

ONE

JD was muttering under his breath as he threw things into an open suitcase on his table. “Why the fuck don’t clients wake up earlier? They know I am going, but...’*JD bhaiya, what about getting a new campaign out for the car we are launching?*’ Just before I fuck all get on the plane!” He couldn’t ignore Munjal Motors though, a significant contributor to his bottom line, leaving him frustrated and annoyed.

“You really must stop talking to yourself, darling.” JD looked up to see Monica, his creative director, walk through the door. He gave her a rueful smile.

Monica was usually by his side in difficult situations. JD and Monica had a long history together, starting off as young executives at an advertising agency. Fifteen years ago, after a big disagreement with their boss, they had walked out and started the Phoenix Media and Creativity Group.

They worked very well together, and had gone from strength to strength, growing into a vibrant and sought-after group.

As managing director, though, JD wasn’t always pleased to be dealing with clients directly. “Mona, you know what these guys do. They sit on their bloody ass until the last possible moment and just because they’re our clients, they think they own us!”

“I know, I know,” she soothed. “You run along now. I’ll handle Yash.”

“Thanks Mona, and sorry to put this all on you, but you know I have to leave today. Everything is already booked.”

“I know. Now go and enjoy yourself. I’ll handle this.” She gently pushed JD out the door. “Tell Rakesh I said hi.” But JD had already taken off.

Monica smiled and walked out of the room and into her office. JD was very much the corporate honcho and a creative genius, but for her, he was just her good friend.

Her husband, who also happened to be in the advertising industry, understood the need for late nights, long hours and impromptu absences

during important campaigns. Which was fortunate, as she never wanted to be in a position where she would have to choose between him and work.

JD's ex-wife, on the other hand, could never understand why he needed to talk to Monica at odd hours. For JD, his work was his passion and when an idea struck he had to act on it immediately. He never quite understood how this affected his wife, especially in the intense early days of setting up the business.

Monica had tried to present things from a woman's point of view, but sometimes she wondered if he really understood why Sakshi had left him. It hadn't just been the long hours; a woman can take that from her husband provided she feels that she is important to him and that he would come home to her. It was more that she felt excluded from his life.

Who knows, maybe if she had felt needed, things might have worked out differently, Monica thought to herself. The really sad part in all this, she mused, was that Sakshi didn't want him to meet their daughter. JD worshipped the ground that Rohini walked on. He had always tried to be a good father and be there for her no matter what other commitments he had.

Sakshi, however, had not been able to differentiate between her relationship with JD and Rohini's relationship with her Dad. On the other hand, neither had JD. He felt guilty for not giving enough time to his wife and by extension, thought he was guilty of the same thing with his daughter.

JD erected a wall around himself after that. He still loved having women around him but as soon as they became too close they were shown the door. He was, ironically, no longer looking for a serious relationship; at a time when his business was booming and he could afford to dedicate time to a partner or spouse, he had come to prefer his solitary existence.

Monica sat down at her desk, and flipped through her contacts for Yash's details. As she dialed the client's number and waited for a response, she looked out of the window; down below among the office hustle and bustle on the ground, she could just make out the hurrying figure of JD as he sped towards a waiting car.

He needed a break, she thought.



TWO

Sonia stared at the email from her boss.

Top management had decreed that morale was at an all-time low in the company, and had ordered the HR department to come up with inventive ways to raise morale. Mr. Sheth, her boss, had promptly delegated the task to her. Sonia was still pondering her options when her friend Reena walked in.

“What’s up, *yaar*? Why so serious?”

“Sheth has asked me to organize some team building activities that won’t break the bank.”

“So?” Reena looked at her questioningly.

“Look at the team! Most of them don’t even want to talk to each other. There is so much politics going on here. How do I get them to cooperate with each other?” She sighed. “We need a new team, not a new activity.”

