

ONE

The road was slippery and the glare of the headlamps blinded her. She stumbled on something, lost her footing and before she knew it, was flat on her back. The tires of the car were just inches from her as it screeched to a halt. The world stood still, or did it cease to exist? She was numb. Was this death? Slowly, she became aware of a crowd surrounding her. She caught fragments of sentences...

“...accident,”

“...a girl has been hit,”

“I hope she’s okay.”

“*Hato, hato, mar gayee kya?*”

Sanjana knew there was something she should do but she couldn’t figure out what. She heard a car door slam and a pair of well-shod feet came into view as she lay on the road. Somebody felt her pulse and announced that she was alive. She was conscious of powerful arms helping her sit up.

“Are you okay?” a deep voice asked. She looked into hard, angry eyes and blinked to indicate that she was. He helped her to her feet and said, “Come, I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine. Thanks,” she whispered. Sanjana flexed her shoulders slowly and was relieved to find nothing broken, but her left shoulder seemed to have taken the impact of the fall and she could feel a dull throb. She looked up, rubbing her arm. The man had been watching her intently. When their eyes met, she saw anger in his.

“Is this how you earn a living?” His voice was harsh. “Or were you trying to commit suicide under my car?”

She looked down at herself, muddy from the tumble on the slushy road and then at his car. A Mercedes SUV, no less. The crowd had lost interest and moved away now that they knew she was alive. Death invited a gory interest, she mused.

“Come on,” he commanded. “I don’t have time to waste. I’ll see you to a hospital.” He looked her up and down, taking in her mud-splattered

clothes and disheveled appearance, then at the expensive upholstery of his expensive car. He walked to the passenger side with quick impatient strides and held the door for her.

Half-dazed though she was, it was clear to Sanjana that she couldn't possibly take anything from this incredibly arrogant man. Did he really think that she had come under the wheels of his car deliberately, to earn money like some beggar? She needed to get away from here as soon as possible.

She looked around and flagged down an auto passing by. But when she took a step towards it, she almost stumbled as pain shot through her whole being. Damn, she hadn't been as lucky as she had first thought. She gritted her teeth and limped to the auto and told the driver to take her to the hospital.

"Wait! I said I'd take you..." the imperious voice called after her as the auto pulled away.

Insufferable man, Sanjana fumed. She should have taken him up on his offer—if only to ruin his precious upholstery. She recalled his expression and what he had said to her. The auto hit a pothole on the road and she felt a sharp stab of pain shooting up her leg. She gritted her teeth and held on tightly, hoping a hospital was close by.

* * *

When they reached the hospital, the auto driver helped her to the emergency department and agreed to wait and take her home later after she had been treated. The casualty room at the hospital was in mayhem and not at all confidence-inspiring, but even as she stood there looking around, wondering whom to approach, a young intern came up and helped her to a couch. Three people were already sitting on it, but they obligingly squeezed closer to each other to make room for her.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Divya Mahtani," the intern introduced herself as she began to examine Sanjana's foot. With sure hands she probed toes, instep and then the heel. Sanjana's sharply indrawn breath told her where the problem was. "We'll need to get that X-rayed I'm afraid. You'll have to go to the radiology department," she said, calling for an attendant and a wheelchair. Standing up was so painful that Sanjana had to stop herself

from crying out, and by the time she got into the wheelchair her forehead and upper lip were beaded with sweat.

The X-ray revealed a hairline fracture in her heel. The staff tore the leg of her jeans to attend to her badly swollen foot. It was well into the night by the time it was plastered and she was given a boot-cast, after which she was allowed to leave.

* * *

Sanjana was exhausted by the time she reached home. The kind auto driver had been waiting for her and helped her to her flat, promising to come and take her whenever she needed to go out. “But *didi*, you should stay at home as much as you can. If this doesn’t heal properly, you will limp for the rest of your life. But you know that—I don’t need to tell you.”

“Yes *bhaiyya* you are right, but with this extra medical expense, there can be no rest for me,” she smiled wanly. “Thank you for your help. I will call you when I am ready to go back to work. It will be a big help if you can pick me up from, not from the main road.”

