

*To my family who love and support me  
despite my eccentricities*

## *Acknowledgement*

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*I am hoping that you all will continue to help and support me this time too. I hope you enjoy all the short stories as much as you have loved and enjoyed 'One Precious Moment' and 'Love Unexpected'.*

*Keep reading, keep loving now and always.*

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**Love Me... Before You**

**I** met an old friend, Aarti, today after a long time. A woman who always sparkled looked drawn and older than her age. She was suffering from guilt and agony. I asked her again and again what was wrong, but she seemed lost. She just broke down, while, I sat in shock and I watched her cry till there were no tears left in her eyes.

She is one of the strongest women I have known, a delighted and organised soul. Aarti alone has taken care of her son and that enormous house of hers since her mother-in-law died. No one has ever heard her complain, always seeming to enjoy her position.

But today seeing her so shattered and broken makes me wonder how much of it was fake. Was it a performance, she put up, and the so-called society role she played or am I being just cynical and absurd?

I let her weep some more, and then enough was enough. I lose my patience and shout, 'What on earth is wrong, babes? Why the tears? Who died yaar?'

She looks up straight at me, but then something in her eyes shuts me up. I can't believe the shame I see with sorrow and unrest burning her eyes. Whatever has happened here has made an enormous impact. As the silence gets to me, questions arise from deep within... Where is that loud husband of hers today? Why is she sitting all alone when she is in so much pain? I wait as long as I can before breaking the silence again with questions only she can answer.

'Sweetheart, tell me what is wrong? Something seems to be amiss here. I know you well enough to know you will do nothing to shame your family or yourself. There has to be an inexorable reason for this turmoil I see in you.'

She just sits there staring at me with so many emotions whirling in her eyes, I get scared. This woman has been a pillar of strength for more individuals around, an inspiration to others. People have her on a pedestal, some even envious of her, but she has always had a smile for all, spreading love and joy all around. I realise she is just human, but nowadays there are a few like her we see around. So, this state of hers has to mean something earth-shattering has taken place.

I stand by and wait and wait, for her to speak because I will surely never leave her alone like this. I have to know, need to help, need to be there for her like she is for everybody. Fear arises within as images of anything and everything bad consumes my mind. Just as I am about to scream at her for answers, when she finally whispers.

"The shame you see is all true, but only it is not mine."

She pauses as if collecting her thoughts before she continues

*'I have known for years now that he is a cheat, but accepted it and stayed, for my son and this family. But today something within me broke. What I had kept behind doors is now out in the open for the world to know? He did not only bring his latest flames to the function last night, but had the audacity to smear my name in front of everyone there. But what was worst was that only a handful of people there stood by me.'*

*She stops as if she still can't accept it's all true. When something snaps within her, and she shouts.*

*'Why did I take this shit for so long? When did I lose my confidence to stand strong? For whom did I leave my job? It should have been him I should have left and taken off when I first caught him cheating 10 years ago. Why did I believe he was remorseful? Why did I accept when he said he loved me and would never ever repeat it? Why did I listen to my parents and my mother-in-law and comprise? I should have given up on him then as my heart had advised. I knew I was being duped. I should have started afresh then with my boy and with my passion to work. I wouldn't be standing here today with empty hands, even emptier heart and a distraught son,'*

*I don't realise I am crying with her. There is so much pain and condemnation for herself along with the world we stay in. I go to her and hug her, whispering words that I hope are right*

*'Sweetie, maybe you needed to experience this, needed to show to the people around, that you tried. Maybe leaving at that time would not have been good, for your child nor for you. If today he has nailed his coffin in front of the world, you should be proud it was his doing and not yours. You stuck it out for so long for love, family and this so-called society, maybe now it's time to create a new song. You now need to think of only you and let him face his deeds and crimes. I believe that everyone who genuinely cares will stand behind you, supporting and encouraging for whatever you choose. It is your decision now and how you wish to move ahead in life. Your son is smart and old enough to know right from wrong, so I know you will have him to start afresh life anywhere you want.'*

*I force her to look me in my eyes*

*'You have nothing to be shameful of. He is the one with loose morals and unappreciative of the gem he had. You have always kept your head high even in the toughest times. So, why give him the satisfaction now for being embarrassed at his mistakes. You, my dear, have kept this family together, it's pride, his name but now it is his mess, so leave it for him to clear.'*

