

SECOND SPRING

By
Sandhya Jane

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In US and India

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ISBN: 978-0-692-25932-0



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Published By:

ANISAN Technologies Inc.

Email: info@anisans.com

Printed by:

Thomson Press India Limited

Distributed By:

India

India Book House

Worldwide:

Ingram Spark & Amazon Inc

*To
my Aryaman,
'you never failed to bring sunshine in my life...'
Love, Mom*

Sandhya Jane

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PART I

CHAPTER ONE

Avantika

I got up with the first ring of the alarm at 4:30 a.m. To be honest, I didn't sleep at all. I tossed and turned all night, and kept looking at the clock every thirty minutes or so. I yawned broadly, stretched, and let out a long, exasperated sigh as I did my best to come to life. It was actually a relief to get up and get started.

With practiced precision, I showered under the hot spray, letting the liquid alarm clock awaken my senses. It was still dark outside when I dressed, but I knew it was going to be a dry, arid day. There had been no rain after the initial monsoon showers had hit Mumbai like a bolt of cosmic fury. The torrential downpour lasted a week, only to disappear without a trace, leaving us to swelter and wonder about its return.

I turned to look at the other side of the bed where my five-year-old son, Aarav, was still fast asleep. So, he had sneaked here in again. I knew it was a good idea to finish getting everything ready for the day before I roused him. The priority for the day's agenda was to drop Aarav off at my cousin's before leaving for a business meeting with clients in Pune.

There was a bizarre silence while I walked toward the kitchen, passing through the corridor that had two bedrooms on each side. Those rooms were occupied by my oldies, my aunts in their seventies, who needed care in their old age. However, this morning, they were visiting with a friend to celebrate the birth of their grandchild. Baku, my maid, had also accompanied them and Aarav's governess was on vacation. So, this meant only Aarav and I were at home.

We had a spacious apartment, by Bombay (Mumbai's) terms. With five bedrooms, large kitchen, dining area, balcony, and terrace, there was plenty of space for our needs. The central part of the apartment faced west, overlooking marshland and the cerulean beauty of the Arabian Sea. The dancing breeze from the water kept our home cooler in the morning and evening, and treated us to abundant warmth in the afternoon from the hot sun. There was a large study that I had converted into my home office. It provided me with much-needed privacy when I was working.

The important part of the home was the maid's room and the kitchen that occupied a small section of the apartment and was next to the entrance. It is important to note this, Baku, my maid mattered to me was a big contributor to my personal happiness. Her love for Aarav and her dedication toward our family made my life very comfortable. Otherwise, without her, my life—the personal one as well as the professional one—would have been miserable, as I had experienced while watching my couple of friends' lives closely.

Aarav's room was next to the master suite. Although it was done relatively well, in his favorite theme of *Spiderman*, he wasn't happy to leave Mommy's side. He would sneak into my bed almost every other night. He told me it was the spooky ghost that drove him out of bed. I wasn't sure if that was just a convenient excuse to be near me or if something was actually torturing him in his sleep.

I knew we wouldn't have time to eat on the way to Pune via my cousin's, so I decided to pack up a to-go meal for us to munch on. I quickly fixed a cheese sandwich and stuffed it into a plastic bag. Before turning off the lights in kitchen, I snagged a chocolate milk pack for Aarav to drink in the car on the way. After quickly looking at the clock, I had a few minutes left, so I decided to make myself some tea, my favorite.

While that heated on the stove, I pulled up my trolley bag, Aarav's bag of clothes for the day, and all of the other assorted essentials, including our travel food. Then, I gently picked up Aarav, who was still asleep, before leaving the house. I wasn't sure how I was going to manage carrying a child on my shoulder, three bags, and a travel mug of chai tea, but somehow I managed. I always did. I got to the elevator just in time to catch it down to the basement parking lot.

Aarav stirred a bit, waking up in my arms. I gently slid him down my body to the ground, and he rubbed his sleepy face into my skirt until he was finally awake enough to look up at me.

"Hey, baby. Good morning. You want to walk by yourself like a big boy? Mommy has lots of stuff to carry," I cajoled him.

Thankfully, he was on his best behavior. He nodded sleepily, but immediately agreed to walk. My little gentleman even volunteered to open the car door.

After making sure Aarav was buckled in, happily sipping his chocolate milk and eating his sandwich, and had his favorite book to read, I took a moment to refocus on what needed to be done for the day one more time to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything.

Drat the man. Why couldn't my driver have found a moment before eleven-freaking-p.m. last night to tell me he was not going to be able to make it today? Naturally, I didn't want to disturb Wendy, my secretary, for another car service or driver at that late hour, so here I was, driving myself to work.

It's an unwritten code with me that whenever someone ditches me at the last minute or by my own hand, I prefer to do the damage control myself without disturbing others. After all, this was one of the traits (not wasting time or backtracking on commitments) that contributed to my journey towards becoming the Managing Director of the much-respected Castell and Kendall Bank.

Before driving off, I decided to make a quick reminder call to my new colleague, Rohan, knowing full well he might not be ready. Reminding him was hugely important. If there was something I was truly paranoid about, it was timing and commitment. It didn't matter if it was one minute or thirty minutes, late meant late.

It was about a year ago when I met Rohan Rana—Rohan for short—for the first time.

Actually, our first encounter occurred on a very strange note.

It was one of those difficult days where nothing seemed to go right. As a routine, my car was

stuck in the gridlock after the Kherwadi traffic signal on the Western Express Highway. I was trying to relax with my eyes closed and listened to the soft music in the car. However, my over-enthusiastic mind wouldn't keep quiet or still. Every couple of minutes or so, my mind would return to my office work and my "to do" list, which was comprised of planning the next day's strategy. We had a morning meeting scheduled at one of the leading banks that we wanted to partner with for rolling out joint services. Although policies are mainly defined by the central bank, each bank chooses their process of implementing them. I had prepared for the presentation and related strategy, knowing their top management's preference and comfort that would gel well with our strength in rolling out the services. Also, I was overthinking in my mind to see if any example could be replaced with something better to convince the bank more easily.

My thoughts were interrupted when my driver began muttering. Bheem, my driver, usually only did that when someone got in his way, fully letting his frustration and anger out for me to hear. I had learned to ignore him for the most part.

After a couple of minutes, though, his mutterings started to get too loud to ignore. I couldn't bear any more, as it was breaking my thought process.

"What is the matter, Bheem?" I finally asked him.

"Ma'am, those two boys on red bikes are troubling me..." He pointed over to the right side.

"What trouble?" I asked him.

He ignored my question and continued, "I will teach them now."

"Bheem, don't act like a real Bheem," I snapped angrily. Once in a while, I needed to remind him that he was not the superhero character depicted in the epic *Mahabharata*.

He didn't reply.

One of the bike riders was wearing a helmet, so I couldn't see his face properly, but I could make out that he was a young, office-going man in glasses who was shouting something at us. He brought his bike closer to the car and tried to make an attempt to talk. And now, Bheem also gained some courage and started replying back.

The person sitting on the back seat of the bike was a tall and breathtakingly handsome man, if I do say so. It was unusual for me to remember what someone was wearing on a first meeting, but I still see it clear as day when it comes to him. He was dressed in a blue formal shirt and dark grey trousers that hugged him in all the right places. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbow. There was a matching tie popping out of his shirt pocket at the left side.

He was leaning towards the front guy and saying something. His companion was getting charged up and increasing his attack.

I rolled down my windows, waved to them, and asked them to talk to me. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"Your driver cut us off in the lane and my bike almost got trapped with the car coming from the other side," he said, finishing in one quick sentence.

Just to end the matter, I asked Bheem to apologize to them.

Now, Bheem was reluctant. "I will not."

Again, I insisted.

He hung his head and said, "Sorry."

The two men didn't hear him.

Again, the person in front was getting louder.

I told him, "He said he was sorry; now, enough!"

"Hey, lady, what is your problem? We're dealing directly with this arrogant driver!" the young man who was in the back said.

