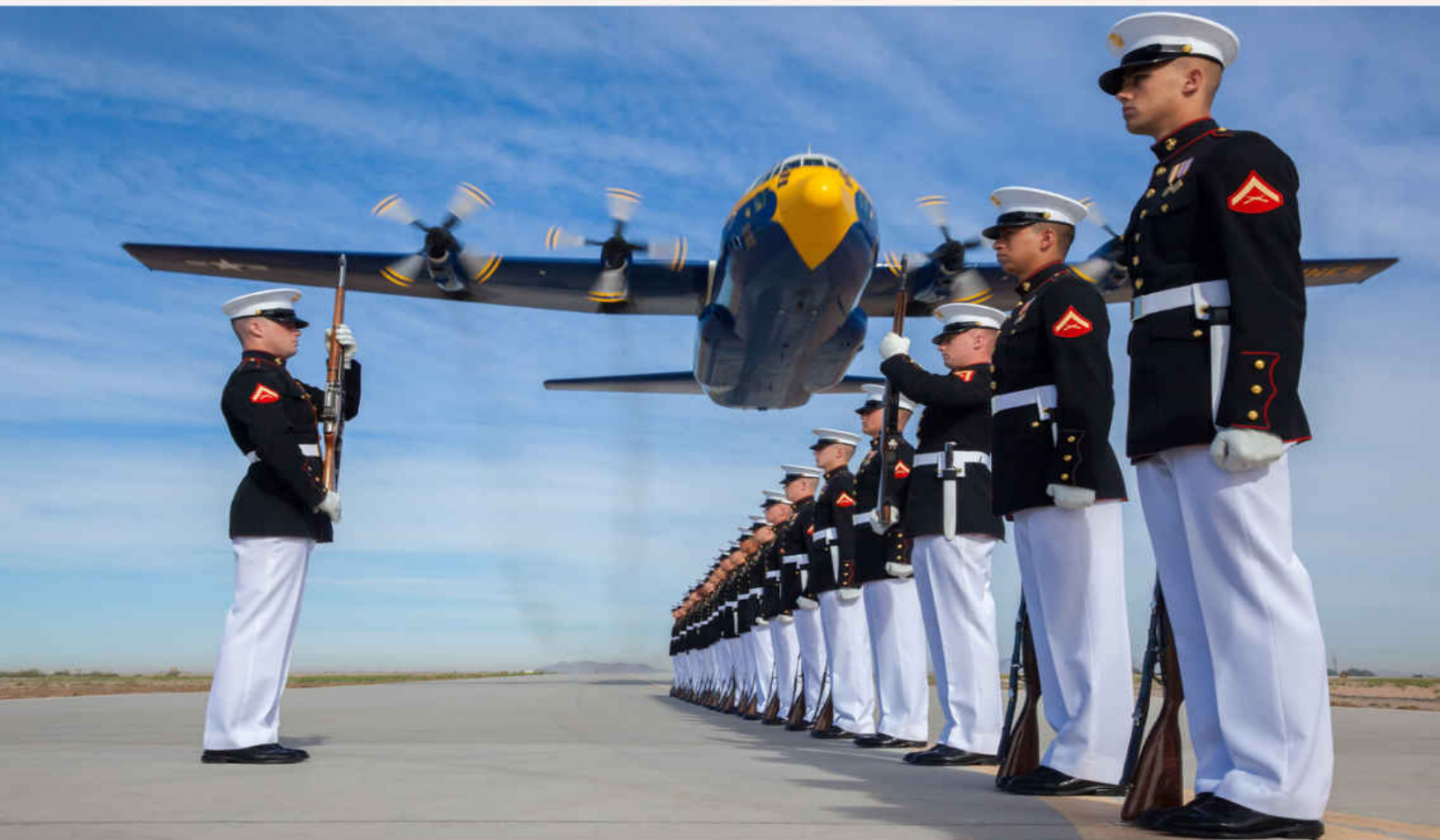


THE MILITARY OBSESSED TRILOGY

NAVY SPECIAL



VAISHNAVI NAGARAJ

Captains of the Seas

10 Navy Love Stories

Vaishnavi Nagaraj

Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing

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To

Every girl in love with an Indian naval officer

And to our men in white on the high seas

Jai Hind!