*I let my words sink in; I let her process what life has for her ahead, and boy was it worth the wait. I see THE smile finally grace her face, adding to her beauty and elegance.*

*She hugs me tight, but her next words will invariably stay with me*

*'Thank you, my dear friend, for constantly being there. I realise my staying may look weak to some, while some might even suggest I have been an opportunist, but I had stayed for love. Love for a man who did not deserve it at all, but it was what that bound me here. Love for him, care for my son, fondness for this family. Later society and its artificial values took over and kept me quiet, which is when weakness set in making me lose sight of what actually matters to me. I realise I am blessed to have people who care. I was just shattered knowing that with it finally out in the open, my son's happy family bubble burst yesterday. The hurt in my child's eyes broke me wide, but I know we will stand again and build a fresh life.'*

*She pauses*

*'Love is not always about the man and woman or the children or one's family. The most important type of love, the most valued one, should be self-love. I have always put my emotions for everybody, my husband, my son, my family, even everyone's reputation before me which is why I am here feeling regretful and empty. But as of today, I plan to LOVE ME more before anybody and everybody'*

*Life is all about the choices we make. It's good to think of others, but not at the expense of your self-respect. It is a simple fact of life if you can't LOVE yourself, flaws and all, then you can never love another person truly and with all might.*

# One Memorable Night



**The** luring voice of the rains finally breaks my resistance and pulls me in. I look behind to find my friends, drinking and dancing to the music, but for me, the melody of the rains and of the waves breaking on the shore is more musical. Without a care or worry of being stopped or berated, I walk into the world of nature and dream. Enjoying the kiss of rain on my face, water seeping through my skin, revives me like sleeping beauty. At that moment I comprehend how long it has been since I have felt this free. Unconsciously, I start to sway to the music I hear, forgetting my friends and the people around.

I dance as I have never before, jumping high, rotating my hips, flowing up or down as the tempo changes with every beat. I don't realise how ethereal I look, all free and wild at one with nature to the world watching me move. Even my buddies had stopped dancing and are in a trance because they were seeing the old me after an eternity.

Just as the tempo goes high I feel my feet leave the grounds as I twirl with a jump, but considering it had been a while I lose my balance and am about to go down when sturdy hands reach out to seize me tight. With my heart, still beating erratically, I hold on to the stranger's arms, laughing aloud. I don't know how stunning I looked to him as I glance up still chuckling at my near fall.

"Thank you so much... That was such a close call."

"The pleasure is all mine, my beautiful siren."

Till then this man and his looks had not registered, but his warm, almost panty-melting voice makes me look at him again. My eyes widen a little, ohh my, he is one handsome guy. Tanned skin, muscular body with zero fat and eyes the shade of champagne you can get drunk on, at least 5ft 9inch tall. But what stuns me is the passion I see twinkling in his eyes, it takes a second to realise that it's burning for me.

Just as I nervously pull out of his grip I hear my friend calls out

"Rami, Rami, are you okay? Babes, that was stunning... I think it is years since we have seen you dance like this."

Looking away from the man, I smile at my friend as I walk towards her. I don't see him follow me, though my friend does.

"I know... Goa air has something in it, I just couldn't resist, and you know how much I enjoy the rains." Just then I hear him say.

"The rains love you too. You were almost one with it... By the way, I am Abir and you are Rami. Are you from here or....?"

*My friend answers before I could*

*“None of your bloody business...” and with this, she pulls me away.*

*Though I know I shouldn't, I can't stop myself from looking back one more time. To my surprise, his eyes are still on me and so is the passion I saw earlier. My beating heart speeds up again. How long since someone looked at me like that? How long has it been since I have felt attractive? I sigh as I follow my friend, much as I appreciated the moment it is just that a Moment.*

*Once in my room, I get dressed for my friend's fortieth birthday party. Fifteen years of marriage and this is the first time I am out all alone with my four forever friends. Since the day I got married until now life has become a routine with husband's duties, child care, family responsibilities, social activities. Somewhere, along with it all, I have lost myself, my choices, my dreams, my identity. This trip was an escape as much as a celebration, a fact which hit me while I danced in the rains. There was no husband getting scandalised, no children getting embarrassed, no censorship at all, it was absolutely liberating.*