Without thinking, I shouted, "Yes, it is my problem. My five-year-old son is waiting for me at home and I need to reach him as soon as I can. I do wish not to spend my time or energy here, arguing over this petty issue," I said all in one go.

He paused, leaned forward, and said, "Whatever. We will take this driver to the police and teach him a lesson," he replied.

Now I knew that he was on an ego trip. He wouldn't back down.

"By all means, please take down my car number and report it to whomever you wish," I said angrily and rolled up my window.

I picked up a magazine from the pocket behind the driver's seat so I could pretend to read and avoid his face. I could see from the corner of my eyes that the young man in the back seat was turning red.

I tried to look at my magazine, but my mind was thinking of him. I wondered what that attractive guy was doing in the corporate world. He should have been in the entertainment business, up on the silver screen, on the pages of a magazine. Anywhere but in a glass office confined to nine to five corporate jobs.

After a few moments, I glanced outside. He was looking at me. Our eyes met for a second, and then I quickly went back to my magazine.

I could see from the corner of my eye that the young man in the back seat had started moving more into his position. He pulled at the bike driver by holding his shoulder. The driver removed his helmet and listened in silence to what the man seated behind him told him in his ear. I could see their faces change and they were silent for some moments. The driver changed the angle of the bike and shifted into another lane.

I was wondering what must have happened. Why didn't they say anything as they simply moved away? Anyway, I shook off the incident and returned to my magazine.

I was determined not to lift my head and meet his eyes again. I picked up an unfinished romance novel from my bag to read.

The next day, as we passed the junction where the previous day's incident took place, the whole ordeal ran through my mind like a movie scene. I recollected the handsome man who was in the back seat and his piercing eyes that seemed to see right through me and touch me deeply.

When I entered my client's office, I saw a red bike in the parking lot.

A thought crossed my mind and the very next moment, I brushed aside as one of those silly daydreams.

Although I had come across many good-looking guys in the course of my career, he was the

only one who had registered so indelibly in my memory bank.

I reached my client's place in time. After we had all settled down in the conference room, I started my presentation.

I had barely finished my first slide when a young man hurriedly entered into the conference room, muttering, "Sorry."

He took his place and turned toward me.

My heart felt as though it had stopped beating and I had to force my eyes to blink at the sight before me. It was the same handsome young man who had been on the bike last evening. Our gazes met and locked for seconds.

Oh gosh! I was thinking of this devil the whole morning and he is here, I thought to myself.

He looked surprised, but waved and smiled.

I said to myself, *So he is now part of the new client's team.*

I wasn't sure how he would take my arrogance from the previous evening. I wasn't sure of either his position or of his influence on the deal.

I pulled myself together and smiled back at him, restarting my presentation.

"Good morning. Before I continue, let's introduce ourselves briefly."

After I finished, he gave a friendly smile and said, "Morning, ma'am. Rohan Rana, working on research and design activity in this team and working with you in this project," he said, finishing.

I let out a sigh of relief, seeing there were no bad vibes between us.

During our tea break, Rohan came to me with his coffee cup. I was the first to speak.

"So, Rohan, did you file a report with the police last evening?" I asked playfully.

His eyes widened. "Of course not! You know it was said in a fit of anger." He looked straight into my eyes and rewarded me with a playful smile of his own. "You know..." He paused for a moment and then continued. "When you mentioned your little son yesterday, I remembered when I was that age, how eagerly I would wait for my mother to return from the college where she was teaching. I would finish my school at one p.m. and she would finish by three p.m. Those two hours were very long for me when I was a boy." He waited a moment, and then added, "I asked my friend to let go of the incident."

One thing I liked about Rohan, apart from his good looks and friendly nature, was his audacity. I loved men who challenged me intellectually. He was a rare one who didn't worry about speaking his mind, even when it didn't please the opposite sex. The best part was he had either logic or data to back up his arguments. I enjoyed holding small or big talks with him. When he was defeated, he made a silly face that reminded me of the innocence of Aarav.

Just before finishing his coffee, Rohan had made an impromptu remark.

"Avantika, hmmm? Rare name," he softly said while sipping his tea.

He looked at my face for a reaction and, when he found none, he continued his analysis. He came closer to me and watched the expression in my eyes while whispering words to me.

"You know, in Sanskrit, it means 'unknown.' It also means 'first flower to blossom of the season.'"

He was smooth. I smiled at his daring and attempted not to roll my eyes, but for the sake of politeness, I said, “Wow, no one has ever told me that before.” I tried not to sound condescending, but I wasn’t sure if I succeeded. “Thanks for the information.”

He simply flashed his perfectly straight, white smile at me, and we went about our workday. He was filling in for his senior who had just left, and whose replacement would take about a month. In spite of my intrigue, I was determined to keep things purely about business.

However, late one night when I was working in my office, I heard a slight knock at the door. I was a bit startled, having thought I was the only one around. I looked up, and there stood Rohan, leaning against the doorway. He was working at our office with my colleagues on that deal. In the dim light of the room, I could see that he had a cup of coffee in his hand. He didn’t say anything at all. He simply walked over to my desk, put the beverage down in front of me, gave me a small smirk, and left.

It was something so simple: a small gesture of kindness and being taken care of. When I recollected such kindnesses, they were things that made me smile, such as the time he’d take handing over the tea, helping me carry the files, sharing a joke when I was down, sending some data or info that could be useful to me, complimenting me to reassure my thoughts, and being more courteous to remind me that I was in charge.

In some ways, his work culture and outlook were quite aligned to a global working style. Sometimes, he reminded me of Chris, one of my ex-colleagues in U&B, one of the leading investment banks in Manhattan. Chris and I were close buddies. He helped me explore most of the midtown restaurants during our lunch. Friday evenings were special for our entire team, as we would all hang out in one of the pubs. It was a carefree life in NYC and was really great during those days.

The feeling that I felt for Rohan was different from most of my friends or colleagues. He touched me deeper with his additional care when we were alone. This type of care was one with which I was quite unfamiliar. It was unsettling and exciting all at once. I shook my head then, and I told myself that I was being ridiculous. I barely knew the man, and all he did was—bring me a cup of coffee. Still, I couldn’t help but let my mind wander a bit.

The initial business deal we were working on together was almost complete; however, a small part of the deal was yet to be finished. We were waiting for another round of meetings and fresh approvals as a couple of specifications were going to be altered at the last minute.

But then, the incomplete work remained and, strangely enough, neither Rohan nor his company got back to our team. On the contrary, Rohan suddenly vanished from my business circle.

When I continued on the remaining part of the project, I felt his absence with lack of insights from the client, required information to complete the work, or just to share a joke.

In the absence of friends, it bothered me somewhat, as I could not find anyone to share personal or business talk. It wasn’t all that inner feeling, but just someone to share routine hassles to vent to when frustrated. I had been beginning to enjoy Rohan’s presence in the office, but it was just as well, I told myself. I was busy with my work and my personal life; or rather, what was left of it.

On the family front, my life was on autopilot. My daily routine was simple—work and only

work, seven days a week. Unknowingly or knowingly, I filled up the many empty spaces in my life—such as the lack of enthusiasm, nothing to look forward to, and the absence of laughter—with work. For all practical purposes, my precious Aarav was the only man in my life. He commanded all my personal time or whatever was left of it, at any rate.

I guess love has a tendency to go out of the window when promises go awry, reality sets in, and responsibilities take over. Aarav's father was a former colleague and friend that I had imagined myself to be affectionate enough with to consider him to be my life-partner. Obviously, it did not work out between us. Everything fell apart just before we were set to get married. I had the baby, and I raised and loved him on my own, absolving his father of all responsibility. I moved on. I was a confident woman—capable enough to raise a baby on my own.

But then, I blinked, and before I knew it, I was in my late thirties. Should any of that matter to me? No! My personal life was no one's business. My time was consumed with working around the clock and I hardly met anyone with whom I felt a real spark.