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Prologue

"I've loved, I've lost, and I've loved and lost, and that's what this is all about.

I hope whatever I tell you will remain confidential, doc?"

"Absolutely, Ipsitaa. Where would you like to start?"

"Carrie Bradshaw said in a popular American sitcom, 'some loves aren't epic novels, some are short stories,'

Sometimes I think, that was meant for my own love life."

I

(Character Sketch: Tall, lean, dark, clean-shaven, with an impish smile, hails from Chennai, air force-brat)

Year: 2018, month: November, time: evening.

I had come to Seasons Mall, Magarpatta City, Pune to meet my cadet partner before the Ball event at the National Defence Academy (NDA), Khadakwasla.

We had consumed food and drink and watched a movie, and it had been time to bid adieu.

NDA cadets aren't allowed to carry their phones when they go out on liberty, so, I had booked a cab which would take them back to the academy.

As we waited for the cab to roll up, my Ball partner introduced me to his coursemate Cadet Kadhira.

I noticed there was a tiny silver anchor pinned to Kadhira's shirt collar.

That meant he was a naval cadet and, after passing out from NDA, he would move to the Indian Naval Academy (INA), Ezhimala, to complete his training and become a commissioned officer.

We gave each other a firm handshake after which we started talking.

I casually asked Kadhira, "Did you manage to get a Ball partner?"

"No... but it's okay ya... I'll go stag."

"Hmmm."

Honestly, I felt a little sad for him.

But I liked that he didn't crib and accepted his situation with a smile.

By then, the cadets had piled into the cab, and I saw my Ball partner wave to me.

Kadhir shook hands with me again and got in.

On the day of the Ball, my Ball partner took me to meet Cadet Kadhir.

As we stood on the NDA Mess lawns sipping Monster juice, my Ball partner told me that they both were in the same squadron and also hailed from the same city, and that's how they had become good friends.

After dinner, my Ball partner took his leave. I was walking over the lawns, back to Swimming Pool No. 2 (where the lady Ball partners had been put up) when a hand touched the small of my back.

I turned around to see Kadhir standing behind me.

He asked, "Did you enjoy the evening?"

I said, "Yes, thoroughly!".

"That's great to hear."

"Yep."

"So you're leaving now?"

"Yeah... oh, and best wishes for your training at INA!"

"Thanks, Ipsitaa."

That's the last time I saw him IRL.

Now we're connected on Instagram and talk occasionally.

II

(Character Sketch: Tall, lean, very fair, expressive face, clean-shaven, hails from Haryana)

In the last year of college, my classmate-and-friend Gurpreet was dating an officer in the Indian Navy. Sub Lieutenant Pranit.

It was a long-distance relationship but, lucky for her, Pranit had come to Lonavala for a course.

Naturally, Gurpreet wanted to go meet him before he got posted to another place.

But for reasons known only to her, she didn't want to travel alone.

So she texted me: *Tu aayegi mere saath Lonavala?* (Will you come to Lonavala with me?).

I like travelling and I thought it would be fun to meet the BF about whom I'd heard so much.

I answered in the affirmative.

Early morning on a Sunday, Gurpreet picked me up from home and we drove to Khadki Railway Station to take a train to Lonavala. After parking the vehicle, we jumped onboard a train bound for Mumbai.

It reached Lonavala at 9:00 am.

Picking up our belongings, we hurried out of the railway station.

According to the plan, Pranit was supposed to receive us but he was nowhere to be seen.

Gurpreet called him up.

After having an animated conversation peppered with a lot of giggling and fidgeting with her earring, she told me, "*Vo aa raha hai par usko thoda time lagega,*" (He's on his way but it'll take some time).

Waiting at that same place was out of question as the locals had started staring at us.

So, we started exploring the town and, soon, wound up in front of a shady cinema hall.

We had been killing time for an hour and Pranit's delay was starting to get on my nerves.

When Gurpreet spoke to him again, she got the same reply, that he was on his way.

