

## IN THE GAME OF LOVE

### ONE

SUMAN SAT BESIDE Rajan on a couch in the lobby of Star International Hotel. They were waiting for their very important NRI clients to arrive. As the two glanced at their watches almost simultaneously, they knew the guests, along with senior officials of their company, would be there any minute. Though guests occupy an important place in Indian tradition, these NRI guests or clients actually meant a great deal for the company's growth chart.

Suman and Rajan, deputed for the arrangements, had been on their toes finalizing all the preparations for the day's meeting. Suman's searching eyes, focussed on the hotel's opulent entrance suddenly saw someone that made her fair complexion change to a bright angry red. Her pretty pink mouth wore a sneer that would have translated into the choicest abuse had she gathered herself enough to vent her emotions.

She raised herself from her seat with agility, as if apprehending an impending attack, and started walking towards the hotel entrance with hurried steps, without a care for the spectacle she would make if she tripped on the longish hem of her sari.

Needless to say, her sudden prance had confounded Rajan. He, too, stood up in response to her reaction. His forehead crinkled as his brown eyes widened behind the black-rimmed spectacles. He made an effort to follow her. But before Rajan could even move outside the

couch area, Suman halted, retraced her steps and came back to her seat. Like a lost soul, she dumped herself most inelegantly on the couch again.

‘What happened to you Suman?’ asked Rajan in a questioning voice. This was completely unlike the proper and efficiently in-control Suman he knew.

Suman said in a low voice, her head leaning back on the couch, ‘I missed getting the scoundrel!’

‘Who...Suman? Whom are you talking about?’ asked Rajan with emphasis this time.

Suman gestured towards the main entrance of the hotel, from where a couple was moving out of the gate. Her eyes were still agitated as she saw their backs moving out of sight.

Rajan looking puzzled asked, ‘But why are you so worked up, Suman! Did they do any wrong to you?’ Then he smiled and added on a lighter note, ‘It seems you have had a nightmare about these people.’

‘Nightmare!No, daymare!’Suman said tightening her lips, her voice a shrill whisper, seething with barely controlled anger.

‘Daymare!But why? And is that even a thing? Why should a stranger make you have the DAYMARE?’Rajan looked bemusedly at a visibly chagrined Suman. ‘It seems you lost sleep last night in anticipation of today’s meeting...are you going to be alright?’

His constant questioning and confusion just served to irritate Suman further.

'You keep making fun of me.' Suman was tearful this time. 'Why aren't you taking me seriously? I wonder why I would need enemies when blessed with a friend like you!'

Rajan knew by now that there was something terribly wrong that was disturbing Suman so much. He placed his hand on hers, contrite, and said, 'I was trying to make the situation less tense so that you don't appear stressed to our senior management team.'

'Rajan,' Suman said, 'I fear for my cousin. The couple that I was pointing at is known to me. And the cause of concern is that I have just seen my cousin in the arms of a man who is a big cheat!'

Before Suman could explain further, she saw their MD leading the guests towards them. They both stood up and Rajan murmured, 'Suman, just simmer down; after we are through with the meeting we will go to a coffee shop and then we can talk over your issues in detail. I'm sure we both together will be able to find a solution to your problem. For now, just relax and look cool or else this meeting will go for a toss.'

Suman tried to look cheerful and walked behind Rajan to greet the guests.

The meeting ended on a positive note. The itinerary for the guests was finalized, and thereafter, the guests took leave to relax in their rooms. The MD congratulated Rajan and Suman for making such excellent arrangements for the day, and bade them goodbye. Suman and Rajan decided to drive to a nearby coffee shop.

She had still not recovered from the incident at the hotel. She looked worried. Her face bore a morose look, a helpless frown marking her

forehead. After a brief spell of stillness that perturbed Rajan all the more, he broke the silence.

‘Suman, until and unless you share your problem, you will not be able to have a restful sleep at night, and you know the amount of pressure we need to take in coming days to make our international project a success.’

Looking at Rajan, Suman thanked her stars for having him in her life. What a wonderful, calming man, wanting to share her worries with him, Suman was transported back to the time where it had all begun.

## TWO

SLOGGING DAY IN and day out, preparing for the entrance examination, was not as torturous as waiting for the results. Since the due date of result announcement was already over, the waiting caused greater anxiety and despair. The mornings began with hope, but ended in angst. Suman had worked hard for the examination, but its result was beyond her control. A seat in a reputed business school could mean a breakthrough in her career graph and establish her on the path to success.

She paced the distance from her room to the entrance door, not one or two, but umpteen times. Her every task was interspersed by checking, yet again, the door entrance. Tired of her to and fro motion, which had become a daily ritual, she sat beside the window. She stared listlessly at the clouds playing the game of hide and seek with the earth; dark clouds would come and go and the concurrent dust storms with thundering nebula raised hopes of rain to give respite from

the sweltering heat. The earth would become hopeful at the sight of clouds, the clouds would then hide behind the hot sun and once again, poor earth would have to fall back on patience and faith. She wondered about how closely this game of the elements of nature matched with her own wait and patience.

Savita, Suman's mother, looked for Suman all around the house, and finally came to check Suman's favourite place. Suman sat beside the window, her eyes searching the sky above.

