

# **SWEAR YOU WON'T TELL?**

**Vedashree Khambete-Sharma**

**To Arjun and Irawati  
without whom this book and this life  
would've been infinitely less interesting.**

Oranges and lemons sold for a penny  
All the schoolgirls are so many  
The grass is green and the rose is red  
Remember me when I am dead.

- English nursery rhyme

## PROLOGUE

The corridor outside the morgue smelled of phenyl. A sharp acrid smell that left even those who had never smelled it before, feeling distinctly uncomfortable without quite knowing why.

The body in the corridor smelled of Mahim Creek in all its fetid glory. Someone had thrown a dirty cloth over it, but a quick look beneath revealed that the corpse wasn't very old. Early thirties, if you were the type to play guessing games with dead bodies. So, not old, but in another sense, yes, definitely old. The sea and its children had had some time to do their work on it. So much so that you could barely make out whether a man or a woman lay beneath the sodden scraps of yellow jersey and blue denim. But pull them apart slightly and you could tell the saltwater-bleached corpse was female.

The harsh fluorescent light fell on a bloated hand protruding from under the cloth that mercifully covered the rest of the body. Rigor mortis had set in and the fingers were stiff. The fingernails still showed traces of pink nail polish. A fly had settled on the index finger, drawn by the smell of decay. Ward boys and nurses passed by, muttering to themselves. That was understandable.

The corpse reeked. It was gruesome. It was unbearable.

It was *perfect*.

## CHAPTER ONE

The conference room ceiling had thirteen little cracks in the plaster. Fifteen, if you counted the squiggly ones next to the fan. There was also something greenish up there that could be moss or just the remnants of the infamous Pesto Pasta Incident. After ten minutes of staring at it Avantika Pandit turned her gaze back to her colleague.

‘Um-hmm,’ she said.

It was the prelude to the weekly editorial meeting, that little time before Nathan Alvares, the editor, walked in, and for reasons beyond her understanding, this was when people felt compelled to share bits of their personal lives with each other. The person currently engaging in this exercise was Shibani Rao, *The Mumbai Daily*'s Arts and Culture correspondent.

A petite bundle of tiny clothes and industrial quantities of mascara, she was a ticker tape of random information about herself that she assumed people would find fascinating. Quite mistakenly so, in this case. So far, Avantika had pointedly yawned, stretched, stared at the ceiling, the floor and her watch; had basically hinted in every polite way possible that she couldn't be less interested in Shibani's monologue about the ‘mad crazy place I went to on Friday night’. She should've known better. Shibani in weekend discussion mode wouldn't take a hint even if it masqueraded as an all-expenses paid trip to Tahiti, or wherever all the cool kids were going this year.

Avantika wished Uday would hurry up. Uday Desai was one of the few people at *The Mumbai Daily* that she got along with. Come to think of it, he was one of the few people she'd got along with in journalism school too. Now, he was equal parts friend, confidante and drinking buddy and it was he who had told her of the job opening here. She was beginning to suspect that it was his idea of a

really elaborate prank. True, she needed the job after *Belle* magazine had shut down. But, she thought wryly, she should've known how amazing it would all turn out, especially since Nathan had made her feel ever so welcome.

'Look,' he'd said in his bored monotone, 'I need a reporter and your CV is the only one without a typo. So yes, you're hired. But this isn't some fancy-schmancy magazine. I don't need any airy-fairy types here.'

Luckily for Avantika, neither of those words applied to her. So she'd joined the following Monday and had quickly discovered that as far as job profiles went, the only difference between writing for *Belle* and writing for this newspaper was how glossy, or not, her words looked in print. Now, wondering if Shibani would shut up if she shoved a handy cement mixer into her mouth, she looked at the clock on the conference room wall. It was ten past eleven. Not only was Nathan late, an event by itself, but so was Uday. At which point she saw him strolling into the room.