*Just as I am contemplating it all I remember the handsome Abir, what a lovely name. The way he looked at me gave me goosebumps and long suppressed emotions arising again, huh?*

*As I wander towards the restaurant to meet my friends, I feel eyes on me making my shoulder twitch. I turn around to look only to be snared by champagne eyes shining bright with appreciation. He is with companions as well, but his eyes seem to be glued to me. I feel my face heating and my heart picking up speed, I quickly walk away as I see him make a move towards me.*

*My friends and I were together after a very long time, so all inhibitions were off tonight. It was like we were in college again, enjoying life. We drank, we danced, we all went wild. I was tipsy, but in a wonderful way, when I crashed into Abir again. Whether it was planned or a coincidence, the tune changes to a soft romantic song. He doesn't ask nor do I speak as he wraps his arms around me and we sway to the tune. The thought of pushing him away did not even enter my mind. I just let the moment take me over and enjoy. I don't recall for how long we danced, but sometime during our dance, I had wrapped my arms around his neck and his were on my waist holding me close. Despite it not being morally acceptable it felt wonderful, forbidden fruit and all. My buddies were somewhere around, but I did not want to look nor do they interrupt my dance with this handsome intruder. I remain in his arms, revealing in the rhythm of his heart, the warmth of his breath on my neck, the caress of his hands causing goosebumps all over my body.*

*He persuades me away from the throng to a secluded place, and I don't stop him, but soon I find myself against a coconut tree. I stare at him as he caresses my cheek*

*“You are so beautiful... A concoction of innocence and temptress.”*

*I feel his thumb move softly over my lips, parting them for his kiss. Closing my eyes to his touch, I immerse in feelings I haven't felt for years now. I don't realise when my tongue unconsciously licks his thumb until I hear a sound so sensuous leave his throat. I open my eyes just in time to watch his lips make his way to mine, I raise myself in anticipation when something tickles my mind. Nooooo, I twist my face away and his lips land on my cheeks*

*“No... We can't... I can't... I am a married woman, have two children I love. This is so not acceptable.” He is silent as he looks at me, all embarrassed and ashamed of what I was about to do. I peer at him, I can see the passion still brightening his eyes and would have proceeded if I just said yes but I know my conscience would never allow it. I move up on my feet and kiss him tenderly on his cheek*

*“Thank you for making me feel beautiful again... and I am sorry for leading you on, that was never my intention.”*

*With that, I spin away to escape when his grasp on my wrist stops me*

*“We don't have to do anything you do not want, but nevertheless I would love to spend this time we have left together.”*

*I glance back and see the earnestness of his words shine bright, beaming with elation I place my palm in his and we wander down to the shore. I look back to my friends, but they are busy having fun with people around. I don't think they will miss me at all. That whole night we either sat or roamed the shores, speaking about everything and anything we possibly could. Never had I shared my dreams before, nor had he let anybody know why he was alone. We both felt connected in many aspects that seemed logically unrealistic.*

*We remained on the cool sand till the early hours, holding hands as we watched the sunrise in front of us. Neither of us felt the desire to sleep, it was like we both knew the moment to separate was near and this was our only chance to be together. We did not share information, which would merely complicate this beautiful soon to be fantasy. Even though we could stay in contact neither of us talked about the possibility.*

*Just as it was time to leave, he pulled out his phone and took a picture of us, for the first time suggested what I feared*

*“Give me your number, I will forward it to you.” I shake my head.*

*“I don’t need the picture Abir. I will always remember this moment, this time we spent, but any reminder will make me yearn for things we can’t have.”*

*“But if I want to speak to you again.”*

*“Look at this picture and smile at the fantasy we had. This is goodbye, but thank you. You returned something of me I had lost, but most of all because of you I discovered the old Rami again.”*

*“Rami, the pleasure was all mine. But then you too gave me what I was seeking for, the kind of individual I crave in my life. Well, then if this is goodbye, we both deserve this to last our entire life.”*