Now, neither did I know that Pranit was coming from INS Shivaji (I got to know only later) nor how far our location was for him.

I started having my doubts and even voiced it once or twice.

"*Yar mujhe nai lagta vo aane wala hai,*" (I don't think he's going to come) I said.

This assault on her boyfriend's character angered Gurpreet but she didn't respond.

Finally, Pranit arrived on bike with another guy in tow.

The joy was evident on Gurpreet's face as she imagined all the lovely memories she would make that day.

After parking the vehicle, the duo walked towards us, and Pranit introduced the guy accompanying him as Sub Lieutenant Harsh.

We exchanged pleasantries and then Harsh drove back the way he had come.

We bought tickets to the movie ZERO and went inside.

The hall was empty except for a few sea trainees from Tolani Maritime Institute occupying the middle rows.

Gurpreet turned to me and said, "*Tu aage baithegi kya please?*" (Will you take a front seat?), implying that she wanted some private time with her boyfriend.

I obviously couldn't say no and, anyways, I didn't mind being in the vicinity of the Tolani trainees.

The movie was boring to say the least, and the trainees were too shy to make any flirtatious advances.

So, I dozed off and woke up only when the end credits were playing on the screen.

From there, Gurpreet, Pranit and I took an auto to a Burger King outlet nearby.

The fast food joint was bustling with people.

I took a seat near a floor-to-ceiling french window with the afternoon sun hitting my back.

It felt so good.

Pranit ordered for all of us.

As I gobbled up my burger, Pranit remarked, "*Lonavala Wax Museum and Horror House hai paas mein.*" (The Lonavala Wax Museum and Horror House are nearby.)

Gurpreet said she wanted to go to Horror House.

"*Tu bhi chalegi?*" (You'll come along?) she asked me.

"*Nai, main Wax Museum jati hoon,*" (No, I'll go to the Wax Museum) I replied.

Afterwards, we took another auto to another mall and went for another movie (I don't remember which).

This time around, I took the middle seat and we watched the movie together.

The sun had set on the quaint little town by the time we headed to the railway station, to take a train back.

On the way, Pranit gave Rs 100 to a beggar and Gurpreet went, "Awwwwwwww".

As we waited for our train, Harsh, whom we had met that afternoon, joined us.

Gurpreet apparently thought Harsh and I would make a good couple.

With what seemed an intention to set us up, she whispered something into her BF's ear and they got up and walked away saying, "We'll come back in a while,".

I made small talk with Harsh and he told me he already had a girlfriend.

Seriously?!

The conversation became awkward after that and I mostly kept to myself.

Then, as a train chugged into the station, Pranit hurried towards us while Gurpreet tagged along behind.

It was the train we had been waiting for.

Gurpreet and I quickly climbed onboard.

Pranit followed us into the compartment while Harsh stood on the platform, a little away.

Soon, the whistle was heard and the train got ready to move.

Pranit jumped down from the train.

I looked at Gurpreet; her eyes were moist and sad.

"*Tujhe leave me milunga,*" (I'll see you during my leave) he told her and grinned.

It was all so sweet!

III

(Character Sketch: Tall, fair, well-built, a curled moustache, Tamil Brahmin settled in Pune, air force-brat)

Achyut had passed out from NDA with flying colours and was home on leave.

Soon after we had begun talking, he became comfortable enough to share details about his family.

His dad was a retired air warrior and his elder brother Ajay was a Lieutenant in the Indian Navy.

A few days later, by sheer chance, I spotted Ajay on Facebook, in a family photo taken at the Passing Out Parade (POP) ceremony.

He was in uniform: crisp white tunic, white trousers and white shoes with a peak cap perched delicately on his head and medals adorning his chest.

He looked so dignified, awe-inspiring and important!

I was insanely attracted to Ajay's moustache that made him look manly and mischievous.

I made up my mind to talk to him somehow.

Wait up, before you start thinking how scandalous it is to be attracted to two men who are real brothers, no, it wasn't like that.

Achyut was simply a good friend and I had no romantic feelings whatsoever towards him.

