

ONE

I have made mistakes—mighty big ones at that. Not the kind that would cause a national fiscal deficit a la Manmohan Singh or ruin some unassuming person's life, but the kind that makes you go into face palm mode and want to die every time you are reminded of them. Remember Ashton Kutcher and Cameron Diaz in 'What Happens in Vegas'? Alcohol makes you silly, doesn't it? Except, in Hollywood, it's all cool and all ends well. No, no, I didn't end up marrying some klutz between drinks. That wouldn't have been half as bad.

"Kay! Kay?" Baani's anxious voice woke me out of slumber. Her face was a blur and my head felt heavy. God knows how long I'd been sleeping. I struggled to get up but my upper body just wouldn't budge. That's when I noticed my shoulders were all wrapped up in a funny-shaped crisscross bandage. "What the fuck happened?" I tried to yell but all that came out was a mousy squeak.

"There's no need to panic babes. The doctor said you'll be fine...just relax, okay?" Her voice was soft, reassuring and she ran her fingers gently down the side of my face.

Doctor? I strained to get a better sense of where I was. Indeed, the walls around me were blindingly white and strange-looking machines surrounded my bed, which incidentally, was also blindingly white. The stainless steel paraphernalia reflected painfully and made my hangover feel worse.

I was in what looked like a common ward, big enough to house ten beds but currently containing four, of which only mine was occupied. Thick white curtains hung from metal rods to give an illusion of privacy but they were all drawn apart.

What kind of out-of-business hospital is this? I thought to myself.

'Looks more like a spaceship to me,' complained the snooty Thought Bubble, but I was too overwhelmed with the goings-on to pay it any attention. Just so you know, the Thought Bubble is quite notorious for making bad situations worse.

I learnt later that the hospital was newly opened one by an NRI doctor who had not-so-creatively named it ‘Candolim Orthopedic Hospital’ because of its proximity to the namesake beach. Kapil, Baani’s boyfriend, was making himself useful by ruffling some papers and talking to the nurse. I gathered that the two of them had lugged my broken, bruised and unconscious body all the way here last night.

“But...how?” a groan escaped my lips.

“Umm...you don’t remember?” Baani pulled up a stool and shuffled closer to me until her face was within breathing distance of mine. Then, she cupped my face in her quivering palms. “Do you remember your name? Do you recognize me? Kairavi! Look at me?”

For the sensible girl that she was, Baani could be quite the filmy freak. She totally craved drama but all she got was a smooth existence, a boyfriend her parents never objected to and a job that didn’t leave much room for money issues. It just wasn’t cutting it for her. My life, on the other hand, had just done a cartwheel and kicked me in the jaw.

“Of course I know my name, you idiot,” I squeaked. “But why is my arm in a sling and what is this stuff around my shoulder?”

Baani looked relieved and yet somewhat disappointed that I had just scrapped any possibility of amnesia-induced drama. I tried to reach for my head. It felt heavier than usual; and it ached when I spoke. My right cheek had risen like a well-turned-out muffin—enough to partially block my vision. It hurt when I poked a finger into it. I looked into the mirror on the dresser right opposite my bed and realized that it was in fact, a blueberry muffin, a very painful one.

“You fell off the balcony, broke your clavicle and dislocated your shoulder,” answered Kapil with a straight face. That’s one thing I admire about men—they know how to cut to the point. Baani would have babbled for over an hour without really lending clarity to the situation.

“Whaa...?” I croaked like a rusted record. Confusion was quickly giving way to panic.

“Why don’t you shut up and get some rest? How you fell isn’t important—what is important is that you did. And thank God you got out of it alive,” said Baani. Her tone was sterner, probably because last night’s events did a quick rerun in her head and now that I was up and talking, she was convinced that no serious damage had been done—which of course, meant that I was in for a good dusting down.

“I need to go collect your reports,” she said before leaving the room. Kapil walked out with the nurse, presumably to get the paperwork sorted.

Now that I had a moment to myself, I tried to recall all that had happened last night, but my brain felt like it would burst and splatter all over the place. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. Suddenly everything, well not everything, but definitely some of it came flashing back. That girl. It must be that girl.

