,' Aditya complimented the girl, aware of the flirtatious attempts.

'Oh please call me Preeti!' the other girl blubbered.

'Gadheri!' Sneha muttered under her breath.

Soon it will be my turn; I'll be the agency's laughing stock, Nandini worried. Her head felt like it was about to explode.

Next to speak was, Mr Vishal Tiwari, the head of the graphics and media department. A pass out of a renowned college from Delhi, his tenure here was a stopgap arrangement, until his paperwork in an American university came through. Vishal, a born rebel of the society and its norms, while talking to Aditya purposely tapped his kohlapuri clad foot (wearing slippers at work was against the company policy) and rubbed his pierced

eyebrow. There was no rule on pierced eyebrows yet, but Vishal was damn sure he was flouting some rule somewhere!

‘Thank you Mr Tiwari and nice sandals,’ Aditya commented with a straight face. Vishal reminded him of so many of the youngsters one came across nowadays – either orgasmic about brands or arch enemies of materialism.

Nandini was up next. This should be fun... the silly girl has forgotten all that I taught her and has already worked up to quite a state, Aditya deliberated.

Nandini, ferociously, clamped her parched lips; blood sang *chama chama* in her ears. She could almost taste the bile in her mouth. Miserably she glanced up, blanching even further as all and sundry fixed impatient eyes on her. Preeti sighed irritated; Vishal increased the tapping of his ethnic footwear.

‘Nandini, Ms Sharma can’t speak today, her tonsils are hurting. But as the peer manager of the design department, I can give you all and *Mr Sarin* the latest status update,’ asserted Sneha, loudly.

The only way you can refute me, is by disclosing to everyone here that you met Nandini earlier today! Sneha’s eyes challenged Aditya, who gave her a dark look.

Nandini crazily relieved, mumbled a limp sorry and sat back.

‘She does seem kind of sick,’ agreed Mr Telang. ‘Do you need some water, some cola, something?’

The plan thwarted, Aditya backed off, curtly. ‘Fine, Ms Verma continues. Ms Sharma, go get yourself a drink or whatever it is that you need!’

Nandini shot out of her chair, exiting the conference room in less than ten seconds. Aditya’s eyes trailed her.

Imtihaan (flashback begins...)

Nandini fled to the rest room and shut herself in the first clean-to-the-eyes stall she could find. Sitting on the pot, closing her eyes, she strove to breathe normally without breathing too much of the phenyl-laden air.

She heard her own miserable voice in the past as she vented to Badi Maa. ‘I can’t do this... really.’ Nandini was experiencing genuine pain in the chest area. ‘My stomach hurts merely at the thought.’

‘No, no beta! You can do it. Imagine us sitting in front of you and then everything will go smoothly,’ Vibha advised, rubbing Nandini’s back.

‘Nah. It won’t work!’ Nandini, in abject defeat, rested her head on her knees .

‘Just don’t think of Adi,’ Vibha quipped trying to lighten the mood.

‘Badi Maa! This is serious. It seems like in the whole universe, I am the only one with this problem. Whoever I tell including my nerdy professor, either laughs at me or accuses me of making it up,’ Nandini grumbled, sitting up.

‘Maybe he is right!’ On seeing the younger girl’s chagrined expression, Vibha hurriedly clarified, ‘You know all this could be just your brain working overtime. This phobia sounds silly.’

‘Even you, think my phobia of public speaking is silly!’ Nandini howled. ‘That’s it! It is decided. I am not going to college tomorrow. Let the professor flunk me and my entire group, I don’t care.’

Rude laughter distracted them. Aditya ambled closer, laughing hard and loud.

‘You said there was no one home,’ Nandini whined, mortified.

‘Adi was in the gym. Nandi, I had no idea he’d be back so soon,’ Vibha replied and then turned to her son. ‘Aditya Sarin, leave at once!’

‘No way!’ Still chuckling, Aditya flopped next to his mom. ‘A person with verbal diarrhoea is scared of public speaking! This is just pure gold,’ he said, nastily. The cackles kept coming.

‘Shutup! I do not have verbal diarrhoea. Oh! Just go and jump off a building or something,’ Nandini muttered, irate.

‘Adi please leave us alone,’ Vibha ordered.

‘Mom, you’re actually buying this BS? In layman’s terms – *full toss nautanki* !’

‘Adi, mind your language,’ Vibha half-heartedly rebuked.

‘No one understands!’ Huffing, Nandini flounced away from mother and son. She sat heavily on a pool chaise, her back towards them. Resting her chin on a hand, she miserably gazed at the shimmering blue water with unseeing eyes. Just when I thought it could not get worse, it just did – now even he knows, she worried.

Aditya killed his laugh. She seems genuinely upset, he contemplated watching Nandini’s silhouette.

‘Adi please! Don’t make fun of her. Shruti called me earlier today. Because of this fear, Nandi is refusing to go for the presentation which is a part of her final exams,’ Vibha confided.

Raising an eyebrow, Aditya mouthed, ‘Really?’

‘Once in school, Nandi actually passed out when she was forced to go on the stage, to address the assembly,’ Vibha added, her voice lowered.

‘Wonders never cease. Over here she yaps nonstop, doesn’t even bother breathing,’ Aditya replied in an equally hushed voice.

‘You go inside. Let me handle this,’ Vibha asserted, getting up to go towards the quiet girl.

‘Mom stop! Please get some Arnold Palmer (lemonade and iced tea) made for me. I’ll take care of this. Or at least I’ll try,’ Aditya said.

‘No thank you! You will do more damage than good. We all know how wonderfully you two get along.’

‘Mom, I’m serious. I have given innumerable presentations, I’ll teach her a few tricks to beat the nervousness.’

‘You would do that?’ Vibha appeared surprised.

‘Yes *Mom* ! Can I have the AP please?’ Aditya requested. Vibha headed inside, leaving the youngsters alone.

Aditya sauntered over to a sullen Nandini. ‘Leave me alone!’ she muttered, feeling his shadow on her .

Ignoring the dismissal, Aditya took the chaise opposite her. ‘What is this phobia you were talking about?’

Nandini made a move to get up. Aditya caught her wrist, pulling her down. She glared at him.

‘At least talk to me. What do you have to lose? It’s not like it is going to get any worse,’ he coaxed.

‘You’ll just make fun of me,’ Nandini replied, trying to tug her hand free.

Aditya let go. ‘No I won’t! Almost every one of us is a bundle of nerves when addressing a bunch of strangers. There are very few born orators. Public speaking has to be practised, cultivated and attempted several times, for it to come naturally. Dad himself dreads the speech he has to give his employees at the annual company meeting. He gets his speech ready several days before, and keeps going over it in front of the mirror, till he gets it right.’

‘Wow! Paresh Uncle?’ Nandini’s eyes widened. ‘You are not making this up, are you?’ she asked.

‘Lie to make you feel better? *Never*. Cross my heart and hope to die.’ Aditya made a silly sign on his chest.

‘See! You are already making fun of me.’ Nandini’s frown came back on.

‘Maybe you need to do the same. Treat this more lightly. Do you know the material you have to say?’

‘By heart, I even know the other people’s part.’

Aditya raised an eyebrow, as if questioning her sanity.

‘The other people, as in, in my group,’ Nandini clarified.

‘Well then the hard work is already done. Listen very seriously to what I am about to say. Chant it, till it gets stuck in your brain or whatever you have inside your head.’

Overlooking the insult, Nandini prompted, ‘Go on! ’

‘When you are speaking to a group, avoid eye contact with anyone... absolutely anyone!’

‘What do I look at? The ceiling?’

‘I am not finished. When speaking look somewhere in this area,’ Aditya said, touching his forehead where the hairline began. ‘Not in the eye, but here,’ he repeated.

‘It’s not that simple!’ Nandini croaked, clutching her stomach. The anxiety came back just thinking of it.

‘Nandini, go home and practise your speech in front of the mirror a few times, avoiding your own eyes. You’ll get the drift. Also, make sure you get a few hours of sleep.’

Nandini’s eyes shone with hope. ‘Do you really think it will work?’

‘Of course, and worse come to worse, when everything else fails just faint. I heard you are quite good at that,’ Aditya drawled, breaking in a sneer.

‘Wonderful! So you know about that, too?’ Peeved, Nandini clucked her tongue. People around me, possess manhole-sized mouths, she fretted. ‘Thanks for your help!’ Nandini said, haltingly. Showing gratitude to your nemesis is not easy.

‘What time is your presentation?’ Aditya asked.

‘My group is second to go on. So, probably around eleven in the morning. Why?’

‘Just!’ Aditya replied, shrugging his shoulders. ‘All the best, now go home and quit whining.’ He got to his feet.

Because of his recent and unexpected kindness, Nandini meekly took the suggestion.

Bundalbaz

(Flashback continues...)

‘Nandi, eat something,’ Nirbhay coaxed, offering her a piece of sandwich.

‘Papa, I’ll throw up!’ Nirbhay hastily put the food back on the plate.

‘I don’t think I can do this!’ Nandini whimpered, lips clenched, colour pale. The sound of the heavy front door opening, distracted them.

‘Good morning!’ Aditya called out, coming in. He appeared full of high spirits and cheerfulness.

Bloody chavanprash ka dabba, Nandini cursed.

‘Hello Aditya,’ Nirbhay greeted.

‘What are you doing here?’ Nandini blurted out.

‘Somebody’s got to get this nervous wreck to college... right uncle?’ Aditya said, taking a seat at the breakfast table.

‘That effort will require nerves of steel and the patience of a saint,’ Nirbhay replied, smiling.

‘In case you both haven’t noticed, I am still here,’ Nandini crabbily retorted, even though she could not understand why some of the tension dissipated.

‘What will you have for breakfast, Adi?’ Shruti inquired, stepping out of the kitchen, a glass of milk in her hand.

‘Thanks Aunty, I just ate!’

The glass of milk was extended at Nandini, ‘Here you go, drink your Bournvita!’

‘Maa, I swear I will throw up!’

Aditya snickered. ‘You still drink Bournvita?’

Cheerfully, Shruti enlightened, ‘Since class fifth Nandini insisted on making her own milk. Only recently, I found out, that all those years, slyly, she had been adding coffee instead. Now, she is making up for all those years of lying.’

‘No wonder! So many years of caffeine have done obvious damage.’ Aditya quipped.

‘Shut up! Mind your own beeswax!’ Nandini hissed.

‘Nandini!’ Her father, as all parents could, turned her name into a verbal smack. ‘You both should leave now,’ he then added, glancing at his watch.

Nandini bobbed her head several times in the puja room.

‘1000 bucks she won’t be able to speak,’ Nirbhay, softly, remarked to Aditya.

‘5000 she will!’ Aditya responded, quietly.

Nandini hugged her mother tight.

‘You are not going for war!’ Aditya scoffed. Nandini glared at him .

Nandini’s and Aditya’s drive to her college was made listening, to Def Leppard, Tim Mcgraw, Maroon 5 to name a few. One of them listened to music, and the other promised, impeccable behaviour and innumerable good deeds, to every god of all religions.

Aditya’s presence in Nandini’s college created quite a ruckus. Almost every girl and a few boys just for an introduction claimed to be Nandini’s ‘longtiya yaar’.

‘This is as far as you go?’ Nandini croaked, pausing in front of the examination hall. Her bones were conducting a symphony orchestra, with the heart providing crude twangs.

‘I am coming inside,’ Aditya responded.

‘You are not a student. How can you come inside?’

‘At the ardent invitation of your principal,’ Aditya smiled, wickedly. ‘Yesterday after you left, I called your principal and gave him a cock and bull story about wanting to observe the dynamics of the India study system for a thesis, I am allegedly writing. I am a very persuasive man, he couldn’t say no.’

In spite of what she was about to face, Nandini blurted, ‘You do realise how that last part sounded?’

‘Shut up and get inside, guinea pig!’ Aditya ordered, giving her a gentle push. Everyone took assigned seats.

Sometime later, Nandini’s group member said, ‘Please welcome the next speaker from our group, Nandini Sharma. She will share with you the quantum research conducted for this project.’

Nandini dipped even further in the chair, her hair covering her face. ‘Get up move! Everyone is waiting!’ The girl sitting next to her urgently

whispered, repeatedly jabbing Nandini, hard, in the thighs .

Aditya loudly coughed, Nandini instantly looked up. He gave her a slow, confident smile. Nandini managed to get up and hobble over to the podium. Aditya furtively raised his hand. Her eyes blindly followed it. He touched his hairline.

Gluing her eyes to the spot, Nandini commenced speaking... stiltedly. She was almost at the end of her monologue when somewhere in the audience a cell rang.

In the back of the crowd, a boy stood up, his eyes met Nandini's.

Aditya, mouthing an obscene expletive, turned around to glare at the perpetrator.

The damage was done. 'Ughh... the...' Nandini moaned, sweat appearing on her forehead. Some students rudely heckled and the panic attack slammed into her. Nandini hopelessly looked at Aditya. A second later, in an untidy heap, she crumpled to the floor.

Sprinting up the few stairs, Aditya was the first to reach her. 'Nandini get up!' His hand, gently caressed, her sticky forehead and cheeks.

Slyly, Nandini opened her eyes slightly and winked at him. 'When everything else fails, just faint,' she whispered. Aditya caught on. A few others including her professor had joined them.

'What happened?' someone asked, offering a glass of water.

'Probably, because of the exams she hasn't eaten or slept enough,' Aditya said, assisting Nandini in sitting up.

On cue, Nandini raised miserable eyes at her professor. 'Let me try finishing my piece,' she offered, gulping.

'No, no Nandini, you need to rest. I can see that you know your subject. Do not worry about the marks. You have done well. Now go home and rest, finals will begin soon,' her professor replied.

'I'll take her home, she's my neighbour.' Aditya offered, politely.

Crap! Why did he have to reveal that, Nandini fumed silently.

'Oh! *You* live next to the Sarins. What is your father's name?' questioned the principal; concern for the almost dying student second to his curiosity. Small towns functioned like that; everyone was into knowing names, not necessarily the person! Especially when it had anything to do with the state proclaimed first family.

'Nandini and I, we're family friends!' Aditya prattled off, straight faced.

Gaayi puri ki puri bhains pani mein. Might as well apply to another college in another city, Nandini decided. She lurched unsteadily.

‘I should get home. Thank you sir,’ Nandini offered, for effect, resting her head on Aditya’s shoulder. They exited the examination hall followed by several, giggling brainless bimbettes.

‘Are you alright, Nandini? Shall we come home with you?’ the girls heckled, giggling.

‘I will kill you Aditya!’ Nandini threatened, in hushed tones. No one except Sneha knew of her closeness with the Sarins. Detesting pretentious and need-driven friendships, Nandini kept her support system small and genuine.

‘That’s the thanks I get?’ Aditya whispered, back. ‘Fine!’ It sounded more like an ultimatum.

Aaj, Kal, Parso

(Flashback continues...)

Before Nandini knew what hit her, Aditya effortlessly picked her up in his arms. ‘You can’t walk. You poor thing, no problems... I’ll carry you.’ His voice was more than loud.

The girls behind drooled, gushing. ‘Ooh, lucky Nandini. You can carry me too, strong man! Watch your back or we will!’ boomed the loud catcalls and whistles.

Nandini cowered, humiliated. ‘I will kill you Aditya! Put me DOWN!’ Her order sounded more like a plea.

‘Apologise then!’ Aditya ordered, thoroughly enjoying her squirming form in his arms.

Nandini measured the distance to the college gate, too damn far. They would pass the staff room and canteen. ‘Fine! Sorry, now put me down!’ through gritted teeth, she begged.

‘Say please!’

‘Please!’ she bit out tightly.

‘Sorry Nandini, you are too heavy. You will have to walk!’ Aditya said, putting her down. He purposely flexed his arms drawing attention to his buffed upper body. Around them, the puddles of spit, rapidly, increased in numbers and size.

‘All bloody baboons! Missed the train to evolution!’ Nandini cursed. Fuming, she strode towards his car and waited. After waving several times to his tittering audience, Aditya got in and they drove away from the college.

Nandini immediately vented, ‘I can’t believe you are such an egocentric, cocky, arrogant—’

‘Don’t forget, I was here to help you and you know I did,’ Aditya said, his laughing eyes surveying the pretty spitfire. Angry dark eyes, errant strands of hair fluttering against flushed cheeks were captivating. The fact

that she is so clueless of her own look makes her even more alluring, Aditya thought. He put his eyes back on the road.

‘Thank you.’ A few minutes later, Nandini said, gruffly.

‘You’re welcome.’

It dawned on Nandini what she had almost pulled off. ‘Oh my goddd! Can you believe it? I was actually able to speak in front of a crowd for the first time *ever* !’ Her voice held awe.

‘Well that wasn’t really speaking; it was more like headless chicken dance, if you ask me.’ Aditya poker faced, offered his opinion.

Nandini was simply, too, happy to be offended. ‘Aditya seriously, thank you. I could not have done it without you. I owe you big!’ Mindlessly, she patted his hand on the wheel.

The car had stopped on a red light. Aditya grasped her hand and leaned in, his face almost touching hers. Nandini’s eyes, startled, widened .

‘Then, I guess it’s time to pay up,’ he murmured, his fingers stroked the soft skin on the insides of her wrist.

Even though she desperately wanted to, Nandini could not look away. For a few seconds ,they stared at each other. A jarring horn distracted them; Aditya straightened putting the car back into drive.

Nandini blinked several times, turning to stare at the passing vehicles with glazed eyes. What would have happened had we not been interrupted, she wondered, timidly. She touched her wrist, which she had never imagined to be so sensitive to touch.

‘You could begin by dishing digits?’ Aditya said, clearing his throat.

‘Digits, what’s that?’ Nandini asked, still not all quite there.

‘Digits as in phone numbers of some girls in your college, I have the names.’

Nandini turned to look at him; Aditya was now wearing his sunglasses. She saw herself reflected in them. How does he see me? The thought popped in her head to be instantly shooed away. ‘Sure do tell?’ she prompted.

Aditya, staring ahead, rattled off several names and descriptions. Nandini’s not my type. Remember CNN, ESPN! Lassi in a wine glass! Aditya kept reinforcing the thoughts, fighting hard for self-control, which had almost slipped when she had touched him.

Her entire sheltered life, Nandini had never come across anyone like Aditya – self-assured, intelligent, good looking and *so polygamous* .

Nandini could not refrain herself, ‘Wow, eleven numbers! Why are you so much into girls?’

‘I don’t think my parents would approve if I was into boys,’ Aditya bantered.

‘C’mon, you know what I mean?’ Nandini’s face held equal shades of exasperation and curiosity.

‘What’s the harm? I don’t force or lead anybody on. The other person is very clear about my honourable intentions or lack of them,’ Aditya replied.

‘Virtually everyone has a past, which usually features one or two or maybe five people. But you have had and are with so many. Aditya, you could start your own country!’

‘One or two or max five! Where do you get these numbers from... BSE?’ Aditya derided. ‘And please, don’t believe everything you hear and read. Most of it is nonsense.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes really! Anyway, since when did you care?’ Aditya countered.

‘I just don’t understand all this numerous or simultaneous affairs and relationships. You probably don’t believe in marriages either?’

‘Why do you want to know?’ Aditya teased, grinning boyishly, as he glanced at Nandini.

‘Because we are still twenty minutes away from home. What, are you ashamed to talk about it?’ Nandini provoked.

After keeping quiet for several minutes, Aditya finally said, ‘I deeply believe in marriages and feel those should happen only once... and with the person you are very sure of. But I don’t believe in love!’

‘You don’t believe in love !’ Nandini’s face held absolute shock.

At her expression, Aditya smirked. ‘Yup I don’t. However, I strongly and completely believe in lust, sugar coated as attraction, and deep friendship between a man and a woman. So, the day I find someone whom I am deeply attracted to and have a lot in common with, I just might settle down,’ Aditya replied, articulating some very private thoughts for the first time.

Aditya usually kept his reasons and rationale to himself. In his arrogance, he had decided that no one was ‘cool’ enough to be let loose in his mind. So far his non-conforming and bohemian ideas, had lead to some nasty and some quite amazing encounters.

‘Hmmm... well to find out or form a deep friendship, you have to be with *a* person... one person, for longer than a few months,’ Nandini said.

Aditya disagreed. ‘Who says? If and when it has to happen it can happen in days, weeks.’

Nandini fired next. ‘You believe in destiny?’ As men can’t talk enough about sports, breasts and imagined conquests, women inherently trust their lives to animals (zodiac signs), and cards which they can’t even read themselves.

‘Nope, but I believe in opportunity. I think every being gets an opportunity or choice at every crucial step of their life. To get the right things, you have to do the right things.’ Aditya was taken back at his own words. Damn! I sound freakishly similar to the old man, he thought. Near this girl, things were just tripping out of his mouth.

Nandini, comically, scratching her forehead, asked, ‘Are we still talking about the same thing?’

Aditya chuckled; his eyes and dimples crinkling, ‘I don’t think so. Can we ever be on the same page?’

‘Heavy fundas dude!’ Nandini mocked .

Aditya amicably, mocked her right back. ‘Tell me about it. What about you? You must be a total believer in love. Daniel Steel, Linda Goodman and all that!’

‘I believe in love but the kind which doesn’t exist,’ replied Nandini, only to become extremely self-conscious. I had opened my mouth to take a pot-shot at Aditya, why did I say that instead, she wondered.

Aditya gave her a muddled look. ‘What does that mean?’

‘Nothing... really nothing!’

‘C’mon, dish ASAP. I told you stuff didn’t I?’

Shaking her head, Nandini vehemently muttered, ‘*No ways !*’

‘Fine, this car is going nowhere!’ Aditya, abruptly, brought the Mercedes to a complete standstill, bang in the middle of the rushing traffic. Thankfully, they were not rear ended; however, loud horns and voices blared.

‘Drive Aditya! Everyone’s glaring at us,’ Nandini hollered. In the overwhelming cacophony of horns, he tossed her an imperious challenging look.

Nandini gave in. ‘Fine, aaj, kal... parso!’ she, lobbed the three random words, loudly between them.

‘What?’ Aditya asked, baffled.

‘I shall elaborate. Please drive first.’

When they had driven some distance away, Nandini heavily confessed, ‘I believe in unconditional, absolute love. The kind, that lasts you a lifetime, even if the person does not. Today, tomorrow, day after! Aaj, kal, parso!’ Nandini kept her face turned away from him. The revelation was too personal. Nandini would rather have someone catch her without clothes .

‘Wow! You are even crazier than you look. Where did you pick that line? From a fortune cookie or the ass of a truck?’ Aditya exclaimed.

Nandini flashed him a quick wry smile. ‘You won’t understand,’ she said.

Aditya kept glancing back at Nandini’s grave face. He finally asked, ‘You actually believe in that?’

‘Afraid so!’ Nandini’s voice held no shimmy or shake of uncertainty.

‘Have you ever been in that kind of a relationship?’ Aditya inquired, unconsciously tensing.

‘Nope.’

Aditya warned, ‘Be careful Nandini. Don’t fall in love with the wrong man or you’ll die of a broken heart.’

Nandini agreed, ‘I agree. That’s why I have chosen arranged marriage for myself... take away please.’

Silence stretched between them. Either the four-door swanky luxury car suddenly compressed or Nandini and Aditya felt an inordinate closeness to each other.

Aditya increased the cooling. ‘That’s a great idea. Arranged marriage might just work for me, too, with someone of similar tastes, and background. It’s probably simpler than finding the person on your own,’ he voiced, lightly.

‘All the best! We’re home,’ Nandini said, flummoxed by the hurt engulfing her at Aditya’s words, ‘someone with similar tastes, and background.’

‘Nandini, are you there? Earth to mars, earth to mars! Psst he’s gone, come out woman!’ Sneha’s urgent summons jolted Nandini out of her reverie .

Emerging out of the stall, Nandini launched a full-scale hug on her friend. ‘Thank you Sneh! You majorly saved my backside just now.’

‘No sweat! But Nandi what a jerk Aditya is; hitting below the belt like that?’ Sneha’s tone and face, both equally stormy.

Nandini splashed some cold water on her sweaty face.

‘Anyway what were you doing in there, for so long?’ Sneha asked, gesturing at the stall. ‘Building a house?’

Nope, just remembering one. The words darted in Nandini’s head, yet she flippantly replied, ‘Shitting bricks honey, shitting bricks!’

Majboor

The next day, everyone at AAA, wrestled to settle to the regular humdrum. An impossible task though! Google, Yahoo and just every search engine had been tapped into and every internet screen minimised or brazenly open was about Aditya, his family and companies. Profound and trivial tid-bits floated all around, falling into blabbering mouths and snoopy ears.

‘Dude! Aditya attended the Oscars and that too with that Victoria’s Secret chick.’

‘Damn it, he is really rich... a stinking billionaire!’

‘Check out his beach house in Monaco!’

‘Colour me red! He has ten balls!’ the buzzing mouths skidded to a halt.

‘Just kidding! The look on all your faces was priceless,’ Tina chuckled.

Not to forget the few media vans, jostling in the agency’s parking, throwing their questions, mikes and camera at anyone and everyone who came in or went out of the building. The mail carrier, chaiwala getting tea or a lost bystander – all got their fifteen seconds of fame.

Sneha, her expression worried, entered their shared office. ‘Just hope no one gets a whiff of you two,’ she said, setting the warmed food on Nandini’s desk.

A mouth full of sandwich stalled Nandini’s reply. It was speedily chewed and gulped. ‘How would anyone find out?’

‘Digging dirt on the Sarins is all that everyone outside is doing. They and your folks were and are quite close. It is simply a matter of time, before some piece of archived crap surfaces.’

The phone buzzed. Nandini glanced at it – HR Department. She picked up the receiver. ‘Hi?’

‘Nandini, can we talk right now?’ A female voice, on the other end, requested.

‘Sure Simi, shoot what’s up?’

‘Mr Aditya Sarin has decided to make Rochak Chowdhury oversee the Design Department; you and Sneha will be reporting to him.’ Simi’s tone

was sympathetic. Rochak and his deeds were infamous.

‘Can I resign?’ Nandini ventured, playing out her part. Sneha, curious, put her fork down.

‘You are under contract for another few months. In the past, we have never gone after anyone who resigned before the contract ended. But with Mr Sarin here, it might be different or not, I can’t say.’ Simi laid the neutral card.

Even if I think of resigning, Aditya will come after me spewing fire and guns blazing. Then I shall have no choice but to involve our folks, Nandini speculated. ‘How many months?’ she inquired .

‘Almost three months, for your two year period to complete,’ Simi replied.

‘Hell! Three months of suffering that jerk as my boss.’ Nandini loudly exhaled, cursing the agency contract with its department heads, binding them to their current portfolio for a minimum of two years.

Simi then casually dropped the bombshell. ‘Listen, you and the Sarins are family friends. You can appeal to Aditya on a personal level.’

Nandini fumbled taken back, ‘Ughh... where did you hear that?’

‘Somewhere, I don’t remember the details.’ Simi did the clichéd, ‘No one in HR dare give a straight answer.’

‘Our parents are close, but we aren’t. I barely know Aditya.’ Nandini lied, ignoring Sneha’s sarcastic and soft, ‘Yenna rascala!’

‘Oh well! But you could still talk to him,’ Simi persisted.

‘Maybe... I don’t know. Adi,’ Nandini, quickly, corrected herself. ‘Aditya doesn’t mix his personal relationships or lack of them with his work.’ She tried to feign crabbiness.

‘Okay! You do what you deem best. I just wanted to give you the heads up,’ Simi replied.

‘Thanks! Totally appreciate it. Whatever I do or don’t, you shall be the first to know Ms HR,’ Nandini spoke more lightly than she felt.

‘Don’t worry Nandini. As far as that creep Roach is concerned, we all have your back,’ Simi vouched before hanging up.

‘I barely know Aditya.’ Sneha mimicked her. ‘Lying old maid,’ she accused, resuming her lunch.

‘Whatever! It is official. The slime ball is our new boss,’ Nandini muttered, tossing her lunch in the trash bin .

‘At least finish your food,’ Sneha rebuked, unfazed.

‘Lost my appetite!’ Nandini opened the bottom-most drawer of her table, and found the largest chocolate bar in her secret stash – kept for emergencies only. Taking big bites she asked, ‘When do we tell our troops?’

Sneha pointedly looking at the chocolate, Nandini was literally swallowing, said, ‘Hopefully never! Aditya will awaken from the delirium and revoke that order!’

‘Sure, and India will have a single party government! Let’s be real,’ Nandini mocked.

‘Before they leave for the day... I guess! And emotional eating is not healthy,’ Sneha suggested.

‘Yes and cancer sticks are,’ Nandini rejoined. ‘By the way, you had kicked the habit a long time back. Why the sudden charasi paana?’

‘A married woman needs something!’ Sneha drawled. ‘Let’s get some work done here before something else threatens our sanity.’

Sometime later, Sneha’s cell buzzed. Kelly Clarkson’s song, *Breakaway*, resounded in the cabin. Nandini poured over her work, labelled Sneha, ‘Fraud!’ to her face.

The other girl snickered and answered her cell, ‘Hi Kit! What’s going on?’

After listening to Ankit, Sneha quizzed, ‘Can you baby sit Advey tonight? Kit has some plans for us.’

‘Of course woman!’ Nandini agreed, immediately. Time spent with Advey was precious... way better than any food.

‘Yup Nandi is in.’ Sneha resumed, conversing.

Soon, it was close to five. ‘Let’s do it now,’ Nandini said, stiffly.

