

ONE

Sanya looked at the crowded room around her. So many people—all of them her friends—so why did she feel so alone? Maybe because she was the only one there without a partner? Sanya shook her head. That was her choice, wasn't it? She was young, pretty and in London. There was no shortage of guys expressing an interest in her, but she never responded.

She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned around. "Shall we dance?" asked a smiling Sid, as he pulled her onto the dance floor. Sanya went with him. What else was there to do?

It wasn't that she didn't like Sid. He was handsome and intelligent and he was Indian. He would have been the ideal date. But—Sanya sighed deeply—she had already given her heart to someone else. If only she could be sure that someone was also waiting for her.

Arth. She had been in love with him since she was eleven. She had a crush on the gentle sixteen-year-old, who had seemed like Prince Charming and Shahrukh Khan, all rolled into one; her first romantic dream come alive. Arth was handsome and amazing—ready to jump to her rescue every time she got into trouble. In those days, Sanya remembered ruefully, she found herself needing his help so often.

The smile faded as she remembered who invariably caused the troubles. Ansh, Arth's twin looked exactly like him, but could not have been more unlike him in personality.

While Arth was her savior, Ansh had been the bane of her life. Sanya moved off the dance floor. What a different world that had been. Ten years ago in Mumbai, Sanya spent every free minute with Arth and Ansh, who were surprisingly tolerant of her tagging after them. The twins were the sons of Shantanu Sharma, Sanya's father Diwakar Chaturvedi's best friend. Diwakar and Shantanu had literally lived in each other's pockets in those days, usually at Panorama, the Sharmas' rambling bungalow.

But Sanya's mom, Bindiya, did not get along with Shantanu's wife, Ratna and slowly became resentful about being left alone so much of the

time. Diwakar had decided to shift to London to please Bindiya, who had been keen to move as far away from the Sharmas as possible.

Thirteen-year-old Sanya had wept inconsolably. She was convinced her heart had been broken and vowed she would never forget Arth, her first—and only—love.

She knew her dad was in touch with the twins' father, but did not know how to ask about Arth without letting her feelings show. How she wished the Internet had been as widely used then as it was now, and that she could have kept in touch with him.

Sanya suddenly realized that Sid was talking to her. She looked apologetically at him, "I'm sorry, you were asking?"

Sid thought Sanya was deliberately ignoring him. His temper had been rising but vanished the minute he felt her honey-colored gaze on him. She was gorgeous, but unfortunately, she wouldn't let anyone into her life; he knew from experience.

"The buffet looks yummy—shall we try it?"

"Oh, do let's, Sid. I'm famished," Sanya said, making her way to the table. Obviously, she found the dinner way more attractive than him, Sid thought to himself.

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It was past two in the morning when Sanya tiptoed into her bedroom. Her parents were asleep, thank God. Bindiya didn't approve of late night parties and Sanya was too tired to listen to another lecture right then.

Sanya sat at her dressing table, with a cleanser-soaked cotton pad ready in her hand. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and thought she saw lines of discontent beginning to etch a faint silhouette around her mouth. She sighed wearily.

Truth be told, she was also tired of this daily party run—hanging out with the same group of friends, night after night.

She was sick of living with her parents, was tired of being under a microscope and was fed-up of being told no Indian boy would consider her wife material. Little did her mom know that she could have lined up a bevy of Indian boys with just a nod of her head.

Sanya sighed again, beginning to dab desultorily at her face with the cotton pad. When would she get a chance to break free from this life and

go look for Arth? When would her real life begin? After all, she was now twenty-two going on twenty-three—that was old.

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Sanya woke up in the morning to the sound of her father's voice on the phone. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized he was talking to Arth's father. She went into the dining room and poured herself a cup of coffee, waiting for her father to finish his call.

When he finally hung up, Diwakar turned to her with a smile on his face. "You know who that was?" he asked her. Without waiting for her reply, he added, "Do you remember Shantanu Sharma, my friend in Mumbai? You used to spend a lot of time with his sons."

"The twins—Arth and Ansh? Of course I do, Papa." A wide smile broke out on Sanya's face.

"I'm glad to hear that."

He fell silent as Bindiya walked into the room. She looked at them grinning at each other and asked, "What?" Bindiya was genuinely worried about her daughter's aimless life, and was exasperated that Diwakar laughed it off. She wondered what the two of them were cooking up now.

Diwakar cleared his throat. "Sanya, would you like to go to Mumbai for a holiday?"

Shantanu and Ratna have invited you to stay with them. I think it would be a great chance for you to get in touch with your roots." Diwakar turned to look at his wife, adding, "*Haina* Bindiya? What do you say?"