Uday never walked. He sauntered. He looked like a fresh-faced twenty-year old and took life at an easy pace; uncommon traits in a reporter, especially one on the wrong side of thirty. But behind the baby face and lazy gait was a mind so sharp you could probably dice tomatoes with it. Today, he had a kid with him. A teenager, by the look of it. Fresh out of college, if at all. The skinny joggers, the Captain America t-shirt were all promising signs, although the look of near-terminal enthusiasm was unexpected. Avantika straightened up and smiled in anticipation.

Uday eased into the chair on her left and Avantika took the opportunity to turn away from Shibani, who was now babbling about some organic yoga cafe she'd been to, where they probably served spiritual enlightenment in jam jars.

'New trainee,' he said, indicating the boy.

'Hi, I'm Wayne,' the boy said holding out his hand.

'Avantika,' she replied, shaking his hand. 'There's a mirror in the men's room.'

Uday rolled his eyes and patted the bewildered Wayne on his back.

'V-A-I-N,' he said, 'Wordplay.' Turning to Avantika he said, 'Really?'

She shrugged.

'So Wayne,' she said, 'You want to be a reporter?'

'Yes ma'am,' he replied, 'I'm passionate about the truth. I think people deserve to hear it.'

She raised her eyebrows.

'What truth?'

'Sorry?'

'What truth do you mean?' she repeated, 'The earth is round, EDM is just noise, crying babies on airplanes are the most effective ad for contraception—what truth?'

Wayne looked abashed for a moment.

'Um ... the truth. You know, in general.'

She stared at him, then looked at Uday, who looked away. At first she thought it was because he was trying not to laugh, but as she followed his gaze she realised Nathan had walked into the room.

Avantika often thought the editor of *The Mumbai Daily* looked more like someone's nondescript uncle than the editor of a popular newspaper. Thin, balding and middle-aged, he'd be in a room whole minutes before you realized he was there, and his facial expressions often had nothing to do with his actual mood. Now, blank-faced as ever, he slipped into the chair at the head of the table and started the meeting.

'Reuters says there was another blast in Gaza,' one of the features editors at the table announced.

'Near the pyramids?' gasped a shocked voice.

In the stunned silence, everybody turned to look at the culprit. It turned out to be Wayne, who promptly went pink in the ears.

'That's Giza,' said Avantika, 'In Egypt. Whole different continent genius.'

Uday kicked her under the table. She ignored him.

'Give him a break,' Nathan drawled, 'He's new.'

'To what? Geography?', she laughed.

This time Uday's kick was harder. It didn't hit her hard, but what did was the fact that nobody else had even cracked a smile. She looked around quizzically. Everyone was studiously avoiding her gaze, as though she was standing outside a railway station handing out pamphlets offering a break into Bollywood, no previous experience required, just call this number and ask for Munna. Nathan, on the other hand, looked her right in the eyes. And smiled.

'Uday can do Gaza,' he said pleasantly, 'You, Avantika, can cover this.' He passed a sheet of paper to her and without a second look her way, continued the meeting.

Avantika skimmed it: it was an invitation to a press conference for some designer. It was exactly the kind of thing she used to cover at *Belle*. Exactly the kind of thing she had hoped to avoid, as Nathan well knew. She opened her mouth to say something when Uday's elbow nudged her gently. He passed her a scrap of notepaper. It had one word in his neat, cursive hand: *Nephew*.

Avantika closed her eyes and swore. Way to go, Pandit. With a sigh, she began reading the details of the invitation and stopped dead at a name in the first paragraph.

Aisha Juneja.

Damn it. Please let there be more than one of those. She did a furtive search on her phone for 'Aisha Juneja designer'. The images it threw up were of the same person and also, because this was the internet, of random women in various states of undress. She ignored those and focused on the one that looked familiar. She wore her hair short these days. But the mocking grey eyes, the imperious

mouth and the bored expression were exactly as Avantika remembered. She sighed. She would have to get out of this event somehow. Perhaps, she could fall ill on the day. Or butter up Uday into covering it for her, or even Shibani. But no, Nathan would find out and she was still on probation. Stop it, she told herself, it's not an exam. Just talk to Nathan and sort it out. What's the worst he could do? One, bite my head off in public, two, fire me, three, bite my head off in public and *then* fire me.