‘Not interested, get lost!’ Sneha shot .

‘You wish! My standards are a little high,’ Nandini rejoined.

‘We all know how exactly high your standards are!’ Sneha gave her a slow, wicked smile.

‘If you say another word, I will have no choice but to kill you,’ Nandini threatened

‘Okie dokie. Let’s get them in. If you want I’ll handle it, you can jump in whenever you want,’ Sneha offered.

Nandini herded the three musketeers in their cabin. ‘You’re firing us,’ Riya said, cheekily.

‘Worse! Effective from Monday, Rochak Chowdhury is the new head of the design department. Over and above us!’ Sneha gestured at herself and

Nandini. There was shocked silence for a few seconds.

‘No way! I won’t work for that pervert.’ Riya was the first to react.

‘Neither will I! I quit man,’ Tina quipped, frowning.

‘Same here, I won’t work for that lecher!’ Roy added.

‘What did he do to you Roy?’ Nandini teased, trying to ease the tension.

‘What is this... mutiny of 2008?’ Sneha hummed.

‘Look, it’s not as bad as it sounds. Everything shall remain the same. You will still report and work directly for Sneha and me. Your contact with Rochak will be minimal and never alone.’ The last part Nandini voiced gazing at Riya, who had a few acrimonious run-ins with the man.

‘We’ll deal with Rochak Chowdhury, and you’ll deal with us,’ Sneha asserted.

The faces still did not perk up. ‘Nandini, how could you of all people agree to something like this?’ Riya demanded.

‘I don’t have a choice. I’m legally bound for the next few months.’

‘Rochak’s probably manipulated this. Aditya Sarin is obviously clueless to that man’s true character,’ Tina said.

‘Maybe,’ Nandini agreed.

‘Anyway, what’s done is done. Do not lose any sleep over this. As Nandini said, nothing much will really change!’ Sneha assured.

After much convincing, Tina, Riya and Roy agreed to remain with the agency. The three went out, unhappy.

‘I hope Aditya isn’t playing us?’ Sneha voiced a thinking crease between her eyes.

‘What do you mean?’ Nandini quizzed.

‘Just hope Aditya isn’t in cahoots with Rochak? Giving Roach free hand, to do his own dirty work.’

‘No Sneh. Aditya has no clue what a creep Chowdhury is. He will figure out soon enough.’

Sneha logged off. ‘We’ll see! I’m calling it a day. Are you coming?’

‘I still have some work, maybe another fifteen or twenty minutes. What time do you want me to come tonight?’ Nandini asked, attempting to organise the strewn papers on her desk.

‘I think eight, should be fine!’

‘Sounds good. Adios Chiquita and tell my friend we shall have fun!’ Nandini called out.

Finally, when Nandini stepped out of her cabin, the floor was completely empty. ‘Crap, what time is it?’ she muttered peeping at her watch. Close to 6:30!

‘I better rush!’ she breathed, sprinting towards the elevator. Nandini turned the corner and rammed headlong into someone. The body was familiar!

Yes Boss

‘This is not your bloody house. Look where you are going!’ Aditya snapped, steadying them both, and the clutter in Nandini’s hands.

Nandini quickly attempted to disentangle. Aditya promptly pulled his hands away.

However, it wasn’t soon enough. Nandini’s body hummed with awareness from the fleeting touch. Focusing her eyes somewhere near his shoulder, Nandini sassily mumbled, ‘Sorry! Hope I didn’t hurt you.’

Aditya narrowed his eyes. This girl definitely has a death wish, he harshly reflected. ‘Where are you going?’ he barked.

‘Home!’ Nandini chose to roll her eyes of the wall, rather than look at him.

‘I don’t think so. Come with me!’

‘We’re going for dinner?’ asked Nandini, clamping her lips to thwart the grin. Getting under Aditya’s skin and irritating the life out of him was as natural to her as salt to a Bloody Mary or kanda to pavbhaji.

‘Even worse!’ Aditya shot back, beckoning her to join him in the elevator.

Eye balling Aditya, Nandini fidgeted where she was.

‘Hurry up!’ Aditya liked the wariness, belatedly evident in the petite face.

‘Fine!’ Nandini’s tone was defiant, as she got in. Now what has taller version of Hitler planned for me, she wondered. Her head bent, she slouched away from him.

Aditya kept his eyes on the elevator doors; disgruntled by his response to the soft pliant form, he had briefly held. Shortly, the heaving elevator doors opened to the lion’s lair... 3rd floor.

Relieved, Nandini sighed. Aditya’s PA and several workers milled about. The floor was a flurry of activity. Walls being painted, furniture and plants carried in and out. The place was getting spruced up to match the grandeur a Sarin head honcho deserved.

‘Wait for me in there!’ Aditya tersely ordered, motioning at the smaller conference room. Nandini did as bid, tentatively smiling at Simone who turned her face away. Budhiya is loyal to her boss, Nandini silently ridiculed, as she waited in the conference room.

A few minutes later, Aditya reappeared carrying a folder and his laptop. ‘Sit!’ he snapped lowering his form in a chair facing her.

Nandini shrugged her shoulders and did so. I will die if I have to be so subservient to him, she meditated.

‘The performance of your department is crappy! Why?’ Aditya barked, unexpectedly putting Nandini on the spot .

‘Well, because... umm...’ Nandini was caught off guard.

‘In the last two years, since you and Sneha took over the department, you have made a total of thirty-three presentations to prospective clients and were able to convert only seven. That is less than three percent. How do you justify that level of inefficiency and incompetence?’ Aditya further insulted.

With the sharpness of Chacha Chowdhury (the tiny old man, with a sari-clad Babooshka doll for a wife and a giant minion, whose brain functioned faster than a computer), Nandini answered, ‘I think the conversion rate is so low primarily because of lack of adequate research and supporting infrastructure within the company. Identification and complete understanding of clients’ needs was missing among the top brass. Also, we face heavy competition from bigger and better rivals.’

‘How easily you pass the buck on. I am sure your failures are always someone else’s fault,’ Aditya spat at her.

Nandini opened her mouth to educate Aditya of her persistent request for more resources, research and head count. However, she closed it; discussion with a frothing saand was pointless. Nandini offered a no-brainer solution, ‘Fire me!’

Aditya’s scowl deepened. ‘You would like that wouldn’t you? You will stay here and earn every cent of the salary you take. I’ll work you to the bone if I have to, but you will deliver. This degree of oafishness shall not be tolerated,’ he thundered.

Nandini looked away. That accusation pricked. Mind-numbing and backbreaking work was all she had been doing for the last couple of years. Nandini strove to remain at the other end of the table and not lunge for

Aditya's collar and jugular. If only the grouch had seen the conversion rate before us, he would not be so upset; Nandini reasoned trying to calm down.

But Aditya had! Comprehensive research and strong analytical skills were part of his work ethic. However, here his agenda was entirely different.

Tired and emotionally fatigued, all Nandini wanted were a relaxing bath and a cup of coffee. 'Fine! Just tell me what and how you want me to do it and I'll do it.'

Nandini bit her lip in utter humiliation. Her interior monologue never ceased to desert her though. Dharti phat jaaye so that I can take cover! What double meaning crap am I saying to him?

Just for a fraction of a second, Aditya seemed to lose track of the constant scowl, stuck on his face when he was around her. Clearing his throat, he said, 'To begin with, I want a complete list of all the presentations made in the last three years. The companies they were made to, and the research done by the agency. Also, I want to know on what grounds were they accepted or rejected and the follow up, if any, done.'

Nandini nodded. 'Sure! You shall have that report on your desk by end of Monday.'

Smirking, Aditya hooked his arms behind his head and leaned further back in the chair. Nandini averted her eyes from the rippling toned torso in the silk shirt.

'I don't think I made myself clear. I want that report before you leave for the day... *today*,' Aditya crooned.

'You're kidding, it'll take hours!' dismayed, Nandini shot back.

'So, the sooner you start the better,' Aditya pointed out, caustically.

'I have plans for tonight. '

Aditya surging to his feet, bit out, 'Cancel them!' He turned around and walked out of the room into his office, beckoning Simone to follow.

Nandini, open-mouthed, stared after him. 'Will he come after me, if I run out of here?' she asked the silent table. 'This Aditya probably will, and the chances of him indulging in kambal kutai minus the kambal are very high,' Nandini herself answered on behalf of the silent furniture. Peeved, she flopped on the nearby chair.

'Yes Aditya!' Simone asked, watching Aditya lower his frame in his chair.

‘I need you to do two things before you leave.’ Aditya loosened his tie and unbuttoned the topmost button of his shirt. A definite sign he was done for the day.

‘Sure.’

‘Firstly, please make a good pot of coffee!’

‘Will you be staying back?’ Simone inquired.

‘No, not for me, for Ms Sharma! She’ll be here for some time. Secondly, with all these workers around, direct the security to station one guard on this floor and one on the second,’ he finished.

‘I will be locking your office and the cabinets outside. Do you still want to station guards on each of the floors?’

Reluctantly, Aditya explained, ‘Ms Sharma will be working here all by herself. Tell the guards, after she is done, she should be escorted to her car. I don’t need any lawsuits!’

‘Of course, is there anything else?’ Simone asked, not buying the lawsuit part a bit.

‘Are the arrangements for my mother’s arrival in place?’

‘Absolutely, the house and the gardens were in impeccable condition. The other arrangements have been executed as you requested.’

‘Thank you! You have a car, full time at your service?’ Aditya probed. Simone nodded.

‘And, your accommodations are satisfactory?’

‘A deluxe room in a five star hotel can be nothing but satisfactory. Thank you for that,’ Simone replied, gratefully.

‘Simone, I promise once things get settled here, I’ll have you back to your family.’ Aditya’s face lost some of its stiffness.

‘Don’t worry; my two teenage sons don’t require a mother to baby sit them. Moreover, with my husband flying in every weekend, again thanks to you, I’ll be fine here. But thank you for asking.’

‘Anytime!’ Genuinely fond of his dependable assistant, Aditya smiled.

Simone exited the room. She passed the conference room where she saw Nandini getting ready to call someone. ‘Aditya despises the girl yet he thinks of security and coffee for her. What is going on between these two?’ she voiced to the file in her hand.

Nandini dialled a number on her cell. After few rings someone answered, ‘Hi, it’s me. Listen, something has come up at work. I’ll be late.’ She glanced at her watch, ‘Around nine. Would that be too late?’

‘Nine is fine but won’t you be tired? We can cancel our plans. Sneha and I will go out some other night,’ Ankit offered.

‘No, don’t you dare cancel on me. I was really looking forward to it tonight!’ Nandini asserted, craving to inhale Advey’s baby smell, listen to his innocent sweet chatter as he curled up in her lap.

‘Nandi, what’s going on?’ demanded Sneha, taking the receiver from her husband .

‘I’ll fill you in later... gtg! The psycho’s on my tail,’ grinning wryly and still on the phone Nandini shifted. Instantly, she froze.

Aditya stood inside the room, holding the door open for his PA, who entered with a pot of coffee. ‘I’ll call you later,’ Nandini hung up.

From Aditya’s livid expression, Nandini knew he had heard the last part. Wrong! He had shamelessly eavesdropped on the entire conversation.

Aditya waited for the older woman to exit the room, which she did after a quick hurried, ‘Goodnight’. He then turned to face Nandini, who had retreated some distance further in the room.

‘If I ever find you lose mouthing me or anyone else working here, to your boyfriend, you will dearly regret it ,’ Aditya threatened, darkly.

Nandini realised he had misunderstood. ‘That was—’

Aditya rudely cut her off, ‘Save it for someone who cares.’ He sharply exited the conference room.

Nandini watched him gather his briefcase from Simone’s desk, began, enacting the famous DDLJ scene, as she whispered, ‘Palat, palat!’

Aditya slung his laptop bag on the shoulder. ‘Abe palat!’

Aditya got in the elevator. ‘Pleaseeeee palat!’

The elevator door shut and not once did Aditya look at her.

‘Go to hell! As if I care!’ Nandini kicked the table. Wincing, she sank in a chair, depressed and alone.

Coming out of the building, Aditya curtly fobbed off a few reporters. Security guards made way for him. Angrily, he slammed the door of his Audi convertible, harshly. Even in the blaze of red he winced at his carelessness to the car.

‘Why are you so pissed that she is dating someone?’ cursing that thought, Aditya pressed the accelerator hard. Screeching, the car took off.

Bombay

Finally, at 8.50 in the night, an exhausted Nandini staggered inside the Verma residence. ‘You look like crap!’ Sneha said, opening the door.

‘Gee thanks! You made my day,’ Nandini muttered.

Massaging Nandini’s shoulders, Sneha propelled her towards the sofa. ‘Oh that feels good Sneh. You won’t believe what that man made me do.’ Nandini stretched her tired form on the leather sofa.

‘Oh no... what?’ Sneha asked, cupping her face, in utter shock

‘Cut it out drama queen! Aditya gave me truckloads of work to finish before I left tonight.’

Sneha clucked sympathetically.

‘Anyway, you guys please feel free to leave, where’s my little munchkins?’ Nandini inquired.

‘You obviously haven’t checked your messages. We cancelled our plans. Advey has fever.’

‘Darn! How much is it?’ Nandini asked, sitting up concerned.

‘A little less than hundred. Hopefully, he’ll be okay after a goodnight’s sleep. Why don’t I pour us a glass of chilled wine, order some food and rent a good movie? Let’s have an impromptu ladies-night-in,’ Sneha suggested.

‘Perfect! But are you sure Ankit won’t mind?’

‘Kit is not here. We were supposed to meet some long lost college bud of his, so I sent him by himself. Chungfa or Anaicha?’ Sneha asked, upholding up two home-delivery menus.

‘Chungfa. Be sure to order the chicken lollypop,’ Nandini said, picking up the editorial page lying on the sofa. ‘What are you reading?’

Sneha, a newspaper glutton, subscribed to numerous papers and actually read each page, start to finish. ‘There was a very interesting article, on that molestation incident which happened a few months ago in Mumbai on new year’s eve,’ Sneha replied, fetching the wine.

‘Can’t believe few groups had the audacity to hold the women’s attire responsible for the depravity,’ Nandini recalled, bummed.

Sneha rudely snorted. ‘When women covered from head to toe or draped in six yards of cloth are not safe from determined perverts, how dare any of us think any different?’

Nandini shook her head. ‘It’s absolutely depressing! For instance, someone in front of you accidentally drops a thousand bucks. Whether you steal the money or give it back is a reflection of your character, not the person who dropped it.’

‘Point melord?’ Sneha asked .

‘Similarly, if a man assaults a woman wearing a mini skirt and ignores a fully clad female, that is a reflection of his character and not the woman’s. The man is the pervert, the criminal, not the woman. She is a victim!’ Nandini asserted.

‘That’s true!’ Sneha agreed, handing Nandini the wine.

‘No one really cares anymore for what is right and what is wrong. All sides have political ambitions, vested interests or too damn busy lives to bother. Anyhow, I am going to hug Advay. I need to hold him.’ Nandini got to her feet.

‘I want all the details of what happened between you and Mr Midas. Every single sordid bit,’ Sneha called out, using one of the tags the press had anointed Aditya with.

‘I knew there had to be a selfish reason for you to offer me food,’ taunted Nandini disappearing in the little tot’s room.

‘I’m not paying either.’

Finally, close to 11.30 pm, Nandini got to her house. Her mother was up, dutifully watching the last from her regimen of TV soaps. One would think the doctor prescribed them.

‘Now, who died or had plastic surgery?’ Nandini teased lying down on the sofa, resting her head in Shruti’s lap.

Contrary to popular belief and their frequent squabbles, Nandini was quite close to her mom and vice versa. Only neither of them said it, probably waiting to spot a pig whizzing around.

Shruti stroking her hair murmured, ‘Tired, Nandi?’

‘Hmmm!’ Nandini shut her eyes, enjoying the relaxing strokes. There was something about a mother’s touch. It always eased whatever the ailment.

‘You work so hard in the office and then have to baby sit for your friends,’ Shruti grumbled, massaging her almost asleep daughter’s scalp .

‘Maa, you know I do it because I want to. I love Advey.’

‘When will you have kids of your own and get married?’

‘Cool mom, very modern,’ Nandini remarked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Have a kid and then get married, very bold and beautiful types!’
Nandini teased.

Shruti had to laugh. ‘Be serious, Nandi!’

‘Please can we change the topic? Kindly tell me what was the highlight of your and papa’s day.’ Nandini snuggled deeper in her mother’s lap.

‘Nothing really! Oh yes, Adi called.’

Nandini’s eyes shot open and she stiffly sat up. ‘Aditya Sarin called?’

‘Yes, Aditya Sarin of course! Who else do we know by that name?’

‘So why did he call?’ Nandini asked, keeping her mother focused.

‘What do you mean why did he call? He called to say hello, talked to your father and me for quite some time. We also discussed plans of receiving Vibha didi at the airport.’

‘That’s all!’

‘Adi told me something else missy!’ Shruti playfully whacked her on the arm.

‘What was that for?’ Nandini muttered.

‘Why didn’t you call up and tell us that Adi bought Ace Advertising Agency?’ Shruti rebuked.

‘Sorry! The new takeover really kept me busy.’ You cannot imagine how, Nandini contemplated.

‘Well anyway, I told him everything about your good-for-nothing company!’ Shruti confessed, sagely .

‘What did you tell him?’ Nandini demanded, all imaginary antennas buzzing.

‘About how that Mrs Shukla makes you work so hard, for mere peanuts; about the lack of communication and creativity in the higher management of the company.’ Shruti’s expression was smug.

‘Mom, sometimes you speak too much!’ Nandini flared.

‘That’s the thanks I get.’

‘Whatever! Please do tell what Aditya’s response was?’

‘Verbatim?’ Shruti teased.

‘Maa !’

‘Adi said, “now that I’m there, I’ll make sure Nandini gets everything she truly deserves.” See what a thoughtful boy,’ Shruti chattered, as Nandini abruptly got up, heading towards her bedroom.

‘Thoughtful? Yeah sure! Even Dr Hannibal Lector was very thoughtful. Killing and eating his victims, was all he thought about,’ Nandini muttered, drawing the covers over her head.

Main Hoon Na

(Flashback – in a dream; Nandini's!)

Aditya strolled in the family room to see his mother and Mrs Sharma perusing something in a magazine.

Nandini engrossed in a book, extended on a recliner. 'What are you reading, *Chicken Soup for the Fool?* ' mocked Aditya, dropping down on the plush ottoman next to her.

'Nope. I am reading 101 ways of recognising a nut!' Nandini shot back, still reading.

'Self-awareness! That's good reading!'

For an answer, Nandini, slyly, rubbed her chin with her middle finger. Grinning, Aditya turned to his mother. 'Mom, I'm going away for three months!'

'Finally some good news! What are the charges?' Nandini piped, slamming the book shut.

'Attempted murder of a brainless wonder!'

'Ooh! You mean suicide! '

'Will you both please stop this nonsense?' Vibha interrupted.

'Nandini, let Adi speak,' Shruti said, her tone sharp.

Nandini opened her mouth to protest, but Aditya cut her off. 'Dad and AB want me to spearhead the new project for our manufacturing sector. For that, offices have to be set up in Big Apple and Dubai. There will be a lot of travel back and forth, so staying here doesn't really make sense. I'll be working out of our Mumbai HQ.'

'When do you have to leave?' Vibha questioned, her expression glum.

'Tomorrow morning. Mom please, don't look like that, it's just few months.'

'You won't understand what a mother feels when a child goes away,' an empathising Shruti offered. Namit and Meghna had recently moved to Mumbai.

'Badi Maa, it's no big deal. GRBR yaar! We'll have more fun without him.' Nandini added.

'GRBR? What does that mean?' Aditya asked.

‘GRBR means, good riddance to bad rubbish,’ replied Nandini, her tone condescending.

Aditya shook his head. ‘You are so lame! Why do I even talk to you?’

‘Because you’re so needy and pathetic! And because no one else will talk to you. I am just doing charity.’

‘Needy and pathetic! Big words for someone like you. Charity is what I do when I let you sit next to me or touch my CDs and blue rays, which you literally beg for!’

‘The only thing I’ll ever beg for is a knife, so I can do you-know-what-to-you—’

Aditya cut in, ‘How about, I first demonstrate you-know-what-to-you with a knife then?’

‘Enough, both of you!’ Shruti and Vibha hollered simultaneously.

‘Do you both even realise that there are other people around you?’ said Vibha, ticked.

‘If no one else steps in, these two could go on for days without a break,’ said Shruti, shaking her head.

Nandini experienced some awkwardness, so did Aditya. He got to his feet. ‘Mom, I’ll be in the gym. Bye Auntie, bye brainless wonder!’ he said, exiting. This time I win the ‘last insult’ contest, thought Aditya. He broke into a brief victory dance on his way to the gym.

Next day, around 9 am, the phone in the Sharma household rang.

‘Chotu, it’s Adi. He wants to talk to you,’ Nirbhay broadcasted to his daughter.

Nandini was engrossed in seeing a sea sponge beat the dear life out of a squid while a squirrel with her head stuffed in a glass bowl, looked on. Sponge Bob Square pants sillies! Nandini watched either cartoons or news while having breakfast.

‘Adi wants to talk to me? He’s on his deathbed or what?’ she whispered, grabbing the receiver from her father who always saw humour in her silly jokes.

‘I heard that!’ Aditya retorted.

‘Good! What do you want?’ Nandini asked.

‘Why aren’t you here yet? I am leaving in twenty minutes!’

‘Your highness, am I supposed to carry your bags to the car?’

‘Not for me, for mom!’ Aditya barked, hanging up .

‘Papa, I’m going over to the white house (Nandini’s nickname for the Sarin mansion). Aditya is leaving for a few months and I think Badi Maa is depressed.’ Nandini hurried out.

‘Ask her over for lunch. After that maybe all you ladies can catch a movie or something,’ Nirbhay shouted.

‘That’s a great idea!’ Vibha, Shruti and Nandini, did not miss a single movie in the theatres – Hindi, English or with subtitles. No amount of teasing and mocking by the rest of the clan could encumber the movie struck trio.

On entering the living room, Nandini spied Aditya hauling his luggage down the stairs. He looked up on hearing footsteps.

‘Where’s Badi Maa?’

‘In her room.’ Aditya opened and started putting a few things laid on the dining table into his suitcase. Nandini observed him, bemused; she had assumed the servants packed for him or lugged his stuff around.

Aditya looked up. ‘What?’

Nandini shrugged her shoulders and looked away. On cue, Vibha and Paresh appeared from their room. ‘Hello Nandi,’ Paresh warmly greeted her. ‘You’re ready to leave, son?’ he asked Aditya.

‘Yup, where’s AB?’

‘We’ll pick him up from the office. Let’s go!’

Seema bhabhi got a small bowl of dahi and cheeni, which she handed to her Vibha.

‘Take care of yourself; make sure you eat your food on time. Come back soon Adi,’ Vibha sniffed, feeding her beloved son.

‘Mom please! You are so filmy,’ Aditya hugged her.

Next, Aditya hugged his sister-in-law. ‘Seema, take care of yourself... for me.’ In good humour, he received an elbow in the ribs .

Nandini standing next to Seema bit her lip. What should I do if he hugs me, she thought.

Aditya gave her a quick side-glance. He stepped towards her. Nandini stiffened.

‘Take care!’ was all Aditya said and did.

‘You too,’ Nandini murmured, slackening; the fleeting disappointment confounding.

The servants carried the bags to the awaiting car. Everyone except Aditya, who was yapping on his cell, headed outside.

Few minutes later, his father impatiently said, 'Seema beta, see what is taking Adi so long?'

Seema, a serious horticulturist, was at some distance inspecting the newly laid grass with her mother-in-law.

Poised close to the main door, Nandini offered, 'I'll go and check.' She ventured inside and glanced around. There was no sign of him.

'Aditya, Aditya, Uncle is calling you!'

'I'm right here!' sounded Aditya's voice.

Startled, Nandini whirled around. Aditya stood close behind, his eyes fixed on her.

'Uncle is calling you. You're... getting late!' Nandini stuttered, unnerved by the sudden proximity.

Aditya languidly hooked a finger under Nandini's chin, tipping her face to his. Wary, she stared back.

After a few, kind of like waiting-for-the-needle-to-pause on the weighing scale, breathless seconds of Nandini's life, Aditya murmured, 'Try not to miss me too much!' Briefly, his thumb caressed her chin, the touch so brief that Nandini felt she had imagined it.

Speedily Aditya headed out. Nandini touched her chin, struggling to comprehend the melancholy stoking her.

'What nonsense! It was nothing!' Nandini challenged the empty hall, shaking her head trying to free it of someone. When she finally emerged outside, Nandini saw the car leaving the driveway. Her eyes fell on Badi Maa who forlornly gazed at it.

'Badi Maa, it's time to open the champagne bottle!'

'Adi has been away for so many years, I was just beginning to enjoy being a mother to two sons. Now, he is gone again.'

'It's no big D, four months will fly like this,' Nandini snapped her fingers, 'plus you have me to keep you busy. Remember ME?'

'Even you'll get married and go away one day. Then again I'll be alone!' Vibha grumbled.

'Please, now you are purposely thinking of reasons to get sad. Let us go home. Mom is waiting for us. We all are going for a movie after lunch. Shahrukh's Khan's latest, Main Hoon Na,' Nandini said, imitating the 'hair flicking shoulder touching' immensely popular move.

'Oohhh! I like Shahrukh Khan,' Mrs Sarin, squealed, like a giddy headed teenager.

‘Oohhh! I like him too!’ Nandini squealed right back.

Dil, Dosti, etc.
(Flashback continues...)

As days passed into weeks, Nandini became a zombie-sans human flesh devouring part. She began losing interest in everything... food, books, even movies! No company was spicing enough and her ten-hour sleep was down to seven.

Constant binges on chocolates and ice creams became a way of life. Every sunset seen through the pollution-laden air, brought a sigh to her lips. Her heart always skipped a beat at the sudden jangle of the phone and the brief moment before the email inbox popped open.

‘If I tell anyone, I’ll surely be committed,’ Nandini agonised, lying prone on her bed.

‘Nandi you weirdo, where are you?’ Sneha’s voice resounded outside her door. Like a banshee, Nandini streaked across her room. The relief to her malady was here .

‘I’m so glad you’re back! What took you so long... you b#%!?’ she fired, almost lifting Sneha off her feet.

‘Hey! Get off me! I was gone for mere three weeks,’ said Sneha, glowing fresh on her return, from a family vacation to Europe.

‘Sneh, I think I’m seriously ill! Something is really off woman!’ Nandini pulled the other girl inside her room, firmly bolting the door behind them.

‘You’re pregnant!’ Sneha teased.

‘Shut up! I’m no Kunti, I have to have sex first. Something really freaky is happening!’ Nandini literally chewed her nails.

‘Freaky how?’ Sneha asked, sprawling on the love seat near the window.

‘I can’t sleep!’

‘Take sleeping pills.’ Sneha shrugged her sandals off.

‘I don’t feel like eating anything.’ Nandini paused and then said, ‘Just colossal amounts of ice creams and chocolate!’

Sneha sat up. 'Hold on! What kind of music have you been listening too?'

Self-consciously, rubbing an ear, Nandini's answered, 'Ghazals and love songs!'

'Not eating, not sleeping, listening to sappy songs... anything else?' Sneha grilled, counting the symptoms off her fingers. Her face bunched as she rested on the verge of a momentous discovery.

'I kind of feel jittery whenever the phone rings.'

'Oh gosh, this is serious babes!'

'What is it? Dish ASAP!'

'Where are the DVDs you recently bought?' Sneha asked, abruptly changing the topic .

Bewildered, Nandini indicated the almirah on the other side.

Sneha quickly opened it. 'Let me see! Where are you hiding?' she murmured, running her seeking hands over the DVD covers. 'Got it!' she exclaimed, holding one up.

Nandini crouched forward, 'Bridget Jones's Diary! Are you loco (insane in Spanish)? What does that movie have to do with me?'

'Watch and learn child, watch and learn!' Inserting the DVD, Sneha quickly forwarded it to the part where Mark Darcy leaves for the US of A. The left behind, yearning Bridget sometime gazes miserably out of the window and at other times consumes an entire fridge, or nervously answers the doorbell. All this while, sappy songs strum in the background.

Sneha halted the movie and asked, 'Bimbo now do you get it?'

'What rubbish! I am not pining for Colin Firth or Mark Darcy. You are such a gadheri sometimes.'

Sneha tapped her knuckles hard on Nandini's head. 'You fool, of course you are not pining for Colin Firth. You are pining... period. Spill it out who are you thinking of?'

'No one!' Nandini chimed quickly... too quickly.

'Don't lie to me Nandi. Puke it out right now!'

Nandini clenched her lips and shook her head, resolute. This secret was going with her to her grave.

'Okay, if you don't tell me right away, I shall go down and talk to your folks. Tell them every itty-bitty detail, and my own very astute conclusions,' Sneha threatened. She rotated and began walking in slow motion, in the direction of the door.

Her hand had barely grasped the knob, when Nandini softly confessed.
'Aditya.'

Sneha, flabbergasted, spun back. Nandini sat doubled over the bed, her head thrust in the pillow.

'Aditya, Aditya Sarin?' Sneha screeched.

The head in the pillow bobbed, tentatively once and then fiercely, several times.

'Kulta, couldn't you fall for someone in your college, or your neighbour or even your doodhwala? Why Aditya Sarin? *He's so bloody out of our league*,' Sneha voiced, amused and astonished.

