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crush

SUDHA NAIR



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First Edition, Version 1.0
16 July 2018

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Malini peered at her computer screen, then rubbed her eyes, shook her head, and looked closely at the words again. Bestselling author, Vikram Mathur's exact words were: "Tara lay there, unmoving, and Vicky knew it was over."

Malini's hands involuntarily shot up over her gaping mouth. Vikram had killed Tara, a character from his latest book, the cute neighbour who had brought the hero, Vicky, and his college crush together. Malini couldn't believe her eyes. This couldn't be happening to a beloved character like Tara. It caused a feeling of panic in her chest, and the page blurred before her eyes.

She had to tell her boss that this scene was going to tank Vikram's sales. It was a sure-shot disaster. She turned towards her boss, editor-in-chief, Sanghamitra Banerjee's cabin, before she realised that her boss was on a long-deserved vacation to Igatpuri, and unlikely to get back before next week, which meant she had to wait for her return.

Sighing, she shut down the wide screen that the office had provided her for easy proofreading. She hadn't refused the fancy screen, even though, she'd been able to work perfectly well without one, like back in the days when she was a bright-eyed, literature graduate, fresh out of college. She was damn good at what she did, even then, with a smaller screen, a tinier office, and shitty work. But once Vikram's books had started coming in, her work life had changed. She'd read every one of his books ever since he'd started writing. In the last eight years, he'd published fourteen books, and she'd proofread every single one. Even though the pay was bad, and she had never got a promotion, her love for Vikram's books was what kept her at Jayco Publishing for this long—or that's what she told herself. His books were funny, and they could also make her cry.

Malini had always been the quiet sort, lost in her world of books. When her colleagues went out for coffee, she preferred to sit in the park and read a book or go to the movies. She loved movies as much as books. When a new movie came out, she'd go and watch it alone. Then, she'd analyse it to death. She'd wonder why the heroine ran away. Or she'd chuckle at the funny scenes or a clever plot idea that made the story shine. In short, she was in love with stories. All sorts of stories. And especially, Vikram's stories.

She wondered what Vikram did when he wasn't writing. She'd watched all his interviews, and read every blog post he'd written. Sometimes, she thought she had had an overdose of him and his stories, as she could easily visualise his characters and sometimes predict what they would do next, in his books. That's

why Tara's dying had come as a shock. She'd never expected it. She had to tell Sanghamitra about this gaffe.

She also wondered when she sat alone, curled up with his books, even earlier ones she'd read a million times, what it would be like if she ever got to meet him. What would she feel? What would she say?

She was the girl with a secret crush on him but how could she ever talk to him? Or even see him. Sanghamitra handled his account, and all these years she'd been the only one who'd met and spoken to him. She sighed again.

Maybe that day would probably never come, she thought idly as she picked up her bag, and locked her drawers. Of what use would it be to think of Vikram when he hardly even knew she existed?

When Malini peeked around her cubicle, the corridor was empty. The entire office was empty. As usual, she had decided to stay back and work late because the peace allowed her to work faster and enjoy the solitude as she drowned in the story she was working on. But it meant locking up the office too, and handing the keys over to the watchman at the gate. She was almost at Sanghamitra's cabin to get the keys, when the phone on Sanghamitra's desk started ringing. The sudden shrill trilling blasted through the silence, startling her.

She put her hands on her chest to calm her nerves. It was strange to hear that phone ring. Nobody ever called on the regular phone anymore. She decided to let it go. Whoever was calling obviously knew the cell phone number to call, or maybe it was a wrong number. She wasn't going to pick it up. The rings stopped, and started again by the time she had picked up the keys from the peg on the wall.

She almost dropped them out of fright. It rang for longer, and all she wanted to do was get out of the office. As suddenly as the ringing had started, it stopped. She had already let herself out of the cabin when it started again. She puffed out a frustrated breath. Who the hell was this annoying caller?

She was almost about to pick the receiver when the ringing stopped. Thank you, she mimed.

She'd just turned around when it started again. Darn! She picked it up. "H _____"

"Where the hell is Sanghamitra? Why is her phone switched off?" a voice barked into the phone.

Malini almost dropped the receiver sensing the extreme irritation of the caller—someone who probably knew Sanghamitra well enough to sound so

angry. "She's...she's gone to Igatpuri," she mumbled.

"Igatpuri! And who the bloody hell pays her to do that! How can she go without telling me?"

The loudness of his voice struck her dumb. It was a few minutes before she found her voice. "Did you need something, Sir?"

"Yes! I thought you'd fallen asleep. I need Sanghamitra to call me back ASAP. Tell her Vikram Mathur wanted to talk to her urgently."

"Vi... Vikram—"

He had cut the call.

Malini stared at the receiver in her hand for a full minute before putting it down.