Nevertheless, after the meeting she followed Nathan into his office. He was sitting on his roomy swivel chair, reading the Reuters report. The wall behind him was full of large framed black and white photographs, some from the stories he'd broken over time, others taken years ago, at Press Club functions. In some of the photographs you could see a younger Nathan, a man with an intact hairline and a mouth that could still turn up at the corners without a trace of sarcasm.

She knocked on the door. He looked up.

'What do you want?' Before she could answer, he continued. 'Let me guess, you want me to send someone else for that press conference.'

'Yes, because—'

'... you're too good for it.'

'Ye- no. Actually—'

'You're a smartass, Pandit. This is a newspaper, not a comedy club. You're doing this thing. End of story. Now, out.'

'Nathan, give me anything else. Please! Anything! I don't want to go there! Seriously, *anything* else!'

Nathan leaned back in his chair and peered at her over the rim of his big, black square-framed glasses.

'Stop being so dramatic. I'm not sending you to review *Housefull 6*.'

'It's . . . that designer and I . . . we were . . . at school together.'

'Schoolmates huh?'

Avantika grimaced.

'No. Definitely not.'

Nathan nodded sympathetically. Then he grinned and said, 'Too bad.'

Avantika frowned at him and stomped out of the cabin. She was just out of the door, when she heard him say, 'Oh, and take Wayne along. He's never been to a press conference before.'



Uday was reading up on the specifics of the Gaza incident, when he heard the chair behind him creak.

There was a loud sigh. He ignored it. Another sigh, then some muttering. Uday turned around.

'He said no.' It wasn't a question.

'Yes! The bastard!' Avantika fumed, 'I offered to cover *anything* else in exchange but the man just *refused!*'

Uday waited. He could sense it coming.

'I told him why as well, it's not like I'm being snooty, there's a genuine reason I don't want to go there!'

Any minute now.

'And to top it all, he wants me to take Wayne "What Is An Atlas" Trainee with me! Do I look like a babysitter? Do I?'

Wait for it, wait for it.

'So listen . . . do you think you could um—'

And there it was.

'No Avanti, I don't think I could um.'

'You don't even know what I was going to say!'

He gave her a bored grin.

'Could I cover it instead? Could I talk to him? Could I tell him you got run over by a taxi? Doesn't matter. I'm not doing it.'

Avantika was torn. She had already finished wheedling once since morning. Twice would be far too much to inflict on her own ego. But she really, really didn't want to see Aisha Juneja in the flesh again. Just the idea of it made her skin feel all hot and itchy like that summer when she had broken out into a rash and had to practically bathe with Caladryl every day.

She gave it one last shot.

'Uday,' she said.

'Yes?'

'You remember I got my wisdom tooth removed last month?'

'Yes?'

'You remember how they had to stitch my cheek to my jaw?'

'I still don't believe that happened.'

'You remember how the wound got infected and they had to drill around and do it all over again?'

He squirmed in revulsion. 'You just like bringing this shit up, no?'

'This press conference is going to be more painful than that.'

He laughed and shook his head.

'Avanti, you're a grown-ass woman. Stop being so scared of a damned meet and greet.'

Avantika drew herself up with as much dignity as she could muster. 'I'm not *scared* of it. I just don't want to do it. It's like reading Paulo Coelho. Or making a jodi.com profile.'

'Aha, and how's *that* going?'

Avantika waved her hands vaguely. Rishi had been two years ago. Now, she was a thirty-two-year-old single woman, a creature considered dangerous and possibly defective, by Indian social norms. You couldn't let unmarried women run amok, in case that kind of thing caught on.