The helpful driver told her his name was Sohanlal, gave her his cell phone number and told her to call when she needed him. He said he lived nearby and if she gave him enough notice, he would make sure he was available.

Once inside her apartment, she sponged herself with a wet towel, took the prescribed sedative and painkiller before sinking into bed with a shudder of relief. The pain was excruciating, but she promised herself, by tomorrow it would be gone. *It will be gone...I will be fine*, she intoned to herself. She was determined to get well soon; she couldn’t afford not to.

* * *

But came the morrow and Sanjana was in pain—and groggy from the medication. She found she couldn’t move from her bed, letting out an involuntary wail when she tried.

Luck had been with her when she landed a plum assignment soon after completing her course in interior decoration. This assignment could get her more, but if she failed to deliver... She couldn’t afford to miss her

deadline. Why was she thinking the worst? She *would* finish the work on time. She prepared a list of tasks for the day and called Mohanty, who was coordinating the woodwork, to tell him that she wouldn't be able to meet him. "Will you make sure that Rahim *mian* and his team don't slack off? They have to put up the panels in the conference room and need supervision." Rahim *mian* was a talented carpenter, but as with most labor, he tended to take it easy when there was no one to watch.

"Why? What happened? Are you sure you're okay?" Mohanty asked. "You don't sound good."

"Actually I've hurt my foot. I'll try and be up and about tomorrow."

"What happened?"

"I fell while crossing the road last night and was almost hit by a car."

"What? And how seriously are you hurt?" When she didn't answer he said, "I think you aren't being honest with me. I'm coming over Sanjana."

"No, I'm fine." She didn't want to trouble him but didn't realize just how weak she sounded.

"Is there someone to look after you?"

"You will supervise Rahim *mian*, won't you?" she evaded the question.

"Sanjana, open the door for me. I'll be over as soon as I can"

Sanjana didn't protest. She didn't have any energy left to do so. She dragged herself to unlock the door and then slumped back on the bed. By the time Mohanty came, she was asleep but the plaster on her foot and the flush on her face told him just how unwell she was.

* * *

When Mohanty called in on her later in the day, he asked if she had told her parents. Sanjana was adamant about not telling them anything; she didn't want to worry them. Her mother would rush all the way to stay with her even though it would be inconvenient. She would worry about leaving Sanjana's father alone the whole time she was with her daughter. It was best that Sanjana recovered first and told them later, if at all.

Mohanty suggested she call a friend, but when she dialed Palak's number it was unreachable, and Sanjana belatedly remembered the family had gone to Dubai for a holiday.

Finally, Mohanty took it upon himself to look after her. He made it a point to come over every day with food his wife had prepared and get whatever she needed. At work, he was able to take some of the pressure off her. Though this was the first time they were working together, Mohanty had taken to her instantly when they had been introduced by a contractor. Sanjana's soft-spoken demeanor, charming manners and large brown eyes that exuded warmth, had made him feel protective about her.

With all the willpower in the world, it was a good ten days before Sanjana was able to hobble around the apartment without wincing. Although he had kept her updated at every stage of her project, Mohanty wasn't able to stop her from going out to check the progress of the work herself. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't persuade her to rest for a few more days. This was her first solo assignment and she didn't want to miss the deadline.



TWO

Sanjana hobbled to the site armed with a walking stick. She had called Sohanlal, the auto driver, to ask if he could take her to the office she was decorating. Luckily he was in the vicinity and able to come across.

The office was buzzing with activity. There were workers everywhere, hammering, sawing and scraping. After inspecting the progress and commending Mohanty on his coordination and management, Sanjana went to her workroom at the end of the passage on the ground floor. Bent over a table littered with fabric swatches and design books, she matched fabrics to the design layout she had designed on her laptop. Immersed in her work, her concentration was broken by the sound of footsteps and male voices.

“I can’t believe you picked someone just out of design school to do up your office.” There was derision in the vaguely familiar deep voice.

“She’s good, Abhi. I went through her portfolio and discussed her work with her professors. They were unanimous in their feedback. Besides, what’s the harm in giving someone a chance?” Sanjana recognized Amit Sethi’s voice and realized they were talking about her.