Bindiya beamed in approval. This was the best idea her husband had come up with in a long time.

Sanya's face lit up like Diwali night. "Oh Papa, I'd love to go."

This was the break she had been praying for—a chance to reacquaint herself with Arth and explore her feelings for him. A couple of weeks away from the London party scene would help clear the cobwebs in her mind, too. Maybe she would also discover what it was that she wanted to do with her life.

Diwakar walked towards the door. "I'll book your ticket then," he said as he went.

Sanya felt excitement bubbling within her. She was going to Mumbai—to stay with the Sharmas. She was going to meet Arth. What would he look like now? Drop-dead gorgeous, for sure.

Her mind moved reluctantly to Ansh. She had never liked Ansh—how he used to tease her. She had been the perfect target for all his pranks and she had hated him with all her heart. Hopefully he had outgrown all that now.

It didn't strike Sanya that she was viewing the twins through the eyes of a childish thirteen-year-old. Time had moved on and they were all grown up now.

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Sanya was in the lounge at Heathrow, waiting for her flight to be called. Now that she was finally off on her adventure, she was feeling nervous.

She was going to meet Arth after ten years. What would he think of her? Would he think her beautiful? What if he didn't live up to the image she had evolved of him over the years? Or worse, suppose she didn't live up to his image of her? Or, horror of horrors, what if he had a girlfriend? He had the makings of a handsome man ten years ago; he must have girls eating out of his hand now. Sanya shook the thought away. She would find out soon enough.

She had spent a lot of time with the twins in the Sharmas' library. They had played board games or read, while tucking into hot *bhajias* provided by the Sharmas' cook and housekeeper, Prita.

And finally, she thought of her twelfth birthday. Her friends had all come to her birthday party, but Sanya refused to cut her birthday cake until her hero arrived. The twins stayed on after all the other guests left. They watched as she opened her presents, Arth enjoying her pleasure in them and Ansh sniggering at her delighted exclamations. Sanya shook her head at the image. Ansh had been so maddening.

Sanya leant towards the small window, lost in her own private world. After a while she closed her eyes and slipped into the rosy world of her dreams.

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TWO

Ansh was in his car when he heard his mobile ringing on the passenger seat beside him. It was his mother. He pulled his car over to the side of the road and picked up the call.

“Jewel of my life. How can I serve you?” he asked, a grin splitting his handsome face. Ratna to the world, Ansh called her Jewel. Ratna adored both her sons and they reciprocated in equal measure. In her eyes, they were perfect. The easy banter they shared just cemented the relationship.

“Listen, you rogue, I need you to get to the international airport in half an hour. I...”

“Mom, you can’t do this to me today,” Ansh groaned. “I was planning to meet up with Suren. Oh well, tell me, what’s up? Who’s coming from where?”

“Sanya’s flight lands at seven-thirty. Someone needs to pick her up and you’re the one who’s closest to the airport. Even if Arth leaves his office this minute, it’ll still take him more than two hours to reach Andheri. Can’t you meet Suren after bringing Sanya home?”

What she said was logical, but Ansh wished that his mother had not picked today, of all days, to make her request. Suren and he had a lot to catch up on.

And who was this Sanya? “Mom,” he asked, “you said Sanya’s coming—who Sanya? Not...”

“Yes, little Sanya Chaturvedi, Diwakar uncle’s daughter. She used to play with you and Arth before they went away to London.”

Ansh chuckled wickedly. “Oh my God. Don’t tell me the little mouse is visiting us after all these years. This is the stick-thin urchin in pigtails, right? She always liked Arth more than me.”

“Can you blame her, Ansh? You used to tease her so much.”

Ratna shuddered as she recalled the time a half-drowned Sanya had to be pulled out of the lake at Mahabaleshwar. Ratna had not been fooled by the innocent expression Ansh wore; she knew exactly who shoved Sanya from the boat. That had been just one of the many

unfortunate accidents that had befallen Sanya in the company of the twins.

Ansh cackled gleefully. “So Sanya’s arriving in Mumbai this evening? Oh, but this will be fun. Okay, Mom, I’ll go to the airport and pick her up.”

Ratna had never thought otherwise. When she asked for a favor, her boys could be counted on.

“How will I recognize her?” Ansh wondered aloud. He did not plan on standing there holding a placard with her name on it.

His phone pinged as he received a message. “I’ve just sent you Sanya’s photo, so that can recognize her,” said Ratna. His mother, as usual, had thought of everything.

“Okay, I’ll pick up the brat and bring her home. Will you let me go out and meet my friend after that?” he asked, tongue-in-cheek.