Elderly aunties with nothing better to do had started hounding her mother about matrimonial procrastination, till the poor woman had buckled and made a profile on an arranged marriage website. Just because one boy turned out to be . . . unsuitable . . . it didn't mean there weren't other fish in the sea, her mother had reasoned. Avantika had gently asked her to back off, as the whole experience had put her off marine life for a while.

These days, her father had made a habit of logging on to the profile when she was around and sighing pointedly at all the eligible bachelors out there, just going to waste.

Now she tried her luck one last time.

'Are you going to help me or not?'

But Uday was already getting up, glaring at his phone.

'Can't,' he said, 'Got to write the Gaza story. Also, I'd rather eat a dictionary than cover a fashion event. You're on your own,' and because he knew she hated it, he added, 'Babe.'

Avantika watched him leave. According to her watch, it was already 2 p.m. If she left now, she could make it to the Taj ballroom in time for the press conference. Maybe she could slip in unnoticed. And it's not like she had to meet Aisha in person or anything. She'd be in and out like a shot. It would be painful, but quick. Like an express bikini wax.

Oddly enough, her stomach rumbled at this point. She hoped they'd serve some decent food at the place. It *was* the Taj, after all. Cheering up a bit at the prospect of five-star snacks, she grabbed her helmet and her black leather satchel. She was about to head to the door, when she heard someone yell her name.

'Avantika ma'am! Ma'am!' Wayne was running to her, his backpack flying behind him.

Damn. She'd almost forgotten about him.

'Just Avantika,' she said. 'Let's go.'



'So what happens in a press conference?', Wayne asked.

They were waiting at the Marine Lines traffic signal on Avantika's scooter. A red Honda Activa that behaved itself on most days and made it unnecessary to offer her firstborn child to taxi drivers in exchange for a ride to work every morning. Now, sitting astride it in the rider's seat,, with Wayne perched precariously behind her, she stared at the sea through the visor of the helmet. The sun, was being its usual democratic self, shining with equal indifference on the backs of luxury sedans and taxis, on the hair of couples necking on the Marine Drive promenade, and on the tin cups held out by the urchins pestering them for coins. A balmy breeze from the Arabian Sea blew her hair against her face, a brief respite from the sweat trickling down her neck.

It was a hot afternoon and the helmet made it worse. But that was Mumbai for you. You wouldn't get anything done if you sat around complaining about the heat. Plus she was trying to be patient, she really was, but this idiot child was getting on her nerves.

Was I this daft when I started out, she wondered. Did my seniors want to whack me around the head too? She swallowed the impulse to wreak violence on a minor, turned her head towards him a bit and answered his question.

'People speak, we ask questions if we want to, daydream if we don't, they give us press releases and freebies, sometimes food, then we go back to office and write fifty words about it. A hundred, if there's a celebrity.'

It wasn't, strictly speaking, the perfect description but what did he know? He thought Gaza was filled with pyramids.

'Sorry if I, you know, pissed you off or something.'

Avantika rolled her eyes. She must've sounded harsher than she felt.

'No, it's not you, I'm just. . . it's not you, okay?' she said, mentally adding, 'even though it's your fault I have to go for this thing'.

The traffic light turned green, saving her from a longer explanation, and they sped off towards the Taj Mahal Palace hotel.



An enduring landmark, rumoured to have been the result of a stunning architectural gaffe, the Taj stands for old money, old world charm and since 26 November 2008, for terror tourism. History has it that the hotel was built by Jamshedji Tata, after he was denied entry into the then-fancy Watson Hotel. The charge? He was, at the time, suffering from a serious case of being born brown. Whatever its origin story, today the Taj throws its doors open to all of humanity—white, black and brown. Well, at least to that section of humanity that draws six-figure salaries. And to the section that included people like Avantika; journalists and other media professionals who got invited to the high-brow events that were hosted at the Taj.