“You’re crazy Amit. You’re throwing away good money, if you ask me, when you can get the very best interior decorators from any corner of the globe. What if you don’t like what she does?”

They stopped abruptly when they entered the room and saw her there.

“Ah there you are, Sanjana. I hope you’re feeling better.” Amit said.

“Much better, thanks,” she smiled.

“Abhi meet Sanjana,” Amit introduced them. “She’s the talented decorator I was telling you about, and is doing up the office. Sanjana, my friend Abhimanyu Chopra.”

Sanjana turned to look at the gentleman she was being introduced to. Her ready smile froze and eyes widened in shock. It was the angry man with the expensive car from the accident. Sanjana registered his considerable height, lean frame and incredibly handsome face. His eyes

had a hard look in them and together with the angular jaw, he gave the impression of being in command. Dressed casually in jeans and a light blue shirt, he still managed to exude power. Sanjana couldn't fathom how someone so good-looking could be so obnoxious.

Amit looked puzzled at the silence between them. Sanjana was a pretty girl; her warm brown eyes and sunny smile made her an instant hit with anyone she met. He was surprised Abhimanyu didn't warm up to her or even say hello.

Sanjana turned away just as Abhimanyu said, "Hello Sanjana."

She glanced at him briefly and replied, "Hello."

"I see you're on your feet now? I wish you had allowed me to take you to the hospital the other day." Abhimanyu continued, even though Sanjana had turned her attention back to her work. "You went off so fast I wasn't able to follow you or take your number. I hope you weren't too badly hurt."

She shook her head and said, "I'm fine." He would probably think she was angling for sympathy or something!

"You guys know each other?" Amit asked.

Sanjana didn't respond. Looking at her, Abhimanyu said, "She was almost hit by my car some days ago and then vanished."

He was somewhat surprised he had recognized her. Her clothes had been filthy after the fall, her hair had come loose and her face had been half-covered with her hair, but those warm brown eyes were unforgettable. They had been wide with shock that day and then bewildered when he had yelled at her. But today he noticed the beautiful eyes, the heart-shaped Madonna-type face and the serene expression.

"Oh!" exclaimed Amit. "This is the accident you told me about, right? But you said the girl was trying to commit suicide. Sanjana?" he turned to her questioningly.

"It was raining heavily and the road was slippery. I slipped and fell. That's all there is to it," she replied matter-of-factly.

"Why didn't you wait for me to take you to the hospital?" Abhimanyu demanded.

"There was no need." Sanjana turned away to look at her laptop screen.

She could sense the anger in Abhimanyu at her less than subtle dismissal of him. She wasn't interested in his false concern. She knew

these typical Delhi types, the wealthy elite—they were arrogant and snobbish with a huge sense of entitlement. And believed that everything and everyone had a price. Well, here was someone who didn't, she thought.

Sanjana discussed the next phase of the work with Amit, showing him the rooms and each wall on her laptop along with the fabric swatches she had selected. "I'm sorry about the delay, I'll make it up now that I'm back," she reassured Amit.

"Don't worry about it Sanjana. These things happen and a slight delay is not going to be a problem." She offered to take him around the site but he would have none of it. "I'm going to show Abhimanyu around," he said and she nodded and smiled.

They moved away and she heard Amit say, "My God Abhi, the least you could have done was take her to the hospital and look after her. Do you know she's come to work after ten days? She's lost weight and is looking pale."

Their voices faded and she couldn't hear Abhimanyu's response, not that she was interested. *Horrible man*. How could she forget the derision in his eyes when he thought she earned money by putting people like him in a spot? If that were not enough, he was trying to influence Amit to give the project to someone more experienced. It didn't help that he was fabulously good-looking. Sexy, actually. *And he probably knows it*. But that was no reason to feel so aware of herself in his presence, so why did she look down at her long skirt and bright red cotton top, and slide her hand through her hair to smooth it away from her face?

* * *

When she left the building half an hour later, she didn't notice the two men standing beside a Camry parked outside. She was just getting into the auto when she heard Amit call out her name. She turned and saw him coming towards her, Abhimanyu following. "Sanjana, you said you were okay. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what, Amit?" Sanjana was puzzled.

