

JYOTI ARORA

#Just
Romance

*7 heart-warming love
stories to make you smile...*



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Drunk on Love

*Oh, darling, don't you see?
You are my spacebar.
No matter what words I use,
my story means nothing without you.
I need you all the time.*

Deep inside the heart of even the quietest, simplest, plainest, most morally-culturally-socially-legally-politically-correct good girl hides a mischievous goddess yearning to break free.

Anjali is a good girl. An obedient daughter, loving sister, and a devotee of Lord Krishna. She has quit her home in Vrindavan and stepped into Gurugram with a very unfamiliar feeling of being independent.

She is the first girl in her family to get a job. The first girl to move to a distant city without marriage. It took three days' hunger strike to achieve this feat.

She is looking up at the apartment buildings of a housing society. One tiny apartment in one of those buildings will be her home now. Her new world. Her freedom. And the mischievous goddess in her is already measuring the extent of that freedom and what she can do with it.

Her father is standing on her left. He's also looking at the buildings, but with anxiety in his eyes. His careworn face and sunken eyes contrast sharply with his daughter's fresh youth. He's dressed in brown trousers and a blue shirt that ought to have retired long ago.

Two younger girls stand on Anjali's right. One is barely twelve and the other is no more than fifteen years old. Anjali's freedom has lit up dreams in their eyes too and tickled the mischief they are hiding in their young bosoms.

'Hello,' a voice startles them. 'Which apartment do you want to go to? Need help?' a young man asks. He looks at the girls, then at the luggage at their feet, then back at them.

As soon as they see him, the three sisters step behind their father. Their eyes don't stop examining the stranger though.

He is wearing black shorts and a grey and black T-shirt. His fast breathing and the dark sweat patches on his shirt declare he was running or jogging. He slips his cordless earphones down to his neck and wipes his face with his blue wrist band.

The youngest sister instinctively wipes the sweat off her face too. It's still early April but the sun is hot. And they have been standing and waiting for twenty minutes.

The young man's eyes, meanwhile, have noticed that the girls are pretty. The eldest one is wearing a printed suit, stitched at home or by a neighbourhood tailor. Her dupatta is pinned to her shoulders. But her beauty amply compensates for the glamour her clothes lack. She looks fresh and eager like the morning light, and as promising of life and animation. Her face is charming with the candour of innocence. Her eyes bright with curiosity as she stares at him. But she says nothing and stands respectfully behind her father.

'Anything I can help you with?' the young man asks again. 'I live here. Rajat,' he introduces himself to the girls.

'Anjali, I —' the eldest girl begins.

'We are waiting for someone. He will be here soon,' her father cuts her words. He wants the stranger to disappear. He is uncomfortable leaving his daughter alone in a distant city. An

encounter with a handsome young man in shorts and a sweaty T-shirt sticking to his chest is most unwelcome. He also dislikes the light beard surrounding this man's mouth and lining his square jaw. His daughters are admiring it though, along with his short side-swept hair, some strands of which are sticking to his forehead.

'You came early,' a raspy voice reaches them.

'Hare Krishna, Gupta ji. We started from home at 5 am,' Anjali's father replies, turning towards it. The youngest girl yawns at that moment, confirming the early start.

'Okay, okay. Hare Krishna. Come, I'll show you the flat,' the new entrant says. 'It's on the third floor. You won't get such a flat in Gurugram at such cheap rent. But your daughter is my daughter. She will be safe here. My friend Vinod Sharma lives next door. Nice family. Two daughters, both older than Anjali. Mr Sharma's mother stays with them too. I'll tell her to watch over Anjali like her own daughter,' Gupta ji says.

Anjali groans within her at those words. Rajat notices her expression and goes through several contortions of face to swallow his laugh.

As the girls pick up the suitcases, he leans down to lift the rolled-up mattress. 'Let me help you with this,' he says.

'No, no, it's okay. We'll manage,' Anjali's father protests.

'No problem. Happy to help,' Rajat says. He glances at Anjali. She looks down. He smiles and starts walking.

It takes only a few minutes for the whole party to reach Mr Gupta's flat. It's a 1 BHK house, but its bedroom is locked against Anjali.

'My son would return from America after two years. I have moved all his furniture into the bedroom. Anjali can live in the living room comfortably,' says Gupta ji.

So, for a rent that will eat a major chunk of her salary, Anjali has the permission to use the living room, kitchen, and bathroom. The happy satisfaction on her face declares it is more than enough.

Rajat puts the bedroll near a wall. 'If you need anything else, let me know,' he says to Anjali. 'I live in 106, eighth floor. Same building.'

'You'll be fine here, Anjali,' her father says. 'If you need any help, talk to the good people next door.'

Anjali nods. But when Rajat turns to walk out, she follows him.

'Thanks for your help,' she says.

'My pleasure,' he replies. 'You are here for a job?' he asks.

'Yes,' she says, smiling. Her head lifts a little with pride. 'I got a job as a Content Writer.'

'Wow, a writer! Nice.'

'What do you do?'

Rajat halts for a moment. Laughter rises in his eyes as he anticipates her response to his answer. 'I'm a bartender at Z Spirits. Come there some time, I'll get you a special discount.'

Anjali's mouth falls open with shock. She glances back to make sure nobody heard his words.

'I do not go to bars,' she informs him in a low voice. Her eyes stare at him as if examining a curious specimen.

'Anjali, where are you?' her father calls.

She steps inside the house and shuts the door at the thrilling secret she has stumbled upon.

But it doesn't matter, of course. He doesn't matter. She will not be friends with him. Her cravings for freedom do not extend so far as to desire friendship with bartenders.

The Z Spirits is ringing with the usual evening buzz. Rajat is busy behind the bar counter. His hands are working with speed. It is more a practised habit than a zeal for efficiency. His head nods to the music echoing in the pub. He smiles when the regulars smile at him and talks when they talk. But his smiles mean nothing. His words even less. He started his shift half an hour ago. And he is already bored. His mind is stuck to his favourite hour of the day. 8 am.

Morning never appealed to Rajat earlier. But he now loves standing in the balcony every morning at 8. That's when Anjali goes to the temple in the society before leaving for her office.

Rajat's mind is still admiring that morning hour when his eyes widen with surprise. Anjali has come to the pub. Standing just inside the pub's entrance, she is hesitant to move forward and unwilling to go back.

She is wearing black jeans and a blue cotton kurti. Rajat knows she gave up her home-made suits within a fortnight of her stay in Gurugram. She hasn't yet moved to mini dresses or shorts, but jeans, culottes, palazzo pants, and long skirts are part of her wardrobe now. A brown handbag is hanging from Anjali's right shoulder. He guesses she is coming straight from her office. Her eyes scan the dim interiors of the pub. They spot the bar counter and look for him. He turns away before she sees him.

A few moments later, she's standing near him.

'Hi,' she says, pretending to play it cool.

'Hi, Anjali,' he says. 'What are you doing here?' Didn't she tell him she does not go to bars?

He knows she hasn't come to meet him. His company is not welcome to her. She made it clear every time he tried to talk to her. Three times, he noticed her change course upon seeing him.

'I have come to drink beer,' Anjali declares boldly while her hands wring her bag's handle.

'Beer?' Rajat asks.

