

# ONE

The evening was ending as Sanjana looked out at the familiar landscape flying past. Small dusty villages with tracks winding aimlessly towards the horizon, green fields undulating in the breeze and the smell of cow-dung fires so redolent of the plains of India—this was home. Why had she stayed away for so long? Mumbai seemed so far away and alien. Huddled close to the barred window of her second-class compartment, she shifted a little to accommodate the young mother trying to juggle her wriggly baby and keep her head covered with her *sari pallu* at the same time.

What was the name of those thorny trees flashing along the tracks? Krish, the nature lover, would have known. He never passed up an opportunity to display his vast general knowledge. Oh dear, what should she do about him? Like a record stuck in its groove, her thoughts kept turning to him. Running away from giving him an answer had been the easiest option, but soon she would have to decide. All through her long journey by air, and now by train, to the hinterland of India, she had wondered if she was being foolish in having doubts about him. After all, she had known him for over two years and actually quite liked him. He was good looking, intelligent and popular in the office.

She knew her own grandparents would welcome him into the family with open arms. Long had Dadima lamented over the giddy lifestyle she believed her darling Sana led in the big bad city. “If only I can see Sana well settled, married into a good family, I can die in peace,” was her constant refrain. Krish Chauhan, son of a retired Admiral, and a Rajput to boot, fitted the bill perfectly.

However, deep within Sanjana still lurked the belief that somewhere in the world her true love awaited her, the mere sight of whom would cause her pulse to race, the day to brighten and the birds to sing. She sighed nostalgically as she remembered Rajan, her childhood crush. Would anyone else ever awaken those heady feelings in her again?

Krish, her senior in the large MNC she had joined as a fresher straight out of business school, had occasionally helped her out of the tight spots she landed herself in because of her impetuous nature. She had been

grateful, though sometimes a tad irritated, by his cool assumption of always being right. Thanks to office gossip in the canteen, she was aware that most girls considered him quite a catch, and she had to agree. However, she had never viewed him as a prospective husband. His passionate declaration of love had taken her by surprise—too many tequila shots at the corporate party? Heaven knows she herself had one too many.

Never fond of liquor, her memory of that night was muddled and she knew that she had been a trifle tipsy. But she was very sure that he had proposed. She couldn't have *imagined* him going down on one knee outside her apartment. Prim and proper Krish in his elegant Hugo Boss suit. Her mystified response had really upset him.

“No, I have not dropped something! Didn't you hear what I said?” he had demanded incredulously, getting up and brushing his knees.

Her hurried apology while struggling to hold back her smile had not mollified him at all.

“Krish, I'm sorry. This has come as such a surprise. Please, can't we talk about this tomorrow? It's very late and I can't think straight.”

“I love you, Sanjana,” he had reiterated, a puzzled frown on his handsome face. “Surely you know that?”

Actually, she had not known that. Always a little heedless and happy-go-lucky, she was not much given to reflection. She had eyed him doubtfully. Though Krish was more likely to criticize than praise, he was a good friend and led her office team. They had often worked late together, sharing a takeaway pizza for dinner in the office or having a quick bite at the cozy Chinese restaurant next door. She had never taken his interest as leading up to anything, although she now admitted to herself that perhaps she had been quite dumb.

Discovering her interest in photography, he had loaned her his telephoto lens that he had insisted he never used. Her housemate Zoya's meaningful glance should have warned her then. A good singer, he would entertain them in office parties with the latest Bollywood love songs, serenading the girls one by one. How was she to know she was not one of his flings? Lately he had started accompanying her gang on their weekend treks to the nearby hill forts that dotted the Western Ghats. She had thought little of it, though his fastidious preparations for an 'impromptu' excursion drove her nuts. A couple of times he had insisted

on having Zoya and her over at his home in Bandra, where his mother had treated them to delicious home-cooked food. Were those dinners actually a ruse to introduce her to his parents, she wondered in hindsight?