“True,” agreed Reena. “So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do.” Reena had a mischievous look in her eye. “How about choosing an activity that they can’t walk out of?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I have a friend who just came back from a whitewater rafting trip at Rishikesh and he absolutely loved it; but he also said it could be quite daunting. Just picture *apro* Batliwalla hurtling down the rapids at a hundred kilometers an hour!”

Sonia smiled at that. Batliwalla had to be the biggest nitpicker in the company. It would be a treat to see him fall out of a raft. However, tempting as the thought was, there was no way her boss was going to agree to the trip. She sighed. It was back to the drawing board to try and find a viable alternative.

Two days later she was still looking; everything was so expensive and way beyond her limited budget. On an impulse, she googled ‘whitewater rafting, Rishikesh’. An hour later, she was still reading. It looked promising.

She went over to Reena's desk. "I researched your Rishikesh idea and I think it might work."

"I told you," said Reena. "It will really shake this lot up."

"It looks like fun and the price is right but I need to know how safe it is before I talk to the boss. Could I talk to your friend and check it out?"

"Sure, I'll tell Rohan to call you."

Reena looked at her friend as she walked back to her desk, thinking that maybe Sonia needed this trip more than the others. She remembered when Sonia had first walked through the office door five years ago as a management trainee. Even though her management degree gave her confidence and poise in her work, she was just a small-town girl underneath, not really sure how to deal with the 'big bad city' of Mumbai. She hadn't known how to handle the women of the office bitching about her, or the men who had tried to come on to her.

Reena had watched from a distance until the day she found Sonia crying in the ladies room. Angry at the attitude of the other women in the office, Reena decided to take Sonia under her wing. She realized that Sonia was too nice, and the others were taking advantage of this.

With Reena's support, Sonia had blossomed. Her natural assertiveness surfaced and she gained confidence in herself. Coupled with her good humor and sweet personality, she was easily one of the most likeable women in the company.

The only problem, Reena felt, was that she was a workaholic, and seemed to have no personal life. Maybe if she got away from the city for a few days it would help her relax and let go a bit mused Reena, as she turned to call Rohan.

* * *

The next day Sonia walked into her boss's office with her idea. He was skeptical, until he learnt how reasonable the cost was to take twenty-five people to Rishikesh. As he signed off on the plan, Sonia smiled to herself.

I bet he doesn't really care as long as they're not here.

'RSHKSH Ok'd' texted Sonia to Reena as soon as she was out of his office. Reena let out a whoop of delight; this was going to be fun.

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Sonia had spent the rest of the day organizing the trip. Liaising with a company called Camp RapidZ, she had booked a guided whitewater rafting excursion in a matter of hours. At the end of the day she looked up to find Navin sauntering over to her table. A CA in the accounts department, Navin was a charmer, smooth-tongued, handsome, and well aware of it. She liked Navin but kept her distance. He had a reputation among the women of the office, and she preferred not to be another notch on his belt. He was quick with innuendos and repartee, often leaving her tongue-tied and embarrassed, so she wisely kept him at arm's length.

"Sonia, darling!" He perched on her desk, and leaned in close. "Where are you taking everybody for this 'corporate retreat'? And what will I do in this boring old office without you?"

"What do you mean?" Sonia leaned back in her chair.

"I heard the marketing team is off to Rishikesh. Can't I join them? Sonia, pretty Sonia, you need someone to carry your bags, don't you?"

"Navin, this is a retreat for the marketing team, not the entire company. I can't just add you to the trip."

"You know you'll be bored without me."

Sonia gave a brief laugh at that.

"Think of it Soni; the water, the hills, the birds, and you and me..."

"Actually, that would be the rough waters, the falls, the mountains, the eagles and...oh yeah, twenty-five colleagues sharing the same boat."

"You're laughing at me, aren't you? Wait and see, I'm going to be on that trip with you."

"Well, I can't take you."