She nods.

'You like only beer?'

She looks lost for a moment. Then nods again.

'Have you had it before?'

'What is it to you? You are a bartender. So, give me a beer,' she orders.

Rajat hears those words. He also hears the tremor in her voice. He frowns, fixing his eyes on hers. She squirms and looks away.

'Sit down there,' he tells her, ordering her to a secluded corner. She nods and walks away. When Rajat joins her a minute later, she's sitting on the edge of her seat and looking all around. Her hands are clutching the strap of her bag and she looks ready to flee. Rajat sits down across the table and puts a wine glass on its round top. 'Try something different,' he says. 'You'd like it. It's better than beer.'

Anjali looks at the clear liquid bubbling in the glass. She takes a sip and grimaces.

'It's good, isn't it?' Rajat asks.

She curls her lips downwards in response. But she takes a couple more sips, nevertheless.

'What does he think of me?' she asks Rajat, in a voice louder than her usual soft tones.

'Who?'

'Rohit,' she replies.

'Your boyfriend?' The words taste bitter in his mouth.

‘My brother,’ she says, scowling. ‘He did not want me to come to Gurugram. He did not even come to drop me here. Papa *ji* had to come.’ Her fingers are busy wiping an invisible stain on the table.

‘Why?’ Rajat asks.

He can see she is angry. She is frowning and there is an angry spark in her eyes. But the anger too is adding an enticing charm to her face.

‘He said — not safe,’ she replies, thumping the air with her fist. Rajat enjoys a secret smile to see her act drunk already. “‘Not safe for girls,” he said, “become a teacher.” But I don’t want to be a teacher!’ she cries out.

‘Okay, okay,’ Rajat says, ‘no need to shout here.’

‘Sorry,’ she says, pouting. Rajat catches himself studying the shape of her lips.

‘Is he still angry at you?’ he asks.

‘He doesn’t call me. Whenever I phone at home, he never talks to me. Until today. But today, he said he cannot trust me in anything now. “I heard even girls drink there,” he said. “Who knows? Even you might have started drinking beer and going out with boys.”’

‘So, you came here to prove him right?’ Rajat asks.

‘No. He’s not right,’ she says, jerking her head forward with anger. Some locks of her long, curly hair fall over her shoulder.

‘Then why are you here?’ Rajat asks, fisting his hand as his fingers itch to run through her curls.

She closes her eyes. Her shoulders slump. ‘I don’t know. I’m here for less than two months. I haven’t even made a friend yet. And my brother thinks I’m drinking liquor with boys.’

‘Umm,’ Rajat mumbles, tapping the glass in front of her.

She puts it to her mouth and empties it. ‘And now, I am! So there, brother!’ she says with a laugh.

Rajat lifts her empty glass.

‘Give me more,’ she orders.

‘You’ve had enough.’

‘More!’

He goes away and brings her a refill. She gulps it all down. ‘I’m going now. How much?’ she asks, trying to get up from the chair but stumbling.

‘No need. My treat,’ says Rajat. ‘How will you go?’ he asks.

‘I’ll catch an auto,’ she says, putting her hand over her head as if feeling dizzy.

‘Wait,’ he orders. He goes away for two minutes. ‘Let’s go,’ he says when he returns. ‘I’ll take you home.’

‘Why?’ she asks, blinking her big eyes at him.

‘Because I believe in being a good neighbour,’ Rajat says. He grabs her arm.

His colleague sees it and winks at him. Rajat winks back, then turns with a scowl on his face.

‘Hold me tight. You are drunk. I don’t want you falling off,’ he tells Anjali as the two climb upon his bike.

She sits astride and puts her hands on his shoulders. All the way to home, she regales him by singing Bollywood songs at the top of her voice. She even sings the latest item numbers, without missing one dirty word of them. No wonder Rajat’s mouth is aching with too much grinning by the time they reach their housing society.

‘Okay, quiet now,’ Rajat says to her. ‘We’ve reached home. You don’t want your neighbours seeing you drunk.’

‘No, I don’t! If they see me, they will tell Papa *ji*. And Papa *ji* will come and take me back to Vrindavan. And my brother will kill me,’ she declares in a loud voice, moving her arm about with every word.

‘We don’t want that, do we? So, be quiet now.’

‘Be quiet,’ she puts a finger on her lips. ‘Papa *ji* must not know. Oh! Papa *ji*,’ her lips curl downwards. A moment later, she is sobbing.

‘Why are you crying?’ Rajat exclaims.

She turns her face away and continues sobbing. He leads her to the elevator. As soon as the elevator door closes, her sobs turn to wails.

‘Stop it! Why are you crying?’ he asks again.

‘I am a bad girl. I did wrong thing. My father has left me here alone because he trusts me. And what did I do?’ She ends her words with a loud wail.

They reach the third floor. The elevator’s door opens. Rajat pushes another button and the elevator continues travelling up. It stops at the eighth floor. Rajat takes Anjali’s arm and leads her through the corridor.

‘Where are we?’ She looks around bewildered. ‘This is not my floor!’

‘No, it is not. You were —’

Anjali cuts his words by her punches. ‘No! No! No! Let me go! Let me go! Why have you brought me here?’ she shouts, thrashing him and trying to free herself from his grasp.

He clasps his hand on her mouth and pulls her to his apartment. Then pins her to his door as he unlocks it. The door open, he pushes her in and kicks the door closed.

‘No!’ she screams, hitting him. ‘You can’t do this. I know I am drunk. But I won’t let you ...’

He arrests her wrists in his hand, behind her back. ‘Stop it!’ he says, wincing at the terror in her beautiful eyes. ‘I’m not going to do anything to you, for God’s sake. And you are not drunk! You are not drunk!’

‘What?’ She becomes still.

‘I knew you’d regret it. So, I gave you no liquor. And I brought you here because you were crying so loudly. Your neighbours and even their half-deaf grandmother would have come out!’

Her fears turn to instant anger. ‘You lied to me?’ she asks, pulling away from him.

‘I ... I was protecting you,’ Rajat says, lifting his hands with exasperation.

‘Why? You are not even my brother! Why must you all always decide what I should have or not have?’

‘Fine! Come there again tomorrow and I’ll give you what you want. But,’ he says, forcing himself to cool down, ‘do you really want to drink beer?’

‘You ... you ... you fooled me! The girls in the office think I’m stupid because I’m from a small city. But my writing is better than theirs! And my brother too thinks I am stupid. I know nothing! But I always got better marks than him. And you ... you ... ugh!’ She pushes him away and stomps out of his home, slamming the door behind her.

The doorbell rings three times before Rajat lifts his head from the pillow. He checks the time on his phone. It is only 7 am. Not yet his hour to go to the balcony.

‘Who the hell is it?’ he mumbles, rubbing his eyes. ‘Coming!’ he shouts as the bell rings again. He does not like early mornings. He does not like visitors. He certainly does not like early morning visitors.

‘Who is it?’ he shouts as he walks up to the door.

‘Anjali,’ a small voice replies.

In a second, he is at the door. He flings the door open first and then realises he’s wearing only shorts.

‘Hare Krishna. Good morning,’ she says, as soon as the door opens. Next moment, her eyes notice his bare chest. They grow wide and her mouth drops open. She turns her face away.