For a fleeting moment, she had suspected that his avowal of love was a joke, maybe even an office dare. Krish had been very serious though and she had not known what to say. Evading his attempts to take her into his arms she had sighed with relief when Zoya had opened the door. Krish had made a hasty retreat, leaving behind a giggling Zoya and a flustered Sanjana.

“How sweet. I hope you said yes, yes, yes!”

“Be serious, Zoya. I can’t say yes just like that. I...I don’t know what to think. He never hinted at anything like this earlier. In fact, aren’t his parents looking for a girl for him? Remember that time he went rushing off to Delhi with them to see that techie girl?”

“He also came back without saying yes. Sanju darling, he has been chasing you for quite some time. Why do you think he always supports you in front of DK? You can be so blind sometimes. As for his parents, naturally they’re on the lookout. He is their only son and has a good future and all that; bound to be the CEO someday. Hey, you might actually get to live in the Bay House; remember how awesome the view is from there *yaar*? Don’t forget me then, okay?” Seeing that Sanjana was getting really upset, she had hugged her and asked sympathetically, “What’s the matter? You like him, *na*?”

“No! Umm...I don’t know...I do like him and he can be fun. But he’s so finicky and bossy sometimes...and marriage? I am not sure I want to marry at all.”

“Don’t be stupid. Every girl wants to get married,” Zoya had observed wisely. “And so what if he is a bit bossy? All romantic heroes are supposed to be the brooding, dominating types.”

“Zoya, this is not some silly love story.”

“But that’s what you are looking for. Romance in capital letters. Otherwise, why would you have doubts about him? He’s a great catch, straight out of a matrimonial ad. Don’t rush headlong into any decision, Sanju. Think it over carefully. Ask for some time. Say you need to discuss it with your family.”

“Damn it, why did he have to start all this? We were so comfortable together.”

“Perhaps because he realized that the perfect girl was right there in front of him.”

But, was Krish the perfect man for her? She wasn't so sure. A lifetime of being bossed over? If only Ma and Papa had been there to guide her. And, thought Sanjana a little indignantly, wasn't he being rather complacent? Shouldn't he have tried to find out about her feelings before popping the question? But as she had cooled down, something held her back from an outright 'No'. In part she had been apprehensive of the awkwardness a refusal would lead to in the office. Besides, his proposal was so flattering. Everyone would think her an idiot for turning him down.

The morning after the party had been extremely embarrassing. Uneasily nursing a mild hangover, she had even considered calling in sick. What on earth would she say to him? He had seemed to take it for granted that she felt the same way about him.

He had cornered her near the coffee machine and asked a tad impatiently, “Feeling better now, Sanjana? I really need to talk to you. How about dinner at the Supper Club tonight?” At her stammering pleas for more time to think it over, he had looked hurt and had rapidly progressed from disbelief over her indecision to an impassioned determination to win her over at any cost. “Don't say no. We are made for each other. I will wait, forever if necessary.”

Sanjana had sat at her desk, holding her pounding head in her hands. “Use your cousin's wedding as an excuse and push off to Fatehpur ASAP.” advised Zoya. “Take a break and chill. Distance lends perspective, darling.”

Which is why she was here, swaying to the rattle of the speeding train. Wrangling additional leave from her boss DK, who had been surprisingly amenable, she had left Mumbai in a hurry, ostensibly to help with the wedding preparations of her cousin, Renee.

At Mumbai airport, she had found a convenient flight to Allahabad from where she would get a connecting train to Fatehpur. Huddled against the airplane window, her thoughts kept returning to Krish. Zoya was right, she should have known something like this was going to happen. Maybe she could have nipped it in the bud. Shrugging in resignation, she decided to shelve the issue for the time being. Later, as the plane circled over Allahabad, she peered down eagerly. The

confluence of the two great rivers of India and the prominent fort in the distance reminded her of happy family outings.