'Aditya is my neighbour!' Nandini reminded, miserably.

'Jahaan panha, neighbours on the other side. Not the globally-most-eligible-bachelor-kinds. Does Aditya know?'

'*Are you insane?*' came Nandini's muffled reply.

'Do you think he might feel the same?'

'ARE YOU INSANE?' Nandini repeated her words, finally getting up to face her friend. 'He treats me like a complete idiot; "brainless wonder" was the most recent compliment.' Nandini's face reflected despair.

Sneha sat down next to Nandini and put her arm around her. Nandini gave her small smile.

'I have a solution,' Sneha said.

'What?'

'Get away from him. Migrate to a country with only burkha-clad women. That's one place Adi is never coming!' said Sneha, smiling broadly.

'Very funny! Anyway, he is not here. He is gone for three-four months.'

'Oh! So that is when our local *laila* realised her one-sided love.'

'Shut up!' Nandini snapped, and then poured, 'The other day, Badi Maa mentioned that Aditya, for the past several days, has been calling regularly to chitchat. He has asked about everyone, everyone excep—'

'Except yours truly!' Sneha finished.

Nandini glumly nodded. 'What will I do Sneh?'

'Get married!'

'Baqvaas! How will marriage help?'

'Once you get some action from someone else, you'll forget all about Aditya Sarin.'

Nandini snickered. ‘Speaking from experience, are we, Queens of Ghantaghar?’ The two best friends giggled uncontrollably.

‘So Dada Kondke! Going forward, what’s your plan then?’ Sneha questioned after a few minutes of mirth.

‘Complete and total denial. Ignore the subject at all times.’

‘That hasn’t worked for the last billion years or so.’

‘Coz it hasn’t been tried hard enough, I’ll make it work! You’ll see,’ Nandini asserted.

‘Have it your way. But all this while I thought you didn’t like the dude,’ Sneha wondered, remembering the constant bickering between Aditya and Nandini.

‘I, too, am surprised. I always thought that on some level we were friends,’ Nandini confessed, sighing.

Right away Sneha smacked her on the arm.

‘Hey! What’s that for?’ Nandini demanded, rubbing her stinging limb.

‘How dare you forget the first tenet of love set by *Maine Pyar Kiya*?’

‘What?’ Nandini grumbled.

‘Ek ladka ladki kabhi doost nahi hotein. Kapkapati raatein, bhadakti aag, dhadakte jism, etc., remember?’ Sneha retorted. The two again dissolved into giggles .

‘Sh#\$! Seriously Sneha, what am I going to do?’ Nandini questioned, hugging her knees thoughtfully.

‘Take up your Chacha on his invitation of living with him in Chicago and pursuing a degree there,’ Sneha at last, gravely answered.

After a few minutes of silence, Nandini asked, ‘So how was your vacation?’

‘Interesting and eventful!’ Sneha replied.

‘Give me the details!’

‘That’s another story for another day. Today let’s deal with yours,’ Sneha replied.

Once Nandini accepted her intense feelings for Aditya, she also saw the futility of her one-sided heartache. ‘When he gets here, I’m going to stay miles away from Aditya. But when will he get here, it’s—’

‘Dil haara re! Haare re!’ jolted Nandini out of her sleep and her dreams. ‘Bloody tumhare dil ki to—’ cursed Nandini. Just then, a few loud raps sounded at the door. ‘Tullu I’m up! Stop breaking the door!’

Sitting on the potty, Nandini grumbled to the toilet roll. ‘Na life mein sex, na dream mein sex. The alarm and Tullu had to go off just as the fun was about to begin!’

Yeh Tera Ghar Yeh Mera Ghar

An hour or so later, Nandini came down the stairs, with a line of excuses ready on her tongue – excuses to avoid going to the airport. ‘Ma, I can’t...’ Her words died as she saw, who else besides her parents, sat at the dining table.

‘See Nandini, Aditya is already here. We are all, together, going to the airport,’ Shruti piped.

Coldly, Aditya glanced at Nandini’s scrubbed face and wet hair flopping around the face and shoulders (Nandini disliked hairdryers). In a contrived polite tone, he inquired, ‘Hello Nandini. You didn’t complete what you were saying?’

Chacha Chowdhury, again, came to her rescue. ‘I was just saying that I can’t find my sneakers.’

Aditya’s lips tightened. ‘You are planning to wear sneakers with that ethnic skirt!’

‘Yes! Does it bother you?’ Nandini retorted, boldly. Shruti and Nirbhay’s presence played dual roles – Nandini’s protectors or witnesses to her violent and untimely end.

‘Nandini!’ Shruti admonished.

‘Let us leave, we don’t want to get late,’ Nirbhay urged.

Quite a few hours later, Nandini stood, quietly, next to Vibha Sarin. Standing at the threshold of her beloved dwelling, the older woman’s eyes swam with tears.

‘This house still shouts of Paresh’s presence, I have so many memories of him here. I still can’t believe he is gone.’ Vibha choked.

‘Didi, Pareshji hasn’t gone anywhere. He is very close and alive for all of us in our hearts and that’s where we’ll always keep him,’ Shruti said.

Denial of the obvious will only worsen your condition mom, a thought darted in Nandini’s head.

‘I have missed you all so much,’ Vibha uttered, gazing at Shruti and Nandini.

Touching his mother’s arm, Aditya gruffly voiced, ‘Let’s go inside.’

Still clasping Nandini's hand, Vibha said, 'Come Shruti, Nirbhayji! Everyone else, please come inside.' Soon, the gathered including a few ministers and other state personalities shuffled inside. The media was stopped at the gates.

'Who informed them of my mother's arrival? It was supposed to be under wraps!' Aditya barked at the group in front. There was no answer.

Vibha interjected, 'It's alright! I am not disturbed by their presence.'

Aditya bit off whatever he was about to say.

'Nandini beta, arrange for tea for everyone,' Vibha requested.

Nandini made a move towards the humungous kitchen, where hovered several helpers .

'No!' Aditya snapped, then stiffly explained himself, particularly to his mother, 'Don't bother her. Simone has taken care of all that.' Simone accordingly moved.

Office mein coffee, and house mein chai! Adi has made Simone D'Souza into Simone Barista, ridiculed Nandini, silently, extending a fake smile in the PA's direction.

The Sharmas and Vibha soon discreetly made their way into the more private family room. 'Adi reminds me so much of Paresh. A sterner replica though. Paresh's passing away seems to have affected him the most. All that consumes Adi now is his work and mindless socialising with silly girls,' Vibha immediately vented to her extended family.

Nandini uncomfortably shifted.

'Aditya is very responsible. The way he took charge of everything is quite impressive,' Nirbhay responded.

'That's true, Nirbhayji! However, while Aditya took care of the family business, he seems to have lost himself. Ajit, Seema and I often try to coerce him to let go of the grief or at least show it. However, all our talks have only increased the distance between him and us. Adi hardly spends more than a few days a year with any of us. Sometimes I feel so miserable; losing a husband was hard enough.'

Dad wasn't the only thing that I lost, Aditya reflected, his mother's worried words falling on his ears.

'Badi Maa, coming back to this house must be hard on him, too,' Nandini gently suggested.

The pretentious fake, she dares to act, as if she knows what I am going through, Aditya fumed coming in the room.

Nandini got to her feet and said, 'We should be going!'

'I'm staying; you go if you have to!' Shruti declined her daughter's suggestion .

Forcing himself to sound pleasant, Aditya requested. 'Nandini, could you come in the office; there is something I'd like to discuss with you.'

'Adi, today is Saturday, at least today don't make Nandini work,' Shruti butted in.

'Ten minutes! I promise, Aunty.'

Nandini quietly treaded behind Aditya into his late father's office. He held the door open and she went in, nervously.

The moment the door shut, Aditya rounded on Nandini. 'Stay away from my mother,' he snarled, holding her by the arm.

'That might not be possible!' Nandini answered, swallowing. Aditya's expression only darkened.

'What I mean is... Badi Maa might get suspicious about us... no, about you and me. What I'm saying is that she might ask...' sputtered Nandini, trying hard to ignore the tingles running all over her body. His smell tickled her nose, his fingers warm against her even warmer skin.

'Don't talk rubbish; you will do as I say,' Aditya ordered. Inadvertently, his fingers rubbed her skin. 'Damn!' he growled letting go. Aditya walked, actually took cover, behind the antique mahogany desk.

'I saw your report. As expected it is completely unsatisfactory!' Aditya, lowering himself in the leather chair, hesitated.

Nandini understood the brief glimmer of emotion. Unthinkingly, Aditya was about to sit in his late father's chair.

'Adi, Aditya, I—' Nandini started to speak but he cut her off.

'Get out and don't forget what I said. Close the door behind you ! '

Aditya swivelled his chair to gaze at the beautifully landscaped, lush Japanese gardens with the elevated koi pond and several fountains... his late father's favourite view.

'Why are you so hard on yourself? It is wrong to hurt the people you care for so much. You should be the one thinking about your mom and not the other way round,' Nandini interrupted.

Angry, Aditya turned around but she was gone. The door left open – perhaps symbolically. His eyes fell on the portrait hanging on the facing wall. His family as it used to be, content and close!

Flexing his shoulders, Aditya stood up. He ran a loving hand over the furniture one by one, the antique bookshelves, coffee table and finally the jade chess board, which lay open like the way his father had left it after a last game. Rubbing his eyes, Aditya murmured, 'So many memories here of dad and that wretched girl.'

'Conquer the past to rule your present and future.' Startled, Aditya quickly glanced all around. The words sounded much like his father's usual profound tips.

'I need to sleep more!' Aditya voiced heading out, towards where his mother sat with her best friend of yesteryears. He dropped on the sofa next to his mum. 'Shruti Aunty, thank you for looking so well, after the house. Everything feels the same, just like when Dad was around.'

'You? After we left, Shruti, you looked after the house? I thought some hired help did the job,' Vibha said.

'Aunty offered to do it. I of course hired and paid for all the help she would need. Not that it in anyway takes away from what you did for us,' Aditya replied .

'Thank you so much Shruti!' Vibha clasped her friend's hand, eyes again tearing up.

'This house and the memories here are invaluable for me. Anyway, it wasn't me but Nandini who actually did all the work. I just did the liaison. She was the one who came here frequently, to make sure everything was in order,' Shruti clarified.

'How sweet of Nandi!' Vibha reacted.

Aditya sat quiet, taken aback. Why had Nandini bothered to take such pains, and not rub it in? In the past even if she lifted a pencil for me, she would go on and on about it until I almost developed allergy to the darn thing, he wondered.

After a few hours of catch-up, Shruti left. Aditya placed a reassuring hand on Vibha's knee, 'You don't have to worry about me. You should only think of yourself and your coming grand daughter.' Seema was in last trimester of her pregnancy.

'It could be a grandson,' Vibha shot back. Then her expression became concerned, 'You work too hard Adi! Why?'

'Why? AB is constantly working. Even Dad slogged equally hard if not more,' Aditya replied, resting his head on the sofa's edge.

‘Yes. But he did that because it made him happy. Self-growth and sense of purpose... remember how often Paresh used that phrase?’ Vibha fondly remembered her husband.

‘Hmm!’ Aditya agreed, his lips twitching. ‘We all would roll our eyes when Dad would start with that lecture.’ Obon and Dumb Supper, Buddhist and pagan traditions, are not the only ways, to remember the dead. Humour, too, can be equally poignant and heartfelt.

Vibha chuckled. ‘Do you remember how upset Paresh got when once Ajit actually fell asleep, while he was still talking?’

‘Poor AB! A solid month without a car and phone.’ Aditya joined Vibha in her chuckles. Sombre expressions soon replaced their faces.

‘Adi, you work as if you have the devil on your tail. Even after so many accomplishments, of such stature, why do you come across so unhappy, so bitter? What happened to my easy going and fun loving younger son?’ Vibha belled the cat.

‘He grew up!’ Aditya replied, his face equally serious.

‘Oh god! You are so filmy,’ Vibha used a line Aditya often said to her.

‘Fine Mom! I get your point and I shall *seriously* try to lighten up. Just give me some time.’

‘And what about your marriage?’

‘You are on fire today! That too will happen... I promise,’ Aditya replied. This is an apt time to tell her, his conscience niggled.

Hesitantly, Vibha said, ‘Adi are you completely over—’

Aditya, curtly, interrupted her. ‘Of course I am! I have asked you several times not to bring that topic up. There’s no room for discussion on that one.’ He got to his feet.

Vibha changed the topic. ‘Can we have Seema’s goed bharai here? The seventh month is about to finish.’

‘Sure! And we shall have it just the way Dad liked – big and expensive. I’ll take care of everything.’

His mother’s smile spoke volumes. ‘Don’t forget the charities,’ Vibha said.

‘Have I ever? If you want more give more... Dad’s rule!’ Aditya replied.

‘You know Adi, I’m glad we are back here. I feel closer to your father in this house.’ Vibha said softly.

Aditya, again, sat down next to her. Putting his arm around her, he whispered, ‘Me too Mom, me too!’

Dhokha

A few days later, sharp at 9 a.m., Nandini entered the office building.

‘Early bird, you’re actually on time today!’ teased Rajesh, Nandini’s colleague, swinging the door open for her.

‘Whatever!’ passing him, Nandini genially responded. His shoulder bag, jostled her hand, and some coffee from her flask splashed on the man.

‘Oh, I am so sorry!’ Nandini winced. The coffee was hot.

Rajesh’s eyes grew in the same proportions as the stain on his shirt. ‘Crap! In ten minutes, I have my first one on one, with the big man himself. There is no time to go home and change my shirt.’

Nandini pulled him to the side. ‘Rajesh, what size shirt do you wear?’

‘Why?’

‘I have a spare shirt in my car. A gift for my cousin!’

‘Fifteen or fifteen and a half.’

‘Bingo! Mr Rajesh, you have just got yourself a new shirt. Let me get it.’ Placing the flask on the floor, Nandini ran to her car,

‘Thank you Nandini. I’ll pay for it later,’ said Rajesh as she handed him the piece.

‘No problem amigo! Just take it. The cousin is anyway in kangaroo land for a couple of months. Go get them tiger!’ A relieved Nandini and a thankful Rajesh parted ways.

‘Bhagwanji, that was my Rs 5,673 worth of good deed for the day! Make sure you mark it somewhere.’ Nandini whispered, getting in the elevator. How can one ignore God in these days of aggressive self-marketing? He is the one who made humans; he, too, should suffer them—like our eco system.

Rajesh changed in the men’s room, gathered his papers required for the meeting and commenced to the third floor. He stepped out of the elevator as Rochak stepped in.

‘Hi Rajesh, nice shirt!’ Rochak complimented.

‘A gift from Nandini,’ replied Rajesh, grinning broadly. Even he was aware of Rochak’s Achilles heels.

Rochak extended his hand, to stall the closing, sensor-run elevator doors. ‘What was the occasion?’

‘No occasion! Nandini is very generous with people she likes,’ Rajesh said; not missing the opportunity to prick the roach... except his harmless lies fell on another pair of ears.

Signing some documents, poised at Simone’s desk near the elevator, Aditya heard the entire exchange. ‘Ladies, if you are done discussing your clothes can we begin the meeting?’ Aditya turned sharply heading towards the conference room, a flustered Rajesh trailing behind .

An hour or so later, Rajesh emerged. Simone, greeted, him with a smile. ‘So how was the meeting with Mr Sarin?’

‘Felt like a hot rod was inserted in every open orifice of my body,’ replied Rajesh. He and his slouched shoulders headed for the elevator. ‘Saali manhoos shirt!’ he grumbled to himself.

‘What’s next on the agenda?’ Aditya’s voice buzzed on the intercom. ‘Meeting with the design department and Mr Chowdhury... in about seven minutes.’

‘I’m running late. I have to do a con call right away; something is going on in the Philly (Philadelphia) office. Let Rochak know will you?’

‘Shall I cancel the meeting?’ Simone quipped.

‘No! Just do what you’re told!’ Aditya regretted the words the second they left his lips. ‘*Sorry !*’ in a gruff voice, instantly followed.

‘No offence taken,’ Simone replied. ‘I know it’s not me who’s got you smouldering like Mount Vesuvius,’ she muttered to the phone as Aditya hung up.

Second Floor

‘Listen, why don’t you go in, I have a leakage!’ said Sneha, dashing towards the women’s room.

‘Sneha, you loony bin! Come right back... leakage or no leakage!’ Nandini sprinted after her. She halted embarrassed. The entire office floor had heard her.

‘Thanks a tonne for broadcasting it.’ Sneha, miffed, disappeared in the restroom.

Nandini fidgeted, awkwardly, smiling at whoever glanced her way .

A few seconds later, Sneha popped her head out. ‘Five minutes, I promise! And people, please wipe those smirks off! All your wonderful

mothers, wives sisters, etc., too suffer this.'

A resigned Nandini, clutching her notebook, entered the small conference room, next to their department.

'Where is everyone?' she voiced, glancing around the empty room. Shrugging her shoulders, she settled in the corner chair.

The door opened. Nandini gave Rochak, an indifferent glance, as he strolled in. He purposely took the chair close to Nandini, pulling it even closer.

Nandini attempted to get up but Rochak grabbed her hand. 'Don't you dare!' she threatened, giving him a shrivelling look.

'Why does Rajesh deserve a gift and I don't? Give me one chance to please you Nandini!' Rochak said, leering at her.

'*You pervert! Get your disgusting paws off me !*' Revolted, Nandini grabbed his hand, trying to tear it off her.

Rochak yanked her forcibly. Losing balance Nandini tumbled, falling straight in his lap. Her untied hair flopped around their faces.

'I have noticed that Aditya Sarin does not like you much. So if you want to keep this job, you will have to play nice with your immediate boss, and that's ME!' Rochak caressed Nandini's face hair away from her face.

'Don't touch me! I'll throw up!' Nandini grabbed Rochak's hand to push it away. That was the moment Aditya and Simone entered the conference room.

For a split second, all froze. Aditya's expression darkened, fiercely. Rochak instantly shot from his chair throwing Nandini forward. She lurched against the table, trying to steady herself.

'Sir it wasn't my fault... Nandini—'

Aditya raised his hand and Rochak flinched. Nandini closed her eyes, anticipating the blow to Rochak's face any second.

With immense control, Aditya dropped his hand to his side and yelled, 'I KNOW! MEETING CANCELLED!' Feeling anger, enough to turn into incredible hulk without any gene mutation, Aditya strode out.

Simone, to avoid death by collision, hastily stepped out of his way. Casting a reproachful look at Nandini and Rochak, she followed her boss.

Rochak turned to Nandini. 'If you ever open your mouth—' Before he could finish, Nandini landed a tight stinging slap across his face.

'Next time you come near me, I swear from a cockroach I'll reduce you to *just* a roach!' Spewing fire Nandini, too, left the conference room.

Aditya slammed the door shut. It shook with force. The sight of Nandini and that man continued to enrage him beyond words. He actually could see the colour red, with silhouettes of kattas and kukris, floating in it.

The sound of something crashing and splintering came from Aditya's room. Simone tense, remained at her desk. Around ten minutes later, the intercom buzzed and she tripped over her feet to answer it.

'Get the farmhouse ready in two or three hours,' Aditya said, no please no thank you.

'The one in Unnao?' Simone asked, nervously.

'How many others do I have here?' The line went dead.

Nandini on her part grabbed Sneha and dragged her into their office. Breathless and fumbling, she updated Sneha about what had just happened in the conference room .

'Roach is such a gutter ka keeda! Tell Aditya about the SOB. God knows what he is thinking?' Sneha repeatedly, insisted.

Nandini disagreed. 'Aditya's eyes made me nervous, Sneh. Facing him, is the last thing I need right now. I'm going to stay holed up in this room, and see how the day pans out.'

'You are insane! Why are you scared? *You did not do anything wrong .*' Sneha argued.

'I know that... you know that! But Aditya? I just want to give him some time to calm down.' Nandini bit heavily into the cold samosa she had picked from Roy's desk.

'I think you should go to HR and report the incident first. Aditya, we'll tackle later,' Sneha suggested.

'Okie dokie! But man, slapping Roach felt so good, you can't imagine,' Nandini said, washing the stale food with a carbonated soda.

'You should have kicked him between his legs while you were at it. Imagine what that would have felt like!' Sneha added with feeling.

A couple of hours later, Simone came down to meet Nandini. 'Can I talk to you... alone?'

A reluctant Sneha left the room. Nandini met the other woman's troubled eyes. 'Mr Sarin wants to meet you at his farmhouse. ASAP! He's already there.'

The pit in Nandini's stomach became a well.

Laaga Chunari Mein Daag... Almost!

Worried, by Aditya's demeanor as he had left, Simone suggested, 'You can apologise to him... through his mother.'

'Is Aditya alone there?' Nandini asked.

'Yes! He is, apart from the servants of course.'

'What do you think... you saw in the conference room?' Nandini questioned, hesitantly.

Without any dithering, Simone answered, 'You getting intimate with a married man.'

Spurred, Nandini got to her feet. Grabbing her purse, she sailed past Simone. 'Do you know where it is?' Simone asked, hurrying after her.

'I could take you there if you like!' Nandini retorted.

Seeing Nandini and Simone's speed and expression, Sneha trotted towards them. Too late! The elevator doors shut, taking Nandini away .

This slur has to be cleared. Aditya will hear the truth about the pervie, whether he likes it or not. The thought drove Nandini. She did the thirty or so odd kilometres, ignoring the incessant ringing of her cell.

The guards at the gates on hearing her name, immediately let Nandini in. She was expected.

Driving through the winding driveway, Nandini stopped next to Aditya's convertible. For a few minutes, all she did was, stare at the structure. Never had steel and cement been as beautifully merged as they were here, to form a four-storey replica of the Pantheon at Rome. The sheer magnificence of architecture and richness at display was mesmerising.

Getting out of the car, Nandini hotfooted to the entrance. The regal door opened at her approach, a maid in uniform standing behind.

'Mr Sarin is waiting for you in the master suite!' she offered, quickly leaving Nandini alone.

Muddled, Nandini fidgeted with her purse strap. 'Why the suite?' she whispered.

‘Airport, flee to the nearest airport!’ shrieked her insides, until they went hoarse. Nandini, gingerly, climbed the stairs, her heels clicking loudly in the silence.

The suite door stood open; Nandini knocked but there was no answer. Having taken a few tentative steps in, she whirled, at the sound of the door slamming shut.

Aditya leaned against the closed door, his appearance rakish and dishevelled. His tie and suit jacket had been discarded, top few buttons of his shirt were open. His hands folded casually across his chest, only there was nothing casual about the way he looked at Nandini.

‘See something you like?’ Aditya scorned .

Nandini quickly averted her face. ‘Why did you call me here?’ she asked, amazed by how calm she sounded.

‘For my share of the spoils!’ Aditya crooned walking past her, yet remaining dangerously close.

‘I don’t understand,’ voiced Nandini, licking her suddenly parched lips.

‘How innocent of you?’ Aditya’s eyes fixed on her mouth.

‘Let’s go downstairs,’ Nandini suggested, swallowing. She turned away, heading for the door.

‘Let’s not! Unless you prefer a table to a bed.’

A strong hand caught Nandini’s arm. Aditya hauled her close, so close that Nandini could count his eyelashes, feel his breath on her face and smell the....

‘*You’ve been drinking!*’ Supposed to be an accusation, it came out like gasp.

‘So?’ Aditya challenged, wrapping his arms completely around her.

‘Stop it! Stop it Adi!’ Nandini, to put some distance, began struggling against him.

‘You’re only helping!’ Aditya said. A cruel smile played on his lips even as unbidden desire flooded his eyes.

Nandini’s face flushed, embarrassment or excitement, she was not sure.

‘Are you about to faint?’ Aditya intentionally, repeated the words from their very first meeting.

‘Please let me go, Aditya. You don’t want to do this,’ Nandini begged, striving hard to quell her own body’s reaction to him. She was melting against Aditya’s hard strength; her arms ached to wrap themselves around him .

‘You, also, want me! Say my name, again,’ Aditya murmured, huskily, his lips working their way against her collarbone.

Crap! He remembers the spot, were Nandini’s last coherent thoughts, before long repressed emotions swamped her. Her eyes fluttered close and she unconsciously pressed deeper against Aditya.

After what seemed an eternity, Aditya’s mouth claimed hers. Nandini moaned. Her body and heart gave in to the potent pleasure, stemming from the touch of the only man capable of satiating her. Nandini had no memory of how they moved to the bed or when most of their clothes came off.

Desire blinded Nandini to everything else... and she was not alone.

Aditya’s agenda of teaching Nandini a harsh lesson was long forgotten. The sweetness and softness of her mouth and body blew him away. The more he took the more he needed. Nandini burned him with her heat. Aditya pressed her even closer, his mouth and hands frantically clinging to her; Nandini became his last gulp of oxygen before he went under.

‘I’ll make you feel better! Better than the others,’ Aditya urgently whispered, moving to draw her under him. The words cooled Nandini like a bucket of ice poured on her body.

Oh my god! Realising the enormity of what was about to occur, Nandini forcefully pushed at Aditya, attempting distance enough to roll away from the hard body.

Clamping his arms even tighter around her, Aditya raised desire filled eyes. ‘What are you doing?’ he asked, thickly.

‘Please let me go Adi... this is not right,’ Nandini reasoned, breathless and struggling.

Thwarted desire altered to anger. ‘Don’t fight me Nandini. I will finish what I started. When you are cozy with every Tom, Dick or Harry in the office why the prude act here?’ Aditya clamped Nandini’s hands above her head.

‘*You have got it all wrong...*’ Nandini half-groaned, half-shouted, desperate to cover herself up.

‘*Then name your price ! What will make you more like what you were a few minutes ago ?*’ Aditya roared. His dark eyes became darker, lust and anger riding strong within. He was feeling so hot that he was sure one could cook their eggs off his back.

Nandini gritting her teeth, bit out, ‘I swear if my hands were free, you’d be the second man I’d slap today!’

Aditya for an answer pinched her wrists even more painfully. He lowered his head to take Nandini's mouth forcefully. The gloves were off.

Aditya is actually going to see this to the end! Warning cymbals went off in Nandini's head. Completely panicking, she blurted out the truth, 'This is a first for me!'

Aditya paused.

Humiliated, Nandini shut her eyes, turning her face away.

Clasping her chin, Aditya brought her face back to him. Nandini had no choice but to meet the probing eyes, through the sheen of angry tears.

'Are you lying to me Nandini?' asked Aditya, watching her gravely.

'Do you want to find out for yourself?' Nandini provoked, a tear trailed from the corner of an eye.

For a few long minutes, Aditya continued to gaze at her; taking in the tousled hair, gloomy eyes and the ravished lips. Abruptly he rolled off her .

Mortified, Nandini lunged at the covers drawing them over her, covering even her face. She heard him move about, probably getting in his clothes.

'Whenever you are ready, come down to the library,' Aditya said, softly to the shrouded body, quelling the titanic urge to join her under the sheet. He stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Bhagam Bhaag

With lightning speed, Nandini jumped out of the bed. Fearing, Aditya might come back any minute; stumbling and lurching, she hurriedly got dressed. Going in the restroom, she splashed her face several times with cold water rushing, from the golden faucets.

‘I have to quietly and quickly get out of here!’ Nandini declared to the mirror, taking in the pale, shocked face, staring back at her.

Opening the door of the suite, she peeked out. Thankfully, the corridor was empty. Clutching her sandals in the hand, Nandini tiptoed – pausing at the top of the winding, marble staircase.

On hearing some sounds, Nandini hastily retreated behind the mahogany glass cabinet. It was just the maid, holding a tray on which sat a glass of frothy pink liquid. She disappeared in the direction of the library, at the back of the house .

Ginger ale! Nandini noticed. Aditya had just ordered her favourite drink. ‘Shove your bloody drink for all I care,’ Nandini viscosly whispered, going down.

At the bottom of the stairs, she paused... listening. ‘Coast clear! Now all I have to do is get out of the main door.’ Holding her breath, Nandini stealthily proceeded. Unfortunately, the protruding edge of the carpet went unheeded.

Nandini’s foot snagged! Slowly but surely she tumbled forward, the sandals hurtled from her hands, knocking the large crystal panther off its place, on the adjoining table.

‘Super canary shit! Probably Swarovski!’ Nandini watched, horrified, as the piece noisily shattered into zillion pieces.

Sounds of the library door opening galvanised her into action. Nandini dashed towards the door. As she twisted the handle to heave the door open, footsteps halted behind her.

Wildly, Nandini careened towards her car, barefoot and her hair flying. She grabbed the handle of the car door and yanked. It remained shut.

'Don't! Don't you dare screw with me right now! Open! OPEN DAMN IT!' Nandini cursed, her fists and feet, tugging and pounding the car door.

'Try using the keys, they might get the job done!' Aditya, standing behind, serenely suggested. He pressed his lips to keep the smile out of his voice.

Uttering another rude expletive, Nandini rummaged inside her purse. On not finding them, frustrated, she simply turned the bag upside down. Receipts going back, probably to the ice age, her niece's hairclip, cell and lipstick among few other things jangled down, rolling at her feet. Still no keys!

'Here you go, you dropped them inside.' Aditya stretched his hand out, over her shoulder. The keys dangled on it. His lips remained tightly clamped; it was getting harder and harder to keep a straight face.

Giving him a nasty look, Nandini grabbed the keys. She quickly retrieved the hairclip and cell. Clammy hands fumbled to open the car door.