He restrains his grin, crosses his arms, and lifts his eyebrows.

‘I came to thank you,’ Anjali continues meanwhile. ‘And sorry. Sorry, I shouted at you and pushed you. Thank you for ... for making a fool of me and saving me from doing something more foolish. Alcohol ruins people and homes. Krishna would never have forgiven me. You are a good friend because you did not let me do it,’ she declares, keeping her eyes averted.

‘Friend?’ he asks, remembering all the times she had rudely shunned his company.

She nods, without looking at him.

‘You want to come in, friend?’ he asks, pursing his lips to restrict his smile. In his heart, he is yearning for her to turn to him. He knows he is well-built, handsome. He wants her to see.

Her eyes turn and finally look at him. ‘But you are still sleeping!’ she says, covering his bare chest, sleepy eyes, and messed up hair in one easy sweep of her hand. She laughs at him and moves away, half waving at him as she goes. ‘I’ll come later,’ she says and vanishes inside the elevator.

A week has passed since Anjali’s early morning visit.

Rajat has filled a kitchen shelf with snacks he thinks she might like. He doesn’t like chocolate ice-creams. But he has a feeling Anjali likes them. So, he bought three kinds of chocolate ice-creams. He doesn’t know what she likes to drink. So, he stuffed his small refrigerator with different juices and aerated drinks.

But Anjali hasn’t bothered to come yet.

That is why, when Rajat sees her entering the society gate while he’s going towards it, he halts at a distance. Anjali sees him and smiles. But would she come to him? She stops near the society gate to chat with another young woman returning from office. Now, she certainly won’t come to him. She wouldn’t want any neighbour to know she is friends with him.

‘I might as well be on my way,’ Rajat tells himself. Yet, he lingers. Finally, when the girls’ chit chat gives no sign of ending soon, he walks towards the gate, keeping his distance from them.

‘Wait! Rajat!’ Anjali’s voice rings through his heart. He sees her coming towards him. Leaving her neighbour behind, she is coming towards him!

‘Hare Krishna,’ she gives him her habitual greeting but changes it the next moment to ‘Hello. I mean, Hi.’

‘Hare Krishna,’ he replies, smiling. She is trying to change her ways. Trying to be more modern. But he doesn’t want her to change for him or feel uncomfortable in his presence. He thinks her a marvel just the way she is.

She grins at him and her eyes light up with pleasure at his response.

‘Coming from office?’ he asks.

She nods. ‘And you are going to yours?’ she asks.

‘Yes, got late today,’ he replies. He had lingered deliberately to catch sight of her.

She nods again.

‘You said you’d come to my house later. You never came.’

‘Never? But it’s only been a week. Life isn’t ended yet.’

‘Come tomorrow? It’s Saturday.’

‘Tomorrow I want to go to market. And, Rajat, do you know any nice bookstore? I want to go to a bookstore. I asked the girls in my office. One said, “Buy a Kindle, darling. You won’t need to waste time at a bookstore.” One said, “I don’t even remember when I last read a fu —”’ here Anjali halts, realising the word she was going to repeat, “a book,” she corrects herself. ‘And the third said,’ she continues her angry mimicry, “I order online. You do that too.” But I don’t want eBooks. I don’t want to order online. I want to go to a bookstore!’ she says, jerking her fists in front of her.

‘Okay, okay,’ Rajat says, lifting his hands as if to defend himself. ‘I can take you to the best bookstore in Gurugram. It’s in a mall. You can buy books and then we can have lunch together,’ he says. He does not expect her to agree to his offer.

But, ‘Sure, thanks,’ she says.

‘You won’t mind going with me?’ he’s still not sure.

‘Of course not,’ she replies. ‘You are a good friend. I trust you.’

‘Rajat! Look what I found!’ Anjali calls.

She is standing in the swanky bookshop. When they had entered the store, Rajat expected her to look for spiritual or religious books. Instead, she zeroed in on the English classics. She is now holding a set of Jane Austen’s books.

Rajat, meanwhile, had wandered over to a different section. But at her call, he hurries back.

‘What?’ he asks.

‘See!’ She shows him her treasure. ‘This is such a wonderful store. There’s no bookstore so big in Vrindavan. I love it!’

Rajat’s breath chokes within his throat at her ‘I love.’ The cruel ‘it’ pulls it out and turns it into a sigh.

‘I’m glad you like it here. Let’s finish buying the books. I’m starving.’

‘You won’t buy any book?’

‘Me? Nah. I’m not a reader. Never was. I find books boring. Can’t tolerate them at all. I never paid much attention to even my course books!’ Rajat says.

Anjali tilts her head and narrows her eyes at him but says nothing.

A while later, Anjali and Rajat are sitting at a burger restaurant. Before coming here, they had stopped at a fashion store. Anjali had browsed through the boldest dresses. She tried some and smiled at herself in the secrecy of the trial room. Finally, she bought a simple knee-length frock with tiny sleeves and a neckline she considers deep.

Anjali hasn’t worn a frock since she was twelve years old. She never wore anything that had a deep neck. And none of her suits and kurtis was ever sleeveless. She is delighted with her bold purchase. The girls in her office might call it boring, but she knows her parents wouldn’t have approved of it. So, she is happy. She has asserted her free will.

‘Are you sure you want a burger? We can go somewhere else too,’ Rajat asks as they settle down in a corner.

‘No need. My parents are not here. I can eat whatever I want. And I want a burger. Proper burger, like everybody else is having.’

‘Even with onion slices in it?’

‘Yes,’ she says.

Anjali’s parents never allow onions and garlic in food. But she is on the quest for freedom. And eating onions is a big step in it.

Rajat shrugs. He brings two burgers and soft drinks.

Anjali picks up her burger. She smells it.

‘Like it?’ Rajat asks.

Anjali nods and smiles, but there’s alarm peeking from her eyes. She takes a deep breath of resolution and bites into her burger. Rajat purses his lips to keep his laughter locked. He can see Anjali would rather throw up than swallow what she has bitten.

‘Everything okay?’ Rajat asks.

‘I ... will take these onion rings out. They stink! I wanted to try them. I have done that. I don’t like them,’ she says.

Anjali is about to open her burger to remove the onion rings. Rajat stops her.

‘Here,’ he says, giving her the second burger. ‘I brought one without onions, just in case.’

‘Why? You too think I should not have them? I’ll eat whatever I want to eat!’ She frowns at him.

‘Sure, sure, My Lady. You can eat a non-veg burger if you want. I don’t care,’ says Rajat.

‘I don’t eat animals. Do you?’

‘I? Oh, yeah! All kinds of animals. Even insects. And frogs. I have even eaten a snake!’ he says.

‘And you drink alcohol too?’

‘Oh, yes! Lots. Every day. I work at a pub, you know. I also have many bottles at my home. I drink a lot.’

Anjali stares into his eyes, a frown appears on her pretty brow. ‘You are lying,’ she says. ‘You do not drink. Not lots, at least. You do not eat all kinds of animals. You have never eaten an insect or a snake. And you like reading books. But you lie a lot. I don’t like that. Don’t lie to me, Rajat. I’m your friend.’

Rajat’s eyes widen at her words. His heart puffs up with joy.