“You go get her and, in the meantime, I’ll think about letting you go,” said Ratna, laughing. “I owe you one, Ansh,” she said before hanging up.

Ansh opened up the MMS his mother had sent him, curious to see the thin little girl he remembered, but whistled as he took in the young woman in the photo. It looked like Sanya had grown up into a lovely young woman. He definitely wouldn’t mind meeting her again, he thought, as he started up the car.

* * *

Sanya got up the moment the plane rolled to a stop. She looked down at herself. She was wearing a pair of slim-fit jeans and a black sleeveless top that flattered her figure—perhaps too well.

She had taken off the denim biker’s jacket she had worn on the flight. Should she put it on again? Was the black top too revealing? Sanya felt herself shiver in anticipation at the thought that Arth was outside, waiting for her.

It took her forty-five minutes to collect her two suitcases before she walked to the exit. Her eyes scanned the people waiting there. She turned when she heard her name being called and saw a tall man waving at her. Sanya felt her heart almost break free from her chest. Arth—she was sure it was him—looked so handsome. Her dream had come true. The love of her life had come to pick her up.

She moved forward with a wide smile on her face. “Hello.”

Ansh came forward to take her luggage trolley, moving it out of the way before turning towards her. He didn't quite know what came over him as he lifted Sanya up in his arms and swung her around jubilantly. The MMS had not done her justice. He couldn't believe this gorgeous creature standing before him was the same scrawny kid he had tormented.

“Hi Sanya,” he said, putting her down. “Welcome to Mumbai. How are you?” His eyes were crinkling with laughter.

Heart in her throat, Sanya looked up at the laughing grey-green eyes. They were lit up with mischief and joy. While her body thrummed from his touch, her heartbeat slowed as she realized that this wasn't Arth. He didn't have a nick on his chin—this had to be Ansh.

She couldn't stop the disappointment from showing on her face.

Ansh realized that all was not well. “Something wrong, Sanya?”

Large amber-colored eyes looked at him reproachfully. “How can you ask me that? You're Ansh, right? You don't like me. So, don't expect me to fall all over you,” she said, the deep-rooted childish anger surfacing on seeing him.

Ansh looked askance at her. “Don't tell me you're going to pick a fight over some childish pranks?” he said.

Sanya glared at him. Oh, she so hated Ansh.

“Where's Arth?” she demanded.

Ansh wondered whether she was plain badly-behaved or just angry with him. Thinking back, he decided that he couldn't quite blame her. He had, after all, treated her quite obnoxiously in the past.

A small grin of apology appeared on his face and he said, “Arth's probably on his way home. Shall we go? My parents are waiting to see you.” He decided to be careful and not tease her into running away. She was too attractive for that.

Sanya nodded without saying anything and went along with him.



THREE

Sanya was filled with nostalgia as the car wound its way through the gates of Panorama. The name was apt—for the garden at the back offered a panoramic view of the Arabian Sea. Her heart thudded against her chest. Surely she was going to meet Arth now.

She opened her door and got out the moment Ansh stopped the car. Two bundles of fur launched themselves at her, tails wagging furiously as pink tongues licked her hands and face.

“Sunny, Sandy, down,” called Ratna through the open double doors, as she walked out to greet her. Sanya laughed as the dogs vied with each other for her attention. It was a couple of minutes before the Labradors—one black and the other golden—listened to their mistress’ command and let go of the newcomer.

Sanya turned a grinning face to Ratna and was overwhelmed when the older woman gave her a warm hug. While Ratna Aunty was diminutive and slim to a fault—not quite the typical mother figure—she had more than enough warmth to compensate.

“Sanya, my dear,” she said, as she held her at arm’s length to study her. “You’ve grown up into a beautiful young lady.”

Sanya turned red at the compliment and hugged Ratna wholeheartedly. “How are you, Ratna Aunty? It’s been so long. Why is it that we never saw you in London? I’m very angry with you and Shantanu Uncle.”

“So, a young lady with a temper, huh?” teased Shantanu as he walked into the hall to hug and greet her. Sanya looked around. Where was Arth? Why hadn’t he come out to welcome her?

The three of them walked into the house with Ansh and the driver following them with Sanya’s luggage.

They all settled down in the main hall, talking with lots of back and forth and laughter. Ansh cancelled his evening plans with Suren—this new Sanya fascinated him and he found he could not tear himself away from her.

Sanya, on the other hand, kept a keen look out for Arth.

Prita, the housekeeper-cum-cook, served them tea and snacks. Sanya rose when the old woman came into the room and hugged her. The housekeeper had always had a soft spot for the little girl.

