

ONE

“Hi Rhea, wait up.”

Rhea was tired. It had been one of those days where she had had no respite and was totally run off her feet. Smiling at another guest and sorting out other people’s problems was just not what she was up to right now. And for heaven’s sake, why did every voice sound like Varun’s? So it was with an effort that she dragged a smile to her face and turned around.

He looked just the same. The dark eyes smiled at her as they always had. There was that familiar crease in his cheek when he smiled. The hair was shorter than it used to be. She had to look up at him, tall as he was. The lean build had given way to a broader frame now. She had never seen him in a business suit before; the grey three-piece he wore complimented him. Her heart lurched. He was as handsome as ever.

Her heart rate went wild, and she clenched her toes as tension spread across her body, but she managed to hold onto her polite smile. “Varun?”

“How are you?” She had been trained to keep her emotions under check and was proud of her control.

“It’s good to see you again. You’ve become even lovelier than before, if I may say so.”

His gaze took in her heart-shaped face and big eyes fringed with long lashes, her full lips tilted upwards at the ends as if she was always smiling. She wore her hair longer now and it fell in voluminous waves to just below her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she acknowledged in an even voice. “Are you a guest here? Is there something I can do for you?”

“Well, yes and no. I have a suite for the moment. But I am actually here to negotiate a deal for the property. You must know that Eastmec Corporation has bought a majority stake in this hotel, right? I am Eastmec—that is to say I am the chairman and managing director of Eastmec.”

“Yes, I know of Eastmec but I didn’t know that you were the owner of the company.” She paused for a moment and then asked, “Is there anything I can do for you? I lead the events management team at the hotel.”

“No, I’m fine. It’s absolutely wonderful to see you again Rhea. Let’s catch up over coffee.”

“Is this about work?” She drew in a breath and asked in her best professional voice.

“Nooo,” he drew out the denial. “It’s old friends catching up.”

She looked away and then back at him. “In that case, would you excuse me, please? I need to get home,” she said pleasantly.

He frowned. “Come on, Rhea. It’s been years since we last met. There’s so much to catch up on.”

“Yes, I know,” she said quietly. “It’s been years. Six years.”

“Rhea...”

“You really must excuse me, Varun. I’d like to get home, if you don’t mind.”

“And if I do mind? As your potential boss I could ask you to stay,” he was imperious now.

She drew in a breath and answered evenly, “Yes you could. Is this an order then?”

“No damn it! You know it isn’t.” Her cool detached voice told him she would treat the evening professionally, which was not what he wanted at all.

“Well, then. I’ll see you tomorrow.” With a wave of her hand she turned and walked away.”

* * *

At home, Rhea’s maid Chandra filled the silence with her chatter. Rhea had her dinner and tried to relax in front of the TV while Chandra watched the soaps she was addicted to. Rhea didn’t have the heart to disturb her routine. After a while she got up and went to her bedroom.

Picking up a book, she lay down and started reading. When she found herself reading the same paragraph for the fourth time, she dropped the book and stared at the ceiling, hands behind her head. Try as she might she couldn’t put the encounter with Varun out of her mind. It had taken

her a long time to get over him, and now he was back. Would she be able to cope with that? She let her thoughts go back to the first time she met him.

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TWO

She had been temping with Educomp, a company that helped students with their admissions to universities abroad as a way to earn some extra money. She used to work there in the afternoons after attending lectures at the university in the mornings. Varun had come to her office to have his admission and visa papers checked.

“Hi, I’m Varun,” he had introduced himself. Dressed in jeans and a navy t-shirt open at the collar, he was tall, had dark laughing eyes, a straight nose and a firm chin with the hint of a cleft in it. “I’ve applied for the hotel management course at La Rochelle in Switzerland.”

“Hi,” she smiled in acknowledgement. “I’m Rhea. Let me have a look at your papers.”

He sat across the table from her and observed her while she went through his file.

She was dressed in jeans too, with a white round-neck t-shirt, and hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was attractive even without a hint of make up on her face. She had a clear complexion, eyes fringed by long lashes and lips that curved at the ends, giving her a pleasing look.

“You’ve already done commerce from SRCC here,” she commented, as she flipped through the file.

“And now I’m going to study hotel management.”

“Wow! Are you planning to do a PhD next?” she asked jokingly.

“God forbid!” he said, pretending to shudder at the thought. “My dad is in the hotel line so that’s where I’m headed professionally. Studying the hospitality business makes sense, don’t you think?”

“Why study commerce before hotel management? Any particular reason?”

“Well, that’s a subject you need to master in whatever line of work you undertake, right?”

She asked him to sign some papers and briefed him on the questions he was likely to be asked.