That happens when you meet someone who can look through all your masks and see the real you. Honest or devious, each one of us yearns to be recognised in our deepest truth. Only with recognition can come the acceptance. Otherwise, the masks remain. The lies remain. And lies are very shaky ground to build love on.

Rajat’s eyes shine as he looks at Anjali. He does not say she is wrong. He only asks, ‘How ... how do you know I like books?’

She bites into the second burger and shrugs. ‘This is good,’ she mumbles through a full mouth. Then, swallowing the bite, says. ‘When I was looking at books, so were you. I saw you check out three novels. You read two pages of a thick novel. You wouldn’t have done that had you hated books.’

He smiles at her and is proud of her. She is not just pretty, but intelligent too. ‘Well, I may read a book now and then, but I’m no bookworm.’

‘Shall I tell you what you like doing?’

‘Okay,’ he says, curious to know what more she knows about him.

‘You like songs. Every time I’ve seen you, you have your earphones with you.’

Rajat smiles. He wants to tell her he also enjoys singing. He was one of the best singers of his school and college. But he just shrugs and bites into his burger, putting his lips where hers had touched it first.

It does not matter what he is good at. It does not make him what his parents hoped him to be. He’s not perfect like them. He does not work in an NGO like his mother. He does not run a de-

addiction clinic like his father. He's not the perfect son they deserved. He could never meet their expectations. Now, nobody expects anything from him. Not even himself.

It hadn't mattered much earlier.

But now, as he looks at the girl sitting in front of him, he regrets he has nothing better to offer her.

Rajat's arms are wrapped around Anjali's waist. And she's entwined into him. Intoxicated by love, careless, unhesitating, demanding and yielding, breaking free. It feels even more delicious than he had imagined it would. His face leans towards her. She is smiling. There's a new sparkle in her eyes. She is ready. Ready for him. He worships her with his kisses, his breath singing a song of ecstasy. She is so soft, so tender, ethereal like a dream. He will be her strength. He will be the greatest happiness she has ever felt. And she would be his.

Bells ring in the air.

'I love you, I love you, I love you,' rings in his heart.

Bells ring louder.

'What are you doing? Rajat!' Anjali shouts.

Rajat jerks out of his dream. It's the doorbell that's ringing.

'Rajat!' Anjali shouts from behind the door.

'What? Uh!' Rajat jumps up from the sofa. He was daydreaming again. He was never so addicted to dreams. Anjali has messed up his head.

'Open!' she orders, banging at his door.

'Coming! Coming!' He runs to the door.

'Has the match started?' Anjali asks as she steps inside Rajat's home. 'Uff, it's so cold today,' she adds, without waiting for Rajat's response.

Summer has turned to winter but Rajat and Anjali's friendship has grown warmer. His apartment is no longer a strange and prohibited place for her. It is her best friend's home. Her best friend lets her take control of his TV. She hasn't bought any yet for her room. So, she spends as much time here as possible, considering their clashing work timings.

Rajat has never been inside Anjali's home though. Anjali does not want her watchful neighbours to know she is friends with him. They have her father's phone number. She does not want her father alerted without any reason. She is doing nothing wrong. They are friends. Nothing wrong with being friends with a guy. And Rajat is a good guy, despite his profession.

'Started half an hour ago,' Rajat says. 'Sit down. Coffee?'

'Yes, please,' she says with a grin.

At her parents' home, tea is restricted to once a day, coffee is never allowed. So, for Anjali, coffee had been the secret, daring pleasure restricted to the college canteen. 'But your coffee is much, much better,' she told Rajat once. So, he loves making it for her.

Anjali plops down on the sofa and sits cross-legged. 'Has Dhoni played yet?' she asks.

'Not yet. He'll come next if someone gets out,' Rajat replies from the kitchen.

'Oh, I hope somebody would get out soon.'

'What? It's the final match. Why do you want our player to get out?'

'Let Dhoni come, then I won't want anybody to get out,' she says.

Rajat shakes his head. He guesses she doesn't have any interest in cricket. He often finds her oblivious of even the score. It's Dhoni she enjoys watching. That is not a very pleasing thought for him, especially since it makes him want Dhoni to get out on the first ball.

He sighs, enjoys a secret smile at her and pours the steaming coffee into cups. Taking it to Anjali, he sits down next to her, also cross-legged. His daydream lingers on in his heart.

It's six months since they became friends. Rajat is desperate to step out of the friendzone she has locked him in. He believes he can. He practices his words. But he's scared he'd lose her friendship too if he tries for more. Besides, speaking out his feelings is not his strong point.

'Umm ... this is delicious,' Anjali says, sipping the coffee. She wraps her cold fingers around the cup to warm them. 'You should open a café. You make excellent coffee.'

He laughs. 'Well, I'll think about it. Thanks for the advice.'

'You are welcome,' she shrugs. 'But, why can't you do something else? Why did you become a bartender?'

'Because of my father,' he replies.

'What? He forced you into it?' Her eyes are wide with shock.

'No, no. He would never. He runs a de-addiction centre in Pune. Both my parents are fighting against alcoholism.'

'Then?' she asks, putting the TV on mute. Dhoni is not on the ground, so there's no interest in the game.

'Well ... I ... it's a long story. And see, your wish came true. Dhoni will come now,' he says, unmuting the TV.

'Yeah!' she claps, turning her attention back to the match.

Rajat's mind goes back to the night that changed his life. The night that should have been nothing but happy. He had passed his Engineering course with excellent marks. His friends insisted on celebrating their freedom from Engineering studies. They partied hard. And despite his many refusals, even got him drunk. His father didn't like it. He beat him with his belt. The kind, soft-spoken man who never raised a voice at even the worst drunkard, he beat his own son with a belt. Rajat left his home that night, vowing never to return. That was two years ago. He came to Gurugram because his college best friend was from this city. Rajat could have found a job as an Engineer. He started working in a pub instead. Seething with hurt and anger, it had seemed the perfect revenge to Rajat.

But in his heart, he had expected the job to last only a few days. He was only pretending to train as a bartender. He had hoped his parents will come and take him back. They care for the entire world. They would care for him too, their only son, he had thought. But once they learnt what he was doing, they broke all contacts with him. And his revenge became his punishment. Days turned to weeks and weeks to months. Now, two years later, he is still a bartender, existing in the present and not caring for what was or what will be.

Anjali's squeal pulls Rajat back to the present. He smiles seeing her on the edge of her seat. Her happy excitement continues as Dhoni leads the team to victory.

'That was awesome,' she says. 'I want every match to be like this.'

Rajat chuckles. He knows what she means. A match where her favourite player comes soon and never gets out. 'May your wish be granted,' he says. 'What else do you want?'

She smiles at him. But her smile fades into seriousness. 'I want ... I've been thinking about it for many days. I think it would be right.'

'What? What do you want?' he asks.

He had brought in a plateful of cookies some time ago. He picks up a cookie and stuffs it into his mouth. Her words have made him nervous.

'I want a boyfriend,' she declares. Then she slaps Rajat on the back to calm down his sudden coughing fit. 'Are you choking? You shouldn't have stuffed the whole biscuit in your mouth.'

‘I’m fine, I’m fine. But what did you say you want?’

‘A boyfriend.’