"I just saw your foot in a cast *and* you're using a stick. You were sitting down earlier so I didn't realize that you have a plaster. You didn't tell me you had broken your foot."

“Oh, that. It’s nothing. I told you I’m fine. Don’t worry, I’ll finish the project as scheduled.”

“Sanjana, do you think I’m some sort of heartless monster? Get well first and then we’ll talk about deadlines. You really should stay off that foot.”

She glanced briefly at Abhimanyu before turning to Amit. “And I promise you won’t regret hiring me even though this is my first big project.”

Amit and Abhimanyu looked at each other in dismay, realizing she had heard their earlier conversation. “Sanjana, I’m a businessman. I gave you the project because I am confident that you are capable of handling it,” Amit said gently.

She looked at him and was reassured that he wasn’t going to be swayed by his friend’s opinion.

Abhimanyu, who hadn’t said a word so far, suddenly offered, “Come—I’ll drop you.”

She looked across at his car, and remembered the disdain in his eyes from that night. Did he even realize just how he had insulted her the other day? “No thank you,” she declined politely.

Ignoring her refusal, Abhimanyu held out his hand to help her out of the auto. “Come,” he said autocratically, with the arrogance of someone used to getting his way.

Sanjana ignored the outstretched hand. “*Chalo bhai*,” she told the auto driver and smiling in their direction, she waved politely as the auto moved off.



THREE

A few days later Sanjana got a call from one of her professors from the design institute.

“Sanjana, how are you my dear? How’s the project going?”

“Very good, sir. It’s a bit hectic and I’m a little worried about meeting the handover date but other than that, I have no complaints. How’s the new batch, sir?”

“Too early to tell. But what I called to tell you is that Alankar Raheja, the son of a friend of mine, visited me the other day looking for someone to re-decorate his house here in Amrita Shergill Marg. I’ve given him your name and contacts. I hope you can accommodate him in your busy schedule.”

“Sir,” she started dramatically, “I have so much work that I don’t know how I’ll manage, but will try to meet him for your sake.”

Sanjana laughed at the idea of her being too busy with just one assignment. “Thank you so much for recommending me.”

“No, *beta*, you have a rare talent. Very soon people will flock to you for work, mark my words.”

Sanjana smiled to herself as she put down the phone. This was just the motivation she needed to finish the first project in time, so that she could devote time to the new one.

Alankar Raheja called and suggested they meet up at the Taj Mahal Hotel which was close to the house he wanted redone. She was about to suggest meeting at Barista, but went along with his suggestion.

She asked him some initial questions about the house, and his preferences in terms of colors and furniture, so that she could work on some preliminary ideas before meeting him, but he suggested she work on what she liked and they could review together.

* * *

Sanjana checked herself in the mirror. The long skirt from Anokhi was just the thing nowadays—and convenient with her foot still in a plaster. The wretched thing was taking forever to heal; she was getting impatient *and* feeling sorry for herself. She stopped herself—after all, it could have been much worse. At least she wasn't laid up in bed. The skirt was in shades of rust and she teamed it with a pretty cream-colored cotton top that went well with it. She tied her hair back with a scarf, lined her eyes with *kajal* and was all set for the meeting.

The first person Sanjana saw as she walked into the hotel was Abhimanyu, who entered at the same time as she did. He was in a business suit and looked very much at home in a place like this, while she felt like a fish out of water. Her heart skipped a beat. Her face flushed. Why on earth was she reacting to him like this?

"Hello Sanjana," he said.

Damn, he had seen her. She had been hoping he would walk on.

"Hello," she replied.

"How are you? Is the foot better?"

"Yes, thank you."

He looked skeptical; the walking stick indicated otherwise.

"Are you here to meet someone?"

She nodded, looking around to see if anyone looked like an Alankar Raheja. She smiled at her own foolishness—how could anyone look like a name?

Abhimanyu caught the smile and asked crisply, "Boyfriend?"

She wiped the smile from her face and shook her head, "No."

Someone called from across the lobby, "Abhimanyu Chopra, as I live and breathe." Abhimanyu was engulfed in a hug by a broad-shouldered stocky man with curly hair. "How are you my friend? Haven't seen you in ages."

Abhimanyu returned the hug. "Lanku! What a surprise. Have you moved back to Delhi?"