Finally, after an hour, Sanya could not stop herself asking, “Where’s Arth?”

Ansh gave her a knowing look and said, “He must be at his place.” Sanya was shocked. Arth had his own place? Did that mean he had a wife and a family? She turned pale. Ansh watched her closely.

Ratna explained, “Arth has his own cottage on the grounds here. He prefers to live there by himself.”

Sanya glared at Ansh as she realized that he had deliberately misled her. She was sure he understood her feelings for Arth. Ansh shrugged his wide shoulders, his eyes glowing more green than grey in the artificial lighting.

“Would you like to see your room, Sanya?” he asked. Sanya would have liked to wait a bit longer in case Arth came to say hello, but Ansh was already standing. She had no choice but to follow him up the Y-shaped central staircase that led to the first floor.

Her hand caressed the wooden handrail as she recalled the number of times she had slid down it, egged on by the very man she was following now. It had been such fun. She admitted to herself that Arth would have never allowed her to slide down like that.

She turned to look at Ansh. He was too handsome for his own good, she thought. With his casual good looks and his acute sense of fun, Ansh had a trail of girls following him wherever he went. She was sure that couldn’t have changed. She wondered whether he was seeing someone but then stopped herself, thinking why she cared about that.

Ansh felt her gaze and turned to look at her. “So, Sanya, what’ve you been doing all these years, besides growing up to become the sexiest woman on earth?” he grinned.

Sanya glared at him. *Flirt*. She should have known that nothing would change him. She literally felt his gaze on her body as he studied her thoroughly. She felt a sudden urge to fold her arms across her breasts as she felt her nipples harden under the razor edge of his gaze. She turned away, startled at her body’s reaction.

Ansh noticed her physical reaction to him and was pleased. He decided to stop bothering her and began whistling tunelessly as they

reached the point where the staircase split into two branches. He took the left fork and she followed him.

She turned towards a large open window. A strong breeze blew from the sea, bringing in a salty smell. Oh, how she loved it. Sanya stopped at the window and breathed in deeply, her eyes taking in the dark beach. Small waves were foaming towards the compound wall of the huge property. It was too dark to notice much, but to the left, she could see a tall figure walking towards the main house. Could that be...? Yeah, it was Arth. Wildly excited, Sanya leaned out of the window and waved to catch Arth's attention. When he did not look up, she shouted, "Arth."

But Arth did not look up even after she had called out twice. Ansh saw her woebegone face and shook his head.

"He can't hear you—he's on the phone," he said gently.

She turned away without saying anything and walked on. Ansh followed her, visibly enjoying the graceful movement of her slim hips as she strode on, her pert bottom delectably sexy in the form-fitting jeans that she wore.

"Sanya," called Ansh when she reached the second-last room. She half-turned to acknowledge him. "This is your room," he said.

Sanya walked into the room where a lamp had been left on. She breathed in the lovely fragrance that greeted her as Ansh switched on more lights.

There were large vases of roses—one on the bedside table, another on the dressing table and yet another on the center table near the two small single sofas placed at the window. The room was huge by any standards, especially compared to her bedroom back home in London, and it was decorated in lovely shades of green and yellow.

A comfortable bed occupied the center of the room. Sanya's suitcases were nowhere in sight. Wondering about that, she opened the wardrobe to put her handbag away, only to find her clothes hanging neatly inside. Someone had already unpacked for her. It looked like she was to live in the lap of luxury for the next few weeks.

She turned around and found her host sprawled on the bed, his hands folded under his head, his grey-green eyes watching her keenly. What the hell was he doing here? Was he waiting for a ringside view as she changed out of her travel clothes? Sanya glared at him, but Ansh only grinned back at her and settled-in more comfortably.

He covered his mouth as a yawn overtook him. “Get on with it, there’s a good girl. Just wake me up when you’re ready and we’ll go down together,” he said. “Do remember that I’m hungry and it’s way past dinner time.” It was not that the Sharmas were sticklers for timing, but it was fun ruffling Sanya’s feathers.

Sanya watched in horror as he turned over on his side and went to sleep—or pretended to. Gritting her teeth in anger, she kicked off her shoes and pulled the socks off. Looking into the wardrobe, she picked up the first dress she could find, pulled out some undergarments and marched into the *ensuite* bathroom.

Sanya removed her clothes in a hurry and threw them into the cane laundry basket under the washbasin. Promising herself the treat of a luxurious soak the next day, she stepped into the bathtub and turned on the shower. The warm water washed away all her weariness as she soaped herself. She shampooed her dark, luxuriant hair and conditioned it.