As she made her way inside, Wayne tagging behind her like a wide-eyed wheeled suitcase, Avantika paused to wonder at the ambience. The hushed tones, the rich but subdued music, the tasteful decor littered with odd pieces of art; the Taj was not very different from any other five-star hotel in Mumbai. But it was elevated in the mind's eye because the mind came from a middle-class to which the Taj, was THE TAJ. You were going to THE TAJ. Better wipe your soles properly on the

doormat. Are you wearing good, clean underwear? What if you crash into a waiter and fall into a pile of diamonds and die? Then *everyone* will know you were wearing tatty underwear to THE TAJ.

The press conference was in the North Crystal Room, all ornate carved pillars and nineteenth century chandeliers. The doors were closed, but there was a PR lackey sitting at the table outside. Avantika glanced at her watch, 3.45 p.m.. They were late. Just as well, she thought as she signed for both of them and picked up their press passes. With any luck, nobody would see her get in. Or out.

The room was dark but in the light of the audio-visual presentation playing on the large screen at the back, she could see people huddled over tables. She made her way to the nearest empty seat and sat down. A second later, there was a thud and a muffled yelp. Amidst whispers of 'Ssshhh' and 'Quiet!', Wayne got back to his feet and slipped into the seat next to her.

'I tripped over the—' he began, but she cut him off with a 'Ssshhh.'

On the screen, blank-faced, pouty models held Aisha's new Spring-Summer collection of handbags, as a breathy female voice extolled their virtues. Bold neons, soft pastels, and vibrant floral prints had been moulded into reasonably attractive shapes. She could see why terminally fashion-conscious bloggers had christened Aisha the 'hot new designer on the block'. But for the life of her, she couldn't imagine why anyone would want to shell out the thousands of rupees each of these bags cost. Then again, it wasn't like she fit the consumer profile for these things. All *her* handbags were bought from Dharavi.

She stifled a yawn and hoped that the AV and the conference would end soon. It's not often that the Universe actually listens to your inner monologue, but perhaps in this case it did. Because just a few seconds later, the AV ended and the lights came on. A plump woman in a lavender skirt-suit came on to the makeshift stage, and began essentially repeating everything the AV had said about the collection.

'Is that the designer?' Wayne whispered.

Avantika shook her head and scanned the crowd.

'That's her, there, next to the tall guy in the glasses.'

Wayne turned in the direction she was pointing at.

'She's hot,' he said with awe.

Avantika didn't bother glaring at him. It would take too long to explain to this boy that nobody asked for his knee-jerk reaction to the looks of a woman he didn't even know. And, also, because it was true.

It takes a special kind of person to carry off black jodhpurs, a fitted black waistcoat minus a shirt, a silver lamé bow-tie and matching silver trainers— the kind of person who only feels at home under a spotlight, the bigger and brighter, the better.

Now, as the plump woman on the stage made way for Aisha, Avantika found herself marvelling at her. Here was a woman in a pixie haircut and an outfit that was part horse jockey, part male stripper, who was nevertheless oozing the kind of electric self-assurance that makes men go weak in the knees and women go wild with jealousy. It wasn't fair. It didn't even seem like she was trying, as she graciously answered a question from a *Vogue* correspondent.

'Same old Aisha,' she muttered.

'You know her or what?' Wayne asked.

Clearly, her mutters weren't as quiet as she'd thought. Kicking herself mentally, she nodded.

'Same class in school.'

'Oh, really?' asked a jolly female voice.

The plump woman who had introduced Aisha, had materialised behind her, holding a bottle of mineral water in her hand. Before she could respond, the woman held out her hand.

'Hi, I'm Renuka from Glitz PR.'

'Avantika Pandit, *Mumbai Daily*,' Avantika said. 'And that's Wayne,' she added as an afterthought.

'Nice to meet you, you know Aisha from St. Agnes?'

'St. *Agatha*.'

Renuka smiled smoothly and for some reason, Avantika felt as if she'd already known that. 'St. Agatha, of course, silly me, would you like to meet her, it could be easily arranged' Renuka said. She was clearly a woman with no time for question marks. Or full stops.