She couldn't believe she had just spoken to the man himself. The man who sounded nothing like the man of her dreams. The man who kept her awake all night when she held his new book. The man who had the power to make her do anything he wanted. With trembling hands, she put down the receiver, fished out her cell phone from her bag, and dialled her boss's husband. That was the number that Sanghamitra had given her in case of dire emergencies. And this certainly did seem like one.

In two rings, someone picked up, and the next instant Sanghamitra's voice boomed through. "Something urgent?"

Malini told her what Vikram had said.

"God, what do I do with Vikram!" Sanghamitra whined. "Didn't you tell him I was on vacation?"

"Of course, I did."

Sanghamitra exhaled sharply. "I can't believe he needs me every time I want to take a break. Thanks. I'll call him."

When Malini locked up the office, she wasn't thinking of Peepal, her cat, waiting for her at home, or the milk she had to buy on the way because her milkman hadn't turned up for two mornings. She was thinking of spending the rest of her evening curled up with a glass of wine, and her personal copy of one of Vikram's early books, even though he had sounded every bit a high-handed, obnoxious snob. Of course, he had been upset and anxious. She gave him that little excuse to be rude.

By nine p.m. she was already done with dinner, and on her second glass of wine. Peepal rested by her side while she was curled up in bed, engrossed in the climax of Vikram Mathur's very first book the one she still loved the one she'd

re-read almost fifty times.

The phone rang out of the blue, making her jump. The half-filled glass in her hand swayed dangerously. She tried to find her phone by the sound of its ring, and then realised it was all the way around the bed, at the far corner of the room. How she hated to be disturbed from her cosy position in bed!

With a grunt, she got up and made it across the room, swaying happily. This had to be her mom telling her about a new boy she had found on shaadi.com. What she needed was a break! A break from feeling terrible about her age, her single status, and the fact that the only living thing she talked to, besides her colleagues at work, was Peepal.

It turned out to be Sanghamitra, a very unlikely caller at this hour, breaking office rules for the first time—no work calls at home. She attributed it to Vikram’s call to the office earlier. For once, Malini wasn’t annoyed, but excited and feeling light because Vicky from the book was about to enter his girlfriend’s balcony. Adrenalin rushed through her as she picked up the call. “Hello?” She let out an involuntary giggle. “Yeah?”

“You’re going to meet Vikram,” Sanghamitra started off without preamble.

“But he’s meeting Tara.” Malini smiled, her eyes blurry with intoxication. Now, where the hell had she put her glass?

“What!”

Sanghamitra’s sharp tone was like a slap; it ended her silliness even though what she did at home in her own free time was nobody’s business. Sanghamitra didn’t know how tipsy she was.

“I’m sending you the place and time. Be there tomorrow.” And just when Malini was starting to feel so confused that her head spun, Sanghamitra added, “Please!”

As it turned out from what Sanghamitra was babbling from half way across the country, on the only vacation she had taken in probably all the years since Malini had known her, was that Vikram was having a major writer’s block. He wanted to discuss the story problem of his latest book, and he would have nobody but Sanghamitra to discuss it with. And Sanghamitra had tried really hard to convince him that her substitute would be good, probably even better, since in her own words to Malini, “You’re the only one who’s read all his books. You know his stories like nobody else does. You’re the best one to go if I can’t.”

How could Malini refuse? On top of which, this was turning out to be what she had wanted most of her adult life. It was freaking unbelievable!

Sanghamitra was adamant about wanting her vacation more than anything else. It would be at least two more weeks before she was back, she said. Malini understood how it had to feel to have no time to give to a marriage, no time to have babies, no time to relax.

When she tried to tell Sanghamitra that Vikram had killed a favourite character in his book, Sanghamitra had only one word for her. "Go!" and four more, "Discuss it with him."

Sanghamitra finally hung up with, "And, Malini, please don't let me down."

But suddenly Malini wasn't so sure about this. Her knees wobbled. Maybe it was the effect of the wine. Her stomach churned with anxiety. What if this meeting didn't go well?

The next morning, still nervous, she had to remind herself that meeting Vikram was not the end of the world. She had to stop acting so jittery and behave like a grown-up.

Looking into the mirror, she talked to herself, "Malini Vaidyanathan. Unmarried. Twenty-nine years old. Cat lover. Lives alone. Has a crush on Vikram Mathur. Is meeting him today."

She fidgeted in front of her wardrobe, waffling over what to wear. She didn't have too many clothes, let alone fancy ones. And nothing seemed good enough for meeting Vikram. She touched her hot cheeks and stared into her wardrobe, confused. Finally she settled on a long skirt she'd purchased on a whim a few months back. What better opportunity to inaugurate the lovely powder blue, mulmul material? She topped it with a white tucked-in collared blouse and was happy with the look. A bit girlish, yet one that radiated a good deal of professionalism and poise. There was no one to ask if she looked good after she'd worn it, except for her cat.