On seeing her condition, Aditya felt compelled to offer, 'Maybe you should let me drive'.

'NO!' Nandini screamed. 'Wow! You really sound hysterical,' currently, the only teeny tiny rationale, part of her brain observed.

'The driver then?' Aditya asked. For a reply, Nandini just got in her car and took off with screeching tyres.

Aditya cursed and ran towards the garage. Punching the code, he opened it. Dragging his Turbine Superbike out, he stuffed his head in a helmet and took off after the red car. Nandini was almost out of the gates. He saw her miss the guard post by mere inches.

'I know you are a speed junkie but this is a bit too much, even for you,' Aditya bit out, shooting his speed accordingly. Both the vehicles emerged on the highway.

Nandini continued to drive fast and erratic, leaving in her wake, blaring horns and squealing brakes, and of course, the expected 'maa-bhen ki'.

Aditya, manoeuvred through the traffic following her at a safe distance, staying hidden, not wanting to spook Nandini any further.

Almost twenty or so minutes later, the red car slowed, coming to a stop near a roadside dhabha—one of several spotting either side of the highway!

From the teashop, a boy in rags approached Nandini's side. He promptly fetched a glass of tea, her favourite kind, 'cutting chai!'

A few sips later and having tipped the boy generously, a calmer Nandini resumed her drive. The bike rider, way back in the rear view mirror, went unnoticed.

Soon, she pulled in the short driveway to her house. Unstopping, the motor bike passed her house. The rider saw Nandini get off.

Aditya smiled, surprisingly buoyant. The Nandini he first knew had resurfaced. Hilarious, fragile, and sensuous enough to make a man swim an ocean.

Nandini on her part directly trudged to her room, avoiding conversation with any living soul. Locking the door, she collapsed on the bed. ‘Oh my god, oh my god’ she moaned loudly, recalling the erotic and demeaning encounter with Aditya. ‘I can never face him again. Oh my god!’ she blubbered, cramming her face in the pillow.

Nandini’s cell phone buzzed loudly. She saw, ‘crazy cow’, flash gaudily on the screen. Sneha!

Finally, when the rings stopped, Nandini grabbed her cell. The screen now flashed a message, ‘38 missed calls’. Curious, she checked to see who had called so many times.

One missed call from home, one from Badi Maa’s cell, one from Dashmesh Dairy—why is Sardarji calling me?—and thirty-five from Sneha. There were also several text messages from her friend. I can’t talk right now, I’ll just SMS her, Nandini decided.

She was tempted to type, ‘The old maid got almost laid!’ but settled for, ‘Don’t worry I’m alive. I WILL CALL YOU! Go make your man happy.’

Boom

Next day, close to 8 a.m., Aditya emerged from the elevator. Simone was already behind her desk. ‘Good morning Simone, how are you doing?’

‘Fine thank you Aditya. You seem to be in a good mood!’ In answer, all she got was an affable shrug of shoulders.

‘With coffee! Yours and mine, in ten in my office, please!’ Aditya speaking in shorthand, requested.

‘Aye, aye captain!’ Simone responded with a mock salute. What happened yesterday evening, she wondered. Her boss seemed to have lost the regular boorish air. ‘Probably in the farmhouse!’ she, cheekily, said to her pen.

An hour or so later, unexpectedly, the door to Aditya’s office flew open. An incensed, Sneha stood glowering there. ‘What did you do to her? *Tell me right now!*’ she hurled the accusation at Aditya .

‘Thank you Simone. We will go over the presentation later. Postpone all my calls by ten minutes,’ Aditya dismissed. Simone immediately got to her feet, gathering the laptop and papers. She closed the door on the two.

‘Have a seat Sneha,’ Aditya amicably invited the girl.

‘What did you do to Nandini?’ Sneha repeated her stance aggressive.

‘Nothing happened that Nandini didn’t want.’ Aditya got up and sauntered over to the window; purposely looking outside!

Sneha snorted rudely. ‘Don’t give me that BS, something—!’

‘You still work for me!’ Aditya gently censured, still not looking at her.

‘I don’t need this job that bad.’

‘Then why are you still here?’ Aditya kept his tone civil.

‘Today, for the first time in two years or so, Nandini has called in sick. She is not answering her cell or coming on the phone to speak to me. I am here only to find out what happened, yesterday, between you two. What did *you* do?’ Sneha came closer.

Aditya was quiet, confounded. He had assumed Nandini to be at work in her office. The plan was to bump innocuously into her, closer to the end of the day.

‘Aditya!’ Sneha exclaimed.

Finally, Aditya turned to face her. ‘I don’t have to tell you anything. If you’re so worried, maybe you should talk to Nandini... in person.’

‘I don’t need you to tell me what I have to do for Nandi.’ Sneha flounced towards the door.

‘I’ll expect you to be back in an hour or two.’

‘If you are so concerned, why don’t you come with me?’ Sneha mocked. Aditya chose silence over words.

Sneha opened the door, held it for a few seconds and then shut it right back. Squaring her shoulders, she twisted to stare at Aditya. He returned her look with a bland, polite expression.

‘You know Aditya, treating Nandini disparagingly, trying to force her to speak publicly, making her work late nights, and cancel plans of babysitting my son Advey whom she loves dearly... all that at some level, still could be stomachable. But making Rochak Chowdhury her boss was super low... even for you.’

‘What is wrong with Rochak being her boss?’ Aditya questioned, catching on the fact that Nandini’s cancelled plans had not been with a man but a kid—her best friend’s kid. He waited for an answer.

‘Rochak Chowdhury is a perverted, lecherous slimeball who got away with someone’s attempted rape,’ Sneha spoke slowly; making sure Aditya absorbed every single word she articulated.

That did get his complete attention. ‘Whose?’ Aditya questioned, slowly rising out of his chair.

Sneha opened the door, and dropped the bombshell on her way out. ‘Nandini’s! Last new year’s office party,’ she exited satisfied.

Sorry Mrs Chodhury, your apology may have moved Nandi, but not me! I always thought your creep of a husband got off easy, Sneha reckoned, quietly.

Aditya remained where he was. Blown away by the revelation, Sneha had just coughed up. Some seconds later, he harshly punched the HR’s extension on his phone.

‘Simi Kapoor here,’ came the singsong greeting.

‘Mrs Kapoor, this is Aditya Sarin,’ he growled.

‘Yes sir, yes Mr Sarin good morning!’ Simi effusively flapped. The hapless woman rocketed to her feet, until she realised Aditya was just on the phone.

‘How long have you worked with the agency?’ Aditya barked.

‘Ughh! Sir, over a year and half. I can provide you the dates.’

‘Were you there for the last new year’s office party?’

‘Yes, yes Mr Sarin, I was!’ Simi puzzled, confirmed.

‘Then I want you and the personnel file on Rochak Chowdhury in my office ASAP!’ Aditya hung up.

Within minutes, a nervous Mrs Kapoor appeared in his office with Mr Telang trailing behind.

‘I didn’t ask for Mr Telang,’ Aditya spoke, his tone curt.

‘Mr Sarin, before my recent promotion, for several years I headed the HR Department of the company. Mrs Kapoor felt it would be appropriate for me to be here, as I know more things about Rochak than she does. Some which never made it to the personnel file,’ Mr Telang replied.

‘Fine, everyone take a seat. Call Simone in, too!’ Aditya rushed, taking his chair.

‘Did some unsavoury incident occur at the party I earlier mentioned?’ Aditya came straight to the point.

Mr Telang gestured at Simi to speak up, which she haltingly did.

Half an hour later, Aditya ordered, ‘You all stay near the phone.’ Eyes ablaze, he thundered out of his office. Simone did not ask any questions; revelations made here, had left her shocked .

The sound of his cabin door vigorously flung open, startled Rochak from his work. Aditya came inside, slamming the door shut behind him. He then proceeded to shut the blinds, completely isolating Rochak and himself from the outside world.

Blanching, Rochak hastily rose, sputtering, ‘Sir, is something the matter?’ He nervously eyed, the seemingly possessed Aditya, pacing back and forth.

‘YES!’ was all Aditya could shout out, as severe rage rendered him incapable of speech. This kind of anger women only experience, when a thirty-day-weight-loss plan strictly followed for four days (three if the diet started on a Wednesday), and on and off for thirty days, does not achieve the promised twenty-pound drop in weight.

Coming back to the story! Rochak guessed what could have Aditya blowing steam, like an over-used and under-cleaned, pressure cooker. ‘Mr Sarin, yesterday what you saw between me and Nandini—’ Rochak’s words

got lost in the sound of a powerful blow, cracking his jaw. Belly up, he fell to the ground.

Aditya hauled him up by his tie. Violently, he pushed Rochak against the wall. Pictures and plaques bounced around them. Using his elbow as a chokehold, Aditya actually lifted the other man a few inches in the air. 'How dare you even take her name?' he quietly menaced, increasing the pressure.

'Please... help me!' Rochak moaned, addressing someone at the door.

Aditya not finished, threatened, '*Forget coming near Nandini! If you even think of her, I will rip you apart with my bare hands .*'

Rochak desperately tugged at Aditya's arm, trying to escape. 'Do you understand what I said?' Aditya dug his elbow deeper in the man's neck .

Rochak's face turned blue. He gagged but managed to nod. Aditya released him. Rochak tumbled on the floor massaging his neck, and gulping in big breaths of air.

'Aditya Sarin, I will take you to the courts. I'll have you arrested!' he hoarsely warned, staggering to his feet, still unsteady. 'You saw all he did!' Rochak again addressed the person standing behind.

Aditya shifted. It was Sneha, partially inside the room.

'I had a meeting with him,' Sneha addressed Aditya. Then, she spat at Rochak, 'I have no clue what you are talking about. I didn't see a thing.'

Aditya interjected, 'Thank you, Ms Verma. You do not have to involve yourself with this. Rochak Chowdhury, you are fired!'

Sneha left the room, her fingers furiously at work, typing a lengthy SMS to a certain someone. The song, 'Dhoom dhoom, dhadham, dishum dishum, akal ke dushman gadhe ki dum!', kept playing in her head—courtesy Advey. She had seen *Hanuman Returns* over a thousand times.

Aditya punched his own extension from the desk phone. 'Yes!' Simone replied, hesitantly.

'Simone, contact HR and let them know Rochak Chowdhury is terminated, effective immediately. Send the security to throw him out of the agency's premises. Also, contact our attorneys and inform them that Sarin Industries affiliate, AAA, wants to sue Chowdhury for punitive damages worth twenty crores, for repeated harassment of its employees and misuse of office equipment.'

Rochak leaning against the table lurched. Aditya had not finished. 'Make sure the local media gets a whiff of this. '

Pathetically, Rochak fell at Aditya's feet. 'Please forgive me! I am so sorry. I have a family!' he grovelled.

'So does every woman you have agonised !' was Aditya's cold answer.

The guards were there. 'Get out and get lost. Just remember what I said. It covers each and every employee who works for me,' Aditya declared, exiting without a backward glance. He ignored the peppered applause and one ear piercing seeti—courtesy Sneha Verma.

Mujhe Kuch Kehna Hai

Later that evening, a knock on her bedroom door, roused Nandini from an engrossing James Patterson bestseller. ‘Come in!’ The door swung open and Nandini almost fell out of the chair.

Aditya stood there, nonchalantly sipping tea from her, ‘I-m-so-hot’ cup. Nandini, recalling their last meeting, felt a blush run from her head to toes. Aditya, too, remembered, but he kept his expression neutral. His eyes, with valiant effort found and stayed on Nandini’s hairline.

The silence stretched between them, neither wanting to break the spell the memories were casting.

‘I’m not going to the office,’ Nandini, avoiding Aditya’s eyes, huskily announced.

‘You don’t have to!’ Aditya replied, finally stepping in the room .

‘Did you just fire me?’ Nandini asked, suspiciously. How can he be so unaffected, so casual, she wondered. And, the Filmfare Award for best actor male goes to...

‘No. All I’m saying is that you come back, to work, whenever you want to,’ Aditya genially assured, leaning against a bookshelf.

‘Oh!’ Nandini mumbled confused, looking but not finding in him, the anger trademark of their recent conversations. Her loony conscience mocked, ‘Who says a way to a man’s heart, mind or wallet is through his stomach?’

Straight-faced, Aditya, pointing at Nandini’s t-shirt, inquired, ‘Is that an invitation?’

Nandini visibly cowered, remembering what the T-shirt read – This Flavor Never Goes Off The Rack. ‘You wish! I mean of course not!’ she snapped, folding her arms defensively in front. Aditya quietly continued to sip the tea, not taking his eyes off Nandini.

Nandini felt her nerves stretch as far as the equator. ‘That’s my cup!’ she blurted, the words sounded like the chatter of a five-year-old.

‘Yup, this is your cup, and this is your bed,’ Aditya quickly moved on, ‘and your room... I could go on.’ He sat in a chair across from her. Aditya

forced himself to look away, his eyes snagging on something at Nandini's bedside table – a pair of crystal lovebirds.

Nandini saw it too. 'You can have it back if you want.'

'No! I do not take gifts back. You keep it.' Finally, Aditya spoke his mind, 'Why didn't you tell me Nandini?'

'Tell you what? '

'About Rochak! Why didn't you tell me what that man had tried to do?'

Sighing, Nandini replied, 'It's no big D. I can handle him.'

'You don't have to handle him... *ever* . He's gone.' Nandini's eyes widened. Aditya clarified, dryly, 'I didn't kill him, I fired him.' A taunt about the amount of movies she watched, hovered on the tip of his tongue, but Aditya reeled it in. Given their history, who knew where that might lead?

'You fired him because of me?' Nandini could not keep the wistfulness out of her voice.

Meeting her eyes, Aditya lied, 'Not just you, others too. I discussed things with the HR Department. They had a complete file on him.'

'Cool!' Disappointed, Nandini glanced away, missing the blink-and-its-gone look of longing in Aditya's eyes.

After some thought, Aditya spoke, 'I'm sorry about what happened... yesterday, at the farmhouse.'

'It's alright... it's all forgotten!' Nandini stammered, getting to her feet, putting some distance between them.

'Really?' Aditya was not quick enough to reel that one.

'What were you hoping to hear?' Nandini snapped back at him.

'Just want you to know that I'm not in the habit of forcing,' Aditya said, fumbling.

'Really?' Nandini shot right back.

Aditya moved so he now faced her. 'You were more than willing, that's why it went that far, it did.' Nandini opened her mouth to protest; Aditya cut her off, 'And please, don't say you were faking. I know the difference! '

Remembering her own wanton response, even the roots of the roots of her hair shrivelled. Nandini moved her mouth to fire an apt response, at least some response, twenty seconds late or IST time bhi daudega!

Aditya took in her miserable expression. 'All I wanted to say was that I don't coerce my women.'

‘You make women sound like cattle!’ Nandini grumbled, irked at the mention of the other females in his life.

‘Still the half-assed feminist?’ Aditya bemused, provoked.

Defensive, Nandini replied, ‘It’s not feminism, just—’

Aditya put his hand out. ‘Let me finish this one! It’s not feminism, just self-esteem which every female should have, right?’ He completed, genuinely smiling, remembering the often-repeated dialogue from their past bickering.

‘Yeah, something like that,’ Nandini nodded, sheepish, but somewhere pleased that he had not forgotten.

‘I’ll see you around!’ Unnerved, Aditya abruptly strode for the door. He had just called Nandini ‘my women’, and proved that not all their memories burning him were hateful.

‘I’m sorry!’ Nandini’s hastily spoken, apology stopped him in his tracks.

‘For what?’

Her conscious daringly encouraged, ‘Don’t back down... say it! I really need a goodnight’s sleep. No eye cream or tea bags can do anything for those bags under your eyes? You are almost thirty—’ ‘Shut up!’ Nandini hissed back.

‘Excuse me?’ Aditya said.

Squaring her chin, completely inflating her lungs and looking at him straight in the eyes; Nandini said, ‘Aditya, I am very sorry for what I did to you.’

Aditya walked closer, his expression unreadable. Nandini apprehensively watched him. ‘Accha hai! Hindustani thapad ka andaaza tumhe ho gaya.’ Dilip Kumar’s dialogue from Subhash Ghai’s classic *Karma*, echoed in Nandini’s head.

Halting, a hair’s breadth away from Nandini, Aditya asked, ‘*Did you mean that apology or are they just hollow words?*’ His expression was dead serious.

‘I mean them, from the bottom of my heart,’ Nandini assured.

‘Why did you do it?’ Her words, to date tortured him.

Glancing away, Nandini tried articulating concisely, not revealing anything but her searing regret. ‘I don’t know, I was confused and immature... but believe me, on my wall of shame that is one thing I hang every day.’

Aditya could not help the wry smile, at the image her words conjured. 'Where is your wall of shame?'

'Where it is in all of us... in our conscience.'

Aditya gazed at Nandini's face, a face in which he once saw his world. 'I guess that was all I needed to hear. Once in a while we all do things we are not too proud off,' he said, only to become steeped in ponderous silence.

Covertly, Nandini watched him. 'The document exonerating Namit Dada?' she mentioned, tentatively.

'The original document was sent to the appropriate authorities, the moment I got my hands on it. The deal was stopped before it happened,' Aditya revealed a glint in his eyes.

Open mouthed, Nandini accused, 'You tricked me.'

'You fell for my poker face!' Aditya's face held arrogance.

Nandini smiling, ruefully, asked, 'So we're okay now?'

'Depends on what you consider okay!'

'What does that mean?'

'Neither enemies nor friends. Merely, acquaintances with some history,' Aditya replied, attempting to clearly mark the boundaries; for whom though was still a question!

'Ten on ten, perfect!' Nandini agreed, suppressing the depression hammering her heart.

For a few minutes, they gazed at each other. Aditya's expression schooled. Nandini's tremulous face held a contrived smile.

'There is something else...' Aditya began and then paused, taking a long breath.

At his tone, god knows why, Nandini's heart dropped a few more feet.

'I have moved on, made peace with what you—' Aditya swallowed the condemning words, 'made peace with what happened between us.'

'Good!' Nandini condoned, bleakly.

'I think it was harder because of the timing. You remember Dad, too, passed around that time,' Aditya rambled.

Nandini nodded, no stranger to his pain.

Finally, Aditya delivered the news. 'So anyway what I was trying to say is that I'm engaged.'

'Congratulations Nandini! You are safe. Now take a gun and eat the bullet!' her conscience shrieked.

Nandini dug her nails in the book, gripping it hard. She felt the world spin in front of her. ‘Great, congrats,’ she said, her tone listless. ‘Anyone I know?’

‘No. I met her in Europe. Gayatri’s father is one of the largest granite and marble suppliers for Europe. She is very nice. ’

‘Awesome, sounds like someone with similar tastes, and background. She will make you happy,’ Nandini quipped, her expression animated, eyes bright... too animated, too bright.

‘Silly girl! Happiness is what one feels when you hear the radio playing your favourite song, or you find no boogers when your hand accidentally, brushes the underside of a bus seat. In love there are either cataclysmic highs or soul shattering lows —there is no place for lukewarm feelings like, “happy”.’ Even Nandini’s conscience was sobering up and doing its job: being profound, rather than tripping into one nervous breakdown after another.

‘Something like that,’ was all Aditya expressed. It is never easy telling an ex about a current relationship, especially when the latter is headed towards the wedding aisle.

‘So when is the wedding?’ Nandini buzzed, her tonsils hurt.

‘While you’re on this S&M trip, take a knife and rip your insides, too. Numskull, quit grovelling for details!’ her conscience begged, profoundness is for the dead.

‘Soon I guess. I haven’t even told Mom yet!’ Aditya made the startling confession.

‘You are planning to elope,’ Nandini chattered.

‘Why? Are you offering to drive him to the rendezvous spot?’ The conscience would not shut its trap.

‘No, just waiting for the right time. There was no formal engagement or exchange of rings. Gayatri and I, after dating for a few months decided that we want to get married to each other. That’s it! Went for a small celebratory dinner with her parents,’ Aditya replied.

‘To each his own I guess,’ Nandini offered, not sure what to say .

‘Well I have taken much of your time. I hope you get well soon,’ Aditya blurted, speedily out of the door, hot demons on his tail.

‘I am not sick!’ Nandini said, woefully to deaf ears.

What is wrong with me? Was I talking of my upcoming nuptials or funeral? Aditya contemplated, walking towards his house.

Tullu came to Nandini's room with another cup of tea. At the threshold, with an expression of shock writ all over her face, she paused. 'Didi what happened?'

Holding up the serial killer mystery, a sobbing Nandini paused, long enough to reply, 'This book is very touching. Someone was just slashed ear to ear.'

Meri Awaaz Suno

Next day at office, Sneha promptly noticed, ‘You have been crying!’ Tossing her purse on the desk, she came over to where Nandini sat, hunched.

‘No I haven’t! Get your eyes checked.’ Nandini focused on her computer with blank eyes.

‘Oh! Really? Then how come your eyelids are as big as Angelina Jolie’s lips?’

‘What a woman, imagine having Brad Pitt to call your own,’ Nandini retorted, typing some gibberish on the screen.

‘Ughh, don’t do that Nandi! Don’t change the topic. Let’s see what you just typed!’ Sneha peered at the screen. ‘Rrrttnnmno!’ she read out.

Humming a song, feigning composure, Nandini deleted the nonsense. ‘What’s eating you Nandi? What happened? You’re scaring me, speak woman,’ Sneha coaxed, gently .

‘*Aditya is engaged !*’ Nandini finally revealed, tears spilling from her eyes.

‘What... to whom?’ Dumbfounded, Sneha took the adjoining chair.

‘Some chick he met in Europe. Some business magnet’s daughter,’ Nandini replied, sniffing.

‘Oh, you poor thing!’ Sneha gathered her friend in her arms. ‘Bastard!’ she cursed. ‘After the way Aditya behaved yesterday, with Rochak, I saw hope for you two.’

‘What does firing that lecher have anything to do with him and me?’ Nandini, wiping her eyes and nose, asked.

‘He just didn’t fire the slime ball. Aditya tore into him, woman!’

On seeing Nandini’s blank look, Sneha ridiculed, ‘You don’t know the details?’

‘What details?’

‘Next time *read* my sms. Don’t assume them all to be dirty jokes or forward-this-to-your-ten-friends kind of junk,’ Sneha replied, indignant. Then, she went on to describe in great delight all she had witnessed. ‘If you

dare to even think of Nandini. I will rip you apart with my bare hands.’ Sneha finished the last part in a growl, doing the best possible imitation of Aditya she could.

‘Wow!’ Nandini voiced, ‘He never told me all that.’

‘Dharam paaji’s, kutte mein tera khoon pi jaoonga, was all that was missing,’ Sneha added. Nandini managed a quick smile.

‘You poor thing! Even your smile looks sad. Anyhow now what’s the plan?’ Sneha asked.

Shrugging her shoulders, Nandini replied, ‘Nothing, I guess Aditya will tell Badi Maa, and then his and her families will get together. Decide a date —’

Unexpectedly, Sneha, excessively peeved, cut in, ‘*Stop it Nandi! Just stop it!*’

‘What did I say?’ Nandini appeared taken aback.

‘I’m asking about your plans, not his. I do not care about Aditya Sarin’s marital plans and now neither should you. How long are you going to be like this?’ Sneha snapped.

Nandini kept quiet. Sneha had a point. ‘When will you start living normally like a woman your age, come out of this vegetative like existence?’

‘I am trying, Sneh.’ Nandini’s voice was meek.

‘Then try harder! *Only you can get yourself out of this sustained miserable rut, not your mom, not me, no one, only YOU.*’ Sneha was practically shouting at her.

‘I will get over this... over Aditya!’ Nandini insisted, now in a firmer tone.

‘How? By blinding yourself to everything but work? By avoiding, all social interaction, with all males, except your father, brother and my two-year-old son. Or maybe, by looking after that damn man’s house, or even better still, by thinking of him 24/7, 365 days a year... right. That’s how one gets over a failed relationship.’ Sneha stopped the tirade long enough to take a breath.

Nandini tripped to say, ‘It’s not easy—’

‘Then make it easy! All of us have gone through heartaches, breakups, the whole nine yards. Yes, even me!’ Sneha revealed.

Nandini stunned, said, ‘When and who? Sneha, you never told me—’

Impatiently, Sneha waved her hand. 'That's another story for another day. Coming back, everyone gets over broken relationships. If you are the sensitive kind, then take a little longer, but a whole lifetime is unacceptable.'

'Three years is not a lifetime!' Nandini offered, quietly; first time on the receiving end of Sneha's ire, and a little scared.

Sneha tugged Nandini out of the chair. 'Come with me.'

'Are you going to push me off the building?' Nandini jested.

'Don't give me ideas!' Sneha muttered, dragging Nandini through the office floor in the direction of the restroom. Inside the restroom, she halted in front of the whole length mirror. Gently, she pushed an unresisting Nandini towards it.

'Look in it! What do you see?' Sneha demanded, hands on her hips.

Impishly, Nandini replied, 'Attila the Hun breathing down my neck.' Sneha fiercely frowned at her. 'Okay fine! What do you want me to see?'

'I see a smart and beautiful woman behaving like the ass of an ass. Throwing her life away for a lost cause. All her dreams slipping away from her, because she has shut her heart and mind to them,' Sneha declared, eyes shining with tears.

'Sneha!' Nandini too choked. Her friend was not the weepy kind, but the kind who smiled, through kanyadaan and labour pains. The former because she had a silly bet with her sister and during the latter, Sneha had screamed and cursed the living daylights out of anyone and everyone around her, including the doctor! Who just happened to be her mothe-in-law, the one solely responsible for turning away the anesthesiologist with the epidural. The woman had it coming.

Nandini, tightly hugged Sneha. '*You don't ever, ever give up on me*,' she fiercely whispered.

'Not even if you hold a gun to my head!' Sneha vouched, wiping her eyes.

'I promise you Sneh! I will change, I promise!' Nandini's voice shook a bit.

'Don't know about you, but at least for me this session was very cathartic,' said Sneha, sighing.

'Cheapskate! You're using my pain to feel better for yourself,' Nandini taunted, as they exited the bathroom.

'Nandi, maybe you should do that thing.'

‘What thing?’

‘You know what Kareena did in *Jab We Met* . Call up and abuse Aditya.’

Nandini stopped in her tracks. ‘Do you think it would bring Aditya back?’ she voiced, her eyes big and round.

‘Nandini behave!’ Sneha threatened.

‘Gotcha! Just kidding crazy cow!’

‘Old maid!’ Sneha snorted.

‘Who got almost laid,’ Nandini finished, giggling.

Sneha instantly caught on. ‘Oh my god, what happened? Spill ASAP, please!’

‘Absolutely!’ Nandini began regaling her best friend with a very recent titillating story, based on true events.

Proud to be an Indian

That very day, later in the evening, Vibha visited the Sharma household to share some news. An hour or so later, Nandini's car purred on the driveway.

'Nandi's home... she will be elated to hear the news,' Shruti said. Vibha nodded, doubtfully.

Nandini on entering the living room cheerfully acknowledged the two women, 'Hello buddhis.'

'She's talking to you, Shruti,' Vibha piped the usual response.

'Aditya is engaged!' Shruti burst out, beaming.

'Finally!' Nandini kept the smile firmly glued on. Fevicol ka jod hein...!

'Nandini!' Shruti reproached.

'It is high time mom! What? Aditya must be forty now?' Nandini even managed to crack a chuckle. 'So who's the lucky gal? '

'Some Indian girl who is born and brought up in Europe. God knows what kind she'll be,' Vibha spoke.

'If Aditya likes her,' Nandini could not bring herself to use the word love, 'then she must be nice.'

'Hopefully. Anyhow, she will be here soon. She wants Aditya to show her the real India. God alone knows what that means?' Vibha muttered.

'Real India, right,' Shruti sneered. 'It is ridiculous that foreigners and even Indians living abroad consider slums, chaotic roads running amok with dogs, cow sometimes even elephants as real India. India is the world's largest democracy, fourth largest economy only after USA, China and Japan, and the world leader in global off-shoring. The co-founder of Sun Microsystems and the creator of Pentium chip and Hotmail are Indians. In India was the number-system invented; we gave zero, algebra, trigonometry and calculus among other things to the world. The pioneer of wireless communication was an Indian professor. Our Bollywood churns out maximum number of movies... but real India is still the one of Indiana Jones and the temple of doom.'

'You go girl! Well said mom.' Nandini had no idea that her mother had such patriotically impressive stats, on her fingertips.

‘You do know that I can read,’ Shruti replied, acidly. Nandini cheekily poked her tongue. She happened to glance at Vibha who kept quiet.

‘Badi Maa, why that long face?’

‘I am just worried how this girl will adjust in the family,’ Vibha confided.

‘I am sure the girl is probably thinking the same thing. The SSS syndrome must be giving her, too, sleepless nights,’ Nandini bantered .

‘What is this SSS syndrome?’ Shruti demanded, puzzled. Vibha’s face held a similar expression.

Nandini, her expression saucy, replied, ‘You know the classic standard for an Indian daughter-in-law – sweep, serve and smile – SSS.’

‘What rubbish! I would never think of my daughter-in-law in such rustic terms. You know me better than that.’ Vibha appeared offended.

‘Please don’t take me literally,’ Nandini placated.

‘Shruti and I have never had any major problems with Seema and Meghna.’

‘That is because you use the AAA method with Seema bhabhi and Mugs.’ Nandini purposely used abbreviations; she liked foxing the ‘buddhis’.

‘Now what is that?’ Vibha asked as Shruti rolled her eyes.