For one mad moment, Avantika considered telling her that Saint Agatha may not be available for a meeting, what with her having died some eight hundred years after Christ.

'Erm, no thanks, we must get going. Lots of work at office.'

'Nonsense, I'm sure you can steal ten minutes—'

And before she knew it, Renuka had grabbed Wayne by the arm and frogmarched him towards the stage. Avantika considered just leaving at this point. Then she imagined Nathan's face when she told him that some random PR valkyrie had taken his Preciousssss away at the press conference, while she legged it from there. She sighed. Some days you were just a hydrant for the Universe to piss on.

Dragging her feet, she followed them to the front of the room. The tables at the back were mostly occupied by the sorts who had come here just to fill column space. But the front of the room was a different story. The clothes were quirkier here, the handbags much more expensive. Here were the journalists who weren't just interested in fashion, but often, dictated it. The style editors of *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*, the hosts of TV shows dedicated to fashion and the ten most popular fashion bloggers in India. These were the ladies who could tell a Birkin from a Kelley, knew what the next 'It'

bag was going to be and could make or break a designer with a mere fifty words of print. They were, in other words, the Handbag Mafia.

They were all currently staring at Wayne, whose Adam's apple was bobbing up and down like a contestant on *So You Think You Can Dance*. Renuka was introducing him to Aisha. Avantika almost pitied him at this point, but she pitied herself more.

'And he's come with a friend of yours from school,' Renuka trilled, 'Avantika, from *Mumbai Daily*. . . right, dear?'

Avantika stepped forward with a nod. Her body language had changed in the last second or so, to completely conceal the distaste she was feeling.

'Yep,' she said with a smile, 'Hello, Aisha.'

It was worth it, just to see the look of horror on Aisha's face. The next second, it was gone and her grey eyes narrowed.

'Hello,' she said, in tones of chipped ice, 'Long time.'

## **1989**

There was a parrot on the tree outside the window. It was eating something Avantika couldn't see. Probably a guava, she decided. The parrot in her storybook ate a guava. And a red chilli. But the thing in the parrot's beak wasn't red. Or chilli-shaped. It was green and white. So it was probably a guava. The mystery satisfactorily resolved, she turned her attention back to class. It was English period, her favourite. She liked all the new words and writing with pencils and Miss D'Sa, who reminded her of her Aunty Rujuta. She liked everything about being in the first standard actually. The small recess and the big recess and the bells at the end of the periods and her classroom with its white walls and her wooden desk and wooden bench painted blue, and all the lovely notebooks and pencils.

Ooh, and she loved her uniform. She had never worn a uniform until she came into primary school. And then, one day Aai and Baba had taken her to a big shop and bought her three! She looked at the one she was wearing now. It was so smart, a pink and white checked shirt, a dark pink pinafore and a pink and white checked belt. She lovingly smoothed her pinafore, feeling the soft fabric under her fingers.

'Can I come in, Miss?'

A girl was standing at the door. She looked old. Probably in the third or fourth standard, Avantika thought.

'Not "can", Kashmira, say "may I come in",' corrected Miss D'Sa.

'May I come in, Miss?' the girl called Kashmira said.

'Yes, you may.'

'Miss, Miss Francis has called you to the 3B classroom, Miss.'

'Now?'

'Yes Miss.'

Miss D'Sa sighed. Then she looked at the class and said, 'I'll be right back, everyone. Don't make a noise, okay?'

'Yesmiss!', the class chorused.

'Just copy what I've written on the blackboard.'

'Yesmiss!'

'I don't want anyone to tell me that the class was talking when I wasn't here.'

'Yesmiss!'

Satisfied, Miss D'Sa followed Kashmira out of the class.