"Peepal, do I look nice?"

"Meow."

"Great!"

She twirled around in front of her mirror. The skirt draped around her hips like a dream, and it was very soft. It complemented her honey skin tone, and she hoped it would help with today's test of showing off a confidence she didn't feel. She pinned up her waist length hair into a neat little chignon, put on her kitten heels, which looked cute on her dainty feet, and was off to the rendezvous, trying to keep down the butterflies in her stomach.

~~She hated to be late. Half-an-hour before the scheduled time she was at the~~

~~She hated to be late. Half an hour before the scheduled time, she was at the~~
hotel, The Grand Heron, and looking into the receptionist's warm eyes. Sanghamitra had said he wanted to meet her by the poolside.

"Please wait by the pool, Ma'am! I'll let Mr. Mathur know you're here, when he arrives."

She nodded dazedly, her mind unsettled, her heart beating as if there was a fire alarm going off. She was finally going to meet him!

The hotel reception was as grand as the large property around it. She sauntered off towards the large open glass doors that led to the pool area. It was a gorgeous day, just the right mix of sun and breeze. The tables were set all around the round pool, the blue of its water shimmering and reflecting diamonds off its surface.

She took one of the small round tables that faced the entrance and the pool, and fished out a book from her bag to keep her company while she waited.

She was so engrossed in the book that she didn't notice anything until a shadow crossed her face and blocked the sun in front of her. She looked up, right into Vikram's curious eyes. He was taller than he looked in his pictures, immaculately dressed in a loose fitting stylish kurta and jeans, his hair, freshly cut close to his ears, a light well-groomed stubble. She swallowed at the breathtaking sight of him, and pinched herself to make sure this wasn't a dream.

"Malini?" he asked, waiting for her confirmation.

When she nodded, he waved his hand at a uniformed man in a dark safari suit, who seemed to be his bodyguard, waiting near the glass door. Did authors employ bodyguards, she thought in wonder. Or maybe, he was just an escort. Then, there was a young girl clutching a notepad standing there too, who looked like his assistant. It seemed he had come with his coterie. Malini wondered if this was how he travelled anywhere, with two people always at his heels. Both disappeared immediately, and Vikram turned to Malini and pulled up a chair next to her. "Hello!"

It was a greeting neither too happy, nor subdued. A closer look revealed a bit of shadow under his eyes. He was just happy to see someone from Jayco as far as she could tell, yet he looked miserable and unhappy, a far cry from the confidence his body projected.

And completely opposite of what she'd heard about him from her colleagues—narcissistic, arrogant, cynical. To her, he just seemed lonely and bothered, whatever it was that had been bothering him lately. And bitter. Definitely very bitter. She wondered if it was because Sanghamitra hadn't shown up.

She rose, and he immediately waved to ask her to sit down, sitting down himself.

“Hi, Sanghamitra said you wanted to discuss your book?” she began tentatively.

A girl in swimming trunks accompanied by her mother walked in and after a quick spray under the showers, the girl jumped into the pool. The mother sat on one of the lounge chairs and watched them surreptitiously.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. But I would have liked to discuss it with Sanghamitra. She’s the one I’ve always spoken to.”

Of course, he had always spoken only to her! Sanghamitra had his account and he had direct access to her. But many of the ideas had been Malini’s, after Sanghamitra and she had spent hours discussing Vikram’s plot problems at the office among themselves. Yet, how was Vikram expected to know who spent hours reading his manuscript, and offering suggestions?

Malini cleared her throat. “If you’re not satisfied after our talk now, I can ask her to pitch in with comments once I’m back at the office.” She hoped it was some consolation.

The little girl in the pool screamed with delight and some of the water sprayed on Vikram’s face. He wiped it off, and called for the waiter. “Will you have some tea?”

“No, thanks!”

“Please.”

He placed the order for two teas, and they sat silently for a while, watching the little girl splash in the water. Vikram seemed to be lost in thought as though he was trying to formulate what to say. Then finally, leaning forward, he steepled his fingers and placed them on the table. Looking earnestly into Malini’s eyes, he said, “About Vicky. I can’t seem to choose which of the girls is right for him.”

Some of his readers might have called him so narcissistic as to choose his own nickname for his hero. But she had no judgements like that. For all she knew, he must have struggled even to choose a name back in the days when he’d just started writing.

“Why is everything so difficult?” He muttered the words under his breath but she heard them.

His plot had played in her mind all night. While Vicky’s college friend in the story was beautiful, sexy, and like a shiny new coin, Tara, was his childhood

friend and neighbour. Tara had seen Vicky through most of his life, she'd adored him, she'd fought for him, she'd been there for him. Always. Making Tara die an untimely death just so Vicky could get to his college friend easily seemed like a stupid idea. Malini had tossed and turned all night wondering how she would tell him this. She couldn't see any other way around it, to save his book.