Navin walked off and Sonia smiled at his retreating back. It would have been fun having him along. He was superficial and not to be taken seriously, but he did liven things up. Navin had a talent for getting his own way, though. She wondered if he would manage to sweet-talk his way into this trip.

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The next morning, Navin was waiting for her as she stepped off the elevator. "Talked to your boss today?"

“Navin, I just got in. When would I have spoken to him?”

Navin held up his hand, eyes twinkling. “Well, then allow me to enlighten you. I’m coming too!”

Sonia chuckled. “So you did manage it, eh? Tell me, Navin, why do you want to come on this trip so badly?”

“It’s cold there *jaan*, I need to make sure you stay warm.”

She smiled mischievously. “And will you keep Batliwalla warm too?”

Navin clutched his heart in mock hurt as she swept past him into the office.



THREE

JD had always loved trekking, but after his divorce, he had started taking longer, more adventurous trips up into the Himalayas. He loved the feeling of solitude, the feeling of being one with nature and being away from everything.

On one of his trips, he had met Rakesh, an adventure junky who ran a whitewater rafting service. Rakesh had talked him into a trip down the rapids, and he was hooked. He began traveling up to Rishikesh every year, reveling in the adrenalin rush of battling nature, and winning.

This time, Rakesh had suggested braving ‘The Cauldron’, a level five rapid for absolute professionals. They would start with ‘The Roller Coaster’, an advanced level four rapid that extended for twenty-five kilometers from Shivpuri to Rishikesh. JD, who had done it before, was looking forward to it. However, he knew there was no place for carelessness and slip-ups. If they cleared ‘The Roller Coaster’ successfully, they would move on to ‘The Wall’, a level four rapid at Byasi that led directly to ‘The Cauldron’.

In companionable silence, Rakesh and JD ran a preparatory check of their equipment. They both had their checklists: harness, toggle, goggles, first aid kit, flares, boat spray for leaks, life jacket—check!

Rakesh was a meticulous and detail-oriented guide, which was why his company had seen such phenomenal growth. They took a large number of novices down the rapids every year, and had managed to do so without a single accident. A perfectionist himself, JD admired Rakesh’s attitude and work ethic.

Three hours later they were back at base camp, laughing with the sheer exhilaration of the experience. Rakesh turned to him and said, “That was great JD, I think you’re ready for tomorrow.”

“You bet your ass I am! Tomorrow, I’m going to cruise.”

“Take it easy champ. It’s been raining for the past few days, and I heard the added water has really made it difficult.”

‘C’mon man, you said I was ready for it.”

“I know, but we can’t afford any mistakes.”

“There won’t be any.” JD stood up and looked up at the sky, arms outstretched, adrenalin pumping through his veins. “We’re going to lick ‘The Cauldron’ tomorrow, just wait,” he sang out loud.

At eight the next morning, he wished he had kept quiet. Staring down at ‘The Cauldron’, he understood Rakesh’s words of caution. Their starting point on the Ganga was approximately forty feet wide, but then it flowed into a narrow chasm where the embankment tapered to only five feet. This was ‘The Wall’. The sheer pressure of the water compressed into that narrow area threw it straight up; on the way down it hit the rocky sides with tremendous force before it crashed through, thrashing angrily at the obstacles nature had thrown in its way. There was no way around ‘The Wall’ or over it. The only way out was through the middle of a fierce, punishing wall of water.

Once past ‘The Wall’, the rapids shot straight into ‘The Cauldron’, a hollow, round area, broad at the bottom and narrow at the top. Hanging rock formations and the massive spray of water blocked out sunlight, turning the cauldron into a grim, dark bowl, the reason for its name. Water poured into it from a small entryway, swirling furiously before flowing out through a narrow crevice on the other side.

Navigating ‘The Cauldron’ was possible if the raft found the crevice in its first attempt. With every swirl in the bowl, the chances of being smashed against the walls increased exponentially.

Rakesh looked questioningly at JD. “Are you sure you can do it?”