It was at this point that Avantika realised with sudden horror, that she needed to go to the bathroom. Really badly. But how? Miss D'Sa wasn't in class. She couldn't leave the classroom without taking permission from Miss D'Sa. It was not allowed. Oh, how she wished she had asked for permission instead of staring at the parrot!

She looked around nervously. Everyone was busy copying the sentences Miss D'Sa had written on the board. Everyone, except Mitali, who sat in the next row and was always being yelled at by Miss for not doing her homework. Maybe if she held on for some time, Miss D'Sa would come back and then she could ask for permission and go to the bathroom.

So she turned her attention to her notebook and started scribbling. A few minutes later, her bench partner turned to her and said, 'I finished. You finished?'

Avantika shook her head. Miss D'Sa had told them not to talk.

'Why you are writing so slowly?' the girl asked.

'Sssh, Miss said no talking,' Avantika whispered.

The girl giggled.

'But Miss is not here to see who's talking, no? And no one will tell her, because she only said she doesn't want anyone to tell her the class was talking.'

Avantika glanced at the door, worried. Miss *had* said that. But it still felt... wrong.

'Let me write,' she said instead, and picked up the pencil.

'Then write,' her partner said, but there was an odd smile on her face.

A moment later, Avantika felt a finger tickle her neck. She turned around and whispered, 'Stop it!'

'No,' her partner giggled, tickling her again, this time on the side of her waist.

'Stop no, please!', Avantika said with a whine.

But it didn't stop. Avantika wriggled and squirmed, her body tense and her mind full of fear, till she couldn't take it anymore.

'Stop it no, please!', she cried, 'I feel like going to the bathroom!!'

Her partner stopped the onslaught immediately.

'Really?', she asked, her face serious.

'Yes,' Avantika replied, relaxing.

And then, to her shock, her partner grinned and started tickling her again, only much, much harder. She tried controlling herself, she really did, but it was no use. She felt her underpants get wet, and a thin trickle flowed down her legs, wetting her uniform. Her nice new uniform.

Avantika felt her eyes sting and before she knew it her face had scrunched up and she was weeping great big blobs of tears. Her nose, clearly feeling that her eyes shouldn't be doing this alone, joined in and began to run. Avantika covered her face with her palms and cried and cried, trying to drown out the whispers and giggles as more and more girls saw what was happening and joined in.

Then a gentle voice in front of her said, 'Girlie, girlie, take this.'

Avantika peeped from behind her hands. The girl sitting on the bench in front of her had turned around and was holding a hanky.

'Don't cry,' she said, 'If you cry, they'll tease you more.'

Avantika took the hanky. It was pink and had an L embroidered on a corner, with a pattern of roses. It was so pretty. She didn't feel like getting it dirty. The girl seemed to understand that.

'It's okay,' she said, 'You can wash it and bring it tomorrow.'

'Thank you,' said Avantika, sniffing and wiping her face.

Then she folded the hanky and placed it carefully in her pocket.

'What's your name?' she asked the girl.

'Laxmi Swaminathan,' the girl replied.

Avantika wanted to say thank you again, but suddenly, the whispers and giggles died down. There was what Miss Francis often called 'pin-drop silence'. Miss D'sa was standing at the door, a stern expression on her face.

'Why are you all making such a noise?' she asked, 'This whole class is going to be punished now.'

'Miss, miss,' a girl from the third row said, putting up her hand, 'That girlie did *susu* in class, Miss!'

The whole class giggled. Avantika felt her eyes sting again, but she remembered what Laxmi had said, and she didn't cry.

Miss D'sa looked shocked.

'Who?' she asked, her threats of punishment forgotten, 'Who has gone to the bathroom in the class?'

Miserably, Avantika raised her hand.

'Very bad, Avantika, why didn't you go to the bathroom to . . . go to the bathroom?'

Avantika stood up, shaking.

'M . . . miss, you weren't h . . . here m . . . Miss . . . how . . . to—?'

Miss D'Sa looked confused. She took a deep breath.

'Come with me,' she said.