Finally, she drew in a deep breath. "Killing Tara in that scene will be a total disaster. The way to solve the dilemma of choosing between two girls is not by killing one of them."

He looked at her, puzzled, and drew his arms across his chest.

She caught a spike of anger simmering in his eyes but she wouldn't back down. It had to be told with a courage she didn't feel at that moment, needing all the nerve she could muster. "Go for Tara. Ditch the new college friend. She's not worth it. Your fans will not love her."

His face turned red. "You think you can just walk in here and tell me what MY fans will love about MY book?"

She hadn't meant it like that. Sweat collected on her brow and upper lip as she felt herself wilt under his stormy gaze. She hadn't meant to make him angry, hadn't meant to come across as more confident than him about his own story, but she hadn't been able to help it. She was his fan too, whether he knew it or not. Maybe she had offended him.

But, she couldn't help wonder whether he spoke to Sanghamitra with an arrogant tone like that, or was it reserved only for the lowly likes of her—a mere proofreader? Sanghamitra would not mince words if she were here. But Vikram did not think Malini was competent, did he?

She could see no further point in their conversation. She was here to help with his problem. But she wasn't going to mollify a bullheaded author who would see no sense. Couldn't he see she was trying to help him?

Her demeanour calm, she caught his sharp gaze straight on. "What would you like me to say, Vikram?"

He flinched, as though he'd never heard his name sound so rude on anyone's lips. She waved away the dread that she felt about his stance. Having read all his books, and been an intricate part of each birth, process, and form, the way his stories made her feel, and her desire for a Vicky like that in her own life, she wasn't going to back down. She wanted to save that Vicky at any cost. If this is what it took to grab the creator's attention and get him to see the truth, *it* had to be.

"If you want someone to tell you how good your story is, it's not going to

be me.”

He reeled under those words, pulling back sharply as if she had slapped him.

The little girl in the pool splashed in the water with her plastic ball, and suddenly the ball was there, right on the table between them. Vikram’s features softened only for a moment as he lifted the ball and threw it back into the pool. The girl squealed with delight and her mother gave him a grateful smile.

He looked back at Malini, his expression tense. “I’m done with our talk. Tell Sanghamitra, if she’s taking calls at all, that I wish to speak to her immediately.”

She hated that he wasn’t the least bit courteous or respectful, hurt that he had dismissed her without a thought, just as he did the waiter who was coming in with two steaming cups of tea.

The waiter went back. She hadn’t been so hurt or humiliated in her entire life. If there was anything she hated the most, it was men who couldn’t accept a rebuttal or a challenge. If Vicky was at all like this man who had created him, she’d never read Vicky at all.

She rose, the iron chair under her scraping the floor, and as she did, she heard an earth-shattering sound—the sound of a tear. *Her skirt!*

She gasped loudly and twisted around to check how bad it was. She had tears in her eyes when she noticed the deep gash across the back of her skirt that had caught on to something sharp on the chair. Her new skirt was ruined. She’d never be able to wear it again. When she looked up again, Vikram was looking at her, a slight amusement playing in his eyes. Blinking away the tears that threatened to spill, she returned a forceful look, determined not to let him think that they were even now.

Just then, his young assistant swept in through the glass doors and made her way to him. “Sir, our next appointment is coming up. We have to leave now.”

He followed the assistant as she led him back to the glass doors, her skirt making a tight swishing sound and her heels tap-tapping on the granite flooring. Vikram was leaving without so much as a goodbye, or any sort of gesture of gratitude for Malini’s having spent an afternoon with him while she could have utilised the time at home doing so many things that would have been supremely more useful than a wasted afternoon with a man who was too cocky for his own good. Did she really have a crush on this man? She felt like he had crushed her heart in just one afternoon.

She slumped back into the chair and buried her head in her hands. How would she go home in a torn skirt which showed her bare thighs? How would she even walk back to the reception and outside, like that? She recoiled at the very thought, wondering what to do.

The girl in the pool was laughing delightedly and screaming to her mother to help get her out. She was cold and she wanted to get back to the changing room quickly. Malini felt her eyes burn. Who would she call for help now?

A noise near her table made her start. She patted away the rogue tear falling down her cheek, and looked up, half-expecting to see the little girl and her mother at her table, wondering what had happened to her.

To her surprise, it was Vikram. He was back.

“Come with me,” he said, holding out his hand.

Her eyes were blurry, and her voice was tinged with despair. “Where?”

“Let me help you get home.” He waved towards the glass doors. “Come.”

“How will I—”

He came around her and whispered, “I’ll walk behind you so nobody will see.”

“But your appointment—”

“I’ve cancelled it.”