Holy bejeesus, did I actually bring her back to my room?

Last night was such a haze. I had had plenty of crazy partying nights but yesterday had been on a whole other level. This vacation was a big mistake and I had only Ricky to blame for the sorry mess I was in.



TWO

Three days ago...

“Why are you sounding so low? Is everything okay, Kairavi?” Mom’s voice on the phone had brought me on the verge of tears. How did she always know when something was wrong? Do moms come with built-in sensors or something, even if they lived a couple of continents away? Dad’s job with the UN required him to move frequently, and mom had chosen to stay put in Mumbai until I completed college. I know how difficult it was for her to stay away from Dad, but she did it anyway, for my sake. Now that I had a job, she wouldn’t miss any opportunity to fly across the globe to spend some time with him. When she returned, her face would exude certain radiance and her smile would be significantly broader. That’s how they loved each other. And that’s the kind of love I craved for myself, not that it flitted anywhere near me for the entire duration of my existence, which is twenty-five years.

“Yes ma...just busy with work, that’s all.” I tried hard to sound convincing. I wasn’t lying though—nowadays, work was my only solace. I would immerse myself in it all day and then bring it home. My editor was happy with my newfound efficiency but Baani, my BFF and flat-mate, didn’t approve of it one bit.

“Any problems with Ricky? You can tell me, I’m your mother!” Damn the sensors. How could she possibly hear my thoughts over this wonky cell phone network? As if on cue, I broke down. Between sniffles and splutters, I went on to tell her how this relationship, like all others, had failed and how I would never find true love, no matter how hard I tried.

“He was a jerk. You can do better than him,” she said, trying to sound sympathetic and understanding, but I knew that she and dad would probably pop a bubbly later tonight to celebrate the eviction of Ricky from my life.

Mom had never been too thrilled about Ricky. She never said it in as many words, but her nose would shrivel up in a weird way whenever he came over.

“He’s not very bright, is he?” she had stated the first time she met him.

“But he’s sweet,” I had blurted in his defense.

He made up for the lack of grey cells by pumping up on the brawn; he was going to be a supermodel after all. All my friends thought he was scorching hot, except for Baani, who always insisted I could do better (like mom). With all the flowers and gifts, and the occasional date at a fancy restaurant he kept showering me with, he didn’t give me much reason to complain—until recently.

The talk with mom had made me feel marginally better, but I would still have to plunge headlong into this new assignment to keep myself from wallowing in self-pity. I grabbed a packet of potato chips, hoping for a shot of comfort carbs before I sat down at my laptop.

It was past ten when Baani sauntered in with two pink pieces of paper between her fingers and a broad grin spanning the breadth of her face.

“What’s that?” I asked, curious about the cause of her happiness.

“*Arrey*, I’ll tell you. Let me fix us a drink first. Today is Christmas, *yaar!*” she said with the kind of excitement that bordered on scary, and disappeared into the kitchen.

‘She’s definitely up to something,’ said the Thought Bubble suspiciously and I believed it.

That face was definitely not Baani’s coming-home face. On regular days, she would usually drag herself in, cribbing and whining about Ed’s indecisive ways or some jerk at the office who stole her ideas or Mumbai traffic in general. Under no circumstances would she head straight to the kitchen to ‘fix us a drink’.

As I sat there trying to decode her strange behavior, she emerged with a jug full of what she called ‘Baani’s Special Christmas Cocktail’. She had painstakingly concocted it with brandy, cinnamon, hot apple juice and a generous dash of nutmeg. It was perfectly Christmassy and warming, except that in a place like Mumbai it just made you sweat like a horse and want to rip your clothes off. Since she’d made it specially for me, I was under immense moral obligation to compliment her on her bartending skills and finish the whole jug.

“We are going to Goa tomorrow,” she said with a straight face as she plunked down on a beanbag. My eyeballs popped out in alarm and I blew out a fountain of the Christmas Special straight onto Baani’s face. She shot me a disgusted look.