Nandini shooting them a patronising look, gestured, ‘How ignorant you two are? AAA bhaiya... accept, adapt and adjust. Anyway this saas-bahu tussles have been done to death.’

‘Today’s generation and their silly lingos and short forms. You all can text and talk for hours, yet few seconds is all it takes for you to kill a language. Anyway, why are you implying that I would treat this girl, Gayatri, any different?’ asked Vibha.

‘Listen to your own tone, “this girl”,’ Nandini pointed, bluntly.

‘Well that is because, I can relate to someone brought up here, but being brought up in some other country... she won’t have the same values,’ Vibha replied.

‘Just because she wasn’t brought up here, doesn’t mean she’ll be a promiscuous, wicked witch. She’ll be different; a difference if taken in the right spirit will actually prove to be variety is the spice of life,’ Nandini said.

‘Hmm... We’ll see about that,’ Vibha replied, uncertainly.

‘The girl, also, has to adjust. Didi can’t be the only one making all the effort,’ Shruti jumped in the discussion.

‘I agree with Shruti! However, adjustments, respect, even love in such relationships is a two-sided street – give and take. A marriage should not imply that the girl shun her personality, ideas and thought process of twenty-three, twenty-four or twenty-six years and become a clone of her mother-in-law, something our own daughters are not.’ Vibha pointedly looked at Nandini who grinned broadly.

Shruti bobbing her head, acquiesced, ‘Marriage should never be thought as the boy’s side acquiring a new member and girl’s side losing one.’

‘Of course! Two families are coming together and none is inferior or superior. If a daughter-in-law has responsibilities towards her spouse’s family, so does the son-in-law,’ Vibha said.

‘The classic is, if the daughter lands a caring husband the mother probably offers prasad to each and every deity that she comes across. However, when her son does the same for his wife, he is labelled as ‘ladka haath se nikal gaaya’ or even better, ‘your father never behaved like this’... which one can never figure out, is an insult or a compliment to the father,’ Shruti commented. The two friends burst out laughing; been-there-overcame-it kind of laugh.

‘No wonder I never had to sit down and sort any of you out. At least where your daughter-in-laws are concerned, your head and heart is in the right zone. Hey Maa! Where’s the mithai?’ Nandini changed the topic, indicating the bare centre table.

Shruti smacked her forehead. ‘What is wrong with me? I’ll get some right away.’ She immediately exited the room to fulfil the age-old tradition of gorging on calories and ghee, in the name of good news. Should not, one eat something sweet at bad news to feel better?

Vibha urgently unloaded. Claspings Nandini’s hand, she asked, ‘Are you alright with this?’

‘Of course Badi Maa. It’s perfectly alright with me,’ Nandini affirmed, patting the older woman’s hand. ‘Aditya and I have made peace. It’s all in the past.’

‘Then why are you still single?’ Vibha grilled.

‘Because you didn’t pop a third son!’

‘It’s all Paresh’s fault; I always wanted a third one. He got himself operated behind my back,’ Vibha confided, smiling.

Nandini covering her ears, protested, ‘Eeeww... too much information!’

‘Jokes apart, your mother tells me you show no interest in any of the eligible boys, she has had to force you to meet, and there have been several.’

‘I guess they weren’t eligible enough!’ Nandini replied, flippantly. ‘Badi Maa, when the right one comes along, I am sure everything will fall in place,’ Nandini mouthed a trite response.

After thinking for a few minutes, Vibha murmured, ‘Maybe I should step in and clear—’

Nandini cut her off. ‘You don’t have to. Let the sleeping dogs lie. Adi is beginning a new phase of life; don’t rake up the past. No one did anything wrong.’

Glum, Vibha dotingly kissed Nandini’s forehead .

‘Here is the mithai! What’s going on?’ Shruti coming in, on seeing their expressions, inquired.

‘Nothing, just telling Nandi that I want to eat this mithai for her... soon,’ Vibha evaded. Nandini grabbed the largest two pieces of mithai from the box.

1520 days equals four years and two months, roughly!

Phir Teri Kahani Yaad Aayi

A couple of days later, the entire Sarin clan, reunited under one roof. Cross-legged, Aditya sat next to his mom and brother. It was no happy occasion—his father’s fourth death anniversary. Peering into the fire, Aditya’s thoughts meandered to another havan, around *1520 days*, ago.

‘AB, I am at the airport! There’s no one here, to pick me up,’ Aditya impatiently hollered in his cell.

‘I’ll be there shortly... another ten minutes or so.’ Ajit was only half-listening to his younger sibling. All his thoughts centred on the car he drove, and the wheel he held, so delicately, as if holding a newborn. ‘I have to get this from the old man for good. What a beauty,’ Ajit whispered.

‘*What is taking you so long ?*’ Aditya, hastily, maneuvered his Mulberry luggage pieces away from a man whose mouth full of tobacco bulged to alarming proportions .

‘Chill little bro! What is the rush? It is not as if you are coming to sin city (Las Vegas). It’s just house warming of the farmhouse, dude!’ Ajit ridiculed.

‘Will you just get here quickly?’ Peeved, Aditya ended the call.

Having put in sixteen-eighteen hours of work, every day, for the last three months or so had definitely taken its toll. His mind and body were bushed. Aditya’s eyes, winced in the sunlight despite the expensive shades he had taken refuge behind. ‘Must be Ulhassnagar material!’ he cursed them.

‘Hi Aditya!’ Aditya turned at the female voice. It was the PYT (pretty young thing), his neighbour from first grade.

‘Can I drop you somewhere?’ she crooned, coyly fluttering her lashes. She reminded Aditya of Betty Boop, but more gauche then classy.

‘Gauche’ – just that word hurtled Aditya into memories that had obsessed and driven him for the last couple of months. Affliction for life – he had happily approved and accepted the idea.

‘Aditya, can I drop you?’ the DBB (desi Betty Boop) persisted. Behind her entrenched was the entire family, the mother, father, another younger

and older DBB, with all their salacious eyes on him.

They are in this only because of my last name. In their minds, I am already atop the ghodi, Aditya smirked at his own crude wit. 'Thanks but my brother is on his way. He should be here any minute.'

The girl took out a smaller than a thumb sized cell phone. If cell phones got any smaller, it would be easier locating a needle in a haystack, than locating a cell in a woman's purse. 'Alright! Let's exchange numbers.'

Lowering his voice, Aditya honestly replied, 'Let's not. Sorry, I am taken!' He grinned at his own words. The sense of belonging, surprisingly, did not feel like a painful paddle in the rear. 'Finally!' he breathed, moving toward the Bentley entering the arrivals.

'Dude, you're slow!' Aditya shot, briefly hugging Ajit.

'Can't believe you are so eager to get home?' Ajit said, as their servant quickly lined up the luggage in the trunk. Besides the spare tyre, rich people's cars always feature a spare human body.

Aditya sank in the comfortable leather, only to eagerly sit up. 'AB let me drive!' he implored.

'Forget it! Dad would have my hide. You know only he and I are allowed to drive this baby.'

The Bentley, one of kind, highly customised and overly loaded was a prized possession of their father. Initially only senior Mr Sarin drove it. However, after much haggling by Seema, Ajit was finally allowed to drive the worshipped machine.

'It's not fair, just because you are married doesn't make you a better driver than me,' Aditya whined.

'I agree. Take it up with Dad! Why don't you?' Ajit suggested, smugly.

'I did! The old man was like, "Adi, bada socho toh bada milega!"' Aditya grumbled.

'Dad is right; marriage to Seema is bada... bada kaam!' Ajit countered.

'AB, Bhabhi is a sweetheart. So where are we going?' Aditya asked, resting his head against the seat.

'To the farmhouse. Mom, Dad, Seema, Sharma Auntie and Uncle, almost the entire city is there.'

'Hmm, wake me up when we get there,' Aditya murmured, closing his eyes.

After several minutes of silence, Ajit interrupted his slumber. 'Adi, you've been acting strangely for the last few months.'

‘Why?’ Aditya asked keeping his eyes closed. What does AB know, he wondered.

‘You work like a dog and finish the project, impeccably, in impossible time. Reliable sources tell me you are not partying much... there is hardly any mention of you and some woman on Page 3, of any city. Now, to top all that you are panting to get back here; a place which in the past you have more than often called boring and dead,’ Ajit replied.

‘AB, you work hard. Only party with Bhabhi and few friends, and spend all your days holed up either at office or at home. Yet, you find it strange when I do the same things.’

‘But that’s me! I have always been like that. You, on the other hand have always been the social butterfly of our house and country.’

‘Then maybe all your prayers have been answered. I have matured, I guess!’ Aditya knew the reason for the change, but he was not telling... not just yet.

‘Don’t give me that crap. I know you better than that!’ Ajit shot back

‘Mr Shrink, may I sleep for some time?’ Aditya smiled, his eyes refused to open.

‘Is there something going on with you that I should know?’ Ajit nagged.

‘No mother!’ Aditya moved the spotlight away from him. ‘So how’s everyone been?’

Aditya dropped the interrogation. ‘Same old! Mom has probably seen few more movies. Dad has probably bought some more antiques, and Seema and I probably have had few more arguments... whose left?’

Aditya, mentally, crossed his fingers. ‘Oh yes, Nandini! Nowadays her and our folks, including Seema, have taken upon themselves to get Nandi married. You said something?’ Ajit broke off.

‘Nope, go on!’ Aditya sat up, pulling the shades over his eyes.

Glancing at his watch, Ajit revealed, ‘It’s almost twelve; Nandini is probably meeting one of the first boys as we speak.’

After a few minutes, Aditya tersely muttered, ‘Your speed is insulting to a vehicle of this kind.’

In less than an hour, Ajit heckled by his younger sibling pulled into the lavishly decorated driveway of the farmhouse. ‘Must have definitely broken some record today, what do you think?’ Ajit said, getting out of the car.

Aditya, already half-inside the house, yelled over his shoulder, ‘Wait till I tell the old man how you abused his baby!’

‘You scumbag!’ Ajit called out.

A hurried, harried, Aditya weaved through the crowded foyer, living room, dining room. ‘Damn, how many people are here?’ he cursed.

‘Adi, you’re back. I would like you—’

‘Later Dad!’ waving, Aditya rushed past his father.

Taking a few scant steps, the life threatening faux pass dawned on Aditya. No one, except maybe his mother, dared ignore someone who behaved like Godfather and smiled like Gabbar Singh .

Contrite, Aditya stepped in front of the crowned sovereign of their household; ‘Sorry Dad! Had to kind of go to...’ he lied through his teeth.

‘Okay!’ Paresh’s face lost its frown. ‘Well, then do go on. It is good to have you back, son. We’ll talk work later,’ he said.

Quickly, Aditya did the customary thing of touching his dad’s feet, followed by a brief hug. About to continue he recognised who stood with his father. ‘Hello Uncle!’ Aditya bent and touched Mr Sharma’s feet, thinking, baap pat gaaya toh beti kahaan jayegi?

Nirbhay, taken aback, mumbled, ‘Bless you, Aditya!’ Such traditional gestures were Ajit’s forte not Aditya’s.

‘Where is Mom?’ The pea would not be far from the pod.

‘Probably, outside in the tent, near the tennis court. The havan is about to commence there shortly. Why don’t you go and change?’ Paresh suggested.

Aditya took off in that direction. A well-manicured hand stopped him. ‘My, my, so you are finally back. I was so miserable without you,’ a female voice crooned.

‘I wasn’t!’ exasperated, Aditya brushed the restraining hand away.

Sheela placed it right back. ‘That is no way to talk with someone you were so close to.’ She leaned closer.

For his past errant behaviour and abysmal choices, Aditya visualised kicking himself in the nether areas, visualised being the key word!

‘Got to go Sheela! Do help yourself to the drinks and food. The latter more,’ Aditya said stepping, around her. ‘Try not to live in the past!’ Aditya superciliously advised. Unheard by him, his destiny guffawed.

Finally, he glimpsed his mother. He scanned the group around her – Bhabhi, Mrs Sharma and ten thousand other women (literally) but no sign of her. ‘Damn.’

‘Hi Maa, I’m home.’ Aditya hugged her close. Vibha lovingly caressed his face. ‘Please mom!’ Embarrassed, he straightened.

‘What? I am your mother not your girlfriend.’ Vibha’s coterie, appropriately, snickered.

Aditya could control it no more. ‘So where is—?’

‘Nandini?’ Shruti finished. Aditya nodded.

‘You stay away from her!’ Seema warned.

‘Why?’ The word just sprung out. ‘I mean, is anything special going on?’

‘Nandini is meeting a boy! We sent them away so they could get some alone time,’ Seema revealed.

‘You sent them where?’ Aditya struggled to keep his composure, quashing the urge to shake the three match mongers.

‘To the other side of the house. The gazebo near the pond, it’s quieter there.’ Vibha enlightened.

‘Okay!’ Aditya promptly took off in that direction.

‘Adi! Where are you going?’ Vibha called out, sweetly.

‘To my room to freshen up.’

‘Your room is in the other direction?’ Seema pointed.

‘Sorry forgot! I haven’t been here, too many times.’ Aditya, headed inside, towards his room or so they thought.

Hum Se Hain Zamana (flashback continues...)

Taking the longer route, all the way around the golf course, the manicured gardens, the gigantic pool and barbecue area, Aditya finally reached the gazebo. It loomed in front; wherein visible were two figures, seated beyond the white, trellis fence.

Aditya stopped, drinking in the sight. The weary parched traveller finally saw his oasis. His hungry eyes drank in the beautiful girl, adorned in the peach coloured traditional ensemble.

The beautiful, black hair, through which Aditya longed to run his hands, rustled gently in the wind. Mesmerised, Aditya gazed at the pure line of rosy cheeks, the pert nose that crinkled a little at the top when she smiled.

‘God, she is all I ever need, how could I have been so friggin blind?’ Aditya voiced his regret, for the time wasted .

The breeze seemed to carry his words. Nandini lifted her head, shifting slightly to peer at the slope, near the gazebo’s entrance. Her breath lurched in her throat; emotions surged from the heart to the eyes.

Nandini and Aditya’s eyes met, and the rest of the world just fell away. For what seemed like an eternity, they stared at each other... eventually Nandini looked away, flustered and breathless.

Aditya grinned, the smile spilling out of his face. With arms outstretched in true Bollywood style, he wanted to run to her. However, he forced himself to saunter... at full tilt. Unfortunately, they were not alone.

‘Oh gosh!’ Nandini whispered, cupping warm cheeks with cold trembling hands. Why is Aditya looking at me like that? Crap, he knows, he saw it in my face, she panicked.

‘Are you alright?’ Vikram the prospective groom, concerned, came closer. He felt her forehead.

Aditya controlled the raging jealousy. ‘Everything alright?’ he asked, entering the gazebo.

‘Oh hi! You are Aditya Sarin right?’ The other man put his hand out.

‘Ten on ten, but who are you?’ Aditya reluctantly, shook the proffered hand.

‘I am Vikram, Vikram Garg. I am here to meet Nandini,’ Vikram spoke the last part, glancing at Nandini with a sense of ownership.

‘*Bh@#%! Yeh to pakka mara!*’ Aditya decided. However, all that was trivial.

‘I am gone for merely two months and you are ready to get yourself married off?’ Aditya softly accused, feasting his eyes on Nandini, the decided love of his life .

Nandini could not bring herself to look at Aditya. Even her voice was gone, so made no response.

‘Nandini!’ Aditya took her name softly, almost like a caress. He was completely lost to that face.

‘Nandini! Nandini!’ Vikram called out jarringly, forcing himself between her and Aditya. ‘I don’t think she is feeling alright. Anyway, we are done; I have asked her whatever I needed to.’

Nandini’s bent head, jerked up. Aditya flashed a wicked smile, thinking, good going jackass! He languidly flopped on the marble bench, all set to enjoy the show.

‘In a marriage, the woman and the man are equal; it is not a contract between an employer and a slave,’ scowling, Nandini said, emphasising on every spoken word.

‘What do you mean?’ Vikram asked, taken aback by the tone and expression.

‘What do *you* mean “by we are done, I have asked her whatever I needed to”? This is not all about you, I have questions too.’ Nandini got up, ticked off by the apparent chauvinism.

Vikram sputtered, ‘I just meant...’

‘What did you mean?’ Nandini heckled.

‘Ya dude! What did you mean?’ Aditya egged.

‘You please stay out of this!’ Nandini pointedly told Aditya off.

‘Everything you say!’ Aditya spoke lightly, but there was nothing light about the way he stared at her. Nandini experienced sudden shortness of breath; with extreme effort, she moved her eyes to Vikram.

‘I don’t know what you are so upset about? I came here to see you— ’

Nandini cut Vikram off, ‘You came here to *see* me. What am I? The eighth wonder of the world?’

‘All I was trying to say is that traditionally the boy...’ Vikram stammered, red faced.

‘Oh please! Traditions? Sure! Who made these stifling traditions? Men like you! If a woman can give birth, feed her child from her body parts and provide for her family, she is in no way less than a man... if not more!’ Nandini declared, righteously.

Vikram gave a stilted laugh; it sounded more like the squeal of a slaughtered pig. ‘But you do need a man to have a child.’

‘Obviously you haven’t heard of sperm banks,’ was Nandini’s disdainful reply. Aditya with some effort killed the cackle, tripping his throat.

Nandini continued, ‘This is a meeting between two individuals, with equal rights to questions and decision. In fact, my first and only decision as far as you are concerned is that this,’ she pointed fingers at Vikram and herself, *‘is ending right here, right now !’*

Stomping her foot, Nandini huffed off in the general direction of the house.

Vikram, bewildered, gawked after her. ‘What did I say?’ he mumbled, sitting down next to Aditya.

Aditya clucked in fake sympathy, for his gender brethren. ‘Understanding this species is like solving the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle or the Yeti. No can do!’

‘You heard what I said. Where did I go wrong?’ Vikram quizzed, rubbing his head.

‘I didn’t see anything wrong with what you said. Maybe it’s that time of the month for her, who knows?’ straight-faced, Aditya offered. ‘Anyway, best of luck with the next one.’ Aditya stood up.

‘Do you think she’ll say no? Maybe I should meet Nandini, again, to make her understand my point of view. You don’t come across such a beautiful girl everyday.’

A twenty-one gun salute went off in Aditya’s head. Manner conspiring, he said, ‘What a shrew! Imagine waking up to that every morning.’

‘I know! Imagine waking up to that every morning,’ Vikram almost drooled repeating Aditya’s words.

‘What the f@! is wrong with you? The lady has made herself clear. Get off my property and stay away from Nandini. I mean it !’* Aditya shouted at the other man. Vikram appeared apoplectic. Aditya, too, headed inside,

winding back to the area where his mother and the other women sat. He spied Nandini there; she was speaking softly to the match mongers, emphatically shaking her head.

Aditya murmured, 'The ducks are lined, time to make my move before some other idiot comes along.'

At that precise moment, Nandini looked up and spotted him. Aditya gazed at her, his eyes devouring her face. Instantly she mellowed. Nandini broke the eye contact, her already flushed cheeks tinged warmer.

Aditya leaned against the adjoining wall, continuing to gaze at Nandini, his look intent, a soft smile on his lips.

Magnetically, or because of some pull yet undiscovered by science, Nandini again glanced at him. Aditya gently brought his lips close and blew Nandini a kiss.

The soulful eyes widened, briefly, and then Nandini hastily averted her face, not before Aditya saw the nervous smile .

'What is happening?' Nandini whispered, anxiously. Her heart raced, breath rushing out in short gasps. Some strong emotion was taking over, forcing her in Aditya's direction. Nandini could not help but peek again but Aditya was gone. Disconcerted, she looked around, her eyes searching the milieu of people.

Just then, the buzz of the cell distracted Nandini. She glanced down, 'crazy cow' flashed across the screen. 'Excuse me, excuse me.' Nandini repeated repeatedly, as she parted the crowds to reach the sanctuary of the house.

'Sneh hold on! I have to talk you. Give me a minute. Are you there?' Nandini asked, her voice rose because of the din.

'I am here, but can't say the same for my ears. Your yelling scared them off.'

'Sorry, there are too many people here. Hold on.' Nandini slipped in one of the guest rooms on the first floor. She glanced around; it appeared unoccupied. Nandini closed the door after her.

'Sneh, there is something really weird going on!'

'You said yes to that Vikram or what?' Sneha asked.

'Urgh! Please! He was quite a sad, totally zit ridden, rotten apple,' Nandini denounced. Standing near the window, she scanned the crowds below.

'So then what's the big deal?'

'He's back !' Nandini squeaked.

'Who's back?' Sneha shot back, puzzled.

Nandini's voice became a whisper. *'He, Sneh. HE !* The man himself and he is behaving sun-rose-in-the-west kind of strangely.'
Nandini happened to glance over her shoulders, the words died in her mouth. Super canary shit!

An amused, Aditya stood at the threshold.

Ishq Viskq

Really? Tell me Nandi... Nandini are you there?' Sneha's voice crackled over the cell. Nandini nervously fidgeted. Her tongue seemed to be stuck to the roof of her mouth.

Aditya came close. Taking the cell from her limp hands, he put it on speaker. 'Hi Sneha!'

'Who's that?' Sneha questioned, suspiciously.

'Aditya. Hopefully the man himself!' Aditya's smile tapered as his eyes, unwavering, rested on Nandini, who in turn shifted from one foot to another, eyeing the door.

'Ohh!' Sneha for once was not sure what to say. 'Can I speak with Nandini?'

'Nope. In fact, don't call her for the next forty or fifty years. I'll be keeping her busy,' Aditya replied. He ended the call on Sneha's howl. Switching the phone off, he tossed it on the bed.

'No more interruptions!' Aditya's voice was husky and dark eyes reflected a look so melting, that it made Nandini's insides all gooey, like a chocolate left in the sun.

Retreating a few steps away, Nandini stammered, 'Badi Maa is probably looking for me!'

'Let her!' Aditya stepped close, his expression arrested.

Now Nandini's breath failed her. Gulping she started, 'My mom—'

Placing a finger on the slightly parted, soft lips, Aditya whispered, 'She's had you for years, it's my turn now.'

'Aditya!' Nandini breathed, timidly.

Aditya simply took her in his arms, his hands running over her back, possessive and personal. Nandini had no will or desire to protest, her arms hesitantly wound themselves around him.

Aditya drew apart just enough to gaze at her. 'You have turned me into a crazy, obsessed man! When and how did you do it?' He teased, but the eyes, oh his eyes, burned with passion. The true importance of eyes dawned,

either when you completely loose them or when you cannot take them off someone.

‘I think it was the sneakers,’ Nandini whispered, hiding her face in the muscular chest. Aditya breathed deep, pressing his face in her scented hair. Nandini fused her pliant body deeper in his.

For a few minutes, the two savoured the joy of the first touch.

‘I missed you so much, Nandini!’ Aditya mouthed, pressing soft kisses against her nape. His lips left a trail of fire on Nandini’s skin. Shocked by the dizzying pleasure, Nandini attempted to put some distance between them .

‘What happened?’ Aditya raised a puzzled face.

‘Don’t do that,’ she implored, shyly.

‘What this?’ Boldly, Aditya’s seeking mouth now moved from her soft neck to even softer lips, unconsciously parted and insanely inviting.

Nandini received her first kiss and Aditya went heady with desire. Neither had experienced an attraction so potent. As Nandini moaned in his arms, her lips wantonly seeking his, a completely unexpected wave of protectiveness surged in Aditya. Using every ounce of his will power, Aditya disentangled from Nandini’s melting, delectable body.

‘What? Did I do something wrong?’ Nandini asked, her tone cheated and expression injured.

‘Sweetheart, you’re perfect, inside out! It’s just that I am really close to losing control!’ Aditya groaned, and raised his hand to caress, a flushed hot cheek.

‘Oh!’ relieved and revelling, Nandini nuzzled her face in his hand.

‘Don’t do that! Think of my sanity woman,’ Aditya gruffly reminded, yet pulled her right back in his arms, relishing how she fitted perfectly against him.

‘What does all this mean?’ Nandini asked, contently resting her face on his chest. She could hear his heartbeat, racing —just like hers.

Hooking a finger under her chin, Aditya raised the beautiful face to his. ‘What does, all what mean?’

‘I mean is this... umm, you are serious about us?’ Nandini had to know.

‘You bet your sweet backside... *I am not* .’ Aditya declared. Irked, Nandini frowned .

Smiling, Aditya gently began shaking her. ‘For the past two month—’ shake, ‘I work like a mad man—’ shake, ‘hardly sleep, hardly eat—’ shake,

shake ‘snub all the numerous attractive women—’ forceful shake, ‘for a mere fling, after a fling, after another fling... till my life becomes a series of flings... but only with one girl, one woman, and one old hag – YOU!’

‘This scheme is better than timeshare. Count me in for hundred percent!’ Nandini cooed, ecstatically planting lingering kisses on Aditya’s jaw.

‘Oh yes, the fling and all its sequels might have a few children thrown in and for their sake, definitely a marriage.’ Aditya savoured the ardent kisses. ‘I hope you are not in this for my body!’ he whispered, quickly finding something for him, to pepper kisses on Nandini’s luscious mouth.

‘Totally, couldn’t be for your nonexistent brains!’ Nandini whispered, not moving a fraction of a millimetre away. The freedom to touch the man she loved was gripping.

‘Stop it woman! You do that any longer and I will not be responsible for the consequences!’ Aditya half-begged and half-ordered, fighting for control.

‘What this?’ Nandini repeated his earlier words, going right back to where she was, perched on her tiptoes.

‘Nandini!’ Aditya warned, but she recklessly continued.

‘Fine, take this then!’ Aditya commenced prodding Nandini’s waist with his fingers.

‘Stop it, please stop it. I’ll kill you... aww ! Aditya please!’ Nandini begged, she doubled over, howling and wiggling to get away from him. Extremely ticklish, Nandini was known to promptly dissolve into giggles, if one even suggestively, wriggled fingers at her .

Aditya kept at it, chuckling as she struggled to escape his hands. Tears streamed down Nandini’s face, as her laugh laced shrieks echoed in the room.

Unintentionally, they both landed on the bed. Instant desire, like instant coffee and way more addictive, took over the lovers. Aditya rammed his lips over her, Nandini moaned, moving restlessly under his muscled strength; her body did not seem her own.

Few breathless, and extreme pleasure-filled moments later, Aditya ricocheted off the bed, breathing hard. He ran his hands through his hair.

‘For my own sanity, I’ll have to make an honest woman out of you soon,’ he growled, bewitched by Nandini’s ravaged lips and desire-laden eyes.

‘Is it always like this?’ Nandini’s face held awe. Love and lust seized her, two overwhelming emotions but for only one man.

Shaking his head, Aditya knelt at the edge of the bed, close to Nandini. ‘Not always! Only when you’re in love.’ He lovingly traced her cheek finally stopping at the lips. ‘In that sense, this is a first for me too.’

Nandini felt tears wet her lashes. ‘And no ghosts from your past will come to haunt us?’

‘I don’t even remember last night’s dream. Seriously, past is important when it was the present, not so much after that.’ Dotingly, Aditya kissed her eyes.

‘Nandini Sharma, I’m crazily, completely and... unconditionally in love with you; only you. *Always! Aaj, kal parso !*’ Aditya said, solemnly. Secretly, he was dreading how the words would sound when spoken. However, right now it came out perfect, just like the girl they were said to .

Sobbing, Nandini flung herself in Aditya’s arms. ‘Hey love, sweetheart! Don’t cry, that wasn’t the idea,’ He stroked her hair, hugging her tightly.

After some sniffing, Nandini lifted joyous eyes at him. ‘Aditya Sarin! I feel absolute,’ a long pause, Aditya waited, expectant, ‘lust and deep friendship for you,’ Nandini finished, collapsing in titters at the look on Aditya’s face.

‘You little minx!’ growling, Aditya gently yanked her hair. ‘Button up and come down,’ he ordered, getting to his feet.

Abruptly, Nandini grabbed his hand, forcefully pulling him down. Aditya lost his balance toppling on the bed. ‘Nahi, nahi! Chordh do, mujhe bhagwan ke liye chordh do,’ he begged, just the way the hapless two-tonne heroines of yesteryears did, when assaulted by villains with thinner biceps and smaller thighs.

Nandini pushed Aditya down on the mattress. Resigned, he fell back. She nimbly jumped off the bed, straightening her clothes. Roughly combing her hair with bare hands, Nandini walked over to the door. Aditya lay still, possessively, watching her.

Instead of heading out, Nandini gazed at him with open adulation. For a split second, she glanced away to draw breath and even more will.

‘Aditya Sarin, I love you so much... so much that it hurts.’ Nandini’s voice shook, smouldering eyes shining with tears. Clichéd words which beautifully summed her love for Aditya. Overwhelming, soul filling love can hurt... you would know if you were lucky enough to experience it.

Stirred, Aditya sat up, thickly imploring, 'Nandini come here. '

'Nada! But I swear I'll do you bodily harm if you ever leave me and go away.' Nandini wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

'Done! Let us go and tell those two old women right now. Fire is already lit, we'll do the pheras, right here right now,' Aditya suggested moving.

Nandini immediately shot down the idea. 'No way, I want the usual pomp and show for my wedding!'

'Fine! However, I'm not ready for a long courtship. Max I am okay is about two months, no wait, maybe a month,' Aditya speculated, donning a thinking pose. 'Nah, that's quite long, maybe a fortnight.' the ramblings went on.