He waved his hand to stop the uniformed man who wanted to join them and the man slunk into the background. It was just the two of them, walking like a pair of ducks waddling in water, him behind her, slowly through the glass doors, by the reception where the receptionist nodded at them, and through the exit. The bright afternoon sun hit her face and she screened her eyes from its glare. He gently held her shoulders as a car magically swept up the driveway.

“Get in,” he said. “I’ll drop you home.”

She couldn’t believe her eyes and ears. Not only had he helped her get out of the hotel with her dignity intact but he was also offering to go the whole distance. “You don’t have to,” she said. “I can manage.”

His eyes shone with a mix of emotions she could not put together. “I insist.”

They were quiet all the way home. No talk about why he had cancelled his appointment, nor why he had decided to drop her home...or anything else. Though she was supremely grateful for the kind gesture. It seemed like he had had a sudden change of heart. Finally when they reached her home, he insisted on dropping her to the elevator inside her apartment building. It was all she

could do to smile graciously and thank him when he left after she was finally in.

And just as suddenly as he had come into her life, he vanished.

Of course, she kept track of his new book release. The one where Tara had almost died, but then that part had been revised. She had heaved a sigh of relief when Sanghamitra had told her that he had decided not to kill Tara, and that he had finally come around and taken her advice. His new book topped all sales records, like she knew it would. She saw him on the news channel, heard him on the radio, watched his videos. It hurt that he had never acknowledged her advice nor asked to speak to her. It really hurt!

But life had to go on. And it did for Malini S Vaidyanathan. It bloody well did.

She had Peepal for company on the weekends when all she did was potter around the house, or curled up on the couch and re-read Vikram's books, among others. Several months went by.

Vikram was on to his next book, she'd heard, but according to Sanghamitra he hadn't complained about a writer's block yet.

Sanghamitra had spoken of an important meeting at the office on Monday morning. There was nothing special on that Monday as far as Malini's wardrobe choices went but still she lingered, probing into her cupboard. She hardly dressed up for work, but who knew if there was a board of directors meeting that day, and what they were calling everyone for, was a promotion. In any case, she wanted to look well turned out. As she rummaged for something nice to wear, her eyes fell on the torn blue skirt. She had folded and tucked it away in a corner. There had been no point in darning it as the tear had been pretty big. She touched it gently, letting the material slip through her fingers, her memory taking her back to the sunny afternoon by the pool at The Grand Heron.

She sighed and pushed the skirt to the back, out of sight, picking up a long, flowy salwar kameez instead, something to beat the heat, and look decently elegant.

When she entered the office, all the cubicles were empty. She wondered if she had heard the timing of the meeting wrong. One of the girls scuttling away in a hurry, told her that Sanghamitra had been looking for her and had asked her to come to the conference room.

Malini parked her bag on her desk and hurried behind her. "So, big meeting today, huh?"

The girl had a huge smile pasted on her face. "It's big for sure."

Malini wondered what that meant but she was headed that way anyway and

would soon find out.

There was such heavy laughter and clapping going on inside when she entered, partially hidden behind the girl, that she didn't see who it was sitting at the top of the table, for whom the entire crowd had assembled. It seemed as if a lot more people than just the folks at her office, were present. This had to be something big.

And then she caught a glimpse of the man of the hour.

Vikram Mathur!

Her breath caught at the sight of him. He was smiling benevolently at the crowd, looking even more handsome than the last time. He had a mic in his hand, and he began reading from his book.

Strangely, when he came to the part where Vicky was on Tara's balcony, it made Malini blush.

When he went on to read how Vicky bent down on one knee and proposed to Tara, the entire crowd clapped joyfully. Malini's eyes brimmed with tears. She couldn't believe she had pulled this. They had pulled this, even if he was the one who had written it.

Malini waited till the end of the session until he had read a few more delectable paragraphs, many of them her personal favourites, and answered tons of questions. The crowd slowly dispersed after that. She was leaving too when Sanghamitra called out to her. "Malini! Come here, please."

Malini weaved her way through the exiting people and went up to Sanghamitra, who was sitting beside Vikram.

Sanghamitra gestured to the seat next to her. "Have a seat."

Malini couldn't bring herself to look at Vikram. It wasn't just the embarrassment of that day that came back to her but also the pain that he'd never mentioned the conversation they had had to anyone. He'd taken the credit for everything.

Sanghamitra cleared her throat. "Malini, Vikram says you helped him get the ending right?"

Malini's head shot up. So he had told her.

Only a nod came out of Malini, who was now confused that Sanghamitra had never told her.

"I'm going to arrange for some coffee to be brought in. Be back in a sec," Sanghamitra said, making for the door swiftly.

When the door closed behind her, it was just the two of them again.

When the door closed behind her, it was just the two of them, awkward strangers, who did not wish to talk.