My professional world spanned an impressive one-and-a-half decades working with various investment banks in a myriad of positions of authority, moving from one strength to another. I seemed to be doing better and better work with each passing day.

My colleagues and juniors admired or, at any rate, envied what they saw. They viewed me as a hard-working girl who grew up in Mumbai and went on to an Ivy League college, followed by a lucrative investment-banking career - professional, committed, gifted, shrewd, business-like, authoritative, forward thinking—were some of the words that had been variously used to describe me.

But was that person really me?

Whatever the truth of it was, the fact remained that I was doing vastly better at work. I was happy and passionate about what I did for a living. I took over as the Managing Director of the bank division that specialized in handling large accounts for corporate clients around a year and half ago. It took me all of three months to settle down.

My work, new colleagues, and professional life kept me absorbed. Joining new associations, conjuring up catchy media bytes, handling press conferences, socializing, traveling extensively, and other top-management-related work kept me on my toes.

And then, just as suddenly as Rohan did the disappearing act, he was back in my life again.

Wendy, my secretary, told me Rohan had asked for an appointment. What a pleasant surprise. How could I resist it? In fact, the very thought of meeting Mr. Cute was making me happy, and, of course, elevated. But I was even more surprised at the force of my feelings. I mean, what we had shared was just an uplifting friendship or maybe merely a meeting of minds.

It was one of those rare, lazy afternoons at work when he came over. He looked different. The aura and shine of our last meeting was just not there. It seemed to have faded a bit. But I soon figured out why.

He was out of a job. His position at the investment bank, which had contributed much to his impressive approach and personality, was really gone. A year ago, he seemed so happy, confident,

and full of life.

I wondered what had happened to him. But I refrained from asking personal questions and came to the point. Even if the query seemed rhetorical, I asked, “So, what are you doing these days?”

His reply was short and succinct. “I am not working currently. Actually, I wasn’t too well for a couple of months, so I went over to my parents’. I couldn’t come back on time.” He quickly scanned my face for a reaction. Reassured that I was not judging him, he continued. “I have come back now. I have given myself a month to get a job.”

I didn’t know how to react to that, so I tried to continue the conversation. “No worries,” I said cheerily. “You have good experience; you will surely get a new position soon.”

He was quiet for the next few seconds, as if gathering the courage to put forth his request.

“In the meantime, ma’am, may I help you with some work on a freelance basis?”

It had taken me a while, but I had somehow gotten used to being referred to as “ma’am,” ever since I returned to India after all those years abroad.

I wasn’t too sure what to do with him; what sort of work I ought to assign him.

One important leadership trait my boss at U&B taught me was that people always have tremendous talent and potential. A good leader is the one who can recognize those aspects and explore them to the fullest potential that would be beneficial to the team member and the organization as well.

Keeping that mantra in my mind, I guessed it wouldn’t hurt to give him some market analyses and research work at this initial stage and later think of taking his profile forward. I wanted to see how seriously he would take it.

He returned in three weeks, presenting before me a basic format for data collection from the market, and asked me to fill in my part. I told him that I needed some time, as I was due to travel abroad shortly. He nodded and left some papers for me to review.

It was the beginning of spring. The weather had started to get warmer and I could see the changes in the greenery around our housing society along with nature’s bright, vivid colors on my regular office route. The fresh green leaves and colorful flowers that surrounded me had acquired a soft, joyful hue. It was as if they were hinting at a new phase in my life in all their exuberant glory. My morning walks were getting warmer, but not unpleasantly so.

However, I wouldn’t be here much longer, as I was all set to leave for my annual vacation, a little tradition Aarav and I followed devoutly. It was our time together, our little getaway from the world.

Aarav loved—well, no—he *adored* travel. He didn’t mind the location or the itinerary, as long as he got to hop on a plane, nab the window seat, and see new places. He was game for just about everything—travel, different food, and changes in his sleep time. For him, as for every other little boy, small things counted big time: Window shopping and whooping in excitement at the shiny ware on display, beaming at new people, perhaps even shaking hands with them, trying out strange dishes, generally looking forward to a new life every day. With, of course, his mommy in tow

twenty-four-seven.

This year, we chose to vacation in Sicily, Italy; famous for its sun, sea, and spring. I had always wanted to explore this area for its rich culture, the ocean, and unique Mediterranean cuisine. We visited the *Valle dei Templi* at Agrigento and the gate to Mount Etna at Catania and Lipari. The remaining part of the vacation we spent on the beach in Gela, visiting nearby villages. We also enjoyed exploring the old Greek city and its archaeological center.

Aarav was too excited with the new experiences of watching the making of salt and wine. Every experience was brand new for both of us.

One of the chefs in a local restaurant actually educated and gave me a demo on Sicilian cooking. He narrated the history of local cuisine that had Spanish and Arabic influence with liberal usage of tomatoes, olive oil, and lard. It all sounded exotic. They used lots of herbs, which he described to me, such as mint, basil, rosemary, jasmine, and spices, as well as culinary additions such as saffron, raisins, nutmeg, cloves, pepper, pine nuts, and cinnamon. The use of nuts like almonds and pistachios in cooking wasn't new to me, but the way they were used in their dishes tasted much different compared to Indian cuisine.

I retained the taste of Marsala, a favorite dessert wine, in my deep memory. I picked one bottle to bring home, as per customs rules. The only other exotic thing I did during the trip was motor boating around the island with Aarav, with the help of one of the local guides.

The flea market was fun. Aarav gleefully picked out toys for himself and for his best friend back home. He also loved to wish every shopkeeper and passerby "*buon giorno*" or "*buona sera*". On the street, Aarav enjoyed *arancini*, a form of deep-fried rice croquettes.

We had three weeks to live it up on our self-planned trip.

During the vacation, our schedule was fixed. On weekends, we would take trips to explore far-off places by car, the kind that took up an entire day or two, but gave us a flavor of the Greek and Italian culture we would never taste otherwise. On weekdays, we would do the reverse. We would explore the delights of the city's flea markets, posh malls, beautiful churches, delightful roadside cafes, art galleries, gaming zones, or nearby villages; you name it.

Aarav and I set course by 10:00 a.m. every day. He was on his best behavior, be it while taking a shower, eating his meals, or getting ready *sans* a fuss. The "big carrot" meant real motivation lay in going out to explore new things each day. Each day was a delight, even as we sampled a different area of town, bravely trying out local dishes, giggling over the surprises in store for us, and generally returning to our hotel by teatime.

Exhausted and happy, Aarav would take a long nap until late evening. I would fix myself a nice cup of tea and get cracking at my work files for a couple of hours. Then, a movie followed the work. It was my routine to catch up with selected Hollywood and Bollywood movies during my vacation. Before I packed my bags for each vacation, I would consult my friend, who had similar taste in books and movies as I did, to recommend what I should take along on vacation. This way, I could watch movies when there was no work and Aarav was asleep.

One fine day, there was an email from Rohan in my inbox. It was a bit of a surprise. I had expected him to have bagged a job by now at another investment bank and repeat his little

disappearing act.

But this was an email with an attachment of the data he had collected for me.

I began to realize he was serious about my little assignment and so I added my own findings to his data. Satisfied, I sent it off.

There was no more email for a week. It didn't register because Sicily and Aarav were foremost on my mind.

Just a day before leaving, I got another email from Rohan with more information on the same data and a perfect summary of the report I was looking for.

At this point, it began to sink in. Rohan needed more help than he was letting on. Perhaps he was too proud to tell me directly that he needed a job. Maybe I intimidated him. Or maybe, I was just too senior for him to speak up. Or possibly, he didn't want to misuse that friendship. Was I now playing a mind-guessing game?

I wrote to him, asking if he was interested in joining us full time in one of our sub-divisions—mergers and acquisitions (M & A). Perhaps he could fill in for the departmental head until a new one joined us and, later, continue to work on the same team.

But it was a risk I had taken, knowing there were others on the team who could complement him well.