Blowing kisses at him, Nandini giggled and then confessed, shyly, 'You have no idea how happy, no, how ecstatic and euphoric you have just made me. You have beaten Robert De Niro, Matt Damon, Naseeruddin Shah, Paresh Rawal, Big B, King Khan and Shahid Kapoor in one go!'

'My filmy bhoot... don't ever change!' Aditya mouthed, tenderly.

'Aditya, Adi.' Vibha's voice near the door sent the two lovers scurrying.

Nandini hid behind the door just as Vibha turned the handle. 'Mom, you're looking for me?' Aditya asked, casually. He held the door, effectively blocking Vibha's entry in the room.

'Adi, what are you doing in the guest room? You still haven't changed your clothes. Beta, the pooja is almost over. You need to come down, your father and brother have done their part.'

'Give me five minutes. I'll be right down. I'm just very tired,' Aditya faked a weary expression .

'You should probably go on a nice vacation... maybe skiing in Aspen or something like that,' Vibha suggested.

'No! No! I'm fine here, just need to be around my loved ones,' Aditya blabbered.

'Aditya that's the first time I have ever heard you say something...' Vibha had a hard time searching for the appropriate word, 'sensitive like that. Anyway, have you seen Nandini?

'Of course, how can one miss her? You let her in the house way too often,' Aditya bantered. For that remark, he received a kick in the shin and not from his mother.

‘Be serious, I need something from the cupboard and the keys are with her,’ Vibha said.

Unthinkingly, Nandini put the keys on the floor. Through the gap between the floor and the door, she slid them out. Aditya’s eyes practically popped out, thankfully his mother did not notice.

Nandini nudged him. ‘Do you mean these keys, Mom? The ones lying in front of this door?’ Aditya asked, rolling his eyes.

‘Oh yes! What are they doing here?’ Vibha exclaimed, bending down to pick them.

Aditya briefly and fiercely frowned at Nandini. Are you out of your mind, he wanted to holler.

Mischievously, Nandini whispered, ‘Your mom, my mom.’

Vibha called out over her shoulder, ‘Come down soon! Adi, are you listening?’

‘Adi, Aditya are you listening? Put the ghee and flowers in the fire, thrice!’ Ajit’s voice, jerked Aditya back to the present.

‘Sorry I was just...’ Aditya mumbled, completing the rituals.

Saajan ki Saheli

Footsteps, made the gathered glance up. Shruti and Nirbhay came in and joined the traditional offerings. After his brother, Aditya respectfully nodded at them. Instinctively, he gave the door quick glances a few times.

‘Are you expecting someone?’ quizzed, the accented, feminine voice.

Aditya shifted to gaze at the exquisite girl at his side, his would-be fiancée in a week, Gayatri Dutta. ‘Just thought I heard something.’

Gayatri nodded sliding closer, comprehending Aditya’s sense of loss for his father even after these years.

Furtively, she eyed Aditya. ‘Mom, I feel like Kate Middleton! It is mind-boggling! Aditya is treated like royalty here! Every time I snap at some intrusive reporter or make, a faux pas about the culture, Aditya handles it all so smoothly. He is my Rock of Gibraltar. And the family... they are not so bad. His mom is making genuine efforts to bond with me,’ Gayatri, a few hours ago, had gushed to her mother. Ms Dutta was completely unaware that Vibha had received some neighbourly nudge in the right direction.

Since her coming to India, almost a week ago, every channel was busy running so-called exclusive pieces on Gayatri’s life, her clothes, perfumes, her friends and their friends, even reporting the number of times she tooted, for lack of anything else to report.

The portly pundit throwing the remaining flowers in the fire concluded the ceremony. Everyone got up and the servants came in to clear the place. Ajit went over to chat with Nirbhay and Shruti.

Gayatri, cupping her hands, offered them the traditional namaste. She had been introduced to them a day before.

Shruti hugged Gayatri, and did the LLTT (looking London talking Tokyo) act, ‘Ajit, where is Seema?’

‘Near the pool Aunt, she’s staying away from the fumes,’ Ajit replied.

‘Good thinking!’ Shruti agreed.

‘Let’s go to the pool area, I’ll have the lunch served there,’ Vibha proposed. The group trooped towards the lagoon themed pool.

‘This generation is so aware; we hardly took any such precautions in our days.’ Shruti chatted with Vibha.

‘Seema’s doctor is making her exercise as if she is gearing up for a marathon rather than give birth. He has her on a diet, can you believe it?’ Vibha expressed.

‘Diet really? For our generation being pregnant meant a free ticket to eat whatever one desired... quantity no bar.’ Shruti recalling, chuckled.

‘No wonder our children turned the way they did.’ Vibha, mischievously, glanced at her sons.

The two women continued their discussion while Ajit and Nirbhay exchanged conspiratorial winks. On seeing everyone coming, Seema tried getting to her feet. Aditya, quickly, came forward to help her up. ‘What you are having? Quadruplets?’ he teased his very pregnant sister-in-law.

‘I’ll ask you when Gayatri is expecting,’ Seema ribbed. Aditya just stretched his lips in what he hoped was a smile.

Seema immediately disappeared in the hug Shruti launched at her. Nirbhay winced. ‘Shruti, Seema is pregnant. Let her and the baby breathe,’ he said.

Shruti made a face at him. ‘It’s been too long Seema. You are glowing dear! Let me look at your stomach. It’s definitely a girl, see it’s riding low.’ Shruti gently prodded a blushing Seema’s stomach. Pregnant women, somewhere hold a placard, inviting every vimla-kamla-salma and Shruti to come and touch them, in the most personal manner. Even the Laughing Buddha’s stomach does not receive that kind of attention.

Nirbhay reprimanded, ‘Stop it Shruti! You are embarrassing Seema. If Nandini had been here—’

Seema immediately griped, ‘Aunty, I am very mad at Nandini. She has not come once to meet me. Where is she?’

Sighing, Shruti sat on one of the padded chairs. ‘God knows what has happened to my Nandi? Seema, she’s not the same girl she used to be.’

Aditya’s finger about to dial a number on his cell, stilled.

‘Is Nandini okay?’ Ajit questioned. Seema joined Shruti on the chaise.

‘On the outside she is fine, but on the inside, something is definitely eating her. I am her mother, I know! She has no life, just a routine – office, gym and home. Once in a while, after much cajoling she will go out with us. Instead of living her life, she’s just aimlessly wandering in it,’ Shruti vented, her face troubled.

‘You worry too much, it is just a phase. It will pass!’ Nirbhay said.

‘Nirbhay, a phase doesn’t last this long. Maybe we should show her to a professional or a tantrik,’ said Shruti. Quite a few people, especially in small towns, see striking similarities between black magic and medical degree attained by hard work and years of analytical research and behavioural study of human psyche.

‘Please Aunt, no tantric and all that nonsense! Maybe it’s something at work,’ Ajit suggested.

‘Well Aditya can help us there.’ Nirbhay gestured at Aditya who stood at some distance, fiddling with his cell.

‘Uncle, how would Adi know?’ Ajit asked.

‘Aditya just bought the advertising agency Nandini works for,’ Nirbhay replied, casually

‘I had no idea! Aditya you never mentioned the acquisition?’

‘I wanted to set up a base here to work from; AAA seemed as good a place as any other. Simone faxed, your PA and the other board of directors, all the paperwork,’ Aditya replied, his words coming out in a rush.

Ajit returned his attention to the Sharmas. ‘Maybe Nandini needs to widen her horizons. She should apply for work in any of the metros. Sometimes a change of place can provide the much-needed balance. I can help her there.’

‘There is no lack of offers. Nandini, for years has been doing, freelance work for reputed advertising agencies. They have made her handsome offers but she keeps turning them down. We suggested that she go abroad and pursue higher education. She aced her GRE, got a considerable scholarship but then backed out. It’s almost as if she likes to test what she is capable of,’ Nirbhay shared.

Gayatri glanced from one face to another. All, except Aditya who was peering at his shoe, held similar expressions of concern. Who is this Nandini? Why are they all so worried for her, she wondered.

‘How long has this been going on?’ Seema asked.

Shruti became quiet, thinking. A few minutes later, she said, ‘I think four years or so!’

Vibha’s eyes clashed with her younger son. Aditya turned, abruptly, on his heels and headed inside.

Gayatri watched the silent exchange between mother and son. Her female instinct stirred.

‘All these years, Shruti, you and I chatted almost every day, but you never mentioned this?’ Vibha complained.

‘How could I burden you with my worries? You all were coping with such a big loss yourself,’ Shruti replied.

‘Is Nandini at home right now?’ Gayatri asked hesitantly.

‘Yes beta, she just returned from the gym,’ Shruti replied.

‘Then why don’t we all go over and surprise her. I would love to meet her!’ Gayatri suggested.

‘That’s a good idea. I need to walk anyway!’ Seema agreed and so did the others.

Aditya from the dining area saw them head outside. ‘We are going to meet Nandini. Are you coming?’ Gayatri invited.

‘I have some work, why don’t you go ahead?’ Aditya evaded .

‘At least that hasn’t changed. These two are still at loggerheads!’ Seema jested.

‘What do you mean?’ Gayatri asked.

‘Oh, Nandini and Aditya couldn’t stand each other. They would argue and pick on each other 24/7. How many aspirins, we took because of these two!’ Ajit replied, laughing.

Aditya kept quiet. After Shruti’s disclosures, he craved some medicines of his own – antacids.

Jhoota Sach

Sharma household

Nandini closed the door behind her, plunging the room in further darkness. The lines from Alanis Morissette's song, 'Ironie – imagine meeting the man of your dreams and then his beautiful wife', strummed in her head.

Not switching the lights, she moved straight for the beanbag in the corner. Flopping down, she dialled a number on her cell. Few rings later, someone answered it. Nandini immediately blurted, 'I just met his fiancée.'

'Describe her?' Sneha's tone was sympathetic.

'Total fugly!'

'I knew it!' Sneha retorted and then ventured a soft, 'Really?'

Exhaling, Nandini confessed, 'Quite a stunner and sophisticated to the T. But her Hindi is atrocious!'

'Dang! How are you doing?'

'Not too well!' Nandini whispered, as tears welled in her eyes. There was a comforting silence between old friends.

'Maybe it is time, for you also to move on. You have to accept that Aditya and you are not getting back.' Sneha flinched, as she uttered the words.

'Do I have to?' Nandini moaned.

'Yes darling, why live in the murky past and overlook a future, which could be so bright?'

'Don't BS me!' Nandini bawled.

'I am not BSing and you know that. Just put yourself out there, and live your life the way you deserve. Are you still there?' Sneha asked.

'I am here! Maybe you are right. This is not end of the world,' Nandini said, wiping her tears.

'You are crying aren't you?'

'No more,' Nandini said, vehemently. 'You are right Sneha! I should now focus only on myself. I can't throw my life away and for what, someone who doesn't give a damn.'

‘Exactly! All those lofty claims of loving you? Well it did not take much for him to believe the worst of you. In fact, if I were you, I’d be thanking my stars that I escaped what could have been a worst mistake of my life!’ Sneha spoke, like a true TV evangelist – blood curdling loud and forceful...

‘You are right! It’s true; I may have actually been saved from the worst mistake of my life!’ Nandini replied, like a fanatic – zealous and brain dead.

‘Now keep saying that over and over till you fall asleep. And mark my words tomorrow you’ll be like new,’ Sneha bolstered.

‘I shall do just that. Thank you my friend.’

‘You go girl, you are now cured!’ Sneha declared.

‘Yes! Yes! I agree, I am cured... totally and completely cured.’ Nandini hollered. Charged, the two best friends ended the call.

‘Aditya could have been the worst mistake of my life!’ Nandini chanted, as she brushed her teeth, donned her night suit, applied the moisturiser and finally slipped in the bed. About to turn the bedside light off, her eyes fell on the crystal love birds at the nightstand.

Self-worth and Mata Sneha’s gyaan went for a toss, as Nandini, sobbing, threw herself in the pillow. The hot, scalding tears came in truckloads. Some minutes later, her cell buzzed. Nandini rolled over and picked it up.

‘Crying?’ Sneha asked, softly.

‘Bawling,’ was Nandini’s drained reply.

‘Babes, it is over,’ Sneha quietly reinforced.

‘You say that word once again and I swear I’ll come to your house and personally strangle you.’ Nandini whispered, hoarsely. Her heart and spirit tanked to the centre of the earth, one could not go lower than that.

Sneha made a sound, ‘Please Nandi, be strong. Do you want me to come over? I can! And this time it is free of any ulterior motives.’ Sneha was notorious for having Nandini drive her around, and do her errands on the pretext of spending quality time together.

‘I’ll be fine. I promise! This is my last night of grieving,’ Nandini assured, sniffing.

Sarin Mansion

Aditya glimpsed Gayatri enter the room. He smiled, but went back to reading his emails.

‘So how come you didn’t marry her?’ Gayatri lobbed at him.

‘Who are you talking about?’ Aditya questioned, faking ignorance.

‘Nandini?’ Gayatri asked her tone chirpy yet expression cagey

. ‘Why... should I?’ Aditya turned the question into a challenge.

‘Well, for one your family dotes on her, and she is not so bad in the looks department either.’

‘Do you think your looks, are the only reason that I’m marrying you?’ Aditya countered, suavely.

‘We aren’t talking about me.’

‘Shouldn’t we be? You want me to talk about other women?’ Aditya innocently egged.

Gayatri flashed him an exasperated look. ‘Why is it so hard to get a straight answer from you?’

Getting up, Aditya walked over to window overlooking the garden. The light of the full moon bathed everything silver. Even the water in the fountains appeared silver tipped as it frothed and bounced making tinkling noises.

‘Aditya, are you going to say something?’ Gayatri was determined to get her answers.

‘Nandini and I, few years back, had a brief relationship.’ Aditya mouthed the words, he had already phrased. Women had a sixth sense about such things and the neighbour’s house (pun intended).

‘So you had a fling with her?’ Gayatri gave Aditya a way out.

Aditya did not take it. ‘*No, it was a relationship !*’ The silence stretched between them .

Gayatri spoke up. ‘So what happened? Why did it end?’

Aditya turned to face her, ‘Dad passed away and soon I realised that Nandini was not the girl I thought her to be.’

Gayatri tried closing the distance between them. Sidestepping her, Aditya went to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. His bitterness was better left with him. ‘Shortly, we moved away. Nandini and I drifted apart till we completely lost touch.’

‘And then you came back and bought the company she works in?’ Gayatri honed.

‘Don’t read too much into it. I just needed a place to work from,’ Aditya replied, observing the golden liquid swirling in the glass. ‘And god’s honest truth is that she and I keep out of each other’s way.’

At least that part was true. It had been ten days since he had met or seen Nandini.

Work related travel and Gayatri kept him busy. However, in the office, whenever he turned a corner and happened to hear her voice or smell her perfume, Aditya forced his feet to tread in the other direction. However, his thoughts were harder to redirect, so he had given up.

‘I hope you are marrying me for the right reasons?’ Gayatri asked, moving in front of Aditya. Her usual doting expression had disappeared.

‘The reasons couldn’t be more right!’

‘Those better include love and insatiable lust,’ Gayatri grinned, but her eyes were wishful.

Aditya’s mouth, creased in a crooked smile. ‘Come here and I’ll prove it to you,’ he voiced, putting the glass down on the mantle .

‘No ways! I am tired. But I promise you shall get a chance, soon!’ Gayatri said, moving towards the door. Please let Aditya lunge across, bury me in his arms and kiss me senseless, Gayatri prayed silently.

‘Whatever makes you comfortable?’ Aditya replied. Some of the tension left his shoulders.

Entering the lavish guest room she occupied, Gayatri murmured, ‘With me Aditya is so placid, like a heart that never races or a river which never overflows... was he like that with Nandini too?’

Rani Roopvati

In a couple of days dawned the evening of Seema's good bhara. 'You look fantastic!' Aditya complimented his sister-in-law.

'Sure?' Seema retorted, sardonically. She moved towards her husband and others assembled in the living room. Just like, every pregnancy is unique, so is the gait. A pregnant woman can glide like a ballerina (okay, that is a stretch), or hobble like one-legged Fakira.

Ajit walked over and pecked his wife on the cheek. 'You do look beautiful!'

Seema, clasping his arm, flashed a warm smile. 'After the baby is born, if you dare to touch me, again, for the next five years, will kill you... in the tortuous manner my feet are killing me!'

'I'm ready!' All glanced up. Aditya let loose a catcall at Gayatri who stood at the top of the staircase. She looked stunning in her pale pink, designer lehenga and flawless makeup. Her hair pulled to the side and held by jewelled pink flowers. Her ears, neck and arms festooned in glittering contemporary pink diamond pieces.

'Bhabhiji, you will need two kala tikkas for both your bahu!' Seema's mom gushed. The three women oohed and aahed over Gayatri's clothes and her appearance. Gayatri preened, enjoying all the attention. Her eyes sought Aditya's, who gave her the thumbs up.

'Adi, keep an eye on your woman, lest she is whisked away,' Ajit teased.

'Didi, why are you all inside? Guests have started arriving,' Shruti interrupted coming in, husband and daughter in tow.

Aditya drew his breath sharply, felt like someone had punched him in the gut.

'Oh my god, look at her!' Seema howled.

'Nandini, you look smashing!' Ajit mouthed.

'Who's this stunning creature, Shruti?' Vibha lovingly cupped Nandini's cheek, while the latter self-consciously glanced at everyone.

‘Doesn’t she look pretty?’ Shruti gurgled. That is the understatement of the century, Aditya thought.

From head to toe, Nandini was a sight to behold. Her black hair parted in the middle, where rested a kundan tikka, only to fall softly in layers over her shoulders. On her neck, she wore a delicate vintage kundan piece. The kohl and mascara adorned eyes with red and gold eye shadow were hypnotising. Cheeks suffused with bronze and dull red colour, followed by the pouting lips, painted in matted red with a hint of bronze were utterly bewitching. Her body clad in cream and gold, heavily embroidered, form fitting lehenga choli .

If the ninety-three year old, Mr M.F. Hussain had seen Nandini tonight; he would have painted her with the haste and passion of a twenty-three-year-old. Venus herself appeared to have dressed Nandini, even though the credit goes to Annie and Jenny (A parlour in the by-lanes of the town, run by a Chinese woman, who has mastered the art, of speaking her native tongue with a north Indian accent and vice versa).

‘If you all have done your share of embarrassing me, can we go outside?’ Nandini avoided looking at Aditya.

‘Wait!’ Vibha stopped her. Opening her purse, she took out a thick wad of money and circled it around Nandini’s head. Another trick, to ward off the evil eye... bribe it! She then handed the money to a maid loitering nearby, and kissed Nandini’s forehead.

‘I have some good news to share!’ Shruti announced, beaming.

‘What, please tell?’ Seema asked, holding Nandini’s arm.

‘Mom, can you please do this later?’ Nandini begged.

‘Let me speak. Didi, Nandi has asked me to go ahead and look for a boy. She is ready for marriage!’

‘Congratulations!’ Vibha gushed.

‘Nandi, I think you will be snagged before the night ends,’ Ajit teased.

‘Please AB, not you too?’ Nandini grumbled.

‘Little bro and Gayatri, sorry now we’ll have to spend less on your wedding... we have to save for another one!’ Ajit said. Aditya, broodingly, watched the ongoing camaraderie.

‘Ooh! AB look, look Adi’s angry! His nostrils are flaring,’ Nandini teased. Her banter similar to the one they shared in the past .

Aditya’s eyes narrowed. Nandini’s nonchalant tone surprised him. Gratefully, at that moment, his cell buzzed. Shutting himself inside the den,

Aditya switched the cell off without even looking at it.

Marching over to the liquor cabinet, he grabbed the bitterest whisky. Pouring a Patiala (more than large and some) peg, he flushed it down his throat. The acrid liquid stung his throat, but nothing like the indifference in those almond eyes.

‘Who the hell will she get married to?’ Aditya fumed. Downing two more PPs, Aditya finally stepped out, hoping everyone had gone out.

Gayatri, her mouth set in an angry line, waited for him. Surprisingly, the displeasure wasn’t directed at him. ‘*That little b@#!* .!*’ she shot, fuming.

‘What happened?’ Aditya asked, taken aback. Just as overweight women, resolutely, steer clear of all cameras, Gayatri, a fervent sophisticate, avoided any kind of coarseness.

‘That neighbour of yours! How dare she?’ Gayatri grabbed Aditya’s arm, as they moved towards the door leading outside.

‘What did Nandini do?’

Oblivious to Aditya’s scowl, Gayatri vented full steam. ‘That tart knows tonight our engagement shall be announced. This evening is mine! How dare she try to upstage me? Mark my words, she will always be the action-on-the-side-and-never-the-wife. All she probably wants is to get laid tonight —’

‘*Enough !*’ Aditya snarled, peeling Gayatri’s fingers off his elbow. He almost flung her hand away. ‘Nandini is a part of this family and no one speaks about her like that. Not even you!’ he thundered. Leaving a flabbergasted Gayatri, Aditya emerged outside. Livid, he entered the decorated lawns, already peppered with guests. However, his eyes sought only one.

‘Outstanding little bro!’ Ajit thumped him on the back.

‘What are you talking about?’ Aditya questioned, reining his anger.

AB with his hands, made a sweeping gesture around him. ‘Look at all this! It is unbelievable that you arranged so much at such short notice.’

It was true; Aditya had pulled out all the stops to throw a party so grand, something akin to his father. ‘You actually outdid, Dad!’ AB praised.

‘Dad would expect no less for his grandchild,’ Aditya replied, blinking swiftly. Suddenly, his emotions were swinging like a woman experiencing a word husbands or boyfriends, for fear of castration, dare not utter.

Ajit hugged his brother. ‘You have more of Dad than I do!’

‘I know! You are all mom minus the sari and petticoat!’ Aditya buzzed, attempting to lighten the mood. Laughing, Ajit walked away. Aditya found Nandini; she was perched next to Seema. He, swiftly, headed in that direction.

From the corner of her eyes, Nandini saw Aditya approach. ‘Let me get you some juice.’

‘Thanks Nandi. I think the baby needs some sugar,’ Seema professed.

‘Absolutely.’ Aditya was almost upon them. Nandini preempted him, ‘Aditya, could you sit with Bhabhi while I get her some juice.’

‘Sure!’ Aditya fumbled, doing as bid. ‘I told you not to have ten kids at once,’ he teased Seema, taking a seat next to her .

‘Please Adi!’ Seema groaned. Smiling, Aditya watched Nandini successfully evade him.

Having dispatched a waiter with the glass of juice, Nandini made her way, away from where Seema and Aditya sat.

‘There you are. Nandini, this is Mrs Prasad and her son Deepak.’ Nandini’s arm was forcefully grabbed and she, like a plate of son papadi, was pushed in front of an eager mother and son.

‘Hello Behl Aunt!’ Nandini croaked over her shoulder at the portly woman, close to fifty, holding her captive.

Mrs Sangeeta Behl, was the most active serial matchmaker of the city. A dog drooled at a piece of bone, and Mrs Behl salivated whenever she came across an eligible girl or boy. Her only parametre was age, anywhere between eighteen to who knows what. Everything else dekh lenge. ‘Nandini is more beautiful than you said. Right Deepak?’ The mother gushed, egging her son in the right direction.

‘Yes, Nandini you look out of this world!’ Deepak said, struggling to keep his tongue inside the mouth.

‘Only a desperate or immensely brave man would want to marry an alien!’ Nandini, ignoring her ever-blabbering conscience, pasted a suffering smile.

‘Well why don’t you youngsters talk? Come Lata, let me introduce you to Nandini’s mother.’ Mrs Behl and the other woman loped off, as quickly as they could with the pain in their ghutnas...erpetual affliction of all Indian women over thirty-five.

‘So what do you do?’ Deepak asked his tone more than friendly.

‘Where do I do what?’ Nandini asked, arching an eyebrow .

‘You know... in life?’

‘She maims and murders!’ sounded Aditya’s smooth voice over their shoulders.

Return of the Jewel Thief

'Aditya Sarin!' He offered his hand to the other man, who initially appeared disgruntled at the interruption. Least affected, Aditya inserted himself between Nandini and Deepak.

'Hello Mr Sarin. It's a great party!' Deepak crooned, realising he was talking to the host and a Sarin.

'Nandini, could you sit with Bhabhi?' Aditya requested.

'Sure, nice meeting you Deepak.' Biting her lip, Nandini swiftly walked away from them. Seema was really coming in handy.

'What have you done to yourself?'

'I knew I married the wrong friend !'

'How prethy you look, *Maasi* !'

Sneha, Ankit and Advey Verma bumping into her, greeted her simultaneously.

'Look at you, Ms Priyanka Chopra and Megan Fox, rolled into one.' Nandini then turned to Ankit, 'I told you at the day of the wedding itself! Thank you darling... you look very handsome yourself,' Nandini cheerfully picked up the tot in her arms.

'Please get us a drink and take your son too,' Sneha, piped to her husband.

'At least let's meet the Sarins, and then you can harass Nandini!' Ankit said, not falling for the 'please get us a drink' trick.

'Kit, promise five minutes... and I'll be right with you!' Sneha vouched. Ankit holding his son, reluctantly, moved away from the two.

'Okay, what's going on?' Sneha fired at Nandini.

'Nothing, what do you mean?' Nandini replied.

'Nandi, why are you looking like a Christmas tree?'

'Is it wrong to look your best?'

'Of course not! But why today?'

'Now that I have officially put myself in the meat market, I might as well look my best to attract the bestest,' Nandini replied.

'Not making anyone jealous are we?' Sneha gave her a sly look.

‘I have no clue what you are talking about!’ Nandini countered, rolling her eyes.

‘Okay! Just a FYI, he’s coming this way, towards us.’

‘Who... Davy Jones?’ Nandini shot.

Sneha chuckled. ‘Davy Jones is that character in the Pirate series that has no heart... right?’

‘Something like that!’ Nandini replied, snickering.

‘You don’t know! You have seen those movies like twenty thousand times!’

‘Yup, for Johnny Depp!’ Nandini shot back. ‘Anyway, how far is he?’

Sneha, a stiff smile, pasted on her lips, said, ‘Almost upon us, you can’t avoid—’

‘Bye! Bye then!’ Nandini whispered, traipsing off.

‘Nandini, come back...’ Sneha threatened, but the other girl was gone.

Irritated, Aditya came to a standstill. He was too close to act as if he was headed beyond Sneha. ‘How are you?’ he asked, stiltedly.

‘Well, very well. Thank you,’ Sneha, equally awkward, responded.

‘Can I get you get a drink?’

‘My husband is getting me one, but thanks.’

‘Well then enjoy yourself.’ Aditya said, turning away from Sneha. He grabbed a passing waiter and guzzled a glass of neat scotch from the tray. Making his way through the crowds, Aditya purposely did not stop at any calls. Finally, he found Nandini! Again, she had company.

A tap on his back made Aditya turn around. Gayatri stood there, remorse written large over her face. ‘I am sorry for all that I said. It was very wrong of me!’

Aditya relented. ‘Do you really mean that?’

‘Yes I do, sorry Aditya.’

Aditya brought Gayatri’s hands to his lips. ‘I have very high regard for you and don’t want anything to jeopardise our—’ Aditya corrected himself just in time, replacing friendship with ‘relationship’. He pulled her close.

Gayatri sniffed the air between them, ‘Have you been drinking?’

‘Yup, you mind?’ Aditya gave her a lopsided grin .

Gayatri caught her breath. ‘Go right ahead! If this is how you behave after it.’

‘Hey love birds,’ interrupted a loud voice. A man not much older than Aditya was making his way towards them.

Gayatri waved exuberantly. 'You know him?' Aditya asked.

'That's one my closest friends.'

'Do I have competition?' Aditya drawled.

'Oh please no! If we were any closer we'd be brother and sister,' Gayatri assured, cheerfully. Briefly, she disappeared in a bear hug. 'Get off me you klutz! My hair!' She complained, laughing.

'Wow! You looking stunning! Congrats! You guys make a great couple.' The newcomer heaped praise.

'It is so good to see you. I am so glad you could make it, Nik. This is Aditya, my fiancée—'

'You look familiar,' Aditya said, shaking the other man's hand.

'Oh! Nikhil is all over the news. His company is a known trader of diamonds and other precious stones in the South East and quite a few parts of Europe,' Gayatri informed.

'Nikhil Chandel?' Aditya remembered.

'Guilty as charged! You are one lucky man for landing Guy.' Nikhil extended a velvet box in Gayatri's direction.

'Nik, the engagement isn't today,' Gayatri, reminded.

'I know Guy, but I am tied for a couple of weeks. This is the only time I could take out, to meet you and Aditya.'

'Oh! C'mon Nik, you can't do this?' she protested.

'I'll be there at the wedding. However long it is!' Nikhil assured. 'Oh wow! I have changed my plans, I think I'll stay on for the engagement and wedding and whatever comes in between and after,' Nikhil crooned, gesturing at someone behind.

Aditya and Gayatri shifted to see whom he pointed at. 'Please tell me that gorgeous creature is available?' Aditya's mouth tightened, but Gayatri laughed.

'You are in luck! That is Nandini, daughter of our family friends. She just announced her availability, today itself!' Gayatri was all smiles.

'Then why are we wasting time standing here. You've found your match, help me find mine!' Nikhil coaxed.

'Aren't you going through a nasty divorce?' Aditya bit out, the smile did not reach his eyes. Tabloids had been full of the sordid details on the Chandel wedding and the tumultuous divorce, merely a year and half later. The pitfalls of marrying a famous page 3 socialite.