“Cool. Thanks for your help.”

She cleared her desk for the day after he left. He was talking to her boss when she walked out of the building. As she waved goodbye to a colleague he caught up with her.

“Can I give you a lift?”

“No,” she smiled. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ll drop you. Tell me where you live.”

“I live in Neeti Bagh. I’m sure you live at the other end of the world. I’ll get myself home. I do every day, you know.”

“You’re wrong madam. I do not live at the other end of the world. I live in Panchsheel. You’re on my way. And I’m sure you get yourself home every day. But then, you don’t have the honor of having Varun Suri as your chauffeur.”

When she hesitated, he cajoled, “Come on Rhea. Is it such a big deal?”

She looked at his open smiling face and gave in. “Does the charm always work?”

“Ah, a compliment. So what if it’s backhanded? Repeat it please, so that I can record it on my phone.”

“Get lost! But you’ve probably worked out that your *modus operandi* is effective.”

“Another one. Oh ye gods, can I handle it?”

Rhea couldn’t stop laughing.

“Are you a gold smuggler or are you into weight lifting?” he asked, surprised at the weight of her bag that he had insisted on carrying.

“Give it back to me. I know it’s heavy but I’m used to it.”

“You hurt my fragile male ego,” he said dramatically. “I do weights you know, this is nothing.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” she pretended to be shocked. They both laughed at the idea that tall and strapping as he was, he found her bag heavy.

“Are you carrying work home?” He asked once they were on their way.

“No, these are my course books. I have an exam tomorrow. I’m studying mass communication at Jamia but I work part time at Educom.”

“Must be hectic,” he commented.

“It is, but I manage. Your life must be very busy, too.”

“I manage my time well, madam.” he flashed her a smile. “As you do.”

“So are you going to come back right away or will you look for a job abroad after you’re done with your studies?”

“Come back, of course. I’d like to do an MBA as well. But that’s a few years down the line. Let’s see.”

“Oh, here we are. That house on the left is where I live. Come on in for a cold drink.”

“Some other time,” he pleaded off. “I was supposed to meet dad at seven and I’m running late.”

“Thanks for the lift home. I really appreciate it.”

“At your service, ma’am. You’re welcome.”

* * *

Some weeks later, Varun walked into her office just as she was getting ready to leave. “Hello Rhea. Caught you just in time, didn’t I?” A blue shirt and jeans made him look casual and well-dressed at the same time. She hadn’t expected to see him again and it was a pleasure when she did.

“Hey Varun, What’s up? Did you need help with anything? You could have just called you know. You needn’t have come all the way here.”

“It could be that I came to see a beautiful girl,” he said flirtatiously.

“Try again. That line is way too obvious.”

“How about—I came to see a really hot and stunning babe.”

She looked down at her pink shirt and burst out laughing. “Yeah, right!”

“You’re a tough nut to crack, Rhea.” He wanted to keep her laughing.

“Not true. I accepted a ride from you without knowing a thing about you.”

“Oops, my secret is out now. How did you discover that I’m a serial killer in my spare time?”

“What I think is that you are taking up the wrong course. You should join the circus, you clown. Now tell me, do you need my help with something?”

“No. I’m here to share some good news with you. The admission is in the bag and my visa came through yesterday. Thanks for all the help.”

“Well, congrats. That’s really wonderful news. Have you booked your ticket? When are you leaving?”

“Actually, the term starts two months from now, but I thought I’d travel a bit before joining.”

“Great idea. Where are you planning to go?”

“Spain and Portugal. I want to backpack a bit before I start university.”

“What about your stuff for Switzerland?”

“I’m sending most of my things directly, and the rest will be in my backpack. I’ll buy books and warm clothes when I get there. The plan is to leave next month,” he sounded excited.

She was happy for him. “That sounds like fun. You’re going to have a blast.”

She picked up her bag and they walked out together. With an unspoken understanding, she got into the car with him. As they were driving, he asked, “How did your exam go the other day?”

“Not sure. I think I did okay. It’s just that sometimes I feel I don’t get enough time to study. Sometimes it can get really crazy.”

“Why don’t you just concentrate on your studies?”

“I could, I guess. But this is good experience.”

“Are you planning to go into the media business after you finish your mass-com studies?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’d like to work in the corporate world—do media management maybe but not be a part of media.”

“The hotel line?”

“If I get a good position in a decent chain, why not?”

When he pulled up outside her house she asked, “Will you come in for a drink today?”

“Tell you what, why don’t you and I go out for dinner tonight? We need to celebrate.”

“I’m sure you have friends to do that with. Besides, I’m not sure if my parents will let me.”