Hello, can't you see me? Not a boy? Not a friend? What? he wants to shout at her. But he says, ‘What kind of boyfriend are you looking for?’

‘Umm ... someone nice and decent, having a good job, vegetarian ...’

‘You mean the kind of guy your parents would select for you?’

‘Yeah. Someone they can approve of. I want to have a boyfriend. I don’t want to break my parents’ heart.’

‘Then why don’t you marry the Mr Perfect they select for you?’ he grumbles.

‘No. See, I have come here to do this job. So, now my younger sisters won’t have to fight for their career when their turn comes. Same way, if I have a boyfriend and marry him, they would get the freedom to marry for love too if they so choose. My mother and father are good people. They love us a lot. But sometimes, it is hard to make them understand what we want. So, as the eldest sister, I must ... open the doors for my younger sisters.’

Rajat stares at her in silence. A chuckle is bubbling inside him to mock her logic. But he knows it makes perfect sense to her. She is not smiling. She spoke in earnest. She has a plan. And he forms no part of it.

‘I can help you,’ Rajat says. *Be quiet, you idiot!* his mind shouts at him. ‘I know someone ...’ *Silence!* his mind orders. ‘I know someone who would be perfect for you. His name is Pratham, and he too is a Krishna devotee. He lives in the next building. Start walking in the society’s park at 6 am, you might meet him.’

‘Really? And you think he is good? Well, no harm in taking morning walks. They are good for health,’ says Anjali, giggling.

Meanwhile, *there is no bigger fool than you*, Rajat’s mind growls at him.

He agrees.

‘Oh! He’s perfect!’ Anjali exclaims as soon as Rajat opens the door. She has come to him straight from her morning walk. ‘You were right, he’s perfect for me. And I think he likes me too. He said he’d wait for me tomorrow,’ she says as she enters the room and plonks down on the couch.

‘Good morning. So, you managed to talk to him,’ says Rajat, joining her.

‘No, I didn’t. I couldn’t. I thought it’s no big deal, I’d go and start chatting with him. But I couldn’t, don’t know why. Not once in a whole month! I only smiled when he smiled at me, a little. Anyway, I did not walk much today. Instead, I sat on the bench thinking I was making a fool of myself. And I should stop doing it. Then, he came to talk to me! He sat down near me. Wished me a happy new year. We chatted for half an hour. He said he knew I lived next door to the Sharma family. He’s friends with them.’

‘Great,’ Rajat grumbles, more at himself than at her.

‘He said he is going to the ISKCON temple this weekend and asked me if I want to go with him. I said yes.’

‘Wow! That’s fast.’

‘Is it? Should I phone him and say no?’ Anjali asks with alarm in her eyes.

‘Oh, so you have exchanged phone numbers too?’

Anjali grins, and Rajat is ready to kick his own butt.

‘He’s a little over-weight, don’t you think?’ Rajat asks, after a few minutes of consideration.

‘Not too much. And in winters, everyone looks fat.’

‘I think he is balding. He had more hair when I first met him.’

‘Oh. I’ll give him the oil I use. It is ayurvedic and great for hair. See, how beautiful my hair is,’ she says, swinging her long curly tresses from side to side.

Rajat has seen it, stared at it, longed to touch it many times since he met her. He doesn’t mind looking at it again to please her.

‘Thanks for finding me such a perfect boyfriend,’ she says, grinning at him. He smiles back and stifles his sigh within.

‘But, Anjali, do you love him?’

‘I will love him. He’s perfect for me. My parents will love him too,’ she declares.

Time has moved on. Months have passed. It’s a summer night, past 9 pm. Rajat did not go to work. He is sitting on a bench in the housing society’s park. His arms are crossed, eyes are frowning, and lips are clenched in a thin, angry line. He has been sitting in the same posture for the past thirty minutes.

‘Rajat? What are you doing here?’ Anjali’s voice breaks through his thoughts.

He turns away from her. He is in no mood of talking to anyone. Especially not to her.

‘Hey,’ she calls again, coming near.

‘Hey,’ he mumbles without looking at her. He believes nobody cares for him. Not even Anjali. He watches her from the balcony every morning. Waits for her at his home. But it’s no use. With the changing season, Anjali has changed too. Happy with her perfect boyfriend, she has lost all interest in Rajat. She has lost interest in even his TV!

Till the previous week, she at least came on weekends for their afternoon movie sessions. This week, even that was dropped. All through the week, she did not even peep into his home. He yearned to go to hers and see what she was doing. But he still does not have that liberty.

Anjali sits down next to him. ‘Are you okay? Why didn’t you go to work today?’ she asks, wiping the sweat off her brow. There is a little breeze, but not enough to make it a pleasant night. Though the sun is long gone, the air is still hot.

‘I’m fine,’ Rajat mutters.

‘Okay. See, I’ve bought a smartphone. I’ve been dying to show it to you. I completed a year at my job last month. This is my gift to me. My first smartphone!’

Rajat looks at the phone, mentally approves of her choice, but gives no more attention to it.

‘Where were you this weekend?’ he asks instead.

‘I was with Pratham. We went to see the Akshardham temple. You know I’ve always wanted to see it.’

‘Sure, sure. You are welcome to spend all your time doing the rounds of temples with your boyfriend. I understand you have no time for your friends now.’

‘Don’t say that. I’ll always have time for you.’

Rajat scowls and turns away.

‘Everything okay?’ she asks after a moment.

‘Super,’ he says.

‘Something is wrong. Why are you sitting here like this? You look disturbed,’ she insists.

She has read him again. He surrenders.

‘I got a call from my friend today. Childhood friend. Lives next door to our ... my parents’ house.’

‘What did he say? Everything okay?’

Rajat shakes his head. ‘He said my father had a heart attack yesterday. He’s in hospital.’

‘Oh! You should go! What are you doing here? You should be with your father!’

‘They don’t want me. They haven’t even informed me.’

‘They want you, Rajat,’ she says. ‘They are your parents. They will always want you. If they are angry at you, ask their forgiveness. At least, try!’ Anjali says, touching his arm.

Her touch feels scalding to him. He jumps up and steps away. ‘No need to give a lecture. You know nothing.’

‘But, Rajat —’

‘Go away,’ says Rajat. ‘You have a perfect boyfriend now. So, stop troubling me. Leave me alone.’

‘Rajat,’ she calls once again.

He curses himself for the quiver in her voice but refuses to turn. Instead, he walks further away. He refuses even to look towards her. He succeeds for about two minutes. Then, he rushes back, hoping to find her still there.

But Anjali obeyed his order. She’s gone.

It is 5 am. Rajat is awake. Because he did not sleep at all. He spent the night cursing himself for fighting with Anjali. Her words haven’t left him either. ‘They are your parents. They will always want you,’ she had said. ‘At least, try!’ she had urged.

Should he? Why not? Is he happy being away from them? Won’t they forgive him?

‘At least, try ...’ Anjali’s words ring in his mind.

And his father is ill. A heart attack. The thought brings tears to Rajat’s eyes. He loves his parents. And he knows they love him too, despite their strictness and anger at him.

‘At least try,’ Anjali said. He would. He must. At least once. He has waited long enough.

His flight ticket is booked. It’s time to leave. Rajat does not know for how many days he would be away.