'Aditya!' Gayatri reprimanded, embarrassed.

‘That’s okay Guy. To answer your question, Aditya, I *was* going through a nasty divorce which is thankfully over and done with,’ Nikhil responded, genially.

Firmly grasping her friend’s arm, Gayatri led him to where Nandini stood with Seema and a few others.

‘This is Seema bhabhi and Nandini. And this is a very close friend of mine, Nikhil Chandel.’ Gayatri made the introductions.

Seema and Nandini immediately recognised Nikhil; it was hard not to, with all the channels constantly running pieces about him and his estranged wife.

‘You’ve probably seen me on TV?’ Nikhil said, dryly.

‘Yup! Though you look better in person,’ Nandini bantered, taking the awkwardness away .

‘So do you!’ Nikhil replied. Within minutes, Nandini and Nikhil stood chattering nineteen to dozen. Suddenly Nikhil’s eyes narrowed and the glass in his hand jerked.

‘Are you okay?’ Nandini asked.

‘Yes, I’m fine! Thanks!’ he replied, even though his gaze remained pegged at a certain someone.

Nandini peeked in that direction. ‘That’s Sneha; she is happily married with an adorable eighteen-month-old.’

Hastily, Nikhil glanced away. ‘She just resembles someone I once knew.’

Vibha interrupted them. ‘Nandini come inside, the rituals are about to begin.’

‘What rituals?’ Nikhil asked.

‘It’s my daughter-in-law’s “god bharai”; Indian style baby shower,’ Vibha explained for the umpteenth time. The gathering was spotted with several UFOs (un-understanding foreign objects).

‘I get good bharai. I was born and brought up in Jaipur,’ Nikhil said.

Soon all the women trooped into the large hall inside. Seema was made to sit on the huge sofa, all by herself. She resembled an over-fed, over-dressed turkey. Lucky for her, thanksgiving was not one of the few zillion traditions celebrated in the country.

‘Where is Nandini?’ Vibha muttered, looking around. She spied her standing at some distance. ‘Nandi, come here! Help me with all this.’

Discreetly, Nandini pointed at Gayatri. The gesture was duly noted by Gayatri who made her way towards her future M-I-L. 'Maybe the neighbourhood is not so bad after all,' Gayatri muttered.

Aakhir Kyon?

Nandini unnoticed by others, quietly exited the hall. The incessant questioning by Mrs Behl and her coterie, the strangling smell of perfumes and the loud chatter got to her. Speedily, Nandini made her way to the other side of the house – the softly lit and tranquil, koi pond beckoned her. Muted sounds of shehnai fell on her ears and the pleasant breeze teased her hair.

Settling on the overlooking bench, Nandini observed the fishes, quietly, dart through lotus stems and weeds. ‘Want to trade places with me? I’m drowning here!’ she whispered to the sea life below her. The fishes darted away from her. Even the slowpoke tortoise dived off a rock it was resting on.

‘Good choice.’ Deeply breathing in the cool air, Nandini embraced the calmness of the night.

‘Why? It’s the belle of the ball herself!’ Aditya drawled emerging from the shadows. Surprised, Nandini choked on her breath and hacked loudly .

Aditya, swiftly, closed the distance between them. He alternately patted and stroked Nandini’s back.

Alarmed by Aditya’s nearness and the effect of his hand, Nandini was quick to get to her feet and scramble some distance away. ‘What are you doing here?’ she piped, on finally getting her voice back.

‘In case you haven’t noticed, I do live here.’

‘Whatever!’ Nandini mouthed stepping forward, intending to get back in the house. Eager to escape.

Aditya moved in front, blocking her way.

‘What are you doing?’ Nandini exclaimed, stepping back.

‘Why, the hurry to get inside... missing all your groupies?’ Aditya stepped closer, his eyes glittering.

‘I have no clue, what you are talking about!’ Nandini arched her brow, haughtily.

‘I am talking about the numerous silly women and their equally moronic sons, all fawning over you. Maybe you should pass out copies of

your resume,’ Aditya jeered, lowering on the bench, Nandini had just been on. He stretched his legs out, effectively preventing her flight.

‘Good idea. Let me get working on that!’ Nandini responded, flippantly. She attempted going around him.

Aditya shot to his feet, this time too close for comfort. ‘You like that Chandel chap, don’t you? I saw you talking and giggling with him. He probably told you the size of his bank balance!’ Nandini’s determined efforts of avoiding him infuriated Aditya.

‘Aditya listen to me—’.

Slinging an arm around her waist, Aditya tugged Nandini close, so close that their bodies touched. ‘If you want, I could give him tips on how to make you purr!’ he taunted .

‘Why bother? I am sure Nikhil is more of an expert than you!’ Nandini blurted out. How dare Adi throw that part of our relationship in my face, she thought incensed.

‘*How would you know? Is he, also, a part of your sordid past ?*’ Aditya snarled, tightening his grip on Nandini.

‘*Stop it! Let me go !*’ Nandini screamed, wrestling to free herself. In the struggle, she lost her footing. Aditya tried steadying Nandini, instead, accidentally, bumped her on the shoulder. Nandini fell hard against the bench.

‘Damn! Are you alright?’ Aditya muttered, contrite. He reached out to help.

‘Don’t touch me!’ Nandini shrieked, slapping Aditya’s hands away. Feverishly, she got to her feet, tears of anger stinging her eyes!

‘I am so sorry!’ Aditya whispered, extending his hand out to touch her face.

Nandini smacked his hand, hard. Possessed, she bellowed, ‘*You have achieved success and affluence more than one can imagine! The woman of your dreams is yours for taking! And from me you’ve exacted your revenge. Then why the hell, can’t you leave me alone? Why Aditya?*’

Aditya had no smart wisecrack forthcoming this time. His eyes appeared muddled.

‘I have had enough of your nonsense! I, too, have moved on, and *you’ll* just have to deal with it.’ Nandini brushed her tears away. Livid, she stepped around him and this time Aditya did not come in her way.

Swiftly, Nandini went into the house. She did not stop there, only increased her pace. Through the house, into the driveway, she now ran. The need to increase the physical distance between her and Aditya swarmed her. Once inside her room with the door bolted, only did Nandini pause.

Tossing the jewellery on the vanity, she rammed her nightdress over her head. The expensive traditional outfit lay in a heap on the floor. She then went onto scrub her face, clear it of every trace of makeup. Taking the weight off her shaky legs, Nandini finally collapsed on the bed and made a call. 'Dad, it's me—'.

'Why are you calling me from your cell? Where are you?' Nirbhay demanded.

'I am at home! I am OKAY, but cannot say the same for my clothes. I spilled some food on them,' Nandini lied, keeping her voice light.

'Fine, so you are coming back after changing them?'

'No Dad! I have had enough of Mrs Behl and the gang. I think I'll call it a night.'

'I saw the bevy of your admirers. Sadly, quite a few middle aged women!' Nirbhay teased.

'Ha ha! Anyway, just let mom know that I'm off to bed,' Nandini said.

'Shall I send her over?' Nirbhay asked.

Nandini instantly, declined the suggestion. 'No! Please no! If mom comes here she will want to know, each little detail of every conversation that I had tonight.'

'Fine! Then you go to bed. I'll be home soon, after the announcement of Adi's engagement.'

'Cool! Goodnight Dad.' Nandini ended the call. The hot tears burning behind her eyes trickled out.

An hour or so later, fireworks went off in the adjoining house. A drained Nandini heard them. Why does a breaking heart make no noise? Thinking, she closed her tired eyes .

Sarin Mansion: 4:01 am

Vibha Sarin tossed and turned on the bed, any trace of sleep miles away. Questions ran amok in her mind. Why did Adi behave the way he did today? Maybe I should tell him everything?

Her thoughts stood interrupted, by the sound of soft footfalls on the staircase. A few minutes later, came the sounds of the front door opening

and then, quickly, shutting.

Getting out of her bed, Vibha hurriedly donned the nightgown. Opening the door of her room, she peered out. The whole house appeared shrouded in darkness. Just then, she heard the garage open and a car purred on the driveway.

Vibha rushed down the stairs and yanked open the front door, only to catch a glimpse of Aditya's Reventon Lamborghini (an engagement gift from Ajit and Seema) exit the driveway.

Mystified, Vibha made her way to Adi's room and switched the lights on. The bed was empty; the door to the gigantic walk-in closet stood open. His last night's suit lay on the floor.

Mrs Sarin was about to exit the room to get Ajit, when a large yellow post-it, stuck in the middle of the headboard distracted her. Grabbing it, she adjusted her head at a distance that allowed her to read, without her glasses.

It read:

I am going away for a few days, to straighten my head out. I will not be available to anyone.

Mom & Gayatri – On my return, I shall quietly take all the verbal abuse, you both heap on me.

AB – Simone has all the details of my meetings, video and con call, as well as the paperwork on the ongoing projects.

Thanks in advance for filling in for me.

Bhabhi – You and your ten children should take ample rest and stay away from the stairs.

Adi.

Gharwali, Baharwali

'Again, you have been crying?' Sneha accused, entering their shared office, next morning.

'Nah! Just passed a sleepless night,' Nandini hedged. Sneha did not push her.

'Even I didn't sleep well last night!' the other girl returned.

'Sneh, are you alright?' Nandini asked.

'Ya, I'm fine. Why?'

'You just accepted what I said at face value; no volleys of abuses and threats of total barbadi. Are you sure you are okay?'

'I am fine kulta! Just a few cobwebs... all clear now,' Sneha responded, symbolically clawing the air in front of her. 'Where did you disappear off to last night?'

'I went home, because I spilled some food on my clothes. And then really didn't feel like coming back to the madness,' Nandini replied .

'You do know the announcement of the engagement, did not happen as planned?' Sneha hummed.

'You're kidding? I heard the fireworks!' Nandini said, surprised. In order to avoid her parents, pressing ice packs to her swollen lids, she had left the house, at an unearthly hour.

'The impending baby became the reason for all that noise and smoke pollution,' Sneha replied, dryly.

'But why wasn't the engagement announced?' Nandini asked. AB had made grand preparations for the announcement. Gold-plated, lotus-shaped, cards were to be handed out to the guests with the date and venue of the engagement. Truckloads of finest champagne shipped and stored. After the fireworks, few Bollywood stars would do the unthinkable dance to their songs, for no apparent reason other than moolah.

Sneha's voice broke in. 'For the longest time no one could locate Aditya. Finally, they found him... completely sloshed, near the pool. Ajit and a few others actually carried him to his room.'

‘Oh wow!’ Nandini breathed, stumped. Just then, her cell buzzed. The room was filled with the signature song of a form-over-content remake, of a content-over-form classic, ‘Mujhko pehchaan lo mein hoon Don!’

‘Yes mom?’ Nandini answered. After mouthing, ‘What?’, ‘How would I know?’, ‘Wow!’ and ‘I’ll call you if I hear something!’ she hung up.

‘That was the most cryptic and one-sided, conversation I’ve ever heard. What was all that about?’ Sneha demanded.

‘Seems Aditya has gone off! All by himself to no one knows where,’ Nandini shared, frowning.

‘Now I am sure, solid khichdi pakk rahi hein! You suddenly leave the party... Aditya gets all drunk and now he lurks off into a self-imposed exile. Puke it out! What happened between the two of you last night?’ Sneha grilled, positioning herself on Nandini’s desk.

Few imperious raps on the door interrupted the two friends.

‘Go away, whoever it is!’ Sneha hollered. The door swung open, to reveal Gayatri poised in all her finery.

‘Hi Gayatri, do come in.’ Quickly, Nandini got to her feet.

‘I would like to speak to you... *in private*,’ Gayatri stiffly informed, still standing at the threshold.

Nandini glanced at Sneha. ‘Sure!’ her friend muttered, heading out of the room. Childishly, she made a rude sign behind Gayatri’s back.

‘Have a seat,’ Nandini warmly offered.

Gayatri lowered herself. After taking in the cluttered cabin, her eyes settled on Nandini. Irked by the silent scrutiny, Nandini murmured, ‘Is everything alright?’

‘You tell me?’ Gayatri riposted, like..B grade detective in...C grade movie. Nandini immediately knew that Gayatri knew that Nandini knew. About what? About Aditya’s abrupt departure! (Keep up people.)

‘I’m sure he’ll be back and everything will be as it was,’ Nandini said, awkwardly.

‘I am sure Aditya will come back. However, there is something, I would like to change. I don’t like *it* as it is!’ Gayatri replied, firmly.

‘As if her fiancée wasn’t enough, now this phirangi Lalitha Pawar, will also have to be suffered?’ Nandini’s conscience muttered. ‘What would you like to change?’ Nandini asked, politely .

‘You!’ Gayatri simply answered.

‘Excuse me?’

‘I want you to change. Actually, not change, just stay away from Aditya and his family,’ Gayatri asserted, leaning closer.

‘Even though I don’t figure in any equation with Aditya.’

‘Not just one crow but an entire nation of crows, will bite your backside off!’ Nandini’s conscience chuckled.

‘Shut up!’ Nandini hissed. Gayatri appeared indignant.

‘I’m sorry, that wasn’t for you. Anyway, as I was saying, I can still understand why you desire to keep me and every other woman away from Aditya. But from his family?... Why should I distance myself from them?’

Gayatri sighed and spoke. ‘I know about you and Aditya. He told me of the fling he had with you.’ Cooked truth, unlike cooked food, only burns, sooner or later. Gayatri observed the hurt flit over Nandini’s face.

‘Look Nandini, till you are around, Aditya’s mother and the rest of the family members, will somewhere on some level compare me with you. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not scared of any competition. But why complicate our lives? As if, we women don’t have enough to do already?’

Confounded, Nandini shook her head. ‘You’re their daughter-in-law. I am no threat to you!’

Giving her an irritated look, Gayatri coldly stated, ‘You are not the daughter of that house or *merely* a family friend. You are somewhere in between. Why would you want to be in these half-baked relationships, it’s not like you lack your own family?’

Because Missy, the so-called, half-baked relations to you, are family to me! Nandini wanted to shout, however, she kept silent .

‘Moreover, in some vulnerable moment, I don’t want Aditya to ever reach out to you. I am sure you don’t want to be considered a dish-on-the-side. You get my drift, don’t you?’ Gayatri, feigning innocence, rambled.

‘*Oh gosh, never !*’ Nandini agreed. Every word that Gayatri let loose, felt like a sledgehammer to her ears and heart, but there was biting logic in the girl’s words. Exhaling heavily, Nandini conceded, ‘You are right! I never realised or thought that I was invading your space.’

‘No harm done! Unintentional mistakes happen all the time. I’m just glad that we have now, reached an understanding?’ Gayatri altered her words into a question.

‘Yes! We have definitely reached an understanding,’ Nandini vouched.

‘Well wonderful then! I should leave now; I have wasted enough of your time.’ Gayatri stood up, so did Nandini.

‘I’ll walk with you to the door,’ Nandini offered.

‘Please don’t bother. You don’t show one, out off their own office, now do you?’ A tinkling laugh accompanied Gayatri’s rude words.

‘Ninety-nine percent of the time, it’s the immediate children and grandchildren who are named in the wills. The daughter-in-law only gets joint accounts and sometimes not even that!’ Nandini griped, once Gayatri exited the room.

Do Jasoos

What a chudail! That conniving tramp! I cannot believe you bought her BS. I should have never left you alone with her!’ ranted Sneha, peeved. Nandini had just finished the tell all.

‘Sneh, she’s right!’ Nandini argued.

‘Nonsense, she’s scared that’s what she is. Obviously, she cannot manipulate Aditya or any other Sarin, so what does she do? She picks on you. Nandi, you are such a simpleton! You actually fall for all those lies and totally misplaced blame.’

‘No point talking about it. I am done,’ Nandini insisted, stubbornly.

‘Please!’ Sneha gave her a disbelieving look.

‘No Sneh serious, I am done here.’

‘What do you mean bimbette?’ Sneha questioned, affectionately mocking.

‘Bimbette yourself! Anyway, I mean I’m done with AAA, with this city and maybe even this country!’ Nandini announced .

‘Oh, now at this very moment, you shall press that invisible button on your head and self destruct or swallow that cyanide pill hanging in your neck?’ In pure sarcasm, Sneha widened her eyes and covered her mouth with her hands.

Tossing a pen at her friend, Nandini said, ‘Shut up! Resignation and migration is what I am thinking of.’

‘Please do tell!’ Sneha, swaying back and forth, dramatically placed a hand over her heart.

‘You may find it hard to believe but I have it all figured out!’ Nandini declared.

Sneha, repeatedly, fluttered her eyelashes, almost breaking the collective record set by all heroines and few heroes of the 50s.

‘Behave! Fine, here it goes. Today is a Thursday. Aditya mentioned in the note that he is gone for a few days. I can bet my bottom dollar he’ll be back by Sunday.’

‘So?’

‘I’ll resign to *you* on Friday around 5.35 p.m. Simi goes for the day around 5.30 p.m., so by the time she sees your notifying email on Monday morning... the deed would have been done. On Saturday, I will proceed to take a flight to Mumbai and stay there for a couple of weeks and consider all my options,’ Nandini revealed, tapping her head thoughtfully.

‘My head is spinning! What options are you talking about?’

You know whether I want to work somewhere, out of this city. Or go and live with chacha in the USA and pursue masters there.’

‘You are going to uproot your life, just because of that silly jealous woman?’ Sneha accused .

‘No Sneh, for myself. To move on in the true sense, I have to first move *away* . There are too many memories of my past here,’ Nandini for once was being practical.

‘That sounds logical... but you can’t just waltz out of our lives, your parents, me and Advey. I am not prepared!’ Sneha, unexpectedly, bereft sat down.

‘Sneh, I’ll be back. Once all the hoopla is over and done with, I’ll make a trip here just to spend some time with all of you, especially you. I promise... but right now, I have to leave ASAP. Please!’ Nandini implored.

‘Nandi, what will I do without you?’ Sneha croaked, miserably. She was not used to a life without her best friend. That is how women BFFs function – till death do us apart or the next man, whichever happens first.

Nandini immediately came over and hugged Sneha, tightly. ‘You’ll be fine. Maybe you should hook up with Gayatri; I see some similarities between you two!’

‘Hey! Watch your potty mouth, young lady,’ Sneha protested, returning the hug.

Nandini chuckled. ‘Listen, I’ll head home for an hour or two. Update my resume, make copies of degrees, etc.’

‘Won’t your parents question why you’ve come home? I am guessing, you’ll drop the bombshell last on them,’ Sneha said, wryly.

‘Absolutely! Right now Mom is at the Sarins calming Badi Maa; and Dad, I can handle. All I have to mumble is, “women stuff” with a grimace and he won’t ask me a thing for a fortnight.’

‘Yena rascala! You’re mean!’ Sneha wailed, but Nandini had left the room .

Drumming her fingers on the table, Sneha addressed Nandini and Advey's picture on her table. 'Aditya should know that the bird is about to fly coup. How can I do it without breaking Nandini's confidence? If she ever finds out, regardless of the outcome she'll slaughter me first and thank me later.' Spying someone in the corridor... close to the HR Department, Sneha perked up.

Loudly, rapping on the door, Sneha asked, 'Hi Simi, do you have a minute?'

'Sure shoot!' Simi replied, pushing the open file to the side.

'Peer managers can resign to each other, right?' Sneha quizzed.

'Yes, are you resigning?'

'Puhlease, I do not take such momentous decisions on Friday.'

'But are you resigning?' Simi persisted.

'No ways! I am not the one who is a thorn in the boss' side!' Sneha droned.

Simi guessing became quiet. 'Oh Rajesh is resigning. Don't know, though, why Mr Sarin is perpetually on his case.'

'Anyway, keep this between us, will you?' Sneha requested.

'Of course! In HR everything is confidential,' Simi assured. 'Sure, except for the wide open files on her desk, the unlocked cabinets and her big mouth.' Sneha rambled, heading back to her room.

'Oh! Hi! I almost didn't see you behind that potted plant,' Sneha breezily greeted someone. Once inside her office Sneha praised her alter ego, 'Inspector Clouseau that was a job done well. Khush keetha!'

Shshsh...Koi Hai!

Friday afternoon, the phone on Nandini's desk rang. Reading the extension, '1212', she let it ring a few times.

Pick up the darn thing!' Sneha muttered crossly, focused on the artwork she was putting together.

'Yes?' Nandini answered, tentatively.

'Ms Sharma, this is Simone.'

'Hi Simone, What can I do for you?' Nandini asked, haltingly. Sneha looked up on hearing the name.

'I just got an email from Mr Sarin,' Simone began, Nandini's hand unconsciously clenched around the receiver.

'He's returning tomorrow evening and wants to go over all files on the open projects. Reesse pen is one of them,' Simone shared.

Nandini relaxed. 'The file and the presentation are ready. I'll swing by your desk and drop it closer to the end of the day. '

Simone shot an awkward laugh, 'Actually Ms Sharma, I'm leaving early today. Do you think you or anyone else could deliver the stuff to me right away? I'd really appreciate it.'

'Sure! Give me a few minutes.' Nandini hung up. 'Sneh, could you drop this file with Simone? She wants it right away!'

'What Mr Midas is here, already?' Sneha casually questioned, not looking up from the laborious work.

'Nope! He's coming tomorrow evening,' Nandini disclosed.

'Then what's the problem? Just leave the damned file on that woman's desk. I am finally getting this thing together. *Please babes !*'

Nandini chewed her bottom lip, the prospect of going anywhere near Aditya's office made her uneasy.

'Have one of the minions drop it,' Sneha suggested, well aware that their team was out for a late lunch.

'Good idea!' Nandini agreed. Grabbing the file and presentation, she stepped out of the room, only to pause, startled. Where is everyone, she wondered, gazing at the three empty desks.

‘It’s no big D. I can just drop it and run right back!’ Nandini bolstered her flagging courage. Apprehensively, she stepped out of the elevator on the third floor, which appeared deserted.

‘Yoo-hoo here!’ came Simone’s voice.

Nandini turned to see the PA squatting on the floor near a file cabinet, at the far side of the lobby. Files lay scattered all around, her hands full of loose papers.

‘Do you need help?’ Nandini offered, the atypically dishevelled woman.

‘No thank you. I have it under control. Do you have the file?’ Simone asked .

‘It’s all here!’ Nandini held up a brown interoffice envelope.

‘Oh good. Please leave it at my desk; my hands are kind of full.’

‘Of course!’ Nandini moved towards her desk.

‘Or better still, could you pop it in Mr Sarin’s inbox? On his desk, it’s the tray on the left,’ Simone requested.

Swallowing, Nandini glanced at the lion’s liar. Seeing the door ajar, butterflies began somersaulting in her stomach and just about every part of the body. ‘Why is his office open?’

‘I had it cleaned. You don’t think I misuse the place do you?’ Simone responded.

‘I did not mean to imply anything like that. I am sure you are fantastic at what you do,’ Nandini sputtered, hurriedly entering Aditya’s office. The sooner I get out of here the better, she thought. Unexpected wetness clogged her eyes. ‘Even when you aren’t around, this bloody place smells like you!’ she whispered, thickly.

Swiftly placing the file in the inbox, Nandini turned to head out. Her eyes fell on the chair behind the desk – Aditya’s chair. Driven by some inner yearning, she walked over to it. Reverently, Nandini ran her hands up and down its contours. ‘I am going far away from you!’ she mumbled, brokenly, to the empty chair.

‘I heard!’ Aditya answered.

Kya Love Story Hai

Nandini startled, pirouetted! Her movement nearly tipped the chair and herself.

‘Steady! I have that effect,’ Aditya teased, stepping away from a dark corner of the room. He moved towards Nandini whose eyes widened, just as a gazelle caught in the head-lights.

Aditya did not look away either, taking in the loose, shiny hair framing the gorgeous face. Beautiful, bright eyes staring back at him, flushed cheeks, pink lips chewing each other nervously, a pulse beating at the neck and her delectable body clad in short pink kurta, tight blue jeans and of course...

As after a collision one tends to remember silly details, Nandini noticed Aditya’s slight stubble, very sexy! His perfect physique covered in all black. The modern day pirate any woman between eighteen and sixty would willingly give herself to. Some might pay too .

‘Your PA lied to me!’ Nandini accused. Her limbs refused to move an inch... even though her mind hurtled at the speed of light, 300,000 km per second. (Chick-lits, are pit-stops of important knowledge.)

‘I had Simone lie. Even promising her a raise if she actually got you here,’ Aditya confessed, casually.

‘Whatever!’ Nandini voiced, weakly. She hobbled towards the door. Aditya had something else in mind. He swiftly put himself between her and the door.

‘I have the answer,’ Aditya said, tipping her face when Nandini refused to look at him.

Briefly meeting Aditya’s eyes, as she wrestled to free her chin of his warm touch, Nandini rejoined, ‘Good! Then I hope you have the question too.’

Aditya gave a crack of a laugh. ‘You had the question, remember?’ He languidly thrust his hands in the pocket of his jeans, waiting for a reaction.

‘Huh!’ was all Nandini could voice. Her vocal chords and brains had again taken off, though in separate directions. I should zip-zap out of here,

with minimal to zero eye contact, Nandini decided. Bullishly lowering her head, she attempted skirting around Aditya.

Hooking a strong arm around her midriff, Aditya stalled her exit. Nandini coldly said, 'Do you mind?'

'Absolutely I mind!' Aditya mouthed. Seeing his smile only widen, Nandini gave up all pretense of haughtiness. She forcefully tugged at his strong hands to free herself.

Ignoring her pitiful attempts, Aditya using, both his hands pulled Nandini in front of him. His arms at her waist, held a glowering girl, in place .

'Then why the hell can't you leave me alone Aditya? Why?' Aditya did a squeaky high-pitched impression of a woman's voice. Nandini gave him a have-you-totally-lost-it look.

'Isn't that what you asked me that night?' Aditya reminded his voice and eyes sobering.

'That was only heat of the moment talk,' Nandini spoke, acutely aware of Aditya's physical proximity.

'Then I hope the heat is still on!' Aditya ragged, pulling Nandini closer.

'I am not going to be your dish-on-the-side!' Nandini voiced, struggling valiantly in the partial embrace.

Aditya's eyes narrowed at the phrase. 'Who have you been talking to?' Nandini continued her vigorous struggle, heaving back and forth.

'Then, how about being the main course and the dessert?' Aditya quietly suggested.

'Yeah right and what happens to Gayatri?'

Aditya's next words blew her away. 'I don't think Gayatri would like to marry a man, who is so obsessively in love with someone else!'

Nandini gaped at him, open-mouthed. Amused, Aditya closed her mouth; his fingers lingered over Nandini's lips.

'Are you trying to say that... you and me... that you love ...?' Nandini sputtered, not able to complete the sentence.

'Yes Nandini, I am still crazily in love with you, and that's the reason I shall *never* ever leave you alone,' Aditya replied, exhaling.

'What about the past?' Nandini whispered gazing at him, her heart in her eyes.

'The past is behind us. All I know is that for me, there can be no present or future without you, only you, Nandini, no one else. '

Nandini swallowed fiercely. She clamped her bottom lip, as her eyes became laden with heavy tears. Her face contorted, as she tried reining the intense emotions slamming into her.

Aditya brought his other hand up to gently touch her cheek, and then caress the quivering full lower lip. ‘Sweetheart, please say something? Anything... please?’ he implored on tenterhooks.

‘Thank you!’ Nandini sobbed, tears dripping down her chin.

A heart-melting smile, creased Aditya’s face. He bent his head, kissing the path left by her tears and whispered, ‘You’re so welcome darling! Though that was not the reaction—’

Nandini put a hand over his mouth. ‘Aditya Sarin, I love you totally, unconditionally... aaj, kal, parso! I love you, love you, love you!’ She flung herself at him, openly bawling. Her head dug his chest as she literally clawed and climbed him, overcome by liberty to show her emotions.

Aditya lifted Nandini off her feet, hugging her tight. For a few seconds, their heartbeats heard each other. ‘Hey sweetheart, don’t cry love... shsh!’ huskily he comforted, nuzzling Nandini’s neck and face.

‘I love you so much Aditya,’ Nandini breathed, as Aditya wiped her eyes, ‘that I can even take your hate.’

‘Nandini, there is no hate for you and there never was. It was stupid of me to think that is what it was. All my actions were driven by hurt that the one I loved didn’t love me,’ Aditya voiced, gazing remorsefully in her eyes.

Nandini opened her mouth, but Aditya’s finger on her lips stopped her. ‘Till I realised that all that matters, is being with you, winning you back. I have more than enough love for both of us. I will spend every moment of my life making you happy, if that is what it takes to be with you.’

‘All I want and need is for you to love me and always keep me really, really, close to you. I have been told without you I become a zombie,’ Nandini said, ecstatic.

‘Done! To save mankind I shall always be stuck to your side and it doesn’t hurt that I can’t see beyond you.’ Grinning, Aditya caressed Nandini’s face and hair.

‘You must really love me; I saw you didn’t even flinch on seeing my sneakers,’ Nandini teased. Content, she linked her arms around his neck.

‘Love can be blinding. I’ll take you even with sneakers,’ Aditya groaned in mock despair.

‘You do plan on kissing me eventually, right?’ Nandini goaded brazenly, basking in the joy of being in Aditya’s arms, for the right reasons.

‘I knew you were in this for my body!’ Aditya claimed, instantly covering her lips with his. The pain of the past simply melted away as their mouths collided and meshed. The primary need to touch, in seconds, altered to raging desire.