"No, I'm here for about a month. Actually I came here for some work then decided to take a break as well. You know how it is—Mummyji has been complaining forever that she doesn't see enough of me and Papaji hasn't been keeping too well."

"Good, good. So shall we meet up this evening, then?"

“Yes, of course. Right now I’m here to meet an interior decorator. You know that house on Amrita Shergill Marg? Well, we’ve decided to renovate it and then see if we should put it up for rent or if Papaji and Mummyji want to move in.”

“Are you here to meet Sanjana, by any chance?” Abhimanyu asked.

“Yes, that’s her name. Do you know her?”

Abhimanyu smiled. “Let me introduce you.” Turning to Sanjana he said, “Alankar, meet Sanjana.”

Alankar extended his hand saying, “Hello Sanjana. I thought you were his wife. I was just going to ask.”

Sanjana suppressed a grimace at the thought. Fat chance, she thought, wife of Abhimanyu Chopra, indeed!

“Hello,” she smiled politely. He was a prospective client after all. Was she fated to work for all of Abhimanyu Chopra’s friends?

Taking in her plastered foot and walking stick, Alankar asked, “What happened? How did you hurt yourself?”

“I fell and hurt my foot.” She didn’t elaborate, and Abhimanyu didn’t say anything either.

Turning to Abhimanyu, Alankar asked, “Why don’t you join us, Abhi? We can go through the designs together. You know the house as well as I do.”

Sanjana froze. *Shit, this is all I need—Abhimanyu Chopra sitting in on a meeting and destroying my chances.*

“I need to finalize something with the F&B manager and then I’ll join you,” he said.

Sanjana breathed a sigh of relief; she would make her presentation really fast and hopefully get out of here before he returned.

Abhimanyu glanced at her and asked, “Will that be okay with you, Sanjana?”

“Yes of course.” Was she destined to keep bumping into him? And to work with close friends of the man who had such a terrible impression of her. *He must surely think I am some sort of gold-digger out to fleece him and his friends of their wealth.*

Sanjana followed Alankar slowly to the business lounge. It was a relief to put down her bag and get off her feet. She powered the laptop and asked him if he had any ideas that he wanted implemented.

“Perhaps I made a mistake. We should have gone to the house first so that you could have formed an opinion yourself.”

“No, your memories of the place are more important. Did you live there in your childhood?”

“Yes. I grew up there and as I was an only child, my friends were constantly over. There is a huge lawn out there, you see, and we were always playing cricket matches. That was serious business, I tell you. We were fierce about it.”

Sanjana could imagine the scenes, so vivid were his descriptions. Her attention was so focused on Alankar and on the stories of his childhood that she failed to notice someone else watching her.

Alankar interrupted himself to ask her what she wanted to have. “Look at me, going on like an old uncle reminiscing about the old days. Why didn’t you stop me *yaar*?”

Sanjana laughed, a sweet tinkling sound. “Frankly, I forgot I was here for a meeting. You’re a good storyteller.”

Alankar beckoned the waiter and noticed Abhimanyu watching them. “Ah Abhi, just in time! What will you have? I was about to order something.” Turning to the waiter he said, “A Darjeeling for me, please. And the lady here will have...,” he looked at Sanjana, waiting for her to decide.

“I’ll have the same,” she said. Abhimanyu opted for coffee.

“Did you manage to get any work done?” Abhimanyu asked. “Or has this guy been talking non-stop, not letting you get a word in edgeways?”

Sanjana was surprised that he addressed her directly, but before she could answer, Alankar said, “I sense an insult in there somewhere. Sanjana, please don’t take this man seriously. He’s always had something against me. You see, he was jealous that I was better than him at table tennis.”

“But I played better cricket than you,” Abhimanyu shot back.

“Oh, cricket! That’s for the masses. You know TT is a special sport, not everyone can master it. And let me tell you Sanjana, I was ahead of him at university, too. To be honest, he’s a bit slow.”

“You’re delusional,” was the retort. Turning to her, he explained patiently, “He’s just showing off.”

Sanjana smiled. This was an entirely new side to him. If she hadn't seen it with her own eyes she wouldn't have believed that Abhimanyu Chopra was capable of fun and banter.