He picks up his bag, steps out of his home and locks his door. Everything is quiet. Most people in the building are still sleeping.

But Anjali would be awake. It’s 5 am. I should tell her.

He goes to the third floor. Like a thief, he slips towards the prohibited territory. He sees her door. *She is an early riser. She’d be awake,* he knows.

Yet, he lingers at a distance and stares at the door.

Would she be angry to see me here? Well, she has a right to be angry. I was a brute to her yesterday. I should apologise before leaving. I must, he thinks.

And yet he stays away and stares at the door, knitting his brows.

Would she even notice I am not here? the thought strikes him. He takes a deep breath. ‘Well, let us see,’ he decides.

The room’s fine furnishings suggest it belongs to a young man who has rich parents. Several photos on the walls show a baby growing into a youth. None of the pictures is very recent.

It is only 10:30 pm. But Rajat is already fast asleep. After a sleepless night, long travel, and a day bursting with tumultuous emotions, the exhaustion of his body has defeated the mind and forced it to rest.

His phone is on the side table, next to his photograph with his parents. It rings but silences before it can disturb his sleep.

It rings again, three hours later. Keeps on ringing till Rajat jolts awake. He is too sleepy to read the name or number on the screen. But the caller's photo on the screen is clear enough. And his eyes adore that face even through their sleepy haze.

'Anjali?' Rajat asks, clearing his throat twice to sound less sleepy.

'Sorry, did I wake you up?' she asks.

'No, no, I was only playing football.'

Anjali giggles on the other end. 'Sorry,' she says again. 'I did not see you on the balcony today, and I ... I thought I'd call you in the morning ... I know it's late, but I couldn't sleep. Are you still angry at me?'

So, she knows I watch her from the balcony, is the first thought that tickles Rajat. Once or twice he had felt her gaze turning upwards to him. But she had turned away quickly each time. She had never waved or anything. Then, the second thought hits him and puffs up his heart. *She is missing me!*

'I am not angry at you. Sorry, I shouted at you yesterday. My bad. Sorry.'

'Don't say sorry. You are my friend. Friends can fight. I'm glad you are not angry now,' she replies. Rajat smiles, then sighs.

'Anyway, I'm not in Gurugram. I had to rush away. I'll be back after three days,' he tells her.

'Pratham isn't here either. He's gone on an official tour. He'll be back in two days. Where are you? Are you with your parents?' she asks.

Yes, Rajat wants to tell her. *All because of your words,* he wants to say. He wants to tell her that his parents have forgiven him. That they still love him. That he is going to quit his job to help his father at his de-addiction centre.

But he doesn't. Instead, *Is that why you are missing me?* he growls in his thoughts. And says, 'I too have come for some work. Have to sleep now. Bye.'

'Wait! Wait! I haven't told you the news! I sent one story to Woman's Magazine. And it's selected. My story will be published in a magazine!'

'That's great. Congratulations. Didn't I tell you your writing is great?' He can't be angry now. Her happiness is his happiness.

'Yeah, thanks.'

'What did Pratham say?'

'I haven't told him yet. I wanted to tell this to you first. You are the one who told me to send my stories to magazines. You read all my stories. Pratham doesn't. He only read a little and said I write well but he doesn't enjoy reading fiction.'

'Okay, but I'm sure he'll be happy for you. Tell him.'

'I will. Anyway, guess what? Pratham said when he returns, he'd give me a surprise. He was also looking at my fingers earlier. I think he's planning to propose!'

'Yesterday you said you'd come after three days. Your work finished early?' Anjali asks Rajat.

'Are you not happy to see me back early?' Rajat replies.

He returned in the afternoon. He was lingering near the housing society's gate when Anjali came back from office. Now, instead of going to her home, Anjali is entering Rajat's.

'I am,' she says. Her eyes smile fondly at him.

Rajat tries to smile back but fails. Instead, he steps away asking her if she would like cold coffee or tea.

'You know.'

He does. Anjali never chooses tea over coffee.

‘Pratham doesn’t drink tea or coffee. He didn’t like it when I ordered coffee at a restaurant,’ Anjali says, curling her lips downwards.

‘Then enjoy it while you can.’

‘I don’t think he would stop me from having it if I want to,’ she replies, doubting her own words.

Rajat says nothing and goes to prepare his special cold coffee.

Fifteen minutes later, the two are sitting cross-legged on the sofa, drinking their coffee and feeling the silence grow between them. Rajat wants to say something, but the words ringing in his heart remain voiceless. Anjali is quiet too.

‘So, big day tomorrow, huh?’ Rajat mumbles finally.

‘Hmm, I think so. Everything he said before leaving, yeah, I think he will propose tomorrow. He’ll come and pick me up tomorrow at 4 pm.’

‘Will you accept?’

‘Of course. He’s perfect for me.’

‘Anjali ... do you ... love him?’

Anjali is silent for a long moment, her brow furrowed. Then she shrugs. ‘I’d love him. He will be my husband.’

Rajat stares at her. *It’s now, or never*, his heart tells him. He takes a deep breath. It’s now or never.

‘Anjali,’ he calls to her in a soft voice. ‘I ... I need to tell you something.’

Anjali turns away for a moment. When she looks at him again, she says, ‘I want to tell you something too. I went to that bookstore again. I got such a fabulous discount! They are having a sale. You should buy some books for yourself before the sale is over. And oh, this movie is boring. Can you please change the channel?’ she is talking faster than she needs to.

‘What would you like to watch?’ he asks, picking up the remote.

‘Anything,’ she says. She doesn’t care what.

Rajat flicks the channels mindlessly while his unsaid words grumble in his heart. An English movie appears on the screen at the perfect moment of a passionate kiss. Rajat’s finger freezes for a moment. Anjali squirms. Rajat switches off the TV.

‘Nothing good is coming,’ he says. He throws the remote on the table.

‘Hmm,’ she agrees.

It seems like the two have nothing to talk either. They become silent and look anywhere except at each other.

And then, ‘Rajat,’ she murmurs, ‘How does ... a kiss feel like? Is it really ... I mean ...’

‘What? Pratham hasn’t kissed you yet?’ Rajat asks. It’s good Anjali is not looking at him at that moment. She might not have liked his sudden grin.

‘He wanted to ... but I ... it ... it didn’t feel right ... to me.’

Rajat gives Pratham the heartiest applause for respecting Anjali’s hesitation. He might even have hugged Pratham, had that man been near.

‘But maybe ...’ Anjali mumbles, battling with her confusion.

‘Maybe now you are regretting refusing him?’

‘No,’ she’s clear of that.

‘But you wonder what it feels like.’

‘Yes,’ she confesses.

Rajat fixes his eyes on Anjali. In his heart, an excitement is flaring up. Though he knows it is useless. *If kissing Pratham felt wrong to her, she will never agree to him ... never*, he knows. Yet, 'Anjali ... do you want to know what a kiss feels like? Right now?' he asks, nevertheless. He knows she will refuse. He is ready to laugh off his words as a joke. They do sound like a joke to him too. A joke in which he's playing the fool.

'What? How?' her eyes widen.

'I can ... kiss you.'

'Come on, don't be silly,' she says. She rolls her eyes at him, laughs a little, and becomes a bit too intently busy in drinking her coffee.