Aditya feverishly ran his hands all over Nandini, remembering and relishing the feel of her soft skin. Nandini on her tiptoes, pressed deeper against Aditya’s muscled strength, greedy and giving.

A few minutes later, a loud, ‘halleluiah!’ broke them apart.

Pyar Mein Twist

Utterly dishevelled and breathless, they glanced at the door. Nandini red-faced, Aditya miffed.

Sneha stood there; an ear-splitting grin on her face, and a paper in the hand. 'I guess, this excessive spit exchanging means you two are back together.'

'Yes we are!' squealed Nandini, not budging an inch... not that she could! Aditya possessively held her to his side. He sat on the desk pulling Nandini into him. Both of them faced Sneha.

'Come in Sneha. I owe you big for the tip,' Aditya said.

'What did she do?' Nandini asked.

'Sneha discreetly revealed your plan of resigning today,' Aditya said, planting a kiss on the tip of her nose.

'Oh, you did not!' Nandini responded, put out. Just like men, true love did not stop for directions. Happy conclusions were only do minute kaa raasta away !

'I did no such thing like your boyfriend is suggesting. I think his PA eavesdropped on a very private conversation.' Sneha feigned indignation, but spoiled the effect by a last minute smirk.

A cheeky smile erupted on Nandini's face. How wonderful the word, 'boyfriend' sounded.

Whatever anyone was about to say was lost, as Nandini's cell buzzed loudly. She retrieved it from the crocheted case, slung around her wrist. 'It's Mugs! I have to take this one! Let go!' With some effort, she tugged herself from Aditya's arms.

'Keep it short!' Aditya called out, tenderly, watching Nandini as she walked over to the other side of the room. He curtailed the urge to do cartwheels.

'So everything is sorted, out in open?' Sneha quizzed, stopping next to Aditya. She inserted the paper in the file; Nandini had just placed in the tray.

'Yup apologies made, explanations given.'

‘Good! Nandi has suffered enough in the last few years... without you. It broke my heart to see her go through all that, for no fault of hers,’ Sneha conversed.

A sharp man, Aditya knew this to be an opportune moment to keep quiet and just murmur an all encompassing, ‘Hmmm!’

‘Nandini probably told you that she didn’t even have the cell switched on, when you overheard her speak, all the crap about you and your family’s Benjamin Franklins,’ Sneha continued her chatter.

‘Really?’ Aditya rejoined, appearing appropriately amused and incredulous.

‘A man of your intelligence should have dug deeper. How could you ever believe Nandi to be a money grabbing tramp?’ Sneha quizzed, casually. The person in discussion blabbered animatedly on her cell. The two things, women tend to grossly underestimate – their mouths and then their friend’s mouth.

‘I guess at that time...’ Aditya cleared his throat, not sure what to say.

‘I can imagine, your head at that time was probably messed up by your father’s untimely death,’ Sneha sympathetically clucked. ‘Had anyone else asked Nandini to break off her relationship with you, she would have probably fed that person, piece by piece to the sharks. But how could she refuse your mother – her Badi Maa... whom she never would say no to.’ Sneha carelessly slipped the big cat out!

Aditya, recoiled, as if ‘kicked in the gut. He straightened, shock written large over his face. Sneha gasped; reflexively she clasped a hand over her mouth. ‘*You didn’t know! What have I done?*’ Aditya please forget what you heard right now! Puhlease Aditya! *Nandini will kill me !*’ Sneha moaned.

Aditya’s mouth worked but no words came out.

‘What are you guys talking about?’ Nandini asked, coming towards them.

Swiftly, Aditya schooled his expression. Grabbing Nandini’s arm, he barked, ‘Let’s go!’

‘Where?’ Nandini asked, nervously, feeling some of his tension.

Feverishly, Aditya cupped Nandini’s face. ‘Home, sweetheart home!’ he murmured, planting a soft kiss on her lips.

Nandini chilled, ‘Okay!’

‘We have to break the news to mom!’ Aditya declared, his eyes veiled.

Sneha grimaced. ‘Lag gaayi lanka!’ she croaked, under her breath. ‘Nandi, please remember how long we have been friends!’ she called out, as Aditya hauled Nandini out of the office.

Laughing, Nandini asked, ‘What does Sneha mean by that?’

‘She knows that now your days and nights are completely booked,’ Aditya said, possessively. He stopped to caress her face.

‘Everybody will see... we’re still in office.’ Nandini moved away.

‘Let them! The sooner the better! You and I have waited for each other, far too long.’

‘Awww!’ Simone gushed, amazed at the difference in her boss. Now content, his face seemed to have shed years, love for the girl on his side, shining all over him.

Aditya glanced at Simone, who became self-conscious. ‘You are most definitely getting the raise he promised you,’ Nandini said, impudently.

‘Coz you deserve every bit and also because Nandini said so,’ Aditya agreed preoccupied. Instead of taking the elevator, he abruptly tugged Nandini towards the fire exit. Bemused, she let him.

The second they stepped in the stairway, Aditya pulled Nandini in his arms. ‘Forgive me Nandini; forgive me for the crap I pulled on you in the past few weeks.’

‘It’s okay Adi! Believe me all that is long forgotten,’ Nandini reassured.

‘*How can you forgive me so easily ?* How I blackmailed and terrified you—’

Nandini burst in peals of laughter.

‘What’s so funny?’ Aditya asked, her laugh, as always elevating and arousing .

‘You silly, egocentric man! I am only terrified of bad karma, the weighing scale and Behl Aunty, and you are neither of the three,’ Nandini caressing Aditya’s face, corrected.

On seeing Aditya’s disbelieving expression, she continued, ‘I always knew that you would never harm Namit Dada and secondly, I could have gotten my hands on that document any time I wanted.’

‘Thank you for that vote of confidence but getting your hands on that document was next to impossible,’ Aditya replied.

‘Yeah sure! All I had to do, is say one word to Badi Maa or AB... and believe me sir, you would have handed that paper to me, on your knees.’ Nandini poked her tongue at him.

‘Hmmm... well maybe you are right!’ Aditya conceded, smiling sheepishly.

Sobering, Nandini confessed, ‘I am pathetic. Even when you fumed and frothed, at least you were close to me. So I let—’

Whatever she was about to say was lost as Aditya rushed her down the stairs. He thought Nandini did not catch the wetness in his eyes. Throughout their drive home, Aditya growled, repeatedly, ‘I love you Nandini.’

For the first, few times Nandini made the appropriate response – sighs, shy smiles and lingering kisses on Aditya’s cheeks, only – as she was against driving under intoxication.

Finally Nandini retorted, ‘Please shut up, and let me enjoy the Lamborghini!’

Aditya, like a broken record persisted.

Mother India

Nearly half an hour or so later, the sports car pulled in the Sarin driveway.

Nandini turned to open the door but it seemed stuck. She tugged hard and Aditya yelped, 'What are you doing? You'll hurt, I mean, break it.'

'I'll hurt it?' Nandini shook her head. 'It's a car made of metal, with thousands of gizmos and weird stuff. It doesn't feel a thing.'

'It's not just a car Nandini, it's...' Aditya searched for the word, 'it's perfect, untainted, utopian magnificence. You don't treat something like that lightly.'

'You lost me after "it's",' Nandini mocked.

'Our first argument is not going to be about this.' Getting out, Aditya walked over and swung the door open for her.

'My wedding gift to you will be an old, beat up ambassador,' Aditya teased.

Nandini couldn't help but look away, smiling bashfully. Aditya leaned in to kiss her.

However, she stopped him. 'Gayatri. Rather than see it, she should hear it... from you! Be gentle with her,' Nandini said. Her eyes clouded, she knew the pain of seeing the one you love with someone else.

Sighing, Aditya responded, 'Try not to be so damn sweet and I'll try not to be so damn horny.' He planted a quick kiss somewhere between her lips and chin.

'Oh my godddd!' Seema's voice made them turn around.

'Hi Bhabhi!' Nandini greeted, embarrassed.

'Hi Seems! How are you and your paltan?' Aditya asked, not the least bit discomfited.

Seema's mouth worked but no words came out.

'Do something Aditya, or her water'll break!' Nandini hastened.

'What is going on? You and Nandini...' Seema trailed off, shaking her head and gesturing.

Aditya hastened over to Seema and put his arm around her. 'Yes, me and Nandini. We've loved each other for the last four years or so.'

‘Then Gayatri! What about her?’ Seema asked.

‘Ask Nandini, it’s her fault. She screwed it all up,’ Aditya, grinning, passed the buck.

‘Shut up Adi! It’s a long story Bhabhi—’

‘Aditya, Adi you are back. Where did you go beta?’ Vibha asked standing at the door of the house. At the sound of Aditya’s voice, she, Shruti and Gayatri, had rushed outside.

Looking at Vibha, Aditya’s face lost its good humour. ‘I need to talk to all of you. Let’s go inside,’ Aditya gestured at Seema and Nandini .

Gayatri’s boring eyes, literally pushed Nandini, to find the nearest wall and write ten thousand times on it, ‘I am a bad-side-dish.’ ‘Maybe Mom and I should go home. We’ll come back later.’ Nandini beckoned Shruti.

Softly, Aditya said, ‘You move your desirable booty one foot away from me, and you have no one else to blame for whatever happens next.’

Gulping, Nandini jostled with the other women, including one very pregnant, to get first inside the house.

Once all took seats, Aditya turned to Seema, ‘Where’s AB?’

‘In the den. Someone can get him,’ Seema proposed.

‘No need. Aditya, where the heck did you disappear off to, dude?’ AB asked, coming into the family room. He had heard the Reventon; it had called to him.

‘I am very sorry for the way I took off . But I needed some time to myself, to figure out who and what is really important to me,’ Aditya said. His eyes kept straying back to Nandini, who on her part, was ignoring him like expired cosmetics. She nevertheless, did reach out, to grab from the nearby side table, a few miniature Pate a Choux, popularly known as chocolate éclairs... or calories that stick to your thighs.

‘Firstly, I need to talk with Gayatri, alone. Could we go in the library?’ Aditya requested.

Gayatri, a resigned expression on her face, asked. ‘Is our wedding still on?’ Her would-be-could-be fiancée fumbled. Aditya was hoping to give her a more private letdown.

‘It’s okay! You can tell me in front of everyone,’ Gayatri goaded.

Aditya answered with the honesty she deserved. ‘I’m sorry, Gayatri. I am not right for you. I can’t give you the happiness and love— ’

Gayatri raising her hand, drawled. ‘Never mind. So she’s the lucky gal?’ Her tone, like her finger pointing at Nandini, was not polite.

Not expecting the spotlight so early on, Nandini halted her cheek swelling chomping, as everyone looked her way.

AB and Shruti appeared floored, Vibha's expression swayed wishful and Seema grimaced; a windstorm was whipping in her stomach. 'Never again will I dare to mix a bowl of broccoli with a seven month pregnancy,' she muttered to herself.

Aditya replied, mildly, 'I am the lucky man and yes, Nandini is the *only* girl... *for me* !'

'Oh! Please don't make me gag!' Gayatri sneered.

'I'm sorry Gayatri. My intention was never to hurt you—'

Gayatri cut Aditya off. 'And yet you just did.' She gestured at Aditya and Nandini, 'That's the problem with true-blue lovers or whatever your breed is called. By the time you get your act together, you really screw up other people's happiness. So what am I expected to tell my parents?'

'That thankfully, Aditya came to his senses, before any real damage could be done. He spared me years of therapy by not dumping me at the altar, in all my designer finery ,' Seema replied, irked. Aditya's genuine efforts to seek Gayatri's forgiveness and ease her hurt and Nandini's inability to swallow her food had rendered them incapable of defending themselves. Someone had to speak for the 'do jism ek jaan'.

AB, too, came to the rescue, though much softer than his belligerent and hormone-happy wife, 'Gayatri, I agree with Seema. It's best that Aditya and Nandini have figured out things before anything official happened.'

Bitter, Gayatri muttered, 'All's well that ends well!' Aditya returned her look, saddened. Even in these times of hire and fire, for a few, hurting others does not come naturally .

Nandini eyed them sympathetically. 'Now you don't go and do anything stupid. The karela ka juice taste, in the suddenly single woman's mouth, is largely because of the shattered ego rather than a broken heart. After a break up, for some time, it is hard to differentiate between the two,' Nandini's conscience scoffed.

Gayatri stood up and so did Aditya. 'I'll pack my stuff. Please, arrange for me to leave at the earliest and the most comfortable. Excuse me; I have to make a few calls.' Gayatri left the living room to take sanctuary in the guest suite.

Immediately, Shruti pounced on Nandini. 'What on earth is going on? You and Aditya are seeing each other? When did this happen? How come

you never told me?’

Haltingly, Nandini spoke, ‘Yes Ma. Aditya and I came rather close. Umm... I don’t mean in the physical way...’ Shruti nearly coughed up a fur ball, Vibha held her hand and AB shifted, uneasily.

Aditya, a wry look on his face, said, ‘Go on, Nandini. Finish what you were saying.... something about your and my physical intimacy.’

Shooting him an irritated look, Nandini resumed her ‘stop-look-go’ disclosures. ‘Umm... as I was saying Aditya and I... four or so years back, came together... not the way it sounds...not physica—’

‘Enough already! Nandini, can you just give the UA rated version? Anyhow, sex is not bad if done for the right reasons with the right person!’ Shruti retorted.

‘Grosssss!’ Aditya, and AB howled, simultaneously. Vibha chuckled. For men, hearing moms impart gyan on sex is as bad, if not worse, as seeing a gal’s hairy and deodorant streaked armpits .

Nandini’s mouth tripped to finish its tale. ‘After Uncle’s demise, when Aditya moved away, he and I drifted apart and lost touch. However, things took a turn and old feelings returned as did Aditya.’

‘Having decided to make it official and absolutely in no mood to wait, here we are seeking your blessings,’ Aditya added.

‘I can’t believe this! What a fool you’ve made of us. Four years?’ AB exclaimed.

‘So no one else knew!’ Seema asked.

‘Nope, no one! Except Sneha!’ Nandini replied, quickly and emphatically.

‘Mom knew!’ Aditya disagreed. Vibha had caught Nandini and Aditya canoodling in the farmhouse; a place where the lovers used to sneak off to, once in a while. Short of bursting into a banabani song, Vibha had done everything to show her joy. Apart from the expected kadas, she had offloaded every bit of her jewellery, from the solitaire earrings to nearly the toe rings, onto a bemused Nandini. Aditya practically had to beg Vibha to keep the news a secret, until Paresh returned, from his fortnight business sojourn to Moscow.

‘Yes, I knew!’ Vibha agreed. Sighing deeply, and looking, only, at Aditya, she said, ‘There is more—’

Eagerly, Nandini piped, ‘Yes, we made Badi Maa—’

Vibha cut her off, 'It's okay Nandi. I have to confess to the wrong that I have done, with you and Adi, particularly you.' Glancing at Shruti, she said, 'Nandini is not telling the entire truth. Aditya and Nandini did not drift apart or lose touch. Nandini dumped Aditya and because I had her to do so.'

Shocked, Shruti murmured, 'Why would you do something like that? I always thought you loved Nandini!'

'Maybe you never thought Nandini worthy of becoming your daughter-in-law. All your affection was merely an act. The fact that I loved her so much was of no consequence to you, right?' Aditya ranted.

'Aditya... don't talk to Badi Maa like that,' Nandini, frowning, rebuked.

Aditya looked at her, sharply. 'You are defending her. You suffered the most in all this. Thinking you betrayed me, I have been giving you hell for some time now. You took it all quietly... my misplaced anger, my threats towards your brother. I very nearly—' Aditya bit off his words. There is always room in the closet for a few bones.

'What are you talking about? You treated Nandini badly. How dare you Adi? Why did you, not come clean to him, Nandini?' Vibha demanded.

'Hold on... what is going on here?' AB butted in. 'One person who knows everything, *please* explain. And others, just hold your horses!'

Nandini raised her hand, 'I'll go!' AB nodded.

'Don't paint rosy pictures of anyone, me and mom included. Just tell whatever happened, as it happened,' Aditya cautioned her.

'It's not your turn to talk. AB allowed, me not you,' Nandini told him off. Aditya shook his head but did not add anymore.

'Anyhow, like now as you all know....ditya and I were in a relationship, which only Badi Maa was aware of. She was elated to find out about Adi and me, and *her feelings were twenty-four carat real*,' The last part, Nandini spoke glancing at Shruti and Aditya .

'Anyhow, we were waiting for Paresh Uncle to return from his business trip...unfortunately only bad news came our way,' Nandini paused. 'A few days after Uncle's funeral, his new business partner, from Moscow, came to visit you all. He also met Badi Maa, privately.'

'Privately? Why did Bakshi meet you privately?' Aditya interjected, peering at Vibha.

Nandini replied, 'I'll answer that. He and Paresh Uncle had come to an understanding about a new venture Uncle was keen on doing. As the financial risk was largely Mr Bakshi's, Paresh Uncle, in all fairness,

officially gave the other man large chunks of ownership in his current businesses, as collateral. Of course, everything would revert back to the Sarins once this project got underway.'

'That can't be right... Dad would have never done anything so hasty, without talking to our advisors, me, and Adi. I did not hear of such a deal ever going down,' AB disagreed.

'I agree with AB. Dad would never do something so rash. Knowing the way he functioned, he would have bounced the decision off his people, and the walls,' Aditya added.

Vibha spoke up, 'You boys were unaware of Paresh's ambition. The new venture of his was the next big thing of the century. It would have taken the world by a storm, but as the patent of the product was pending, everything was extremely hush-hush. Except for a handful of people, including me, Paresh did not bring anyone on board, not even you both. The idea was to talk to you, and the board of directors once he got the financing in place, for phase I of the development.'

Aditya and AB exchanged confounded looks. 'Go on. Then what happened?' Aditya prodded Nandini .

'Then, in that private meeting, Mr Bakshi put forth another idea to Badi Maa... buying a groom!' Exhaling, Nandini continued, 'Mr Bakshi, proposed a union of the families – marriage of his daughter with Aditya.'

'In exchange, the older deal would be negated. All paperwork would be shredded and the threat of takeover would disappear,' Vibha added.

Aditya, his expression displeased, got up and walked over to the other side of the room, to the windows. He turned his back at the ones sitting inside.

'So you asked Nandini to break up with Adi? *You let your son's happiness become a part of some money deal* ,' AB demanded, losing his cool, probably for the first time, with his mom.

'AB, Badi Maa was not thinking of her son. She was thinking of the numerous employees, in your offices and factory, and their families. She was thinking of the people who had invested their hard-earned money in the Sarin shares. She was also thinking of saving Paresh Uncle's name, his legacy.' Gesturing at Aditya and herself and tearing up, Nandini voiced, 'Two people are inconsequential in front of so many and with so much at stake.'

Vibha averted her face, as tears rolled down her cheeks. ‘You both did the right thing,’ Shruti reinforced, eyes glistening. Seema, too, gulped.

AB instantly fell to the *abla-teri-yahi-kahaani* spell. He came over to Vibha and patted her knee, ‘Mom, you should have taken me into confidence. We would have found a solution!’

Sniffing, Vibha said, ‘You think that breaking up Nandini and Adi was my first and only idea? That was last and the most unbearable resort! After Paresh’s demise, you all thought I was locked up in my room, grieving. But, I was making calls, brainstorming; exchanging emails back and forth with people who I thought might get us out of the sticky mess.’

As Vibha poured, her voice rose, similar to the pastel sari clad, twenty-five-year-old’s acting as 109 year-old’s, female head honchos in popular sitcoms. ‘A middle-class wife grieves after her husband’s death but a rich widow plans and prepares – plans for her family and her husband’s unfinished work – and prepares for the eventual takeovers and splits.’

Nandini in her head could see the camera zooming on Vibha’s face seven times, peppered with the sound of a storm strong enough to blow away an entire civilisation.

‘Was that the reason for the sudden trip to Moscow, a month after Dad passed away?’ Seema asked. Vibha nodded, glumly.

‘So how come things didn’t materialise between Adi and that girl?’ Nandini asked, trying to change the topic.

Smirking AB, replied, ‘An hour or so after meeting Aditya, the girl eloped with her boyfriend.’

Nandini snickered. ‘Adi’s not that bad!’ she tried to keep the glee out of her voice.

‘Why didn’t you get AB married off to that girl?’ All glanced at Aditya in utter shock.

‘Yes Mom, why not AB? He has had a few years of happy married life. Did you even think of Seema... Bhabhi even once?’ Aditya, grinning dryly, joined his mother and brother on the couch. ‘Did you ever think of her plight?’

Lightening, Vibha murmured, ‘There’s always a next time!’

‘*No ways !*’ Almost everyone present burst out.

‘Next time, please speak to at least one of us, excluding Nandini. No more, filmy qurbaani! I have had enough for ten lifetimes!’ Aditya was about to grasp Nandini’s hand, but he hesitated glancing at Shruti.

Nodding, Shruti smiled, 'You have my and Nirbhay's approval. After four years I am just glad you both are holding hands instead of coming inside with children, we had no knowledge of.'

'Maa!' Nandini howled, embarrassed.

Grinning, Aditya grabbed Nandini's hand and felt bold enough to plant a lingering thirty-second kiss on her soft cheek. 'Itna toh banta hain!' He voiced to the awkward budhis.

Glossary

ABBY – Oscars of the Indian advertising industry.

Achha! Waise if *Times Magazine* gave Mr Sarin such an important award, toh *India Today* ne bhi kuch diya hoga. – Okay! If *Times Magazine* gave him such an important award then even *India Today* (comparable to *Times* in India) must have given him some award.

Aati nahin, teri yaad aati hain per tu aati nahin – A popular song from an 80s movie, *Prem*, which means: ‘You don’t come! You come in my thoughts but not in person.’

Aaj, kal, parso – Today, tomorrow, day after.

Adda – Depot

Accha hai! Hindustani thapad ka andaaza tumhe ho gaya – It is good that you realise what a slap from an Indian feels like. The dialogue was uttered by a veteran and highly decorated actor, Dilip Kumar, in the movie *Karma*, which was directed by Subhash Ghai.

Abla teri yahi kahaani – Poor woman, this is your story (is a dialogue and thought made famous by the old black and white movies where the lead actresses were usually portrayed as weepy, sacrificing and quiet martyrs).

BTM (Behenji turned modern) – Acronym for a conservative girl, from a small town, trying to pull off being western and fluent in English and obviously failing. Behenji is what you call women respectfully in colloquial language.

BSE – Bombay Stock Exchange

Badi Maa – Older mother, a common term for paternal grand mothers.

Bada bhagwan, chota shaintan – The elder one is a saint and the younger devil incarnate.

Bhagwanji – God

Bhabhi – Sister-in-law

Bhi daudega – Will do

Bidai – After a marriage, the bride leaves her home and goes to her husband's house. The ceremony is called bidai and is one that is quite emotional for the bride's side of the family.

Beta – Child

Budhi – Brains

Budhis – Old women

Budhiya – Old woman

Bua – Father's sister

Bahu – Daughter-in-law

Bada soche to bada milenga – Think big to get big.

Baap pat gaya toh beti kahaan jayegi – If I get into the father's good books, then I can get his daughter too.

Baqvaas – Rubbish

Bunty aur Babli A blockbuster Indian movie, released in 2005, about two lovable, street smart and rustic crooks, hailing from small towns.

Chaddi-buddies – Friends since they were in their bloomers. Childhood friends.

Chama Chama song – A popular dance song from the Indian film, *China Gate*, released in the year 1998.

Chyawanprash ka dabba – A box of a rejuvenating, energising, and immunity boosting, herbal preparation, widely used in India.

Charasi pana – Chain-smoking

Chotu – Little one

Chudail – Witch

DDLJ – *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (the lover shall take the bride) is a blockbuster Indian film and one of the highest grossers of the Indian film industry to date.

Dahi and cheeni – Yoghurt and sugar. Traditionally fed for good luck.

Dada Kondke – A famous Indian actor and film producer hailing from Maharashtra. He was famous for his hilarious and double entendre dialogues.

Dekha! Impress kar diya – See, I have made an impression.

Dharti phat jaaye – The earth should split in two.

Didi – Elder sister

Dimple Kapadia – An Indian film actress, known for her glamorous looks and gorgeous hair.

Dhokha – Betrayal

Dhaam dhoom, dhadham, dishum dishum, akal ke dushman gadhe ki dumong from a popular Hindi animation movie called *Hanuman Returns* . It basically makes sounds used that sound like a person being punched and kicked alongside terming the villain as dense in the head and a donkey's tail.

Dharam paaji's, kutte mein tera khoon pi jaoonga – 'Dog! I shall drink your blood' was a favourite dialogue often uttered by a famous Indian film actor, Dharmendra, while bashing the daylights out of villains in movies.

Dekh lenge – We'll see.

Do minute ka raasta – Two minutes away.

Do jism ek jaan – Two bodies, one heart or life.

Filmfare Award – Indian film awards, comparable to the Oscars. It was started in 1953 and sponsored by the prominent film magazine, *Filmfare* .

Fakira – Mendicant

Full toss nautanki complete drama queen.

Gadheri – Slang for female donkey.

Gayi puri ki puri bhains paani mein – Now the whole buffalo is in water (all is lost).

Gharelu – Homely

Ghatiya dukaan – Third grade shop

Goed bhara – A ceremony to celebrate an impending baby's birth usually done in the seventh month of pregnancy.

Gola – Circular in shape.

Gole – Coconut

Gutter ka keeda – Bug in the sewer system.

Ghodi – Mare

Ghee – Clarified butter

Ghutnas – Knees

Gyan – Knowledge

Hanuman Returns – An animation movie based on the Hindu god Hanuman, a devout worshipper of Lord Ram.

Haramkhor – Cuss word equivalent to a lazy slob.

IST – Indian Standard Time. A common joke to label any latecomer as arriving by the Indian Standard Time, which is always known to be one hour later than the actual time.

Itna toh banta hain – At least this much is called for.

Johny Leve – A famous comedian and mimic in the Indian film industry.

Jahaan panha – Urdu way of addressing the king/royalty.

Jab We Met – An Indian romantic comedy film, released in 2007, that became a blockbuster.

Kada – Bracelet

Kambal kutai – Beating given after covering the victim's face with a blanket so that he cannot see the assailant.

Kamini budhiya or paapi paet ka sawaal hain – Evil old hag or is it a question of putting food in the stomach (as in pay the bills).

Kanda to pavbhaji – Onion garnished over a vegetable and bread – A Maharastrian dish popular all over India.

Kantha – Embroidery work from West Bengal.

Karela – Bitter gourd

Katta – Country made gun

Karz – A highly successful Indian film made in 1980 about reincarnation. It was remade in 2008, with a few extra Zs in the name and new star cast, but bombed at the box office.

Kukri – Nepalese curved knife

Kanyadaan – A traditional ritual in Hindu weddings where the parents of the bride give their daughter and all her rights to her husband.

Kaala tikka – Black dot to ward off bad luck.

Khana Khazaana – A popular TV cooking programme hosted by a renowned Indian chef, Sanjeev Kapoor.

Kohlapuri sandals – Handmade leather slippers and sandals, for both women and men, from the Maharashtra region in India.

Kua – Crow

Kulta – Slang for witch

Kundan – A type of jewellery

Khush keetha – Made happy

Laadka haath se nikal gaaya – The boy has gone out of control.

Lassi – Yoghurt based drink, which originated in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent

Lehenga – Traditional Indian dress, which comprises of a long skirt, blouse, and long scarf.

Mara hua – Not so dead, unanimated.

Manhoos – Unlucky

Maa-bhen ki – Shortened and incomplete version of coarse cuss words.

Meena Kumari – An iconic Indian film actor and poet. She was famous for playing grief-stricken and tragic roles.

Mithai – Sweet meat

Mata – Mother

Murukku – A savory snack popular in South India.

Nandi – The bull Lord Shiva rides on.

Naari – Woman

Naayi – Roadside barber

Nahi nahi! Chord do, mujhe bhagwaan ke liye chord do – No, no! Leave me, for the sake of god leave me. This dialogue was voiced innumerable times by heroines in movies of yesteryears when they were being sexually assaulted by villains.

Naada – No

Na life mein sex na dream mein sex – No sex in life and not even in dreams.

Pakka – For sure

Palat – Turn around

Paltan – Regiment

Phataka – Firecracker

Pakau – Boring

Prasad – Food offered to God at a holy ceremony.

Qurbaani – Sacrifice

Raddhiwala – Buyer of junk

Sarkari job kar lo – Get a job in the government sector.

Shah Jahan – The fifth Mughal emperor who had the Taj Mahal built in Agra.

Shanti – Popular Indian girl name that means ‘peace’.

Soch – Thought

Seeti – Whistle

Shehnai – Double reed and conical oboe of North India.

Saas – Mother-in-law

Son papadi – North Indian sweet made of ghee, flour, sugar, and nuts.

Solid khichdi pakk rahi hein – Something major is cooking.

Tael – Oil

Tantrik – A practitioner of tantra, usually associated with black magic and occult.

Tashan – Indian film released in 2008. It became more famous for the brimming romance between its lead pair, Kareena Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan.

Upma – South Indian breakfast dish made with refined wheat grains, called suji.

Vimla-Kamla-Salma – common Indian girl names.

Whela – Useless

Yaar – Friend

Yeh saraasar jhooth hain – This is an outright lie. This line has been used innumerable times in court scenes of Indian films.

Yeh to pakka mara – This one shall surely die.

Yenna rascala – You scoundrel!