But Vikram broke the silence first. “I was about to leave, but I looked at you, sitting out there by the pool, looking so lost and worried about your skirt, I couldn’t help but want to drop you home. And I’m glad I helped the woman who helped me.”

Malini fiddled with her fingers in her lap, wondering what to say. So was he going to tell her what made him change his mind about killing Tara?

“I’m sorry about the other day at the hotel,” he said, pausing for a moment, as though he was thinking about what to say. “I mulled over what you said. I was angry at first at how certain you’d been about it, but I’m glad I took your advice.”

She was too dumbfounded to open her mouth at the suddenness of everything—his coming to the office, his apology, the way he was looking at her, waiting for her to speak. Sanghamitra strode back in before she could say anything.

“So, you are to have Vikram’s account going forward,” Sanghamitra announced.

Malini blinked and gazed blankly at Sanghamitra wondering if she had heard her right. “What?”

“You heard me. You got promoted and assigned to a very special account.” She gestured towards Vikram, whose face was so composed, Malini couldn’t understand what Sanghamitra meant.

“Congratulations, Malini!” Sanghamitra said, beaming. “It was high time. You deserve it.”

Malini was stunned. “After all these years?” she managed to ask.

“Vikram said he wanted to work with no one but you.” She gave him a hard stare before turning back to Malini. “In fact, he threatened to walk out if he didn’t have you.”

Malini couldn’t believe her ears, or eyes when she saw the hint of a grin form on Vikram’s face as he held her gaze, until cheeks burning, she was the first to look away.

EPILOGUE

“Malini...Malini...”

She could hear his voice from halfway across the hall. She slapped her head just as he pounded in through the door to her office cabin.

“I have a problem with a situation.”

She had to tell her assistant to leave her office for a few minutes so that she could deal with Vikram peacefully.

“Vikram!” she started, but he held his hand up to stop her, shut the door, and faced her.

“Malini,” he said, again, grinning.

“Didn’t we discuss it already?”

“Ya, but I was thinking a little practical demo would help me get through the theory much faster.”

She still remembered the first time he’d said that. They were discussing a plot problem as usual, when they started arguing, she, wanting the hero to wait, and Vikram, wanting the hero to hurry up and kiss the girl.

“Why would you want to rush it?” she asked.

“Why not?”

“Because slow and steady wins the race?”

“But the hero is very vocal and impulsive. It’s just not like him to wait so long. You’re talking like his girlfriend, not like him.”

It annoyed her when Vikram got unreasonable and stubborn. “Then why did you need to discuss it with me? Can’t you get him to do just what you want?”

She’d been about to storm out when he grabbed her hand. She was pulled right back into him, and his lips gently touched hers. “Like this,” he said softly.

She hadn’t been able to check the sting in her eyes. Was all this merely for his book? Or did he realise she had real feelings for him too? Did he know how hard she’d fallen for him over the last few meetings? Was all he could do, was give her a demo?

She pushed against his shoulders and tried to wriggle out of his hold. “Let go. Don’t you dare play with me.”

The door burst open into the room, Malini took a deep breath. “Dad, mom...” he

He twined his fingers into hers, making her go still. Don't you see, he said, holding her gaze. "It's never a good idea to be so late in showing your love. So late as to bring a girl to tears."

She blinked at him, taking a moment to realise it wasn't about the book anymore, but before she could react, he was pulling her in. In that heated moment, it was all she could do to close her eyes, and go with the tingling feeling rising all the way up from her toes, as he swept down and crushed her lips with his.

Her mouth curled upwards now, seeing his grin. She pulled a pen from the stand and threw it at him. "My God! I never thought I'd marry a twenty-four-by-seven client."

And then he came towards her, the man of her dreams, the man who'd swept her off her feet with a proposal that followed soon after their first kiss, who'd made her wonder how she'd lived alone all her life, who made Peepal jealous of how much time she was spending with someone other than her. Spending a year working together with Vikram, she had got to know him, and it made her realise that her crush was much more than what she had imagined.

Vikram fished something out of his pocket and held it towards her.

Her eyes grew wide as she opened the pretty bow-tied box. Inside, were the most beautiful emerald green dangling earrings. "Oh, Vikram!" she gasped, too shocked to believe he had got her the pretty earrings she had admired at a jewellery store a few months ago.

"For my love, on our anniversary," he said, kissing both her hands.

Just at that moment the assistant barged in, noticed their intimate huddle, and escaped after mumbling an excuse.

Vikram and she giggled. She pushed at his chest playfully. "Serves you right for frightening her into thinking all we're doing inside this cabin is making love."

"Ah, thanks for the reminder," he said, grabbing her waist, and amidst her giggles and laughter, kissing her fervently.

Vikram had bought a large stake in Jayco, and now they owned more than eighty percent of the company. Sanghamitra had moved to a new position in Delhi, leaving Malini in charge of this dream-like office, and the man she'd fallen head-over-heels in love with. The sexiest writer she had ever met. They had been married exactly a year.