Although Rohan came across as a well-educated, smart professional with a definite talent, it dawned on me that I didn't know much about his actual ability or background other than our brief professional encounters.

It was an impromptu decision to offer him a job. I was concerned about him, although I wouldn't admit it to myself.

At my age, at that time and level of success, one tended to fool oneself into believing that one had outgrown the need for admiration and excitement. Those little butterflies in the stomach, the anticipation of talking to someone, wondering when you'd see them again in person—please. These were emotions and reactions strictly for teenagers.

Although I liked to believe I was a mature and clear-headed pragmatic woman of the world, I was not sure of my motive in the case of Rohan's appointment. I felt it was an emotional decision.

On my return to Mumbai, I got a positive reply from Rohan. I asked Wendy to coordinate with the HR team to complete all the necessary paperwork for Rohan's joining process. His start date was fixed based on mutually agreed terms. He was set to join us on Tuesday, May the tenth.

On that day, I had my quarterly meeting with a client. After the meeting, I returned to the office, but there was no sign of either Rohan or a confirmation of his date of joining from him. It appeared to me as if it was an old, notorious habit with him of taking his own sweet time. But why did it matter so much to me?

At the end of the day, I got an email from Rohan, informing me that he would join the office the very next day.

It didn't seem too professional to me. The next day was not far away, after all. Was he unprofessional? Anyway, I tried not to read too much into his absence nor did I feel it important enough to reply to his text message. We—rather, I—welcomed him the next day.

I felt a discernable positive energy in the office with Rohan's presence. I was not sure if it was palpable others to experience it too, but I felt it keenly. Gawd, my stupid feelings!

Rohan, I could see, was used to marching to his own drummer. He had a rhythm of his own. His lack of discipline was the complete opposite of my exacting, finicky methods. I liked order, punctuality, and perfection.

But Rohan liked to do things his own way. He would come and go as he pleased, although he generally got the job done. On the rare occasions he goofed up, he specialized in saying nothing at all. Not a word of apology escaped his lips. Instead, he flashed his best smile and moved on. And, I would realize that I had forgotten to scream at him. That grin of his was his best defense mechanism on almost all occasions.

Looking back, I see myself for the monster I used to be. I had a habit of bullying everyone on the team. I was a complete control freak who insisted on complete obedience. The "no" word had no business existing in my teammates' dictionaries or vocabularies.

Rohan took things lightly, though. It was part of his charm. He had his own logic to bifurcate into the 'not-so-serious' and the...well, 'not-so-serious'.

Before I went deeper into my thoughts with Rohan and his memories, I applied an unconscious brake, a mechanical process I used when I saw someone trying to cross the road without a vehicle. This jerk brought me back from the memories I was recollecting to the present state of mind. Now, I was actually focusing on the road ahead. One hand was on the steering wheel and, with the other hand I rubbed Aarav's head, which was popping out of the two front seats. He was also fully awake and standing behind the handbrake. He was a bit frightened.

When I looked at the clock on the dashboard, I realized that it had taken me around fifteen minutes to walk down memory lane with Rohan. His past memories and his interactions to date were neither bad nor good; maybe just nice ones.

When I called, he didn't pick up. Sure, it was just past 5:30 a.m., but I was supposed to pick him up on the way to Pune. We were to drive out about forty kilometers from the city before 7:00 a.m. so I could get to the highway without the traffic hassles. The drive was not bad at all.

I had such a single-track mind. When it fixed itself on a single point of focus, I just could not see beyond that. Since, at that time, Rohan was on my mind, I, unknowingly ignored all other details that I needed to take care of before embarking on the entire trip.

I crossed the Sakinaka exit and continued to Jogeshwari-Vikroli Link Road. I was approaching Powai, where I was to pick him up. He was not there. I got Wendy to call him. She could not figure out where he was either. I pulled the car aside, disconnected Wendy's call, and dialed Rohan. Finally, I was able to reach him. He was at the Mulund Checknaka toll station, about twenty minutes away. I called Wendy to ask if I had the correct time. She confirmed in the affirmative. I said, "Wendy, ensure that you explain our work culture to him well." I disconnected the phone without even saying a formal goodbye and threw the phone on the dashboard.

It was an old habit of mine to disconnect the call when I was angry for two reasons: first, for

letting the person know that I was angry; and second, for avoiding any unnecessary discussion or talk that I might end up regretting later.

The thud sound when the phone hit the dashboard didn't bother me. Truly, it was madness. I was furious. How irresponsible could he be?

After a couple of minutes, when I felt composed enough to talk, I called Rohan.

I ordered him to rush. I drove on the Eastern Express Highway toward Airoli. After the turn toward the Airoli Bridge, I pulled the car aside with my parking lights on. After almost twenty-five minutes, his cab pulled over and it took him a few more minutes to cab it out and get to my car.

He avoided making eye contact with me, even as he got in the car seat beside me. I had forgotten that Aarav was right behind him. Rohan reacted with a start as the little fingers connected with his neck. He turned and gave Aarav his best smile ever.

"You are late by twenty-five minutes," I bit out.

"No, ma'am," he said smugly. "It's only been eighteen minutes."

Now, I wanted to punch him. First, he was late, and second, he argued instead of apologizing.

Silence ensued. I was furiously concentrating on making up for those precious few minutes we had lost.

When I reached the first toll on Mumbai Pune Highway, I called Prasad, my maternal cousin, to let him know when to pick up Aarav at the entrance of the bungalow. I spoke in Kannada.

Gathering his courage, Rohan asked me timidly, "What language is that?"

"Northern Kannada, which is a dialect different to Southern Kannada."

"Oh, I see. Is there a big difference?"

"Yes and no."

The mood lifted by the time we reached Lonavala, a beautiful vacation town in Western Ghats located approximately one hundred kilometers away from Mumbai to the east.

I was trying to figure out where my cousin's new house was, as I had been there just once before. He usually stayed in a small apartment with my aunt and his father in central Mumbai. This bungalow was used for vacations only.

We managed to locate it eventually. With a heavy heart, I handed over Aarav with his bag to Prasad, who looked pleasantly happy to have my son over for a week. Aarav's expression fell. He knew Mommy had to go. He didn't like it. In fact, he never liked being at someone's home except ours, where he had his toys, his cycle, his TV, and his space. And of course, his Mommy.

Determinedly, I planted a good-bye kiss on Aarav's cheek and turned away quickly to avoid any sort of emotional drama.

Whenever Baku had a plan to visit her home, I needed a Plan B. My maternal aunt, Prasad's mother, had always adored Aarav, her sister's grandchild and first third-generation child in the home. She enjoyed having him around. She was like my second mother and also felt responsible for me after my mom's death.

Once we re-started the journey, we switched on the FM radio and made for Pune silently. We halted at one of those food courts on the way. It was unhygienic and really in bad shape, as the

owner was just getting ready to clean up and was clearly not expecting any customers at that time. Rohan went to the counterperson and asked for the breakfast. I didn't say as much as I wanted, in order to keep my displeasure under wraps. Rohan sensed that I hated my surroundings, and he was trying to make it all better without much conversation. That silence gave me a few peaceful minutes to do my mental planning and strategizing for the upcoming meeting.

We reached the hotel right on time. Both of us checked into our respective rooms and hurriedly changed into our professional gear.

I was most particular about the way I dressed. It was just as important as the content of my presentation.

I could see Rohan getting out of the elevator. He looked terrific in his blue business suit and red designer tie.

It was a busy day. The initial session was taken over by Rohan, who introduced the new products and services of the company and its future worth along with a few charts. The client showed interest in buying that company. This was our initial meeting to proceed further. There were some queries on our past deals and this was where I took over from Rohan.

After his presentation, I took over for the details of the exciting deal and issues related to the same. The problem came along with the delivery of products from the ecommerce company they intended to acquire. I presented more options to deal with it. The client had short-listed two options—one to have a tie-up with a local courier company as a partner. Thus, they shared a certain percentage of the profit, thus directly making them responsible for future profit/loss. The second option was working with another ecommerce company to set up a collective delivery system. This would reduce the delivery cost when they shared the responsibilities. It also offered more control over delivery and customer-related issues.