“Introduce me to them. I’ll be on my best behavior, I promise. I’ll keep the serial killer side of me under wraps,” he winked. “I’ll call my friends, too. You’ll like them.”

Her parents, Rajiv and Bina Kochar, had taken to him instantly. Anyone would for that matter. With his easy-going personality, open face

and laughing eyes, Varun could charm anyone. “Aunty, please don’t bring me anything,” he told her mother when she insisted on getting him something cold to drink. “The truth is that I’ve come to ask your permission to take Rhea out for dinner tonight. I just got my visa to go to Switzerland for further studies, and it was all because Rhea helped me out. Tonight I’m taking my friends out to celebrate and would really like to have her there as well. I won’t keep her out too late, I promise.”

Bina Kochar gave in to his persuasive charm. “Well, if you want to take her out, you better have a drink here while she gets dressed. Should I get you a *lassi* or would you prefer something with fizz?”

Varun chatted with Rhea’s parents while she went to her room to get ready for her evening out. She wore a long fuchsia-colored shirt, added black leggings and slipped on a pair of black sandals. Some *kajal* in her eyes and gloss on her lips, and she was ready.

Varun’s friends Ajay and Kirpal had joined them for dinner. The three guys had known each other since school and spent the entire evening making fun of one another, and telling Rhea stories about their escapades. Rhea had not enjoyed an evening so much in a long time.

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The next day Varun, Ajay and Kirpal came to Educom. Ajay wanted to find out about some courses and Kirpal and Varun waited around while she went through different syllabi with him. A few days later Varun turned up with his cousin.

“Rhea, what are the possibilities for para-medicine? Can you help my cousin with some suggestions?”

After a week of coming over with one friend or another under the pretext of checking out courses abroad, he turned up by himself one day.

“What? No escort today?” she grinned.

Varun laughed. “What was I supposed to do? You wouldn’t have agreed to meet me every day. I had to think of something.”

“Very resourceful of you, Mr. Suri, but you might have had some consideration for your friends.”

He wrinkled his face in acknowledgement. “Yeah, you’re right.” He sighed dramatically, “Okay then, where are we going today?”

“Who said I’m going anywhere with you?”

“See, that’s why I had to bring my friends along every day.”

She laughed. “You are incorrigible. My parents won’t like the idea.”

“But they’ve already met me.”

“I know, but every day...”

“Come on Rhea, we’ll just have coffee or something and then I’ll drop you home.” She wanted to go out with him so she laughed and gave in. His charm was hard to resist.

He would pick her up from work most days after that. They would stop somewhere for an iced tea or coffee, and then he would drop her home. As often as not, Ajay and Kirpal would join them and the easy banter between the four of them was as if they had known each other for years.

* * *

One day, Rhea was walking home from the metro station when Varun pulled up silently behind her in his car. She jumped in surprise when he called out, “Lift, Rhea?”

“You startled me. What’re you up to Varun—stalking me?”

“Offering you a lift, babes.”

“No thanks, I’m just a step away from home.”

“You can invite me home.”

She stopped and looked at him driving at a snail’s pace alongside her. “Are you serious? You always find an excuse not to come in when you drop me home.”

She smiled and got into the car. “So that’s what works.” he commented. “Baby doesn’t always want a day out.”

She laughed and nodded her head in agreement.

Her parents weren’t at home—which was quite usual. Her father ran a petrol station as well as a car dealership company while her mother did voluntary work for a local NGO. Rhea could never keep track of her timings. She asked the maid to get them something cold to drink and came and sat down next to Varun.

He took out his phone to take a picture of hers. She protested, “What are you doing Varun?”

“I need a pretty screen saver.”

“That would be Kareena Kapoor then.”

“What’s wrong with Rhea Kochar?” His smile teased while his eyes said he found her more attractive than the actress.

She felt a flutter at his blatantly male gaze. “You can stop right there. I don’t want to get into this discussion.”

“Coward, just when it was getting interesting.”

“Okay then, what do you find attractive about Kareena Kapoor?”

He was amused at the tactic but beat her at her game. “I didn’t mention Kareena at all, you did, but I’ll tell you what she doesn’t have. Her eyes aren’t big and brown with mischief in their depths; her mouth doesn’t look as if it’s waiting to be kissed, and she doesn’t have your Venus figure. She’s too thin, a size zero for god’s sake. She’s definitely pretty, but for my screen saver I want someone even more beautiful.”

Rhea blushed furiously as she realized he was telling her in so many words just how attractive he found her.

“No comeback, my dear motor mouth?” he asked sweetly.

She was flustered and cleared her throat. “Umm, err...”