The bustling Allahabad railway station had not changed much over the years. Not wanting to miss the Toofan Mail impatiently blowing its hooter, she had rushed into the first compartment she could. Second class, but what the heck. It was a short journey to Fatehpur and the late January weather was pleasantly chilly. “Er...is there place for me?” she said, as she saw assorted baggage strewn all over.

With her sparkling eyes, silky, lustrous hair and dimpled smile, Sanjana made a very attractive picture and a thin youngster with gelled-back hair, wearing an over-powering deodorant shifted suggestively and patted the space next to him. Luckily, a young mother with a baby in her arms indicated the window seat next to her and Sanjana thankfully settled down. An older woman, who was methodically chewing *paan*, smilingly pressed some *laddoos* into her hands.

“I have made them myself, have some.” It was churlish to refuse such a motherly looking woman.

“*Beti*, how far are you going and why are you travelling all alone? Don’t you feel scared?”

Sanjana smiled at the thought of her many trips all over India as a consultant in a large company and explained a bit about herself.

“Fatehpur? We’re going there too. Do you know the big chemist shop near the station? It is owned by my *bhabhi’s* brother,” she said, nodding proudly. With credentials established, the old woman embarked on her favorite topic—her health. Contentedly, Sanjana listened to her monologue, nodding her head from time to time. Her Dadi Bua used to grumble the same way before she finally succumbed to one of her many ailments at the grand old age of ninety-two.

Dadi Bua had been quite a fussy spot and everyone in the family had bowed to her iron will. ‘Shyam Villa,’ the rambling old mansion built by her great-grandfather, had been Sanjana’s home all through adolescence, but since the tragic death of her parents in a car accident while she was in college, she had shied away from the family home. It held too many memories. Whenever she shut her eyes, she could still see her mother shelling green peas in the *aangan*, smilingly ignoring her father’s pleas for another cup of the sugary ginger tea he loved. Shielded by his morning newspaper, Papa would roll his eyes at his giggling daughter and loudly

whisper, “She must have been a hospital matron in her previous life.” Papa had been a borderline diabetic and Ma had been so careful about his diet. Their continuous banter had always made her laugh. Rajan, their next-door neighbor, had once called her the ‘luckiest girl in the world’. The product of a broken home, living with his mother in his maternal uncle’s home, Rajan had envied her secure loving world, which she had taken so much for granted. Rajan—her first love. She still remembered everything about him.

Shaken out of her reverie by the slowing of the train, Sanjana saw the twinkling lights of Khaga come into view. Khaga meant Devika, her favorite cousin and confidante. It would be such fun to surprise her. She was the only person in her family in whom she could confide her mixed-up feelings about Krish, and the quandary caused by his proposal. Devika, dear practical Devika, would help her as she had so often in the past. It would be such a relief to lay it all on her lap and wait for advice. Notwithstanding her highflying job, Sanjana hadn’t changed much from being the youngest, most pampered kid in the family. Since no one was expecting her to come so early, a few days in Khaga, being cosseted by her cousin, would be perfect. Impulsively gathering her bags and with hurried farewells to her astonished co-passengers, she got off at the station. The halt was miniscule and barely had she drawn breath than the train pulled out en route to Fatehpur.

Now what? Khaga was scarcely bigger than a village. It was highly unlikely that it would have any auto rickshaws. A chilly wind had sprung up and the road was dark and lonely.

To her relief, she saw a cycle rickshaw parked at the corner. Clutching her handbag tightly, she asked the rickshaw-*wala* to take her to Bank House.

“Fifty rupees,” he replied belligerently and seemed taken aback when she acquiesced without a murmur. Devika’s husband was the manager of the oldest bank in the small town and everyone knew their home. The distance wasn’t much, but then nothing in Khaga was too far away. As the rickshaw turned into the long driveway, Sanjana’s heart sank. The house looked dark and deserted.

“No one at home,” the rickshaw-*wala* commented.