Now, the client raised more queries about the intricacies of the delivery network, partnership terms, and other details.

We decided to develop both of the models fully before we chose one of them.

The whole day passed in a blur of questions and answers, endless rounds of coffee, and intense discussions. I kept glancing at Rohan. He was making little reminders for himself—sketches and diagrams only he could comprehend.

Before I knew it, it was 5:00 p.m. Rohan was visibly tired and I realized I hadn't noticed his fatigue—or mine, for that matter—up to now. I smiled wryly. As the saying goes—old habits die hard. When I was engrossed in work, nothing else around me existed.

I did mention my single-track mind before, didn't I?

In the evening, I was invited to a cocktail dinner by some old clients. The dinner also happened to be in the same hotel where we were staying. I asked Rohan to escort me. He agreed. Of course, he had no choice.

I changed for dinner. I wore a classic, fitted little black dress; knee-length and slightly low in the neck. Like most of womankind, it is my firm belief that a well-cut black dress is a must-have in the travel case. Dress it up or dress it down—either way, it's a winner.

Rohan emerged from his room at about the same time as I. I saw unmistakable admiration in

his eyes. My new look had made an impact, though he didn't utter a word. He hadn't changed, but simply removed his tie and jacket.

Someone fixed me a martini. I asked Rohan if he'd like a drink, but he shook his head and said, "I don't drink."

But a few moments later, I saw a mojito in his hand.

I was curious about his mojito and asked him, "I thought you don't drink?"

He replied in all seriousness, "No, I don't. I only drink vodka."

I smiled at his youthful innocence and said nothing.

His innocence, his willingness to change his career path, and his boyish enthusiasm were all working on me slowly, steadily, and unknowingly.

I went back to my company and continued the professional talk. Around 12:00 a.m., I returned to the room, fagged out. It had been a backbreaking day; a four hour drive to Pune, followed by eight hours of work. Every bone in my body seemed to ache and my nerves were frayed, although the martini had helped me unwind earlier in the evening.

It was going to be an even longer day tomorrow. Driving back to Mumbai after the day's business concluded was going to be a killer. The mere thought was exhausting.

But then, my schedules were always like that: jam-packed, relentless. It was one client after another, interspersed with the ubiquitous preparation that preceded every meeting. Planning and attention to detail were vital.

The next day went on in a similar fashion. The client and department meetings continued all day and then it was back to Mumbai.

Driving back was relatively fun, as meeting stress and deadlines were not on my mind. Rohan and I were relaxed. Listening to music and having a casual conversation made me feel better.

I narrated some stories from my college days in India and my time in the United States.

"Rohan is cute name," I started the conversation.

"Really, it was actually 'Rohan Pratap Rana.' Boys would tease me, rhyming my name with the great Rajput warrior, Maharana Pratap, although I had a much leaner physique. So, later, it became Rohan P. Rana, and now, finally, it is Rohan Rana. It's actually a very unromantic name. My father named me after his favorite West Indian cricketer, Rohan Kanhai," he finished.

We started talking about his family background and their culture and he related a story about his family for me. "One of my cousins loved a man. But my uncle and aunt—her parents—didn't approve of him as her boyfriend, as he was from a different community. Once they learned about the affair, they somehow searched for a groom for her and got her married off to him within a month."

I was actually wondering if this still happened today in educated families. Then, Rohan continued talking about his college and friends.

I asked him casually, "So, Rohan, as you mentioned, many of your classmates got married within the group. You didn't find anyone? You guys get married early in your community, I guess?"

He looked embarrassed by my intrusion into his privacy. He was silent for a few seconds, as he was a bit uncomfortable with my unexpected attack on his personal life.

Cautiously, he said, "Actually, I tried, but it didn't work out. I wasted four years."

I said, "Oh, sorry to hear about it. Let me tell you, whatever happens, it happens for the best. Think about this: If it didn't work out after you got married, that would have been far worse."

For a few moments, he was silent, but then he grilled me.

"So, what about your husband?" he asked.

"Well, I have no husband," I replied as quickly as I could.

He looked at me, confused.

"Well, I mean, it is a long story and maybe we can talk about it some other time," I said so he would close the topic.

Silence prevailed for the next ten minutes.

He said, "You know why I was late? My friend's wife delivered a baby boy the previous night. I was helping him get her to the hospital and I didn't get home until well after two in the morning. I was concerned whether I could get up on time, so I thought I could remain awake for the entire night. But somehow, I fell asleep."

"Oh, I am so sorry, Rohan," I said genuinely. "Why didn't you mention it then?" I asked him curiously.

"How could I? You were so furious with my being late. Moreover, you didn't speak to me afterwards, so I wasn't sure if I needed to mention it," he said, further explaining his inability.

I touched his arm for a moment to express my apology.

He just smiled. We made peace.

We, like most Indians would love to do, returned to the favorite topic of movies and Bollywood.

He asked me, "Who is your favorite movie star?"

"Salman Khan, undoubtedly. I was in high school when I first saw his *Maine Pyar Kiya*. I was smitten with him," I said.

I was a bit embarrassed when I realized what I had said, and Rohan noticed that. He tried to hide his smile.

He continued further. "I see. So a macho man is your choice?"

I blushed. He deliberately leaned toward me and stared at my face, taking notice of my facial expression. He just wanted to make his action obvious, as he was now in a teasing mode.

After a few seconds, he turned his face away and started laughing. How wicked of him.

The ice started breaking slowly.

Our friendly conversation made the remaining journey pleasant and shorter than we anticipated it would be.

The next day at work, Rohan was visibly unwell. He had a high temperature and red eyes. But I scarcely noticed, as I was concentrating on work.

He checked to see if I was available a couple of times. He wanted a few minutes with me.

We didn't have a formal system of meetings for managers and senior managers in our office. I aimed at a friendly and open culture for our division. People should feel free to walk into my corner office if they saw me alone and of course with a simple nod from Wendy.

After an interview with a business magazine, I went to fetch my coffee and relax a bit.

Rohan saw that.

He stood near the cabin door and talked with Wendy to fill in the time while he waited for me to return. I entered my cabin and signaled him to follow me. He had some data and reports to present, but even then, I made him wait a bit as I answered a call.

He was brief and crisp, and deftly presented a summary of his analysis. I asked for some changes; the rest was okay.

I finally noticed his watery eyes and I called him back. "Why don't you go home and rest?"

"It's all right. I'll manage." He finally left at 6:30 p.m.

CHAPTER TWO

Rohan

It was a Saturday evening and Avantika was in her last meeting. I asked her if she could drop me off halfway home. She agreed easily as she said, “No problem. It is on my way home.”

I would like to make it clear here that Avantika was neither a very friendly person nor a friendly boss—she was just a bossy boss.

But then, she was full of life. Smart, savvy, sexy—yup, I said it—and sensitive. She was always on the move and getting things done. It was a common sight to see her deftly handle three or four things at the same time. She could be a brand ambassador for multi-tasking.

When I first met her, I was overwhelmed by her. Undoubtedly so.

She came from a humble background and made it to an Ivy League college on her own merit. With her diversified work experience, she had risen to a senior management position. Her work ethic was influenced by plenty of hardship, coupled with global exposure to the assorted work cultures of Manhattan, Mumbai, and London. I never ceased to be amazed by her energy and dedication. She had two personalities that contradicted each other—one when she was dealing with a deadline and one when she was not. When she was not dealing with a deadline, she had a ready laugh and a sharp wit. Many times, I didn’t know whether she was joking or serious. She also had a God-given gift of bringing down a conversation with a thud and saying the most outrageous things with a poker face. She taught me to live with a sense of humor, instead of walking about the office with a long face. This was new to me from her initial impression of “Bossy Boss” she engraved on my mind.