One fine day, what I had so strongly wished for, happened.

Ajay accepted my Instagram follow request and replied to the *hi* I'd sent him.

He **also** requested to follow me back!

I was over the moon and immediately began thinking of the kids we would raise together.

Hehehe.

The conversations were good for a few weeks after which came badly-disappointing radio silence.

In a fit of rage and despair, I stalked Ajay on Facebook and that's when I realised he had a long-time girlfriend.

I didn't pursue him after that, and last year, he got married.

But even today, I'm wildly attracted to him.

IV

(Character Sketch: Average height, lean, wheatish skin tone, hails from Bhopal)

Sub Lieutenant Anubhav was Gauri's friend from one of the schools she had attended.

Her first attempt at setting me up with her boyfriend's coursemate Harsh had failed yet she hadn't given up.

She introduced me to this guy, Anubhav, and was behind my life to do a voice call with him.

To get her off my back and calm her desire for matchmaking, I agreed.

Anubhav told me his father worked for the Madhya Pradesh Government and his mom was a Hindi teacher.

After two or three topics, aircraft carriers made their way into the conversation.

Now I'd never seen what an aircraft carrier looked like and I asked him, "Is it big?".

He laughed for two whole minutes.

Then he said, "*Abey vo ship ko hi attached hota hai...*" (Dude it's attached to the ship itself). He needn't have laughed at my lack of knowledge about the Indian Navy.

I felt ashamed that I had asked.

Anubhav added me on Whatsapp and, the next day, texted me: *Ye kya pocha pehen rakha hai DP mein lol* (The top you're wearing in your DP looks like a dishcloth lol).

That was the last straw.

He had just called my expensive Bohemian top with a flower motif, a dishcloth!

I started typing out a long text defending my choice of clothing and giving him an earful about his gross lack of fashion sense when better sense prevailed and I just blocked him.

I was done being made to feel low and there was no point wasting my time on such people.

It was an important lesson not to look at the uniform but at the person ***inside*** the uniform.

Shiny brass buttons and colourful ribbons can easily impress a young girl but those only show how well an officer is doing in his professional life.

How he deals with his personal life is what a young girl finds out ***with time***.

I didn't want to interact with Anubhav any further, so, things ended on that note.

V

(Character Sketch: Tall, athletic, dark, debonair, Keralite, naval brat)

I matched with Alex on Bumble.

We texted back and forth and quickly set a date and venue for meeting up.

I had just arrived at Starbucks and settled down on a couch when the main door opened and Alex walked in.

First impression? Would totally do him!

He looked around, caught my eye and waved.

I waved back.

Walking over, he took a seat beside me on the couch.

Soon, we were sharing anecdotes and laughing heartily.

Finally letting his guard down, my date revealed details he had been unwilling to before.

He was serving in the Indian Navy as a Sub Lieutenant and was staying at the Defence Institute of Advanced Technology (DIAT), next to Khadakwasla Dam, for a short-term course. After sometime, as I stood up to leave, Alex offered to drop me home.

I readily assented, and we drove back to my place on his bike.

Ganesh Chaturthi was around the corner and *dhol tasha* (live-drum) practice was on in full swing.

It was the first time Alex was seeing anything like that.

He was completely mesmerised by the musical performance.

I was wondering whether I would see him again when he perked up and said, "Ipsitaa, it's my last week in Pune and I want to spend more time with you before I go to Karwar (his next posting)..."

I was speechless.

I liked how directly he had voiced whatever was on his mind and hadn't left me feeling uncertain about a second date.

"I too would love to see you again!" I replied and a smile appeared on his lips.

"For that, you'll have to give me your phone number..." he continued.

I did a mock facepalm as I realised I had neither given him my number nor taken his.

Then with my number saved on his phone and a promise to meet soon, Alex drove back to DIAT.

On our second date, we went to Cuba Libre, a high-end pub.

It was dimly-lit and the DJ was hitting all the right notes with the music.

Alex and I took a couch, sitting close to each other, and ordered food and drink.