'It's good to be silly sometimes,' Rajat says and follows her example of concentrating on coffee. *What was I thinking?* he scolds himself. *If Pratham felt wrong to her, how can I feel right?*

A long moment passes in silence.

Then, 'Okay,' she says in a tiny voice.

'What?'

'Okay,' she repeats, her eyes wide with alarm at her outrageousness. 'It won't mean anything, of course. You are my friend.'

'Of course,' he says, wondering how good a friend he is, luring her innocence into temptation thus. But it is hard to care for right or wrong when your heart is bursting with desire.

'Come here,' he says, standing up. In his heart flashes the image of a devil seducing an angel to darkness. He doesn't care. After this, even if she marries Pratham, he would still be her first kiss. She would never forget him.

Anjali puts her coffee mug down and stands up. She does not step towards him.

Rajat goes to her and takes her hands in his. Her eyes stare at him and her lips are half-open. She looks unsure. But he is sure. His words have always been his enemy. They will never help him. Maybe his love would. If he could just make her feel what he feels for her. His plan is ready. Give her a kiss throbbing with all the strength of his love. A kiss that will open her eyes and show her what love is like. A kiss bursting with such passion it will make her forget everything and everyone else.

His fingers tighten on hers as he tugs her closer to him. He can feel his heart bursting with all the love he wants her to feel. He takes a deep breath and brings his face closer to hers, ready to sweep her off her feet with his passion.

But when his lips touch hers, it is as if caressing a fragile treasure. It is a kiss not of passion, but of despairing love. Soft, reverential, hungry for possession, yet hesitant. The treasure is so pure, so precious ... so ... not his.

But oh! How he throbs to claim it! How his heart longs to love her ... to love her so it will brand her soul with his name. And she will be his. His.

She pulls back, staring at him with stunned alarm. He turns away, with tears pricking his eyes.

How his arms burn to crush her to his heart. But he knows he doesn't have the right to hold her. He gave that right to another. And he is now making a fool of himself. Fool he has been in bringing her closer to another man. And coward in keeping his love hidden from her. An idiot now in thinking one little kiss could undo all that.

'Oh,' Anjali murmurs as she stumbles back on the sofa. 'That was ...'

'Nothing,' Rajat says, cursing himself anew. He picks up his remaining cold coffee and gulps it all down at one go.

Anjali sits down and picks up her coffee glass too. She stares at it, then puts it down and jumps to her feet. 'That was ... I ... I shouldn't have ... I must go.'
She runs out of Rajat's apartment. He does not stop her.

Anjali steps out of the building. It's a little before 4 pm. Pratham might come any time now to pick her up. Her steps turn towards the temple for a special prayer. Her eyes flit up to Rajat's flat. There's nobody in the balcony. She doesn't know why the absence halts her feet and makes her sigh.

'I'm here,' Rajat's voice turns that sigh into a smile. But the smile too vanishes when she looks at him.

His eyes might have told anyone he hasn't slept all night. And the CCTV cameras of the third floor in his building could reveal he went there three times in the night. All three times, he walked over to Anjali's door, looking resolute. But he returned each time with a bowed head, without daring to meet her.

'You were waiting for me?' Anjali asks.

'Yes,' is the truth. 'No,' his lips say. But she knows.

'Give me five minutes,' she says. She rushes into the temple and is out of it in four.

Tell her, tell her, tell her, Rajat's heart has been shouting at him meanwhile.

'So, all set?' Rajat asks when Anjali skips back to him.

'Yes. What do you think of this suit? Is it okay?' she asks, half twirling to show off her dress. It is a new and stylish pink suit with a gorgeous embroidered dupatta.

Rajat also notices her silver earrings. The big dangles sway as she moves and touch her face, just as Rajat's fingers are yearning to do.

'Anjali ... I ... I want to tell you something. I've been trying to for many days, but —'

'Oh, do you think the weather would get bad today? The sky is darkening. Will it rain? I hope it won't rain. I hope Pratham will come soon!' she says, pushing his unsaid words away with her prattle. She also takes a step back from him and turns a little away, as if looking for Pratham at the gate.

'Anjali, listen. I must tell you ... I ...'

'Rajat, have you been to LV Park? That's where we are going today. Pratham said it's nice. I hope the weather won't turn bad. I like the rain, but this is a new suit and I don't want it ruined. Oh, here's Pratham. Bye!' she says, moving away.

'Anjali, I love you!' in the last moment of desperation, the words finally stumble out.

Anjali continues running towards Pratham. Half a minute later, he drives her away.

Anjali's fear of bad weather has come true. Nothing surprising. It's May, and dust storms are common at this time. But as Rajat stares up at the sky, he feels it darkening with his gloom. The wind too is roaring with his heart's tumult. His eyes are staring at the sky, but watching Anjali run away from him.

He calculates they would have reached the park by now. *Or has Pratham taken her to some other place, considering the weather?*

I better check. I better make sure she is okay. So many people died in the last dust storm. I must make sure she's okay.

He knows that is not why he's racing out into the storm. But the real reason now sounds too hopeless. Even the news that he wished to delight her with seems useless now. So, he grabs at any thought that serves his purpose. He needs to be with her. That is all.

Fierce winds don't matter. Dust blowing at him doesn't matter. The ominous yellow darkness only makes him increase his speed. He must find Anjali. And for once, he must make her listen. Before it's too late.

What if it's already too late? And what makes you think she'd care for your love? She considers even your friendship wrong.

'I'll tell her. I'll tell her,' is Rajat's answers to all his objecting thoughts.

When Rajat runs into the park, the afternoon has almost cloaked itself as night. The air is heavy with dust. And the trees are swaying dangerously under the strong, stormy wind.

It is a big park. How will he find Anjali there? If she's still there, and chances of that are very less. Nobody in their right mind would sit in a park in such weather.

But what's that? Who's that? There ... on the first bench of the park? He runs towards the bench. Is it she? It is a woman. Is it she?

It is!

'Anjali! What are you doing here in the storm?' he shouts, and then coughs, choking on dust.

She smiles at him and extends her hand for him to take. 'Waiting for you,' she says. 'I knew you'd come.'

'Anjali ... I,' but no, he must first get her out of the storm. They can't speak here. 'Come!'

Rajat takes Anjali's hand and the two run into the nearest leafy tunnel adorning the pathway of the park. They speed to the centre of the long and curved tunnel before halting, coughing, and laughing together.

'Anjali I ...'

'Rajat ...'

Both speak together.

Rajat won't have it. Not again. He presses his palm on her mouth, silencing her. 'Shh ... listen to me first. Anjali, I love you. I've loved you ever since I saw you. There never was anybody I loved more. There never will be. I know you would not choose me. But I promise you, you will forever remain the choice, desire, and passion of my heart. Forever.'

Anjali's mouth is shut by Rajat's palm. But a thousand emotions are swimming in her eyes. One trickles over and streaks down her cheek.

'Oh! Don't cry, don't cry, Anjali! I'm insane. I'm sorry, I said those things. Forget them. Please don't cry!' Rajat exclaims, removing his palm from her mouth to wipe her tear away.

She smiles at him, then sighs.

Rajat considers the sigh his answer. He steps away from her.