My immediate senior was not there, so I was reporting directly to her and learning to survive in a very fast-paced work environment.

However, she wanted me on her team and tried her best to make me feel comfortable with her humor and unique knack for soothing feelings after the turmoil of our team meetings. That was how she was able to leave a long-lasting impact on everyone every time, be it for better or worse.

To be honest, I had never met anyone like her. At thirty-two, I was still struggling to gain a foothold in my profession; quite unlike my other friends, who knew where both their personal and professional lives were headed. I had been hopping from job to job and had yet to create that long-lasting impact in a single job that would help build a solid base for my career. When I met Avantika, she was one of a kind, and I couldn’t help but marvel at her.

She was so unlike the ladies I had met so far; so unlike Neha, my college sweetheart, who didn’t know if she was coming or going. Right to the end, I failed to see the shallowness that underlined the sweet, vacuous expression that I had once found charming.

To my own peril, I ignored the warning bells that told me ever so clearly that Neha was not the

right girl for me. And sure enough, before I knew it, she pulled the carpet out from underneath my feet by announcing her sudden departure over some petty issue, just a few days after our marriage was announced.

She did not have the decency to explain why she did what she did. Moreover, she behaved as if nothing had changed for her and she continued to maintain a relationship with my folks. I was upset, humiliated, and furious with her, as well as myself for not recognizing her personality. Precious years of my life had been wasted.

After that very public humiliation, my parents predictably did what good Indian parents do. They rounded on me and demanded an explanation as to where my life was heading. Of course, it wasn't anything too subtle, and that also added a hint—a veiled threat cum demand—handing over the responsibility of choosing of my bride to them.

It was easier to do that than to argue. My mom was a cardiac patient, and I desperately wanted her to be happy. As the third youngest child of four, and the only boy at that, I had been cosseted and bullied in turn.

I had a happy enough childhood. In fact, it was the quintessential Rajput family upbringing—firm about tradition, but high on togetherness and camaraderie. My two elder sisters were married within our community. The third one was pursuing her MBA, and was dutifully awaiting her turn to marry after I obliged everyone, that was.

So here I was, working for boss-lady Avantika, and impressed as well as confused by her.

It had taken me a couple of months to learn to deal with her, but eventually, we were fairly comfortable with each other. So much so that I could slip into her cabin with ease and get my work done, with a little help of my charm, which I was sure Avantika had noticed.

The entire floor was taken up by our division. Avantika had a big corner office along with an adjoining secretary chamber. A little terrace, attached to her office on the eastern corner, accommodating a small seating arrangement.

The east side of the section had rows of cabins for the sub-divisional heads who worked on Avantika's team. The other side of the office had rows of cubicles for managers. I occupied one of them. In between were the desks for staff and other professionals.

Near the entrance towards the north side, we had a small pantry and a couple of rest rooms. Since I had never seen Avantika using any of these rest rooms, I guessed boss-lady had one all to herself attached to her own cabin.

Her office was equipped with a large L-shaped desk and chair. The cabin was well decorated and synchronized in a classic European theme. A neat seating arrangement filled one corner. One wall was full of books, the other contained file cabinets, while a third wall showcased pictures of this hugely successful woman posing with global dignitaries of various sorts. The effect was one of understated power. There were some beautifully shot pictures of Avantika and her son. She adored her baby boy; that much was clear. But where was a picture of her with her husband? Something seemed odd and incomplete here.

I did enjoy her aggressive, but nevertheless, safe driving skills when we traveled together to

Pune. Avantika behind the wheel was an apt metaphor for who she was — a woman in control of her car, her emotions, and her life. She took her risks, but they were on her terms. And she usually landed on her feet, unscathed. In short, she was a control freak.

Her controlling nature initially made me uncomfortable. But I learned quickly enough to get to the other, softer side of this woman by sharing her sense of humor, and even gently making fun of her. Her die-hard love for Bollywood biggie Salman Khan was a huge surprise, and I just loved to tease her about it.

Little things revealed the chinks in her armor. The secrets she hid so ferociously—her vulnerability and her care and commitment to those in her vicinity. But then, a smile here, and a little gesture there to accommodate others gave her away for what she really was—a deeply passionate, caring, and over-sensitive lady.

Boss-lady had asked me to arrange a meeting at her residence. It was a common enough practice with her, arranging meetings and working from home once in a while. I guessed it was more to keep an eye on little Aarav without disturbing his schedule. Whenever she had a nanny problem, she brought him to the work. He played quietly in a little corner of the cabin that she had created for him. On such days, all her meetings were arranged in a conference room located to the northeast of our floor.

That time around, though, her meeting plans went well with mine. I had planned on staying overnight at a friend's home. She lived in the same area and meeting at her residence the next morning would fit perfectly with my itinerary.

Unexpectedly, I heard her voice. "Rohan, are you ready?" I came back to the real world from my virtual one, where I was engrossed in taking down some data and planning for my next analysis.

Instantly, I stood at attention, my previous thoughts forgotten. "Yes, ma'am," I said without thinking.

She did have that effect on me.

"Great. Let us walk down to the lobby," she said, picking up her handbag while the office boy handled her laptop and lunch box.

Walking next to her, I smelled her perfume and heard the tick-tock sound of her stilettos on the hard lobby floor. I had no clue what perfume it was—floral, fruity, woody—maybe all three. But it was probably a classic; the kind that lingers in both your nostrils and your memory.

Absent-mindedly, I took the seat next to the driver, thinking she would drive today. To my surprise, the driver was new.

I looked at Avantika, who was arranging her laptop on the backseat.

"I hired a new driver, as the other fellow was taking too many days off and, most of the time, he didn't inform me in advance." She smiled. "You can shift here, if you wish." She pointed to the empty space next to her.

"I am fine," I said.

My refusal was quick, far too quick. I hoped she didn't notice it. But I didn't want anything to give away the turmoil within me.

On our way, we spoke about the clothes and brands we wore. I also told her that I was going to take advantage of my friend, a store manager, who would help me exchange some clothes or pick up new stuff at the employee sale price.

She was smiling, as usual. I wondered why she smiled at me whenever I explained something to her. Was it an admiring smile or a caring smile? It was a little strange. I was probably talking a bit childishly. I hoped she didn't mistake me for her boy. I didn't like the thought of that. Oh, watch out, boy.

Brushing aside my idiotic thoughts, I pulled out my phone and showed how I was helping my sister pick out a sari. She took the phone carefully and saw my sister, who was posing with a yellow and blue sari.

"Oh, she is pretty. So good looks run in your family?" said Avantika while handing over the phone.

I blushed from her comment and the way she admired my looks.

To ease the situation, Avantika told me stories about her college days in India. I couldn't stop laughing when she was narrating the stories with all the dialogues.

This was a different Avantika, real and natural to herself, shedding her corporate image. I discovered her simplicity and the hidden girl behind that image. She was becoming more comfortable in my company. She was more natural. I started liking this Avantika.

She narrated a girlish story of a dress exchange and a major fight with her cousin with all laughs and tears ... So much emotion was associated with those memories.

"My father also does not approve of exchanging dresses among my sisters and cousins, and, of course, the fights that usually follow afterwards. He always tells my sisters not to do so, but you know girls." I smiled as I said this.

Avantika just looked into my eyes and batted her eyelashes. She was a bit mischievous.

She dropped me off at the Andheri Bridge, which connects the east and west parts of the Andheri suburb in Mumbai. She lived in Andheri West on the Yari Road, while my friend lived in Andheri East.

Andheri is one of the largest suburbs of Western Mumbai and much of this area is busier than the rest of the city. In Mumbai (Bombay), the suburbs extend along the local rail tracks from the south towards the north and the east. The Municipal Corporation has divided the suburb on these rail tracks into the eastern or western part of the station, such as Andheri E & Andheri W, Bandra E & Bandra W, Kandivali E & Kandivali W. Each one of them is the size of a small town itself.