*With that, he drew me in his arms and kissed me with all the passion he had suppressed all night. I don’t know for how long we remained glued, but when it was over, there were tears in both our eyes. I exhale as I watch him leave. This trip gave me so much more than freedom... I briefly tasted what love is like... who my friends are again... the allure of life, but most importantly it reintroduced me to me again.*

*I smile wide... I realise my life had changed and would not be the same ever again.*

# My Beautiful Thief

**A**s the music beats go higher, the crowd goes wild. It's the same most nights, inexperienced boys and girls scarcely out of school going insane. None are above 21 or so, but they sure think they are adults already. Every night, booze is overflowing and young women are wearing clothes that would mortify their parents. But the philosophy of the youths today is 'Who Bloody Cares'. He proceeds to observe, making certain all was safe and in order, after all, he is the owner of this lounge.

Just then the door opens bringing in a vision that was almost surreal.

She is the most exquisite woman he has ever seen, even from far she is like a dream. The desire to see if his eyes see right, he steps towards the entrance where she is speaking to the hostess. As he reaches near, her accent is clear despite the loud rap and the noise around.

The nightingale's sweet music fails next to her voice, that's how soft and musical she sounds. This close to her now, he notices she is more lovely than he had realised.

Huge black almond eyes with a tinge of golden hue, lips defined in crimson, as for those plump and round cheeks would put the woman in the Dove advertisement to shame. She must be 5ft 3inches but her four-inch heels were adding the extra height to her slim sexy figure. Just as he is about to address her himself a hand moves up pulling her next to him.

Undefined anger hits him hard as he looks at the gentleman who stands by the lady who has him intrigued. He is smart and well-built but much older than her. He counted on the man to be her father or uncle, but then he hears.

"Darling, are you sure you prefer to be here? The place is swamped with children rather than adults." He awaits her reply.

"Why don't you go back to your party next door? You know I have done my bit and now I wish to be by myself, anyway."

"But I want you by my side. You are my lucky charm." He watches his angel's lip curl in disdain.

"Listen you paid me for 3 hours and it's now 5. I am an escort, not your wife or girlfriend. My time has been up for long, and I am on my own now, so please don't push me any further."

"I told you I will pay you for the extra hours."

"Then please do that now and leave, would appreciate it if you let me be."

*He watches the man huff aloud as he pulls out his wallet and almost throws the payment at her, but something in her eyes warns him to be discreet. He draws a step back as he gives her the cash which she places in her purse. The man waits for a few more seconds, hoping she would change her mind, but she ignores him. She speaks to the hostess instead.*

*“I want a place for one please, even the bar will do.”*

*The hostess looks at him, and as the owner of this place, he should say no, especially as he now knows her line of work, but he just couldn't. The desire to know her forces him to nod a yes. He sees the hostess's eyes widen a little at his odd behaviour, but she takes her towards the corner of the bar to an unoccupied chair.*

*He regards her as she slides up gracefully turning her back to the crowd. As she waits for her drink, she messages to someone. Many guys approach her, but she ignores them all which he finds odd her line of work. From the sides, he observes her drink slowly, she frees the clip holding her long wavy hair. He stares while she shakes her head as if freeing a heavy burden. After what seems like an eternity of observing, he determines to talk to her. He doesn't know what is so compelling about her, but he wants to find out.*

*“Would you prefer another drink?”*

*She stares at him with startled eyes, like a deer caught in the dark before she whispers*

*“No, I am fine, thank you.”*

*“You have been playing with that drink for the past 20 minutes or so, it must be flat by now. At least let me refresh it for you.”*

*“Have you been watching me all this while?” He doesn't lie as he looks at her*

*“Yes.”*

*Her “Why?” throws him off*

*“I don't know. You, seem to have me snared since you entered the lounge.”*

*“I know you overheard me at the entrance, you know I work as an escort. Are you hoping for a pleasurable time? If so, you are in for a disappointment. I only escort people to parties as their dates or for meetings, that's about it. I don't do sex.”*

*“I did not expect that...” though he knew that is a lie, something she calls him on*

*“Liar.” With that, she smiles, which transforms her whole face. She looks younger and even more beautiful if that's possible. Even her eyes sparkle with her smile. He is mesmerised by the change.*