“Yes, do go on,” he laughed.

She threw a cushion at him which he fielded neatly. Being with him was loads of fun, she enjoyed his company. It helped too that he was sexy as hell.

* * *

The following day they were at the poolside of the Defense Officers Club where Ajay was a member courtesy his dad who had retired from the army. The boys were all in the pool while Rhea was sitting under an umbrella sipping a virgin mojito.

Varun pulled himself out of the pool, shaking droplets of water on her as he sat down on the lounge next to her.

She squealed in protest, “Varun, what are you doing? You’re getting me all wet.”

“Sitting next to you,” was the innocent response. “Making a huge sacrifice, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Thank you. But you can go right back into the pool.”

In a shocked voice he said, “And leave you alone here, all by yourself? No, no, never.”

“Get away funny man. How come you didn’t think of me when you were showing off your diving skills?”

“So you were watching?” a satisfied male grin lurked behind his eyes.

She looked at him sideways, a faint smile playing on her lips, “Isn’t that what you wanted? Wasn’t that what the show was all about?”

The laugh was male and smug. “And did you like what you saw?”

“Fishing?”

He looked at her with half-closed eyes, “And if I am?”

“Well, I must say, Ajay is very muscular while Kirpal has a more athletic build,” she said dreamily.

“And?”

“And what?”

“And?”

“Varun, are you trying to ask me something?” she asked innocently.

“You little devil.” He picked her up and strode to the edge of the pool.

“Varun, don’t! Put me down, put me down!” She beat his chest with her fists as she squirmed in his arms. Slackening his hold he dangled her over the pool. She clutched his shoulders in panic. “No, don’t, please.”

He lowered his arms and she screamed.

Varun realized this wasn’t a game for her anymore. “Relax Rhea. I’m not going to throw you into the pool.” He lowered her to her feet keeping a tight hold of her. A tremor went through her. “I’m sorry. I was just teasing you.”

Fighting for control, she turned away from him without answering.

“I’m really sorry Rhea. I didn’t realize you were afraid.”

She turned around, her face pale. “It’s okay. I’m fine. Why don’t you go back into the pool? I’ll be all right.”

He hesitated. She pulled herself together and joked, “Varun Suri hesitating? That must be a first. Go on, I’m fine.”

“You know I was going to suggest that when I come back next year we should all go to Goa together. Swimming in the ocean is something else.”

“Of course you can. Just don’t count me in. First of all, my parents won’t allow it, and secondly, I don’t know how to swim, so it’s not much fun for me. Besides, I’ve been there once already.”

“I’ll teach you how to swim. You know, there are other things to do besides swimming in the ocean. We’ll talk to your parents. And yes,

everybody and his dog, has been to Goa, but you aren't supposed to go there just once." he countered each of her arguments.

In a serious voice she said, "Be realistic Varun. No parent would allow their daughter to go off for a holiday with three boys. It's hard enough making excuses every day that I'm out with you."

"But you'd like to, no?"

"What? Be with you or go to Goa?"

"Both, I guess."

"Definitely fishing for a compliment." she teased. She looked down for a moment, feeling suddenly shy. "I lie to my parents every day to be with you—what does that tell you?"

Her indirect admission that she liked spending time with him had brought a smile that was male chauvinism personified. "And Goa! Who doesn't want to go to Goa?"

"Then we'll make it happen," he said with a touch of arrogance. He dived back into the pool and the three friends raced each other for one last lap before calling it a day.

* * *

A few days later they all went shopping for Varun's backpacking trip to Spain and Portugal. As they went through the checklist of things he needed, Varun told his buddies, "I wish you guys were coming along on this trip. Think of the fun we would have together."

Ajay said wistfully, "Yeah man, if I didn't have that project to submit, I would have come along for sure."

Kirpal shook his head. "Don't make me jealous. You know that not one, but two of my cousins are getting married. If I don't attend, my grandmother will have my head."

Rhea said, "Don't even look at me. How do I come into the picture at all?"

Ajay and Kirpal glanced at each other and said nothing. Varun looked at her and opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it. He smiled ruefully and tweaked her nose affectionately with his knuckles.

All too soon it was time for Varun to leave. They kept in touch even after he left. Through Facebook and Skype they were in constant

communication, sharing details of their everyday lives. She knew of his professors, his friends, and his roommate. It was as if she was right there.

She continued to work at Educom for another six months and then resigned to concentrate on her studies. Her exams were barely three months away and she didn't want to risk her work overlapping with her exam dates.

When Varun came back for summer holidays a year later, she couldn't meet him right away. Her last exam was the day after his arrival and she didn't want to mess it up. But, boy was she distracted!