In the eastern part of the Andheri suburb, there was the MIDC industrial area that is now converted into a commercial sector—SPEEZ (software export zone)—and a few residential colonies. The western side of the suburb contained small residential colonies/areas named like Four Bungalows, Seven Bungalows, Lokhandwala, and so on... Varsoa Beach was the western part of Andheri, which was near Avantika's home. Along the beach, some part of the coast was covered by creeks, a patch of mangroves, and marshland.

I took an auto-rickshaw, India's favorite three-wheeler, to my friend's place.

Alok was at work. His wife, Ash, welcomed me at the door. Both husband and wife were my

classmates during my management studies in Pune.

The evening was a riot. Alok joined us later and we drank, ate, laughed, and pulled each other's legs in ways only old college buddies could.

Naturally, it was a trip down memory lane as we recollected the good old days and, inevitably, the conversation turned to our favorite topic—girls. Ash rolled her eyes in exasperation at what she protested was guy talk, but gamely joined in.

I got a few updates on what each of our classmates was doing, while Ash and Alok didn't seem to tire of asking me endless questions.

It was a big group we had in college, and a close-knit one. We put together our combined stash of phone numbers and called some old buddies. We were in luck. Some responded and we talked—it was an evening to remember.

It was past 2:00 a.m. when we decided to call it a day. That heady mish-mash of excitement, chatter, and vodka-based cocktails made it real tough to put on the brakes. But I had to. There was no choice. It was going to be a busy day with Avantika and possibly a stressful one as well.

Alok protested that the next day was Sunday; surely boss-lady Avantika would not begrudge me a day off? "No," I explained. "I have to work this Sunday to compensate for the unscheduled day off we had due to *bandh*(strike). You remember?"

I was always uncomfortable with this unscheduled *bandh* (closer), usually called by the local political party to mark their protest in the city against a ruling government over some issues such as a price war, scams. It was a perceived political issue to mark the score. Although most "*bandh*" are peaceful at times, the violence might erupt, depending on who was involved. Like we all knew, a *bandh* was the accepted way of protest in India. Offices tended to remain closed if the employers sensed a danger to their employees' lives. Of course, the employers expect the employees to make up or compensate for their unscheduled day off.

The next day, Sunday, I got up with a start at nine o'clock. There was no time to lose unless I wanted to risk further annoying Avantika by being late. Besides, we had a serious subject to tackle, and I definitely did not want to risk starting off on a negative note.

I put on my clothes in a jiffy, even though I did linger a while over the absolutely delicious *chhole* and *paratha* brunch complete with *ghee*, white butter, homemade pickle, and creamy curds laid-out by Ash. Like any true-blue northern Indian would tell you, there was just no way you turn down a *paratha* and *ghee* meal, especially when it's home-cooked and served up hot. Besides, I had been living in my rented guest digs for the last seven years, and *ghar ka khana*, home-cooked food, was rarer than a blue moon.

I ended up pigging out, but now I absolutely had to run.

It was going to take me over half an hour to get to her place, although, strictly speaking, the distance between east and west is not much. But the Mumbai traffic has a will of its own and I hoped and prayed it didn't give me a hard time; not that day, at least.

Around 10:45 a.m., I called Avantika, but there was no reply. Next, I sent her a text message

to tell her when to expect me. Still, no reply. That was so not like her.

I sent another text to inform her of my arrival time. No reply. Now I was annoyed.

Close to 11:00 a.m., I reached her building complex. It was an impressive residential complex with seven luxury high-rise buildings with around thirty-five stories each.

The security checks were stringent. A call to her apartment confirmed that she was indeed expecting me.

Bemused, I compared that strict policy on entry/exit to other housing societies; it was unlike most of the housing societies in Mumbai. Very few high-profile housing complexes had such restricted and inflexible security systems. That was the state of India's financial capital; a big, bustling city with a rising crime graph too, but then Mumbai is Mumbai.

The lift transported me to the twenty-fifth floor. I marveled at the neat precision of the building layout. Trust Avantika to inhabit a neatly manicured environment.

I found her apartment door ajar; yup, the number was correct. It was her home indeed.

Inside, amidst a higgledy-piggledy heap of toys was little Aarav. Only half his attention was on the toys, as he was closely following the antics of Tom and Jerry on TV. Jerry was hammering Tom with a saucepan to a background score of cymbals and drums, something that sent Aarav into peals of laughter. Like most little boys, he found violence hysterical. Madam Avantika would probably frown at that stereotyping, but hey, I was a little boy myself, once upon a time.

Aarav glanced up to look at me and then ignored me royally.

He had enough on his plate—watching cartoons and building a bridge with blocks. I couldn't help but smile. It seemed that multi-tasking was infectious, and inherited.

I sensed quickly enough that Aarav was not about to call out to his mommy, so I rang the doorbell in hopes of being received.

A maid materialized in a few seconds with a polite "*Namaste*." She asked my name and pointed me to the sofa. I settled myself on it and looked around.

It was a beautiful home; spacious and sea facing. The furniture was expensive, but otherwise, the interior was Spartan. I loved the view. I stood on the balcony. I got an eyeful of the picturesque mangrove forest to the north, even as a cool breeze from the sea assailed me.

I re-entered into living room. Although her apartment was elegant, the walls told a different story. They were, after all, integral parts of Aarav's creativity. I traced his artistic journey from the post-toddler years' squidgy lines, to present-day images of trees, clouds, a little boy, and slices of pizza.

I looked outside the balcony. Although the sky looked largely empty of clouds that day, that is, no sign of rain, which was unexpected of a Monsoon day. There was a morning breeze that kept me cool. The sea was reaching its high tide and water breaking on the shore was making a faint noise. I thought the seashore would be smelly during monsoons, with fish and sea mess. But this was not the case. On the contrary, the breeze was a refreshing one.

I knew for a fact that Avantika had many visitors on a regular basis. A lot of people were staying with her. She loved the buzz of a messy, happy home, and the laughter of loved ones. That vital bit of information came from who else but good old Wendy.

It gave me a deeper insight into the lady who was now my boss, *en route* to becoming a friend. Long before she metamorphosed into her present role of a single mom and boss-lady, Avantika was part of a large, bustling household, with the security and friendship of many.

Quite a contrast to the life she led now; one with little room for encroachments on time and space.

My reverie was broken by Avantika's booming tones. "Baku, has someone arrived from office?" she demanded of her maid.

Presently, she emerged from one of her rooms and found me seated on her sofa. She seemed happy to see me. I told myself to get a grip. She was just being polite and professional.

Her avatar or demeanor was far from official. Clad in casual three-quarter-length capris and a loose, sleeveless top in a soft, girly peach, she was a far cry from the intriguing boss-lady who occupied so much of my mind-space these days.

Her shoulders were bare—oh lordy, that was a sight never seen before—casual, relaxed, and feminine. I was so used to her sharply tailored business suits at work that her new look had me stumped.

She made herself comfortable on a sofa opposite me. Casual pleasantries over, she turned a firm eye on Aarav. On a center table rested a cup of milk that Aarav had no intention of finishing.

She pulled the little boy into her lap and, in a gentle, but no-nonsense tone, told him to finish the milk. All the while, she was talking.

That was such a new setting and a whole new facet to her. Had I not seen it myself, it would have been hard for me to imagine the tough taskmaster in this mild, mothering role. She teased her son after he finished the milk. "Now, show us your muscles. I bet they have become strong and big just like Chota Bheem's (a popular Indian cartoon character; the name inspired from a mighty superhero in Mahabharata, a Hindu epic) after drinking your milk." She gave his muscles a gentle squeeze and Aarav preened for a minute, then suddenly remembering a stranger's presence, shyly hid his face in her bosom.

She gently tugged at Aarav and asked him to look up and greet me. But he was as willful as he was reluctant, and firmly refused to engage with me.

Wow, I thought. Here's someone who doesn't listen to Avantika or give a hoot about her disapproval.

Avantika led me to her home office, the same room from where she had emerged. But as soon as she showed me this little home office, she excused herself.