She had found what she had wanted the most after all.

A husband she loved as much as his words.

A PEEK AT LOVE OFFICIALLY

Remember the time when you were young and life was full of confusing choices? What if you didn't know which was the right choice to make? What if your whole life depended on that choice? Take a nostalgic trip down memory lane. Read LOVE OFFICIALLY—a sweet and short office romance story to find out how Meera faces the challenge of choosing the right man!

'Hey, want to go out for coffee?'

Meera looked up from her messy desk.

Elbows propped on her office cubicle wall, Vivek beseeched her with puppy eyes.

She threw him a quick 'No!' and went back to rummaging for those client requirements that she'd jotted down after the customer call that morning.

'Oh, come on,' Vivek said, blocking her entrance, his hands spanning the width. 'You need a break.'

She rolled her eyes at him. Did he think she wanted to start the office gossip mills by going out alone with him?

'I was only suggesting a cup of coffee!' Then, 'Hey!' as he moved the tiny clay Ganesha idol out of the way before she could knock it down in her frenzied search. 'Want me to call Shabnam too?'

Shabnam—smart, well-dressed, and always the first to know what was going on in the office—was her bestie at work.

As if on cue, Shabnam came over. 'Hey there, you two!' Her face was flushed, and she couldn't help giving Vivek a flirty smile first. 'Guess what?!"

Head bent back over her desk, Meera said, 'What!' Then, suddenly, she found those rogue documents she'd been looking for. 'There you are!' She put them right on top of her to-do box and turned to Shabnam.

'One of us will get that transfer to the US this month.' Shabnam bounced up and down. 'The boss is going to announce it in a couple of days.'

Meera's heart missed a beat. This was what she'd been waiting for. Please, please, let it be me, she said a little mental prayer.

'Well!' Vivek said. 'Another of his marketing ploys.' He turned to Shabnam. 'By the way, Shabnam, do you want to go out for coffee?'

'Really?' Shabnam shrieked. Some heads in the other cubicles turned

~~Really. Shabnam smirked. Some heads in the other cubicles turned~~
towards them. Shabnam glanced around羞愧地, then went back to him, all smiles.

‘With us?’ Vivek’s face broke into an amused grin.

Shabnam’s face fell but she rebounded quickly. ‘Sure!’

Vivek raised his eyebrow at Meera, then stuck out his hand to help her up from her seat.

Without thinking, she nestled her hand into his. Her hand tingled at his touch, sending spirals of warmth up her arm. She jerked it away as soon as she was up.

On the way to the cafeteria, the girls needed to use the restroom, so Vivek went on ahead.

‘You see how he can’t take his eyes off you!’ Shabnam said, as she did an ‘O’ in front of the mirror and touched up her lipstick. ‘You should give him a break.’

A smile played on Meera’s lips. ‘You want him? He’s all yours.’

Shabnam pouted. ‘I wish he’d shown the slightest bit of interest in me.’ She brushed her hair till it shone while Meera waited. Then she lined her beautiful eyes with kohl. ‘He’s handsome, eligible and so hot!’

Meera didn’t deny his hotness factor. It made her blush, every time she thought about him. He was also a great co-worker, kind, helpful. In other words, perfect! But, she’d decided, she wasn’t going to let romance ruin her chances for the transfer that she’d been waiting for, for a long time. ‘What I need is that transfer. Then I can get away from home and not have to meet men I don’t like.’ She let out a long sigh. ‘I can’t wait!’

‘What you really need is a good man who loves you.’ Shabnam pursed her lips. ‘Like him.’

Meera smirked. ‘How can I be so sure he loves me? For all you know, it’s just a fling. It’s only been two months since he joined.’

‘He has eyes only for you,’ Shabnam said. ‘You’re smart, attractive and sweet. Only you don’t know it yourself.’

‘And you’re the best friend in the whole world.’ Meera squeezed her into a hug.

When they reached the crowded cafeteria, they found Vivek seated at a corner spot.

‘I’ve already ordered three coffees, a masala dosa for Shabnam and two

pav bhajis for us,’ he said to Meera, as they took their seats at the tiny round table.

‘How did you know I love masala dosa?’ Shabnam looked up at him and fluttered her eyelids.

Meera loved to watch Shabnam flirt.

He played along. ‘Because I have good memory.’ Shabnam’s slap at his hand made him grin.

The waiter arrived with their food and coffee.

‘You shouldn’t have ordered pav bhaji for me,’ Meera said. ‘It’s too much!’

‘Why? Are you on a diet?’ Shabnam winked at her. ‘Is someone coming to see you again?’

Vivek choked on his coffee. ‘Aw!’ His hands flew to rub the quick setting brown stain off his shirt.

