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westland publications ltd
61, II Floor, Silverline Building, Alapakkam Main Road, Maduravoyal, Chennai 600095
93, I Floor, Shamlal Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002

First published in *Verve*, February 2016

This ebook edition first published by westland publications ltd, 2017

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ISBN: 978-93-86224-73-6

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Preeti Shenoy

The moment she walked in through the circular glass door, pausing just a little and tapping her feet to shake her boots of the snow, I knew there was something different about her. She removed her gloves, her coat and her woollen cap, hanging them on the stand carefully. She shook her head and used her fingers, crooking them like a hairbrush—that thing women do—to smoothen it and fluff it back. I drew in a sharp breath, as I noticed her waist length, thick, cascading jet black hair. There aren't too many women in Norwich with hair like that, and if there are, I can say with certainty that they definitely do not frequent the Norwich Millennium Library for sure.

In the four years that I have worked here, I have seen many women, men and children walking in through these doors, spending time, browsing, reading and sometimes just taking shelter from the cold. I can always tell the serious readers from the non-serious ones. The ones who read head upstairs because that is where the books are housed, and the ones who don't read head straight to the movies section, look at a couple of movies and then plonk down on one of the chairs, whipping out their phones, probably texting whomever they had arranged to meet here. We got that a lot. Being centrally located at Forum, right next to the market place, our library was frequented not just by serious readers but a lot of people just wanting a place to wait in luxury and comfort. And what better a waiting spot than the most popular library in UK, spread over 20,000 square feet and two floors, with a café, a training centre, a children's section, a film section, more than a 100 computer terminals, photocopying and fax terminals, all of it in a beautiful horse shoe shaped plan, with full height glass walls extending from the floor to the ceiling, allowing a complete view outside. In the initial days I had been happy here. But now even this splendid atmosphere made no difference to me.

She was a serious reader for sure. She seemed to be in a hurry as she took two stairs at a time, almost running up the stairs. She was wearing Ugg

boots and a long faux leather black skirt. I stared at her mesmerised. Those boots were exactly the ones my Anna used to wear. I kept glancing at the stairs to see if she would emerge. I didn't want to miss a chance of looking at her once more. There was only one exit to the library, and when she left, I would see her for sure from my till which was located in a spot that gave a 360 degree view of the whole place. I kept watching out for her, long past lunch time. When Peter asked me if I wanted to join him for lunch in our usual spot in Pret-a-Manger, I said I wasn't hungry.

She finally emerged three hours later, and I hadn't moved from my spot. I desperately wanted to take a leak but there was a chance that she might have left the library when I went to the restroom, so I stayed put. I willed her to approach me—customers usually did if they needed something. But she had a stack of books in her hand and she headed straight towards one of the self-checkout counters. She then swiped her card, issued the books and put them in a large leather bag that she carried. It was a designer one for sure—probably a Hermes. I knew as my Anna was crazy about handbags too. Anna had definitely taught me a lot on women's fashion. Most men would check out a woman's arse, her legs or her boobs. I always noticed their bags and boots.

As soon as she left, I logged into the library system and found out her name and address. I drew in a sharp breath. My Anna used to live on that very street. Wroxham, Beech road. How well I knew it—every bump, every curve, nook and cranny of that street. It was one of the most expensive areas in Norwich. It overlooked the River Bure and was among the most sought-after residences on Norfolk broads. From the address, I knew she was just a few houses away from Anna's. I looked at her photo from our records. God, she was beautiful. She looked a lot like my Anna. Slender eyebrows, brown eyes, a dainty nose, a near perfect complexion and pouty lips. She could easily have passed off for a model. I snooped a bit more through her records, and found that she had joined the library just a month back. This was her second visit. On her first, she had borrowed no books, only two movies—*Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind* and *Amelie*.

'Trying to hook up with her, eh mate?' asked Peter and I almost jumped out of my chair and saw him standing behind me, staring at my computer

screen. It was his most annoying trait and it irked me. Always.

‘Why the fuck do you spy on people? Go get a life,’ I snapped. That didn’t deter him though.

‘I know her sister well,’ he said, and he had my interest almost immediately. I was even willing to forgive him for peering over my shoulder and reading my computer screen.

‘Oh, come off it. Women like her won’t even look at guys like us,’ I said.

It was a calculated statement, one that I knew would draw a response from him. If I had asked him for details, he would have probably not divulged much. Peter liked to feel important. But he wasn’t as smart as I am, and he rose to the bait.

He shook his head and said ‘Oh, that is where you are wrong, my friend. I was “seeing her” for nearly a year. She was a good lay.’ He drew commas in the air with his hands as he spoke.