'Where ... where is Pratham?'

'I told Pratham to leave.'

'He didn't propose?'

'He did.'

'Oh,' Rajat believes himself defeated now. 'So, you said yes.'

'He's a good man.'

'Yes,' and Rajat hates him more than he can ever hate the vilest villain.

'But I said no,' she says. 'It would have been wrong.'

Rajat doesn't let relief please his heart. 'Because your parents wouldn't have approved?' he asks Anjali.

‘No, I have to go against my parents’ wishes. I told you I must do love marriage. It is my duty as an elder sister to the two girls who can’t even wear clothes of their choice. I said no because it felt wrong. He ... felt wrong,’ she says, stepping closer to Rajat and meeting his gaze.

‘Then what feels right?’ he asks, hoping, fearing, choking his breath in anticipation of her answer.

‘You,’ she says. ‘I know you are a bartender. My parents will think that wrong. But when I am with you, Rajat, it feels right to me. When I talk to you, it feels right. Yesterday, when you kissed me — and today when you said you love me — yes, I heard you, I thought it bad, but it *felt* so good! Rajat, the world might tell me you are wrong, but ... you feel more right to my heart than anyone else!’ she says, gently touching her fingers to his cheek. Then she turns and sits down on the ground, resting her back against the leafy wall.

Rajat stares down at her. His heart expanding with joy, mind still trapped in disbelief.

‘Come,’ she says, extending her hand to him.

He takes it and plonks down on the ground. Both sit cross-legged, facing each other. The storm is raging outside. Some gusts reach them too. But mostly it’s just wind. From the gaps between the leaves, they can see a yellow gloom smothering the world. It is dark inside the leafy tunnel too.

But it does not matter. Despite the dim light, they watch each other like never before.

‘What about your family?’ Rajat asks.

‘My brother might kill me. But it’s okay. People die for love. I can die too. But I can’t stop loving you!’ she says, holding his face in her hands.

Rajat chuckles at her words and instantly grabs at the freedom her words have given him. The freedom to hug her, kiss her, and to breathe into her hair. ‘You’ll kill me first, Anjali,’ he whispers into her ear.

Then he pulls back. ‘You need not die for me. I have news for you,’ he says. Now he feels he should have told it to her as soon as he returned from his trip. But it is not his habit to grasp the opportunities to appear better. Besides, since childhood, he has hungered for unconditional love. A love that does not depend upon what he does. *If you can’t accept me at my worst, you don’t deserve my best*, is the unconscious challenge he binds everyone with. No wonder he was always lonely.

But not anymore! Anjali accepted him at his worst. Anjali’s words have satisfied more cravings than one.

And now he tells her his history, the reason he became a bartender. And his reunion with his parents. ‘All because of you,’ he does not forget to mention. ‘I have quit my job at the pub,’ he says. ‘My father wants me to help him run his de-addiction centre. He’s old. I should help him.’

‘Great!’ Anjali clasps her hands in delight at Rajat’s words.

The howling wind outside has quietened down. The fragrance of rain now permeates the air. The dust is settled. And the world inside and outside the tunnel bears fresh new colours and the promise of pleasant weather.

‘But ...’ Rajat looks at Anjali, ‘our clinic is in Pune.’

Anjali sees his worry. She is ready with her solution. ‘No problem,’ she says. ‘Marry me and take me with you. I’ll find a job there. You’ll work with your father! Your parents are so respectable too. It’s perfect! My brother will not kill me now.’

‘No, he will not,’ says Rajat, grinning at her words. She doesn’t even realise she has proposed marriage to him.

‘Thank God! I didn’t really want to die.’ She laughs, throwing her arms around his neck. ‘Everything is all right now.’

His arms don’t waste an instant in wrapping her in a tight embrace. She is correct. It feels right, so right!

This is the first story from #JustRomance, a delicious collection of 7 heart-warming short romances full of love and smiles. If you want to read something happy & cheerful, check out this book at [Amazon](#)

[Universal Book Link](#)

About The Author



Jyoti Arora is an Indian novelist and blogger. Besides her books, her writing achievements include several wins in blogging competitions, over five years of freelance writing experience, developing books for kids and abridging 30 English novels like Jane Eyre, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, etc.

Jyoti's first novel 'Dream's Sake' was published by V&S Publishers in 2011. It tells a beautiful love story revolving around the troubles of physically challenged people. Her second novel 'Lemon Girl' is based on the theme of gender crime against women and victim-blaming. It is featured in Ezvid's wiki list of "9 Well-Written Novels That Put Women Front & Centre." It also received appreciation from Ms Maneka Gandhi. Her third novel 'You Came Like Hope' talks about the opposite side of the issue discussed in Lemon Girl. That is, it talks about the fake cases filed by women. This too is a case of gender crime and victim-blaming. But in this case, it is the man who suffers. The book received much appreciation for its unique theme and heart-warming love story. All three books are intense and based on serious social issues. For her fourth book, Jyoti decided to write something lighter and happier. That's what led to #JustRomance, a collection of happy love stories.

Books have always been Jyoti's best friends. Books so fascinated her from early childhood that she learnt to read by herself even before she started going to school. And she considers herself fortunate that she is able to pursue her dream of being a novelist and work at what she loves best.

However, if books are her first love, the thrilling and steadily advancing world of technology also fascinates her. As a result, one of her blogs is a technology blog called TechnoTreats. One of her posts in this blog even won her the title of Samsung Mobiler in 2011. After that, she won several other blogging competitions too.

She is a patient of Thalassemia which forced her to drop out of school too soon. But she did not let that defeat her. She studied on her own and completed her schooling through correspondence courses. Then she went on to study BA English (Honours) from Delhi University and then achieved postgraduate degrees in English Literature and Applied Psychology from Annamalai University.

For her determination and achievements, she has received appreciation from several eminent dignitaries and her life story has been covered in various TV shows, radio programs, newspapers, magazines, and websites. In the year 2016, she was one of the 100 special women achievers of India that were invited as guests to attend the Republic Day parade in Delhi.

Jyoti can be found online at jyotiarora.com, [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Pinterest](#), [Tumblr](#), [Your Quote](#), [Goodreads](#).

Other Books by Jyoti Arora

You Came Like Hope

The entertaining and heart-warming love story of You Came Like Hope takes you on a roller coaster of emotions as it uncovers some bitter truths, challenges widespread prejudices, and forces you to reconsider your beliefs. A must read for those who enjoy romances that leave them with something to think about.

Lemon Girl

Lemon Girl is an entertaining yet thought-provoking story of an abuse victim's journey to self-recovery and self-realization. A book that has won the love of readers and critics alike, Lemon Girl has been universally applauded for its heart-warming love story, hard-hitting theme, tight plot, and the writing style

Dream's Sake

Dreams give life to hope, breath to ambition and a meaning and purpose to existence, making it what can be called 'Life.' We all dream, and we all do what we can to make our dreams come true. But how far can a person go to fulfil the dreams of someone else? That's the question that the two closely inter-linked love stories in Dream's Sake seek to answer.

Dream's Sake is an intense and gripping novel telling the story of dreams, of friendship and of love, all of these gasping and struggling under a heavy burden of past traumas, personal doubts, fears and insecurities, and social prejudices.