It was a neat little space. There were two workstations in the corner, a low Indian-style seating arrangement, a Lazy Boy chair, and a smart little sofa. Behind the workstation was a shelf that contained books ranging from western classics to modern fiction and non-fiction as well. Like I mentioned before, it was a day full of surprises. So many spiritual titles from Hindu culture—from Kundalini to Brahmavidya to the *Seven Secrets of Shiva*, to an unabridged copy of the epic *Mahabharata*. I couldn't imagine Avantika being interested in such matters. Clearly, the collection indicated a much developed taste and passion for reading. And there I was, thinking that only business, profit, and branding mattered to her.

Aarav came hopping in with his blocks and showed them to me. Now, my next task was to build a castle for him.

Recently, I'd done it for my friend's kid, so I quickly assembled it while Aarav helped me with handing out blocks.

I instructed him to fix the remaining block and its position before getting up.

Next, I spied several photos featuring Avantika in her younger days. She looked so very pretty, relaxed, and soft. I especially loved one of her posing with her hair down, and a smile that was mirrored in her eyes so deeply, it was as if she was in love with the photographer.

Unexpectedly, I felt her presence. It was her perfume again. She was standing right behind me, watching at me staring at her photo. For some reason, she was tense and breathing heavily from rushing around.

I was a little embarrassed at being caught gazing at her pictures so blatantly, but she seemed to be unconcerned. Not too much, anyway.

To ease the tension, I asked, "When were these pictures taken?"

She replied easily, "Almost fifteen years ago. Let me show you some more pictures," and left the room.

Before she left, she asked Aarav to tidy up the place and leave the room.

She returned, armed with a couple of albums. Some were taken in her college days, some during her work-life, and a few with Aarav. She was way prettier in those days, although she still looked much younger than her age. Perhaps it was the expression in those pictures that arrested my attention.

She kept up a steady stream of conversation, explaining the backdrop of the pictures, the people, and situation associated with each of them.

In one of the pictures, I saw Avantika teaching a class. She looked very engrossed talking with one of the students. In the background, there was writing all over the board. It seemed like some university in the United States with students who had all colored skins. Avantika smiled at me and explained that she had a teaching assistantship during her university days where she taught a couple of undergrad classes for two years.

She mentioned to me, "I love teaching and that is one of the reasons why I give so many presentations all the time..." She smiled and said, "Of course, overlooking those yawns and hidden smiles at times..." As usual, she was her best when being humorous, especially when she involved herself.

After learning about her family through the photo albums, we settled down to work.

But it was as if a barrier had been broken. Perhaps we knew each other a little better that day.

Avantika sat on the low seat, while I chose the Lazy Boy chair. I could just visualize her reading in her free time on this sinfully comfy chair.

It was difficult to concentrate on the work at hand, as my mind wandered again and again to her low neckline, which was ever so visible from my angle. Man. That was just so bloody distracting. And of course, disruptive to my peace of mind. Why on earth did women wear such clothes?

After a few minutes, Avantika moved to her office chair, as if she could sense my discomfort. I just hated her being able to read my mind with such ease. She knew I could read hers as well. We both knew what the hell was happening, that strange connection that was hard to define—chemistry.

Thinking alike is no fun at times. It just complicates everything.

She took the discussion forward, moving smoothly from one topic to the other. It was as if we were desperately clinging on to something to avoid the obvious.

I asked her to print the agenda. She indicated that I could use her laptop to do so while she double-checked the facts in a recently printed newspaper article. I bent over to give the print command. There it was: a sharp, clear whiff of that utterly delectable Victoria's Secret body lotion (I figured that out and its smell later when I helped her choose her dress for PR work). It drove me crazy for a few seconds.

Luckily, Avantika did not notice my reaction, engrossed as she was, circling the important points in the business article with a pencil.

Soon, she handed me the print out. We resumed our discussion. It was a focused negotiation on target and goal. She was tough, uncompromising, and demanding. I was soft and persistent. No, I told her; it was my way, not her way.

Suddenly, Baku, her maid, entered the room with a tray of coffee and snacks. Time for a little break. Aarav took the cue to come bouncing in. Otherwise, he had been busy. There was just so much to tell Mommy and, like all little boys do, he started meddling with the food.

I smiled. By that time, I was used to all that. We had two kids at home: a niece and a nephew. My two older sisters had one brat each. They were the joy of my life, although a couple of years ago, I was extremely uncomfortable in their loud presence. Today, I was used to them. After all, most of my vacations in the last few years had been spent playing with my sisters' kids.

But to Avantika, it did not seem to matter much; Aarav jumping around and demanding to be heard. He came closer to me. I took the cue and picked him up and made him sit next to me. He felt safer with me in that situation; otherwise, Avantika would have shooed him away. I put my arms around him. He smiled at me. I looked at Avantika. She was turning her face toward the laptop screen to hide her smile. She was used to getting her work done in this din.

We finally concluded the discussion. I had managed to convince her of my course of action on my terms and conditions with a smile and a joke.

I took a final sip of coffee and got up to leave. Avantika's so-far grim expression eased into a grin. "Rohan, you are one sweet negotiator. I mean, you have managed everything your way."

We laughed together.

It was time to leave, and we both got up from our chairs.

Outside, in the dining area, there were three elderly people sitting around the table. I figured out that the elderly gentleman was her father, but it was difficult to place the other two ladies.

So they had been at home all the while.

Avantika asked me to join them for lunch. It was a formal invitation, issued without much thought or will.

I would have loved to have joined her, had she and Aarav been by themselves. But not in that setting, no.

I declined politely and walked to the door.

Even as I waited for the elevator, I heard Avantika issuing her standard instructions, although they were in her native tongue. I could make a wild guess what she was saying. She was just demanding some food and I heard a couple of names—*appam* (rice bread from southern India) and *gobi* (cabbage).

It was the boss-lady as usual. Even at home.

The next day, Avantika didn't come to the office, as she was traveling on business.

I found this out from Wendy, who had now become a good friend of mine ever since she had sensed my growing closeness to the boss. She seemed very happy with that development, as Avantika was known to be an aloof person; very quiet and keeping to herself.

That had helped create an aura of mystery around her, but it seemed Wendy could see past it.

I glanced through my email. Wendy had sent me a message about a possible business trip to Hyderabad with Avantika, tentatively scheduled for the next week.

I called out loudly to Wendy, "Hey, can you not find someone else to go with MB?" Monster Boss was our secret short code for Avantika.

"Of course not. It was sweet revenge, since you forgot to get my candy."

"Well, just wait; I will see you," I mock threatened her as we both laughed.

"Sure; see me with a box. Well, no, make it two boxes now," she demanded.

Wendy D'Souza was a sweet colleague—easy going, reasonable, and well suited to her role as secretary to the division head. She had been with the organization for over two decades now and was well versed in its culture. She understood its structure and knew the pulse, especially that of our department. Moreover, she had been with Avantika ever since she took over.

Wendy had worked briefly in New York City when her husband was transferred there for couple of years and understood the global business culture that went with Avantika's work style. With two grown-up kids and a well-settled life, Wendy did not have higher career aspirations and looked to retire from the same department.

She had managed to create a comfort zone for all in this fast-paced, ever-demanding set-up. She played shock absorber when things went wrong from either side.

I went over the travel itinerary mentioned in the email.

"Horrible, horrible," was all I could mutter under my breath.

A flight out at 6:00 a.m. meant almost no sleep the previous night. I was so nervous about angering Madam again that I could barely sleep. After a stressful flight, we reached Hyderabad at the unearthly hour of 7:30 a.m. and headed straight to the hotel. There was no time to change clothes, as we had to go straight to the business conference, where we worked maniacally throughout the day.

We spent the whole day standing, working, and talking mindlessly to promote the business and our product. It had not been an easy task.

I cursed Avantika for that kind of schedule. She was busy in a meeting the previous day, so it was her idea to travel together the next day. She worked like a maniac and expected the same from everyone else.