“How can I just go like that? I’ll never get leave at this time of the year. Ed will never agree to this!” I reasoned. There were times I envisioned myself flattening Baani’s razor-sharp nose with a saucepan but I never quite got around to doing it. She was my best pal, my partner in crime, my anchor during turbulent times and privy to my deepest darkest secrets. I knew I could trust her with my life.

“Don’t worry about it...I’ve got that covered,” she smiled with a mischievous glint in her eyes and handed me a leave application that had Ed’s neat signature at the bottom. I gasped in surprise. Just when you thought you knew him. Blow-hot-blow-cold Ed should really have ‘unpredictable’ as his middle name.

“Kay, you’ve been so down in the dumps lately and all because of what? That scumbag Ricky?” she started. “Anyway, Ed was looking for someone to cover the Sunburn Fest and the wine culture of Goa so I put up your name. Since you’ve been slogging your ass off for a while, he thought you deserved it more than anyone else!” She smiled triumphantly at me.

“Baani, you are my superstar!” I squealed and pounced on her, spilling a little more of my cocktail on her as I did.

“No babes, you’re the superstar. And Ed did this because he thinks you are capable, not because he has the hots for you,” she teased.

Did I mention that Ed and I had a little something when we were working together on a travel story in Mauritius? But that was much before I met Ricky—it wasn’t like I was cheating on anyone. Plus, it was Mauritius—what’s the use of going there if you can’t have sex on the beach? Ed and I soon realized that this drunken mistake wasn’t good for our professional equation so we closed the chapter, burnt the book and never spoke of it again. What had happened in Mauritius had stayed in Mauritius. Ed is a pretty mature guy that way.

My life had been at its suckiest best for a while and things had finally started to look up. All thanks to Baani. Only she could have pulled this off.

My eyes lit up at the prospect of lazing around on hammocks, sipping margaritas in the swimming pool and taking long walks by the private beach but that was only until reality reared its ugly head.

“But...the maid will come in the morning...we haven’t told her we’re leaving. And there are so many dishes in the sink, and we haven’t even cleared out the fridge...” I trailed off.

Baani slapped her forehead with her palm.

“Oho, now don’t tell me you’re going to give up a fully-sponsored stay at an expensive beachside resort because of the maid? Why do you think so much? Can’t you, for once, let go?” She was right. It wasn’t like me to be such a worrywart. Maybe it was sign that I really, really needed this break.

* * *

I had known Baani for seven years, but still wasn’t sure why we hit it off the way we had considering that we had so little in common. Maybe because she was so far removed from all the girls I had grown up with during my boarding school days in Delhi or the pseudo-intellectuals that made up a large fraction of the student population at XIC, Mumbai.

When she walked into the classroom in a nondescript cotton *salwar kameez* and tightly tied-up hair, looking as plain as sugar-free vanilla ice-cream, the snoots labeled her the ‘behenjee from Kanpur’. Before long she learnt to work her lithe five feet seven frame and lush waist-length hair to her advantage. That, along with straight As in every semester, she metamorphosed into an object of envy for every one of those pseudo snobs. She was not afraid to wear her roots on her sleeve, and it was her no-nonsense attitude and knowing what she wanted from life that drew me to her.

She was stable, I was shaky; she was svelte, I was a little...err...stout; she was the small-town girl who had found her place in the big bad city and I was a city slicker, lost in my own trappings; she was in a steady, committed relationship, while I was up to my eyeballs with pathetic boyfriends. That is how diametrically opposed we were and yet, similar in so many ways. I liked to think that we were the ‘balancing force’ in each other’s lives—at least she was in mine.

When Baani and I moved from the hostel into my parent’s boxy little Bandra apartment just after college, my parents were very pleased.

“She will be a sobering influence on you,” they’d said to me.

Ha! If only they knew, I thought to myself. We did crazy things together and partied well into the morning, but it was Baani who knew where to draw the line. Sometimes I felt my parents were paying her to be my nanny.