“*Haan, haan...*I know,” she replied, feeling foolish and deeply regretting her reckless decision.

“*Arre* Sana, must you always rush into things? Try thinking sometimes.” Ma used to admonish her.

“I will take you to good hotel,” he offered. She eyed him suspiciously.

“No, the neighbors may give me some information,” she said, pointing to the lights visible over the boundary wall.

That indeed proved to be the case. Devika had left in a hurry with her husband for Bhopal, where her ailing mother-in-law’s health had taken a turn for the worse. Naturally, under the circumstances, nobody could say when they would return. The Agarwals hospitably insisted that she stay the night with them. After all, a guest was the very image of God.

“No, no, you cannot go alone to Fatehpur; it is not safe at all. And there are no good hotels here,” said voluble little Mrs. Agarwal. “*Arre baba*, do you think Devika will forgive me if I didn’t look after her sister?”

Knowing that social norms here were very different from Mumbai, where often the only contact with neighbors was a polite greeting in the lift, Sanjana acquiesced. A bath and change of clothes did wonders for her spirits, as did a quick chat with Devika on her mobile.

“Really Sana, couldn’t you have rung me up earlier? We do have mobiles, you know.” scolded an agitated Devika from the other end. “When can I come home? How do I know? We will have to see. Mummyji is improving, but you never know. Yash says he will stay back with her if necessary. I will probably see you at the wedding now. Look, the Agarwals are very good people, so don’t worry. They will arrange for you to carry on home tomorrow. Just don’t do any more mad things please.”

As she went downstairs for dinner, the lights flickered and went out. “Oh no.” moaned Mrs. Agarwal in the throes of dinner preparation. “Mr. Srinivasan will be here soon. Mr. Agarwal is working on a big project with him,” she added for Sanjana’s benefit. The battery inverter being on the blink, candles and lamps were hurriedly lit. Apparently, power cuts were the norm here. Sanjana, imbued with her mother’s training, instantly went into the kitchen to offer her help but was shooed out. In truth, she was thankful, as her culinary skills were basic at best. Besides, Mrs. Agarwal had her trusty maid to help her.

Hearing a car draw up outside, Mr. Agarwal grabbed a candle and leapt to open the door. Apparently, Mr. Srinivasan was a *very* important person.

A tall, broad-shouldered man in a tweed jacket stood framed in the doorway. Mr. Agarwal ushered him in, apologizing effusively for the power cut, as though he was responsible for the inefficiency of the electricity board.

“It's all right, Agarwalji, it was no trouble finding your place. I hope I am not too late.” In the dim light, Sanjana stared at him. The timbre of his voice was familiar, as was the tilt of his head. Mr. Agarwal made the introductions, describing her as their neighbor's sister-in-law.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, peering down at her in the gloom. Taking in her graceful figure in a demure *salwar kurta*, he smiled and extended his hand.

Instinctively shaking his hand, she gaped at him. Rajan? Surely not. Wasn't he in the US? For a dizzying moment, Sanjana was once again a breathless fifteen-year-old with a hopeless crush on the boy next door. Her heart thudding uncomfortably, she blurted something unintelligible and fled to the kitchen. Finding Mrs. Agarwal busy with the salad and garnishing, she took a deep breath and pulled herself together.

She was no longer an impressionable young teenager. In those days, Rajan had never paid much attention to tubby little Sana. She had usually figured as the boundary fielder in the cricket matches played during the school holidays and was invariably at the receiving end of her elder cousins' jokes about dropped catches. Rajan had merely to look at her for her to nervously trip or fumble. Not that he had looked at her much. Whenever he had come to their house, he had had eyes only for Rashmi, her beautiful eldest cousin. Small wonder then that he hadn't recognized her.

A daunting thought crossed her mind, did he remember her at all? Recalling their last meeting, perhaps it was best if his memory was hazy she thought. She squirmed every time she thought about that day. Forlorn at his imminent departure for the US, she had spied him from her bedroom window and had rushed out to the large untidy garden. He had looked so dreamy with his hair still damp from the shower. Cornering him, she had impulsively asked, “Will you write to me from Berkeley?”