I was slightly tipsy when he brought his lips close to my ear and hummed,

"I have died everyday waiting for you
Darling don't be afraid I have loved you
For a thousand years
I'll love you for a thousand more"
Oh my god, I was so impressed!

At 11:00 pm, the dance floor was thrown open and Alex asked me for a dance.

My arms around his neck and his hands on my waist, we swayed to the beats.

Soon he started dancing better than anyone else on the floor and I complimented him.

"Thank you, thank you, I actually was a professional dancer before I joined the navy," he responded. I was in absolute awe of him.

After a couple of hours, we got out of there and, on the way to the room we had rented for the night, stopped to drink *chai* (black

tea) at a late-night beverage joint.

Later, as we lay in bed, he started telling me about his family.

His dad was a retired seaman and his mother taught mathematics to secondary school students.

I asked if he was up for a relationship with me and his face became crestfallen.

"I can't think of anything serious with a non-Catholic girl re..." he began.

"I was in a relationship with a Hindu girl... I wanted to marry her so I introduced her to Mom... She didn't agree, still I persisted ... it led to a huge fight at home... I don't want to go through that again..."

I was shattered on hearing that but I also understood where he was coming from.

"It's okay, I understand," I replied.

I put my head on his chest and, listening to his heartbeat, slipped into dreamland.

It was afternoon when we woke up.

After a shower and breakfast, plans of going to Lavasa City were made.

We started out and had driven for an hour when there was a sudden downpour.

Then as the rain receded and we got ready to move again, Alex got a work call.

"Manage kar le... I'll take some more time to reach," he told his coursemate.

A fall-in had been ordered at DIAT at 3:00 pm.

Alex could have cancelled the plan to go back.

But he didn't and stuck to the plan despite work obligations.

It was terribly sweet of him.

After driving up and down innumerable hills in very low visibility, we reached our destination.

At a restaurant at Lavasa City, we ordered noodles and two glasses of red wine and left soon after.

Alex dropped me at Chandni Chowk which was closer to DIAT and said, "Ipsitaa... I'm sorry I can't drop you home today,".

"Arey it's okay, not a big deal," I replied. "I'll get an Uber."

He fished out his wallet and handed me some money for the cab.

At first, I was unwilling to take it but when he insisted a lot, I did.

The gesture was awfully gentlemanly.

It was Sub Lieutenant Alex's last day in Pune and he took me to Cafe Peter.

I was sad that he was going away.

I didn't want him to go.

We had spent so much time together.

Why did all good things have to come to an end?!

Fresh tears kept flowing out the corners of my eyes every few minutes.

Alex tried to console me.

"We'll meet when I get my next leave," he said and put his arm lovingly around me.

I snuggled into his warm and comforting embrace.

His body shivered as he resisted the urge to cry in public.

Outside my house, Alex held my palm in his tightly for a few seconds.

I turned my back to him and walked away.

After I had gone a little distance, I looked back to see if he was still there.

He had left.

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.

We got in touch again a year later.

Alex had just been promoted to Lieutenant.

He shared that, in the interim, he had dated a Mallu Christian girl.

They had spent some fun moments together but the relationship hadn't lasted.

And from that point onwards, Alex and I became very good friends.

VI

(Character Sketch: So tall you have to crane your neck to look at his face, dark, impish smile, a chest you'll want to die for, devil-may-care attitude, gym freak, sneakerhead, horologist, topper-type, hails from Coimbatore)

I found Lieutenant M K Raman on Alex's Instagram follower list and liked his profile instantly. We became friends, and he told me that after Sainik School, Amaravathinagar, he had joined NDA and topped his batch in INA.

He was awarded the Chief of the Naval Staff trophy and Telescope for Best All-Round Sea Trainee.

Impressive!

Over the weeks that followed, it became apparent that Raman was interested in me.

We would text back and forth all day, see each other's Insta stories, like posts and send snaps.

He had also started opening up about his family.

Raman was then moved to Vizag in Andhra Pradesh where he went back to working on ship and, as a result, he would reply to my texts only after he came back to his cabin at night.

Calling happened rarely as the Indian Navy had recently issued a smartphone ban onboard ships to prevent leaking of sensitive information.