‘So what happened then?’ I asked. If a guy says that a woman is a good lay and then breaks off with her, in all probability it is she who has dumped him.

‘I couldn’t stand her derogatory remarks about my family,’ he said.

I could relate to that one. Anna was like that too. The last time we had a fight, it was because she wanted me to tell my mother what to wear to the launch of the East Anglian charity ball. I refused. ‘I just want to make sure that she... um....you know... doesn’t feel out of place,’ she had said.

‘She won’t.’ I had been terse.

But Anna wouldn’t shut up.

‘See, the thing is the press is going to be there and the pictures are going to be all over the papers. So I just want to be extra sure.’

‘Look Anna, if you are ashamed of my mother just say so. It’s not like she *wants* to attend your fucking ball you know,’ I had said. She had asked me to mind my language and called me impolite, uncouth and lowbred. If she had shut up after that, I could have still controlled my anger. But she wouldn’t. She went on and on, ranting and ranting. I folded my hands and dug my nails into my flesh, gritting my teeth with each sentence she uttered. It was her final remark that had sent me over the edge.

‘This is what happens when you fall in love with the cleaning lady’s son. I was only trying to help so she fits in with the crowd. Everyone would be so well-dressed you know.’

That had made the slow fire sizzling inside me finally explode and I had hit her across the mouth then. I hadn’t meant to. The impact of my blow sent her reeling and she banged her head against the candle stand on her side board. She attended that ball with a bandage around her head, and she told everyone that she had slipped and fallen down. She had ended it with me the very next day and my mother was thrown out of the place she had lived in for the past thirty years. My mother had been working for Anna’s uncle’s family and she lived in an outhouse on the estate grounds. She never forgave me for what I did.

I couldn’t hate Anna though. Even though she had got married that fall, a part of me still loved her. She had married a wealthy man, the son of one of her family’s business associates, and had moved almost immediately to the United States. I never heard from her after that. As though losing Anna wasn’t bad enough, I lost my mother too. She said she didn’t want to see me anymore and stopped talking to me.

I had beaten myself over and over, thinking and rethinking about the events of that day, and I thought I had finally closed it and moved on until today—when this woman had walked into the library and raked up a monster I thought I had long buried.

‘Women like her are like that, aren’t they?’ I now said, softly.

‘I don’t know about her personally, but her sister sure was a foul mouthed bitch,’ Peter replied.

I knew that Dr. Norman would want me to write this in my journal. This was the kind of thing he was always encouraging me to write. He had said it would be a slow process for recovery and I was to write down every single event or incident that made an impact on me or left an impression. I saw him every second Thursday and he carefully read every single thing I wrote. He was my therapist – thought he liked to call himself a psychiatrist and an integrative medicine expert—and he kept assuring me that and it was common to be in a depressed phase. The bastard even asked me if I truly loved Anna. ‘I just want to make sure it isn’t erotomanic delusion, you know,’ he had said. I had answered all his questions about Anna, and he asked a lot of questions. Each time we met, he asked if I was taking my medication—and though I threw away the prescription and the pills he gave me after my first visit, I assured him I was.

I hadn’t updated the journal in three weeks now. The last I had written was a single line which said ‘I feel dead inside and I cannot feel anything, anymore’. It had been months since I had felt anything. I felt hollow, empty, bereft. I did not want to write anything about the woman who had walked in that morning and so I didn’t.

I couldn’t be bothered to go for a haircut or to shave, and I knew I was beginning to look unkempt. It hadn’t bothered me till today. Now there was a small spark inside me which had been lit. As soon as my duty hours finished at the library, I headed to In-Trim for a shave and a smart hair-cut. By the time they finished, I couldn’t recognise myself.

The next day was my weekly off, and I found myself at Beech Street, walking outside her house. There was a wooden bench in a park which faced her house, and I sat there, hidden by the foliage as I stared at her home. It had a beautiful garden. The first floor was an open plan living space with floor to ceiling windows and I knew it would have panoramic views of River Bure. She emerged about 45 minutes later. She was wearing shorts and a tiny little white top, accentuating her curves. She was stunning. And as I stared at her, awestruck, she transformed into my Anna before my very eyes. I think I fell in love with her then and I knew I had to approach her.

I clutched my bag, and felt the heavy duty wrench that I had packed, as I walked towards her house, feeling vibrantly alive and happy for the first time in days.

Three days later, when Peter was reading the newspaper, I crept up quietly behind him, peered over his shoulder, like he had done to me a countless times. “Community shocked by the murder of a woman on Beech Street,” it read. It had her picture too. She was smiling sweetly.

“Good Lord, Peter. Wasn’t she the one who came here the other day? The one whose sister you were dating?” I said.

And I smiled as a startled Peter almost jumped out of his chair.