Suman's pleadings to be left to her own devices had never worked well with her mother. Savita was annoyed and worried at her daughter's restiveness, and pushed her to accompany her to the market to run some errands. It wasn't like Savita thought that the teeming masses of humanity, the sweltering heat, commotion and noise of the local market would give her daughter any pleasure. But she was a staunch believer in retail therapy, and if nothing, Suman would at least be distracted from her turmoil.

The market was full of people, a rainbow of varied shades and emotions that made up this mankind. Shopping, perhaps, is one activity that rouses a person to complete alertness, curiosity, and high levels of enthusiastic energy. People all around haggled with vendors to strike the best deal. The cacophony of vendors and customers sounded like the crackling of an ancient sound system needing repair.

The foodies flocked around streetfood stalls. Girls giggled and ladies stood gossiping and laughing in long serpentine queues before the *golgappaseller*, holding on to their plates, waiting for their turn to devour a serving of mouth-watering golgappas. Others relished aloo tikkis with colourful, green and red chutney, smooth white curd and ground spices. The wide-mouthed Indian wok, more than half full of oil, contained rounds of wiggly lines forming into hard crust jalebis;

the man clenching the cloth holding batter, rotated his hands like an artist holds his brush to paint the canvas with his strokes. After dropping the jalebi rounds in the wok, he picked them up, immersed them in the sugar syrup and heaped them on the perforated spatula to let the extra juice drip back into the hot syrup.

The delicious aroma wafting through the air had the power to trigger the most dormant appetites, but not so in the case of Suman. Despite her mother's insistence, she did not want to eat any of her favorite food. Watching happy faces of people glued to the food stalls, having satiated their gastronomical gluttony, could hold her attention only briefly.

Savita was holding Suman's hand in a firm clasp like she did when Suman was a child and navigated the stone hewed narrow pathways of the bazaar, like a cork bobbing up and down flowing with the stream of humanity, caught up for a while against the kiosks and then drawn away by the flowing current. Suman's senses had started drowning in the chaos of the market, her mind still glued to the entrance of her home. She wanted to rush back to reach her home. And she raced through the market leaving her mother behind to find a rickshaw to drop them to their residence.

All through the fifteen minutes ride on the rickshaw, Suman kept biting her nails. Savita had to reprimand her constantly, warning her, 'Suman my darling, nothing except patience will help you. Your nails will start bleeding if you chew them like this!' But it was difficult for Suman to keep still. As soon as the rickshaw came near her house, she jumped off, and rushed to their mailbox. She opened it to check if there was any letter for them. 'Yes...!'

There was the envelope for which she had been waiting. It had the emblem of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, and was addressed in her name. Her heart started pounding. It was difficult to get inside the house and open the letter. She could not wait a moment longer, and with thousand butterflies in her stomach, she started to tear the seal of the envelope.

A few drops of water fell on her face, hands, and on the envelope; her anxiety changed to an inexplicable anger! The water droplets served the purpose of fat used to increase the intensity of fire.

She looked up confident that the kids residing on the top floor were playing pranks on her by throwing water. They had done this earlier, but only when the Holi festival was round the corner. She had never become angry with them. She had dealt with their mischief with a smile and a warning to not get them sweets. This time, it was different.

She muttered, 'Enough is enough; my goodness! Why can't the parents teach their kids to behave properly?'

But she could see no one above. She looked from different angles to check for a human form, but no, there was nobody hiding.

And then her eyes shifted to look at the sky above; like we seek an answer to everything beyond our perceptible limits by looking up, believing that there resides an unknown power, an unlimited source of energy.

Suman got the answer, as a few more drops had fallen on her by that time.

Yes! Indeed, it was raining!

'Wow!' she exclaimed.

Savita reached her with racing steps and asked, 'What has happened, Suman?'

'It's raining! It's raining, Mom!'

Savita smiled at Suman's exultation at the sight of rain.

'Suman you are behaving like a child,' she said, shifting her gaze to the envelope in Suman's hand. 'Whose letter is this?'

Her mother's question brought Suman's attention back to the letter. Rather than replying to her, she rushed inside her house. Savita followed her closing the door and by the time she turned to look at Suman and repeat her question, Suman was reading the letter with a grin on her face.

She could easily read the expression on her daughter's face. It was the look of success! Joy and pride oozed from her face. She went near her daughter, kissed her forehead and embraced her in a tight hug.

Suman's eyes welled up with tears and in a choked voice she said, 'I have done it, Mom! IIM Ahmedabad, my dream destination!'

The few drops of trickling raindrops had changed to a happy, hearty shower.

Suman's happiness knew no bounds and nature seemed to complement her feeling. The land had become parched due to the heat



for days. The unexpected showers made the whole civilization dance to the tune of happiness and life. The raindrops breathed energy into vegetation, which was on the verge of collapse. The rain seeped through cracks and fissures and the air absorbed the aroma of the soil and emanated as fresh earth fragrance. It made the air refreshing, like the ecstatic smile of a newly-wed bride, waiting for her husband to return after a long day of work.

The fervour in nature was transmitted to the animals and the vegetation alike. The gusts of wind accompanying the rain blew through bushes and trees making them dance elatedly. The stray animals also rejoiced at the sight.

Suman was standing in the corner of the verandah collecting raindrops in her cupped hands. She had closed her eyes to let the coolness soak in to reach her soul.

After a long time, she was experiencing the bliss of a child—carefree and relaxed. She wanted to jump and play with the rainwater, but biologically she had crossed the boundaries of her childhood, and hence, was too old for such an activity. But, her spirits danced within her. She felt on cloud nine.

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