“What? Write to you? You mean like a pen pal? Umm...won't it be better if you find someone nearer your age? I'm going to be really busy

Sana. Tell you what, I'll send you lots of postcards. California is supposed to be very beautiful."

"I love you, Rajan," she had blurted out, hands clenched tightly at her sides.

A long silence had followed in which she had prayed the earth would open and swallow her up.

"Sana, you're only a kid. You'll soon forget all about me. Besides, don't you also love Shahrukh Khan?" he had smiled down at her kindly with all the wisdom of his nineteen years.

"No. I won't forget." she had cried and had plunged into the overgrown bushes, overcome with hurt and mortification. She had heard him calling out to her, but she had run to her favorite hiding place and stayed there till she was sure he had gone. How could she face him now? Suppose he told the other boys? She could well imagine their raucous laughter. All day long, she had slunk around the house, avoiding everybody, thankful he was leaving the next morning.

So many years had passed since then. She was no longer the plump lovelorn Sana, was she? Sanjana caught a glimpse of her slim figure reflected in the window, and nervously patted her hair. Really, she was over-reacting as usual. While not vain, she knew men found her attractive. Certainly Krish did, enough to want to marry her. Emboldened, she straightened her silk *dupatta*, walked out and sat on the sofa.

While Mr. Agarwal went in to have a word with his wife, Rajan turned towards her and said pleasantly, "Lovely weather, isn't it? Seattle, where I'm based, can become really damp and cold. Are you on a visit here?"

He definitely had not recognized her. Mischievously, she murmured, "You know, I never think of you as Mr. Srinivasan."

"Eh? Excuse me?" he said.

"You're Paro Aunty's son, Rajan, aren't you?"

"Yes of course, but...sorry, I don't think we...hold it, I do know you. Fatehpur, one of the Ranas, right? Don't tell me you're Sana?" he exclaimed incredulously at her dimpled assent. "Sana, I don't believe this—you've changed so much."

"So have you," she replied shyly. The tall skinny youngster forever covered in mud from the playing fields had filled out into a well-built

man with a wide forehead and determined chin. Sneaking a quick glance at him, she decided that the crinkly eyes with the thick long eyelashes were still the same as his endearing smile. He sounded the same too, with only the faintest hint of an American twang peeping through.

Rajan was eyeing her with interest and Sanjana felt her cheeks grow hot. Did he remember her confession of love? How embarrassing.

Tilting his head slightly, he said, "It's great meeting you like this. When are you coming home?"

"Actually, I was on my way there but took a little detour," she said, not wanting to admit to her foolishness. "Will you be there for long?"

"A fortnight..."

"She's our neighbor's cousin. She was supposed to stay with them, but they had to leave suddenly for Bhopal. The old mother-in-law, you know, not well at all," interjected Mr. Agarwal, coming back with *nimbu paani*. "Perhaps you know the Ranas? They are a well-known Fatehpur family."

"He means Devika...do you remember her? Yash, her husband, is posted here," Sanjana clarified.

"Of course I remember Devika. The Ranas are my neighbors," he added for Mr. Agarwal's benefit.

Mr. Agarwal smiled in relief. "Oh, then you know each other. That is very good."

Well yes, she thought, but she certainly would like to know more. Like what had he been doing all these years and was he with someone in the US? She would have definitely heard through the family grapevine if he had got married. After all, Paro Aunty still lived with her brother and his family in Fatehpur. Rashmi, now a sedate wife and mother, had not pined for long after Rajan had left for his engineering degree in the US. Sanjana, still heartbroken, had wondered how Rashmi *didi* could have so easily forgotten him, but Devika had laughed and dismissed it as an inconsequential boy-girl affair.