*“Okay, I speculated. Though, I have no right to judge even if you did”*

*“Hmm... I guess I will have that drink if you will have one with me.” He orders for a repeat*

*“If you don’t mind my asking... Why did you say no to the man? You could have earned more money.”*

*“He expected for more than just the company and I avoid situations that can turn ugly. And anyway, I had what I required from him so to stay around was a waste of my time.”*

*Now that remark sounded odd. It should have been him who had received what he required not her... right? As he contemplates this, he refuses to ask her with the understanding that he might sound like a moron. Standing there, talking to her makes him do something he hasn’t done in years, he orders a drink for himself. He doesn’t drink while he is at work, but she drives him to break the rules. They talk, talk and talk, all the while the drinks flow.*

*The crew starts closing the lounge at 3 am, so he takes her to his office, another first for him, despite knowing his accountant will be coming up with the money and the daily account files. As we sit on the sofa, he realises he again has a drink in his hand, but how? And when? But she distracts him with her touch on his arm and her breath on his neck. He feels her lips close to his ears asking him questions he has no idea of, but he nevertheless answers all unknowingly.*

*The feel of her so close muddles with his heads, the desire to touch is all he can think of when all of a sudden he feels himself slipping away. Seconds later he lies down on the sofa snoring away not knowing where she is nor that she has slithered away.*

*The next morning he gets up with a ballistic headache. He searches around in bewilderment at finding himself in his office. He speculates about what had transpired last night, when he suddenly remembers her. He frantically looks around the office and the lounge below, but she is nowhere. As he returns to his office, he peers at his watch only to discover it gone. With a grimace, he searches for it because he is certain he was wearing it. As he searches for his watch he notices the bills and account records on the table but the money pouch was missing. Strange, because his staff is extremely efficient and dependable. Something seems amiss.*

*With hands in his hair, he sits down on his chair trying to remember last night’s events. At that moment he realises he doesn’t even know her name. He thinks or at least struggles to recall what all she had revealed to him but all seems hazy now. Fuck, he never drinks this much and last night he didn’t remember how his glass kept getting refreshed. After hours of brain wracking, he chooses to call his staff. First, he calls the bartender*



*“Neil, good morning... Okay, tell me how many drinks did I order last night?”*

*“Sir, you ordered one for the lady and one for yourself.”*

*“Okay, then how come I am hungover?”*

*“Sir, after your request it was the lady who asked me to keep the drinks coming. In fact, when I refused for you, she said it was on her.”*

*“Huh, any idea how many?”*

*“Sir, three beers, two whiskeys, two tequila shots and lastly two brandies.”*

*“What?” I practically shout into the phone.*

*“I am sorry, sir, but when I asked you, you said it was okay. In fact, twice, I made small drinks for you, but your friend topped it with her too.”*

*“Huh... okay, thank you, Neil... I will see you in the evening.”*

*He pulls his hair because now he is getting an awful feeling about this. With shaking hands, he calls his accountant who drops the money at the end of each night*

*“Hello, Tasha... Please tell me what time did you place the books, bills and money in my office?”*

*“Sir, it was around 3.45 am. You were fast asleep when I came in. I was going to leave with everything but your lady friend said it was okay to leave it there. She had the locker number which only we both know, so I presumed it's safe to leave it. I assumed she must be special if you shared it with her.”*

*“She knew the locker number... Fuck... And you just left it with her... How much cash was there?” Knowing he was in for a shock because yesterday was Saturday one of his most profitable days*

*“Sir, 8 lacs plus the cash in the locker from yesterday's luncheon party.”*

*He disconnects the call without acknowledging her. At that moment it hits him hard, he had been taken for a ride by a temptress. She was a crook who knew how to work her good looks and swindle people. He had not only been conned of his watch and all the money he had but also of an exquisite dream. Now that he thinks of the odd statement she had passed, he wonders what that poor man would find missing when he looks again. As he gets up to leave the office wondering if he should call the cops a paper flutters to the floor. It's a note from her*

*“Much as I cherished every moment I spent with you (which is a first) I just couldn't change my habits, even for you. For the first time, I am feeling sorry for conning someone so sweet and genuine. Taking the watch for keepsakes until we meet again □□*

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