There was a knock on the door just as she was toweling herself dry. She wrapped the towel hastily around her and stepped out onto the bathmat. Thinking she heard the door open, she called out, “Don’t you dare!”

“It’s past ten, Princess, and my stomach’s growling now. Are you done?” Ansh called out.

How dare he call her ‘Princess’? Why couldn’t he just go away? Sanya went up to the door and locked it before answering, “Get lost, Ansh. I’ll take a while.” As she spoke, she toweled herself vigorously, her movements angry. Any feelings of relaxation she had enjoyed in the shower had vanished.

When Sanya pulled on her dress, she got a shock. In her hurry, she had pulled out one with a halter neck. She couldn’t wear a bra under it. And she couldn’t go out to get another dress. She was sure Ansh was still there. Damn the man. She had no choice but to remove her bra and go without—not quite the look she had wanted the first time she met Arth after all these years.

Sanya looked in the mirror as she dried her hair in a hurry. The dress looked quite good, she had to admit. It was in shades of mauve and blue, shot with white, with the hem stopping a couple of inches below her knee.

She turned sideways to check that the sides of her breasts were not showing. Finally satisfied, she stepped out of the bathroom. She had been right. Ansh was sitting on the bed, still waiting for her. Sanya glared at him as she looked for sandals that matched her dress.

Ansh had to stop himself from whistling again when he saw Sanya emerge from the bathroom. Good lord—she had lovely long legs. He itched to touch the smooth fair skin of her shoulders and back, laid bare by the halter neck. It didn't bother him that her efforts were intended to impress his brother, not him.

As she strapped her feet into white sandals, Ansh got up to hold the door open. She walked towards him and he drew in a deep breath. "Hey, that's a lovely perfume you're wearing," he said, and before she realized what he was about to do, Ansh bent down and nuzzled her neck. Her skin broke out in goose bumps. He pressed his lips to her racing pulse before getting out of harm's way.

Sanya chased him across the corridor and down the staircase, his laughter grating on her nerves. She got off the last step to see him standing in front of her, smiling innocently.

In a flash of temper, Sanya raised tightly clenched fists and hit him on the chest. She didn't notice the startled expression on her victim's face. Ansh had driven her up the wall from the minute she saw him at the airport.

She was forced to stop when she found her hands caught in a firm grip. "Hello? What's with you, Sanya? I know I didn't call back to you when you were at the window, but I was on an important call. Surely, I don't deserve such an extreme reaction?" Gentle grey-green eyes twinkled at her and Sanya noticed the long straight hair pulled back in a ponytail. This wasn't Ansh.

Her eyes widened in horror as she realized she had hit out at Arth. Her shocked eyes flashed again with temper as she caught Ansh a few feet behind his identical twin, a grin on his face. He was enjoying himself thoroughly.

Sanya gave Arth an embarrassed look from under her long lashes, her cheeks pink with mortification. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. What must he be thinking of her! Here she had been, hoping to make an impression on him. Damn it. She hadn't waited all these years to meet the love of her life only to make a fool of herself. *Oh, I so hate Ansh.*

Arth smiled holding her hands and looking her up and down. “You’ve grown up into a beautiful young woman,” he complimented her.

Sanya blushed as her temper vanished. Arth thought she was beautiful. Maybe she could still make a new beginning with him.

She refused to look at Ansh through dinner, concentrating instead on talking to Arth. Ratna and Shantanu watched on in amusement as the little drama played out.

Ansh, on the other hand was quiet, contenting himself with studying Sanya. He was glad that he had cancelled his meeting with Suren.

Sanya felt his gaze on her, but ignored him. It wasn’t easy, as her body seemed to be equipped with a special radar that picked up signals from him. Whenever he looked in her direction, she could feel her pulse race. She gritted her teeth. She was determined to focus on Arth, no matter what. To hell with the physical reaction that she felt for Ansh. It was but the temptation of the devil.

She kept her eyes on Arth. He looked very like Ansh, but, somehow, his features were gentler, his expression calmer and more restful. His smooth skin shone with good health, while his sleek, straight hair gleamed in the ponytail. He looked fit—without the overdeveloped muscles that spoke of hours spent in the gym.

Arth was keen to know everything about her. The gently probing questions in his soft voice brought forth a spate of answers as Sanya bared her heart and soul to him, practically forgetting the existence of the rest of the family.

She talked as if she had not had a chance to speak in the ten years that she had been in London. She told him everything, including the fact that her future was still a big question mark. Arth heard her out attentively, a smile in his eyes.

Sanya was reminded of how much she used to enjoy his company, just like she was doing now. She basked in his attention, happier than she had been in a long while. Home was definitely where the heart was.