"All they did was look at each other. In any case, the oldies would never have agreed," she had asserted confidently. "Can you imagine Paro Aunty and Rashmi living together, or Dadu accepting a non-Rajput? Impossible."

"But we all are such good friends. We have known them forever. Raghu Uncle is like family." Sanjana had naively insisted. "And it isn't as though their status is any less than ours."

“Uff, you’re such a baby. They are Brahmins and South Indians and they are a different caste.”

“I don’t believe in that nonsense. They have lived here forever and are as familiar with our ways as we are with theirs. Do you know Rajan’s great-grandfather had settled here over a hundred years ago?”

“Sana, can’t you understand? Why would Malti Bua consider Rajan, who is still studying and doesn’t even have his own home, when she can find someone more eligible for Rashmi? Besides,” Devika had teased her, “why are you so concerned? You should be celebrating that Rajan is still free.”

Sanjana had blushed and hurriedly changed the topic. What would Devika have said if she had known about her young cousin’s reckless confession? Never had Sanjana been so eager to return to her boarding school in Dehra Dun and put all that behind her. In the intervening years, she had deliberately tried to distance herself from any news about him.

She wondered how Rajan saw her now. Her freckles had faded except for a faint dusting over her nose and she had grown taller and slimmer too. While she rarely used makeup, except for *kajal* and a light lip-gloss, she was fond of perfume and was glad that tonight she had used her favorite—Davidoff. She looked up to see him watching her, his eyes creasing in a smile.

“Do you have some other work here, Sana? I mean, do you intend to stay here long?”

“Well no, only tonight,” she hurriedly cleared her throat. “Mrs. Agarwal has very kindly insisted I stay with them, as it’s impossible to get transport to Fatehpur now.”

Mrs. Agarwal, panting slightly from her exertions in the kitchen, nodded vehemently. “Imagine a young girl travelling alone on these roads. *Arre baba*, what is the hurry? In the morning, we will arrange a reliable taxi for her. No problem, no problem.”

“Oh, but I can provide the ‘reliable taxi’ right now. I’m driving back to Fatehpur after dinner.” He bent forward, the laughter lines around his eyes deepening. “Sana, how about coming back with me tonight? It’s not far and I’d love to have company. It’s not much fun driving alone.”

Mrs. Agarwal looked at him doubtfully. After all, what did she know of him beyond the fact that he was collaborating with her husband’s

company? However, Sanjana sat up straighter, eyes sparkling. A moonlight drive with Rajan should be exciting.

“Actually, I think it’s a wonderful idea. Let’s give everyone at home a big surprise. Mrs. Agarwal, we live next door to each other and we have known each other since childhood. Really, it’s the perfect solution.”

“Oh, you are like brother-sister.” exclaimed Mrs. Agarwal in relief.

“Er...not quite.” Sanjana demurred, choking back a giggle at Rajan’s look of mock horror. Conscious of her husband’s frown, Mrs. Agarwal subsided.

Aware of a sense of urgency now, dinner was quickly served. Sanjana stole a quick glance at Rajan and blushed to see him looking at her too. While she helped clear the table, Rajan and Mr. Agarwal moved to another room to complete the legal paperwork. Rajan laughingly explained that his was a working holiday, as he was providing technical expertise for Mr. Agarwal’s sugar refinery.

“Are you sure you want to go?” asked Mrs. Agarwal anxiously. “You know that you are most welcome to stay with us tonight.”

Sanjana impulsively hugged her and laughed, “Don’t worry, I have known Rajan since I was in school.”

Soon, it was time to leave. Thanking her kind saviors with heartfelt sincerity, Sanjana got into the old Ambassador, while Rajan put her luggage in the boot. Raghun Uncle’s car, she recalled. Running her fingers over the dashboard, she found the place where years ago, a carelessly left cigarette butt had burned the plastic. His uncle had roundly reprimanded Rajan. Happily, she settled down, inhaling the indefinably male scent. Who would have thought she would be going home with Rajan?