Avantika followed wretchedly, the back of her wet pinafore clinging to her thighs. She could feel the eyes of the whole class on her, as Miss D'Sa led her out of the classroom. She had no idea where she was being taken. What if she got punished? What if they told her to not come from tomorrow? She liked school, she didn't want to stay at home. And what if Miss D'Sa took her to Miss Francis and Miss Francis gave her a note in her diary? Mitali was getting notes all the time and one day Miss Francis had even called her parents to school! What if Aai and Baba were called to school to meet Miss Francis? Her eyes filled up again and she wiped them away with the back of her hand.

But Miss D'sa didn't take her to Miss Francis' room, which was on the second floor. Instead, she took her to the first floor, to the staff room. Avantika had never been inside the staff room before. It had big windows and tables and chairs and dark grey steel cupboards. When Avantika entered with Miss D'Sa, two other teachers were sitting at one of the tables. One teacher, whom she didn't know, was correcting notebooks with a red pen. The other teacher was Mrs Cama, her craft teacher. Avantika liked her. She had a soft voice and always smiled in class.

As Miss D'Sa came in with Avantika, Mrs Cama looked up from the magazine she was reading. She saw the patch on Avantika's pinafore and smiled.

'Spilled water on your uniform, dear?' she asked.

'No Miss . . . I . . . I did—'

'She went to the bathroom in class,' Miss D'Sa said briskly, opening one of the steel cupboards and taking out a neatly folded spare uniform and clean white cotton bloomers.

'It's alright, dear,' Mrs Cama said in her soft voice, 'It happens.'

Avantika cheered up a little at that and felt just a little less nervous, as she went with Miss D'Sa to the toilet to change.

She was back in class, twenty minutes later, her uniform, underwear and eyes, all dry. Her bench, on the other hand, was still wet. She raised her hand.

'Miss, bench is wet, Miss.'

Miss D'Sa, who seemed to want this period to end almost as badly as Avantika did, gave her a tight smile.

'Then sit next to Laxmi, till peon-*dada* cleans up.'

For the first time in the past half hour, Avantika felt like smiling. She picked up her schoolbag and went and sat next to Laxmi, who promptly shifted along the bench and made place for her. But she didn't have time to feel happy for too long. The period was almost over. Once the bell rang for the next class, Miss D'Sa would rub off the blackboard. Sitting down, Avantika hurriedly started copying the sentences on the board in and managed to copy them all before the bell rang.

As Miss D'Sa left the class, her old partner nudged her in the ribs and began singing, '*Susu* girl, *susu* girl!'

Avantika turned around angrily.

'I only did it because you tickled me! Say sorry!'

'No,' said the girl, and made a face.

'Say sorry! You're supposed to say sorry when you do a bad thing!'

'No! I won't!'

Avantika clenched her fists. She had never felt so angry before. When you did something wrong, you were supposed to say sorry! And this girl was not saying sorry! And there was *nothing* she could do about it! She felt her eyes sting again, but this time out of sheer rage. She felt like hitting someone. No, she felt like hitting a very specific someone.

Just then, Laxmi spoke up.

'Just say sorry,' she told the girl calmly, 'Or I'll tell your name to Miss, okay?'

The girl glared at Laxmi as if she was a strange new kind of beetle.

'I'm not doing anything to you, no? Then why you will tell her my name?' she asked.

'Because you're not being nice,' said Laxmi. 'Just say sorry, okay?'

The girl glared at them both, her eyes filled with loathing.

'Sorry,' she said through clenched teeth.

Avantika's fists slowly unclenched and she breathed out. She knew what she was supposed to say next. She was supposed to say 'it's okay'. She was supposed to forgive. Good people always forgave others, even if they weren't nice to them. Miss Francis had said that day in assembly. God loves those who forgive, she had said. But Avantika was still angry. So she said the worst thing she could think of, something she had never said to anybody else ever, ever.

'You're a bad girl, Aisha. I hate you.'

■ ■ ■