JD squared his shoulders and nodded, none of his trepidation showing on his face. This was the ultimate challenge and he was ready for it.

An hour later uncertainty crept in. Hurling towards ‘The Wall’ at a hundred and fifty kilometers per hour, the river was a raging, seething demon that showed no mercy. Seconds before hitting ‘The Wall’, he turned to look at Rakesh, who gave him a tense look, sensing JD’s apprehension. After that there was no turning back. Nearly thrown against the steep embankment, they paddled ferociously to stay afloat.

Lean in, lean in. Rakesh’s words reverberated in JD’s head; *that can’t be right, though—wouldn’t they capsize?*

In that split second of indecision, they lost momentum and flew through ‘The Wall’ towards the opposite bank, narrowly missing the rock face and sliding down into the swirling waters of ‘The Cauldron’. Rakesh frantically pointed at the exit but the current was stronger than both of

them and he realized they wouldn't be able to make it in the first shot. They spun around, away from the crevice. Rakesh reached across desperately and tried to get a hold of JD, who shot past him and out through the aperture. Rakesh hurtled into him and their canoe followed, mercifully out of 'The Cauldron' but still in the rushing rapids that threatened to hurl them against the rocks that rose up from the riverbed.

A line flew in from the bank, thrown in by their support team. It was close enough for JD to grab hold of. He pulled himself up, looking back for Rakesh. He found him floundering, unable to reach the line. Slithering back down, but keeping a firm grasp on the rope, JD managed to snag Rakesh's safety vest. He turned and yelled at the helpers on the embankment to pull them up. As they were dragged out of the water, JD noticed the awkward angle of Rakesh's right leg and the pain stamped on his friend's face.

"I am so sorry, man! I just don't know what happened."

"I told you to lean in," Rakesh murmured before he passed out.

* * *

Rakesh's leg was broken. JD looked at the plastered leg as they wheeled Rakesh out of the clinic, and pulled down his mouth in remorse.

"This is all my fault, Rakesh. I am so sorry."

"Shut up, *yaar*. I told you, these things happen. Forget it." Medicated and dry, Rakesh was looking better. "The thing is, you need to help me with this group that's coming in. Ordinarily, Farhan would take over, but he's out with another group and Sethia is on leave so he can't help either. I need you to take over and handle it. Luckily it's a beginners' group, they don't need anything fancy, and you're certified for level three rapids."

"After today, Rakesh, you would trust me to go back out again?"

"After today, I trust you with my life. Just show them the ropes, put them in the boats and take them down. Sheela and the team will handle everything else. It's also important that you get back in the water yourself, or you'll lose your nerve."

"I'll do my best," JD said, nodding. He knew he had to get back on the water as soon as possible. "Who are they?"

“It’s a group of twenty-five from Rittam Exports, coming in for a corporate retreat. You’ll meet them at Jolly Airport and bring them here.”

“You’re joking! You want me to be a customer service rep for twenty-five people? Don’t you know me by now? Big groups make me uncomfortable and it doesn’t take much to piss me off.”

“*Arrey* JD, I’m not asking you to have *chai* with them and take them dancing. Just bring them to the camp, and take them down the river. Nice and easy. Sheela will give you the flight details. Some girl is bringing them down. What’s her name now? Hmm...oh yeah, Sonia Mehta. She’ll coordinate with the group, you just need to coordinate with her. And hello, if you think you have it tough, it’s about time you saw it from my side,” added Rakesh unsympathetically.



FOUR

It took Sonia less than half an hour to realize that this was going to be a disaster. The marketing department was at its contrary best; all of them trying to be as difficult as possible. Trouble had started brewing from the security check at Mumbai airport. Batliwalla grumbled about having to take his computer out of his bag. Mrs. Pathak had three carry-on bags, and Shetty and Mehra insisted on playing cards while standing in line. To add to it all, Navin was annoyingly cloying, constantly touching her and whispering in her ear.