Meera wished Shabnam would stop being such a blabbermouth. Vivek’s face had grown darker. He was staring down at his coffee. She couldn’t tell what was wrong with him all of a sudden.

Clueless, Shabnam egged her for more details.

‘It’s my parents,’ Meera said, shrugging it off. ‘I’ve tried but they won’t stop calling suitors home to see me.’

‘Do you know who it is?’ Shabnam said.

For a moment, Vivek’s ears perked up.

‘All I could gather was that he works in the US.’ She took a long sip of coffee, hoping that that would be the end of the discussion.

‘So he can so be your ticket to the US?’

She glared at Shabnam. ‘Don’t be silly. As if I’d marry somebody just for that.’ Then she slid a glance in Vivek’s direction. He had gone back to his coffee.

‘Talking of the US,’ Shabnam started again, ‘who do you think is going to get this transfer?’

I hope it’s me, Meera thought. That way I can escape awkward meetings with suitors.

‘It’s going to be one heck of a great experience to work in California,’ Vivek said, sounding excited. ‘From what I’ve heard, the assignment will be for three years. I’d love to go but I’m new to this office. I’m sure you guys have a

better chance.'

'Oh, you're smart,' Shabnam blurted. 'You do have a chance.'

They discussed a few more likely candidates, and all of their own chances, and then Shabnam had to go because she got a phone call.

'Shall we go too?' Meera said, looking around at the crowded cafeteria and wondering if she recognized anyone that she knew.

He leaned forward and smiled. 'But we haven't finished our conversation.'

She didn't know why but she felt like a deer caught in the headlights.
'What do you mean?'

He leaned closer and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. 'Why are you so afraid of going out with me?'

'Stop that!' She swatted his hand away. 'Someone will see.'

'You're being paranoid,' he said, laughing. 'Just tell me you're not attracted to me like I am to you and I'll leave you alone.' His eyes shone like a baby's.

With how close he was leaning towards her, and his eyes daring her, she just couldn't think straight. *Uff!* 'Don't be so pushy!' She shoved his chest.

He caught her hand and wouldn't let go. 'You're this amazing woman that I want to know better. Won't you give me a chance?'

'Look, Vivek,' she said, wriggling her hand free. 'I don't want this...us to ruin my job.'

He let out a whoosh of breath. 'Okay,' he said, raising his hands in his defense. 'I know you have an independent streak. You're charming and incredibly delightful to talk to.' He ran his fingers through his hair. 'And here it goes.' He held her gaze as he said the words softly, 'I think I'm falling in love with you. All I'm asking is to give me a chance.'

The waiter came to take away their empty cups and plates, and she smiled to herself, watching how he was helping the guy along, impatient for him to leave. Twisting the end of her dupatta, she waited for them to be alone again.

After the waiter left, he looked at her, one eyebrow raised, waiting for her reply.

'I don't think romance at work is a good thing. So, either you'll have to quit or I'll have to.' She shrugged, faking the sassiness while inwardly scowling that both choices sounded terrible. *Did her self-imposed rule about office romance even make sense?*

His shoulders drooped. 'So, do people working together never fall in love?'

‘They probably do. I’m just not one of them,’ she was quick to retort.

‘All this excuse about working together is BS,’ he said, calling her bluff.
‘You know you don’t care about that—’

‘I do!’

Just then the waiter sauntered over again with the bill. Vivek pulled out his wallet at the same time that Meera pulled out her purse.

The waiter went straight to him.

‘Let me,’ he said to her. ‘Consider it my best wishes for the latest man who’s coming to see you.’

Meera frowned at him.

‘Though I really hope he’s horrible.’ He grinned. ‘If you need more time to get to know me, I’m willing to wait.’ He winked at her. ‘Hopefully you’ll change your mind before you or I are transferred out of here.’ He chuckled to make light of it but Meera’s heart beat so hard she could almost hear it.

Together they rose to leave, with Vivek coming up right behind her. As she took her first step, she felt a strong tug at her dupatta. It pulled her backwards and she fell straight up against his chest.

Strong arms held her steady. ‘Sorry,’ he said, his breath blowing across her ear, his baritone making her toes curl. Her throat went dry. There was a brief pause and the next moment, he lifted his foot off her dupatta and released her.

‘Thanks!’ Gosh! She felt her cheeks burn as she looked everywhere but at him. She so wished, after it was over, that she could have snuggled closer for longer.

****Thanks for reading! The rest of the story can be found exclusively on SudhaNair.com****

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SUDHA NAIR won the Amazon Pen to Publish contest for her debut novel, The Wedding Tamasha, a tale about love, family and traditions. A former techie, she now spends her time writing stories and creating worlds where she lets her imagination run riot and has fun along with her characters. She lives in Bangalore, India, with her husband and kids.

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