Baani made frequent trips to Goa, where her boyfriend-turned-fiancé Kapil had a fancy HR job at the Luxe de Goa. Now, she wanted to give up her job at the New Age Traveller and move there until they got married six months later. Me, I thought she was screwing up her life big time. Giving up a job she loved just so that she could be closer to her decade-old boyfriend? No man was worth it, and who would know that better than I.

“Trust me, you need to get away from all this,” Baani reiterated, lest I had any doubts left in my mind.

“There is no getting away from my sorry life Baani, and you know it.” I said regretfully, as my thoughts went back to Ricky. Not just Ricky, all my past relationships with men had been like a spate of pesky diseases—each more formidable than the other. It was almost as if I had run a ‘sucky boyfriends marathon’ or something, and won. The mere thought of them caused me to grimace.

“Well maybe, but it’ll feel less sorry on the beach, with the cool breeze and chilled breezers, and beer.” Her eyes were twinkling and she had a broad Cheshire smile plastered on her face.

Oh well! She had a point there. When it came to love, I was jinxed all the way. Nothing was going to change that—not the sun, not the sand and not the sea. But yeah, I needed this vacation-cum-work trip more than anything else right now. Some peaceful timeout may take my mind away from the breakup and help me focus on things that really mattered, whatever they were.

From the Sunburn Fest that began on the twenty-seventh of December right up to New Year’s, it was one whole week of pure unadulterated party. It would be foolish to pass that up.



THREE

I simply adored my job at *New Age Traveller*. It didn't pay a whole lot but life as a travel writer was rather enviable. Every assignment was a vacation and every vacation was an assignment. Ed had trusted me with this job and I wanted to make sure he didn't regret his decision. I would do an awesome job of the two stories and make his jaw drop. With the possibility of a promotion and a raise shining in my eyes, I set to work immediately. Also, if I drafted the stories sooner, I'd have more time left to soak in the pleasures of Goa, AND enjoy the New Year's bash on the beach. Oh God, I was so looking forward to this!

Luckily for us, we got a beach-facing room at the resort. The silhouette of palms danced to the tunes of salty oceanic breezes and the setting sun cast a warm amber glow across the sparkling horizons. Team that with yumilicious cocktails and a chatty BFF, and you have the recipe for a perfect vacation.

I went to bed early that day in preparation for the next, which happened to be the first day of the Sunburn Festival. The atmosphere on Candolim beach was stupendous, with frenetic crowds grooving to electronic music that would play non-stop for three days. I spent my day interviewing musical bands and got some interesting tidbits for my story. The newer bands, many of them first-timers, were more enthusiastic about the interviews compared to the seasoned ones, who were hurried in their responses and looked bored most of the time. I decided I wouldn't give them as much mileage in my article—that's the price you pay for being snooty. Hmmph!

And then there was this very good-looking guitarist from a young, all-boy band who was trying to get too friendly. I would have been open to the idea of getting to know him better, given his hotness and all that, but something about his slick, gelled hair put me off. You see, Ricky wears his longish black hair just like that—combed back and gelled in place, with nary a strand out of place. Right now everyone and everything that reminded me of Ricky was making my skin crawl.

* * *

The last day of the fest was simply surreal. I was totally taken in by the infectious energy but Baani wasn't as lucky.

"Umm, Kay...I need to go for a while. You won't mind *na*?" she said sheepishly as loud music blared from all four directions.

"Why? Where? It's so much fun here!" I shouted above the din.

"I know darling, but you know Kapil, he's a little uncomfortable..."

I peered over the sea of bobbing heads and spotted Kapil standing on the outer edge of the crowd, looking vexed. He had been absconding for the first two days of the fest but Baani had somehow coaxed him into coming today when all the awesome performances were lined up. And now he was standing there, sticking out like a sore thumb. Baani must be seriously off her rockers for being in love with someone like him. As for me, I cannot IMAGINE myself with someone that drab and boring.

"Oh, crap! Fine. Go!" I said petulantly. I wasn't going to mope over Kapil being a spoilsport. Selfish idiot! Baani had really been looking forward to this and now, she had to miss out on all the fun just because this weirdo was sulking away. I had never been a big fan of Kapil and I thought Baani could definitely do better than him. I mean she was beautiful, intelligent and street-smart, and he was a bit of a loser—not only in the looks department, but in many, many other ways. I mean, what kind of person wears his hair that oily and skips vacations because he has to save up for 'investments'?