By the time they reached Jollygrant Airport at Dehradun on a flight in which all of them had been crammed into a tiny airplane, Sonia was seriously contemplating taking the next flight back. To make matters worse, the Camp RapidZ guide was late.

Looking around impatiently, she brushed a long strand of silky brown hair behind her ear.

“Where is the damn guide,” she muttered in irritation. Just then a man entered the building. She saw him look around and head towards them. He didn’t quite match the mental picture she had of Rakesh. He wasn’t very tall, definitely less than six feet, but well-built with broad shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist. He had thick, springy, black hair that seemed to defy any semblance of order. Sonia watched as he walked up to them with a confident swagger.

“Excuse me, are you Sonia Mehta?”

Sonia nodded. “Yes, I am. Are you Rakesh?”

“No, my name is JD. I’ll be your guide for the tour.”

Tired, frazzled and on edge from a trying journey, Sonia had reached the end of her tether and wasn’t concerned about being polite. “First of all, I thought Rakesh was going to be our guide—I have not been informed otherwise. Secondly, you’re late. We’ve been here for over half an hour.”

“Rakesh can’t make it I’m afraid. I’m his replacement.” JD looked at the stiff woman through his sunglasses.

Nice legs, nice skin; too bad she’s got such a temper.

“What do you mean he can’t make it? Shouldn’t your company have informed me if there was going to be a change in plans? I don’t know who you are, and you want to us to get into a car with you and take off into the countryside?”

Yup, a shrew. Pity.

Slowly taking his sunglasses off, he extended his hand and said charmingly, “Forgive me. My name is JD and I am going to be responsible for your group.”

Sonia, automatically extended her own hand to take his, and looked up into his smoky gray eyes, startled by their contrast against his dark olive complexion. In the face of his polite demeanor, she was a little ashamed at her own acerbity. About to apologize, she was disconcerted when he dropped the charm.

“Now, can we leave?” he asked brusquely. “The van is parked outside.”

She was about to sputter something else when Navin, who had been standing nearby watching the interchange, walked up and put his arm around her shoulder. “What’s happening Sonia, can we leave now?”

Normally she would have squirmed out from under his arm but in the face of the man’s sudden aggression, she was thankful for Navin’s show of support. She turned to JD. “Okay, let’s go but I would like to meet with Rakesh when I get to the camp.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said JD in a sarcastic tone as he picked up her luggage and began walking towards the door.

“C’mon everybody, time to go.”

“About time,” grumbled Batliwalla.

* * *

Sonia found herself sitting next to Navin in the seat just behind the driver.

“C’mon Sonia, relax. Let me give you a neck rub to get the tension out.”

About to brush him off, she looked up and saw JD watching her in the rearview mirror. He had a sardonic look to his eyes. Something about that man raised her hackles. *What the hell was it? Why did it feel like he was*

judging her? In need of some positive reinforcement, she turned to Navin. “You know, why not? It is a long drive after all,” she said with a smile.

JD kept glancing in the rearview mirror. He couldn’t quite comprehend why he was getting upset at the scene behind him. From everything he had seen so far, this Sonia woman just wasn’t his type. The last thing he needed was an uptight, demanding woman in his life.

Yet, there was something about Sonia that stirred him. Was it the long silky brown shoulder-length hair, or the liquid brown eyes? Was it her slender body or her delicate pink bow-shaped lips? Maybe it was because he liked her voice and confidence; that she was tall and had matched him step for step when they had walked to the van. Unbidden, the thought of kissing those lips flashed through his mind.

‘Hold on JD, just hold on,’ he muttered to himself. ‘You’ve just met her, she’s a client and you have to keep this professional, for Rakesh’s sake.’

He determinedly turned the mirror so that he couldn’t see them anymore, angrily wishing he had earplugs to block out her soft sighs of appreciation. Gritting his teeth, he sped down the road, the music blaring louder than necessary.