Their beverages arrived and Sanjana took the opportunity to show Alankar her designs. She turned the laptop and Alankar and Abhimanyu moved closer to get a better look at the screen. They chatted between themselves as they scrolled the screens. "I quite like this look for the back room. What do you think Abhi? What about this sort of furniture for the living room? A bit formal for the room on the east side, I think. How about this for the living room?"

They went on like that, almost forgetting her presence. This was a strange client meeting, mused Sanjana. She would have thought that she would be the one to talk the client through the designs and discuss alternatives, but this was turning out to be very different. Abhimanyu obviously kept his pleasant side reserved for his friends. To her surprise, she found him quite charming; when he relaxed and smiled, he was even more irresistible. But there was still a kernel of fear within her where he was concerned. For all his sudden bonhomie towards her right now, he might still try to influence Alankar away from signing her on. She crossed her fingers mentally and offered up a quick prayer.

Abhimanyu glanced at her and noticed she was a bit tense. It had been like that since their disastrous first meeting. "Should we go and look at the house?" he suggested. "This discussion would probably be more relevant there. What do you think Sanjana?"

"Whatever you like," she answered, looking at Alankar.

"Yes, of course. We should have met there in the first place. Come on. Let's go."

While Alankar settled the bill, Abhimanyu called valet service to bring his car around. Sanjana collected her things and put them back in the bag on her shoulder. She reached for her walking stick and was bracing herself to get up when she saw Abhimanyu extend his hand to help her up. She ignored it and got up with the help of her stick without looking at him.

"Why don't you guys go on? Don't let me slow you down. I'll catch up with you," said Alankar. Sanjana nodded and hobbled slowly towards the door, with Abhimanyu at her side. They must make a strange pair she thought. It was just her luck that she had to be with someone as gorgeous

as Abhimanyu Chopra and be almost handicapped; limping along with the help of a stick was not really elegant.

“Let me carry your bag,” Abhimanyu offered. “It looks heavy.”

“I’m used to it,” she smiled her refusal. Sanjana sensed Abhimanyu wanted to say something and she tried to hobble a little faster. She really didn’t want to have any sort of private conversation with this man. With her attention on getting away from Abhimanyu, she didn’t notice when the carpet gave way to polished floor. Her foot slipped and she cried out involuntarily.

Abhimanyu reacted quickly and caught her before she fell. Their eyes collided and her heart began to thud so loudly she was sure he could hear it. He felt solid, as if he wouldn’t let any harm come to her. With his face so close to hers, she could smell his woody aftershave. Her cheeks felt warm with embarrassment and she looked away.

Abhimanyu steadied her saying, “You really shouldn’t be up and about, you know. Putting stress on that foot is not a good idea at all.”

“I’m fine, thank you,” she felt inexplicably shy and couldn’t look at him.

“How can your family allow you to be out on that foot when clearly you should be resting?” he wanted to know.

She didn’t say anything.

“Don’t tell me, you live alone.”

When Sanjana didn’t answer, he said, “Okay, I get it. You do live alone.”

After a pause, as if the implications of the situation had just hit him, he said slowly, “So who’s been looking after you all this time?”

Sanjana concentrated on walking. She wanted neither his pity nor a sermon. He probably thought she was a poor little orphan and she wasn’t going to disabuse him of the idea. Why should a guy like Abhimanyu be interested in a small-town girl like herself? The concerned Prince Charming act was just that—charming—but it couldn’t possibly be for her. Oh, but it would be sweet if he were actually concerned about her. Her foot had started to ache and she really wasn’t up to answering any questions or keeping her guard up.

“You’ve been alone since the accident, right?” He shook his head in disapproval. He saw the strain on her face and suggested quietly, “Perhaps we should postpone this visit to the house. Let me tell Lanku.”

“No,” she said sharply. “I’m fine.” There was no way she was going to pass up the opportunity for another assignment. He could advise his friend not to sign her on, but she was going to give it her best shot.

Abhimanyu could see she wasn’t up to it but didn’t say anything further. He helped her gently into the car, and out of it once they were at the house on Amrita Shergill Marg, which was just five minutes from the hotel.