At times, when she was adequately drunk, even Baani admitted that he was a bit on the dull side. He would never go out partying, never surprise her with a gift and just blurt out an awkward 'same to you' when she called to wish him on Valentine's Day. But man, did she love the guy or what! She blushed like a pre-teen every time his name cropped up in conversation.

I'd rather die than admit it, but I secretly craved what the two of them had. If my cursed history with men was anything to go by, that was never going to happen. I shook away those thoughts and decided to make the most of my evening—alone. I downed a few shots of Vodka to revive my enthusiasm, which had so cruelly been watered down by a certain Mr. Kapil Jain. Luckily for me, that did the trick.

Suddenly, being alone in the midst of a mad crowd didn't feel so bad. With all the drinking, dancing and grooving, this could easily have topped the 'best vacations I've ever had' list if I hadn't spotted Ricky making out with another girl bang in the middle of the crowd, oblivious to its presence (as if anyone gave a hoot). I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me at first. I blinked, rubbed and squinted, but it was him all right.

Ricky, as you know already, is my ex-boyfriend and the cause of all my agony. I had dumped him rather unceremoniously just a week ago. Reason: he had been breathing down my cleavage every minute of the day. He wasn't anything like that when we started out. In fact, he was mostly okay for the one year that I spent dating him, much to mom's and Baani's chagrin. In fact, I had started to believe that maybe THIS was the guy for me, until something inside him snapped a couple of months ago and he turned into an over-possessive MCP, a very clingy, whiny one at that.

"You wear these clothes just to attract men," he'd said when I turned up for a movie in a very regular looking summer dress with reasonably long sleeves. Every time I wore a skirt or a pair of shorts, he would remind me that we lived in India.

"Yeah, we may be in India but we're not in the Middle East," would be my standard reply. It was sickening going through with the same drill over and over again. If Baani's psychoanalysis was anything to go by, he was becoming insecure because he wasn't meeting with success in his modeling career.

When he wasn't fretting over my wardrobe, he would imagine I was bedding my boss just because he was the only male I frequently interacted with at work. Well, he wasn't *all* wrong there. Actually, it wouldn't have been so ugly if Ricky had been a little reasonable about it. I needed my space and I told him as much—is that so bad? Catastrophic enough to make a guy fall down on his knees and weep like a spanked toddler? Grovel and beg for forgiveness? Did it freak me out and make me feel like a heartless vamp from a Hindi soap opera? Yes, of course it did! Did it change my mind? Hell, no.

And yet, here he was, with a spanking new girlfriend when he should be in his bedroom with the curtains drawn, moping and grieving over being dumped by me. Oh, and did I mention that the hot new arm candy

was clad in a teensy-weensy pair of shorts that anyone could have easily mistaken for panties? No, I'm not jealous or anything. Not by a mile. I'm just royally pissed. Pissed not because he showed up at the resort, which I imagine could be intentional, but because he showed up with a new girlfriend who was thinner, hotter, taller and prettier than me while I still wasn't done feeling bad for myself. And yeah, he had never offered to take me on a vacation! And all this when I was the 'dumper' and he was the 'dumpee'.

Anyway, like a sensible, mature girl, I avoided him as much as I could, which was turning out to be tougher by the minute. I could see right through his childish and rather futile gimmicks and I wasn't going to fall for them. I was almost inclined to believe that he had hired this tart to make me jealous because every time he would nuzzle her swan-like neck, he would look in my direction, trying to gauge my reaction.

Of course, I wasn't stupid enough to give him one. If Baani had been around, maybe I would have jumped up and down like a kangaroo on steroids to show him that I was having the time of my life, even as he made a PDA overkill right in my face. But I just stood there awkwardly like a lone loser. Walking away would make me look like a chicken so I did the next best thing—downed a few more shots of Vodka. I didn't count my drinks and I don't remember much after that, except for the voluptuous pair of breasts grinding against my back...