I wanted to go to Vizag to meet him as he had exhausted all leaves for the year and there was no way he was gonna get more so that **he** could come visit **me**.

Ugh, the hardships navy girlfriends have to bear!

A round-trip by flight would have cost me at least ₹10,000 and my savings were low.

Nothing was working out.

It was the eve of Eid al-Fitr.

I had just come back from the gurdwara and was having dinner.

I got a text from Raman: Are you free tomorrow?

I replied: Yeah why?

He: I have leave. Let's meet.. I'll book your flight tickets

Me: What? Are you serious?

He: Yeah I am

Me: Woah okay... But.. but Pune airport is shut for repairs to the runways... no flights are operating

He: Yeah it's only showing me flights from Mumbai

Me: What time is the flight?

He: 12 noon today

Me: Ohhh I'll have to leave right away then...let me think

Okay cool I'll have dinner and start packing.. *tu ticket kar de* (you book the tickets)

He: Okay... on it

Me: Awesome!!

He: I'm excited :-D

Me: Me too! See you soon!

Packing done, I hopped onto a cab and drove to Mumbai airport.

In my excitement, I had left home very early, and when I reached Mumbai airport, I was looking at a waiting time of 6 hours before my flight to Hyderabad (where I had a layover) would take off.

From there, I would have to take a connecting flight to Vizag.

The view of Vizag from above is something I'll never forget.

The Bay of Bengal, reflecting the clear blue of the skies, was spread out as far as the eye could see.

The waters were lapping against huge Indian naval ships and tiny commercial boats alike.

I also spotted some dolphins jumping out of the water.

After half a day's travelling, I finally stepped onto Vizag ground and walked out of the airport with my luggage.

The airport was surrounded by hills on all sides.

I booked an Uber auto and got a booking almost immediately.

When I called the driver to ask him where he was, it turned out he could only speak Telugu!

I couldn't speak Telugu which I conveyed to him in broken English, so, he handed the phone to an English-speaking person nearby.

This guy told the auto driver my location in Telugu and, within a few minutes, he drove up to the airport entrance.

I heaved a sigh of relief and got onboard.

Now Vizag is a small town and also the headquarters of the Eastern Naval Command so you spot naval officers everywhere.

I spotted four in blue overalls, two by two on scooties.

It was a long drive to the hotel where I got myself a room for the night.

I was so tired I wanted to sleep for two days straight but I didn't want to be sleepy when I met Raman for the first time.

So I washed my face with cold water and started unpacking.

Around 5:30 pm, Raman texted me saying he had left the ship and was on his way to the hotel.

A knock on the door and I was up in a bound.

All of six feet and looking dapper in a printed shirt and trousers, Raman stood before me.

We hugged and he came in.

We sat on the bed, gradually inching closer to each other.

Raman had borrowed a car from his colleague, and for dinner, we drove to an Italian restaurant tucked away in a corner of the town.

As we entered, he saw some of his senior officers with their families and became visibly uncomfortable.

As a result, the dinner was a rather low-key affair.

We drove back to the hotel and spent the night together.

When I woke up the next morning with sunlight streaming in through the window, I realised my boyfriend had already left for work.

I checked my Whatsapp messages to see a PDF from Raman containing my return flight tickets.

My flight out of Vizag was at 3:00 pm, so, after a quick breakfast, I managed to squeeze in a visit to Visakha Museum.

This museum showcases the Indian Navy's history and maritime operations.

On display are also models of Indian naval ships, submarines and aircraft.

I thoroughly enjoyed seeing it!

After I was done, I booked an Uber auto to go to the airport.

The driver started speaking to me in fluent English, and I was surprised.

After all, speaking English is not a skill set auto drivers in India boast of!

Then onwards and upwards it was to Bangalore (where I had a layover) and then Mumbai.

On my way back home, I opened Instagram to check what Raman was up to, only to realise that he had removed me from his followers list.

I was shocked and tried to figure out what I had done or not done to prompt this reaction.

I texted him asking about it but got no response for days.

Then I didn't try to contact him further.

It took me a long time to get over the breakup though.

VII

(Character Sketch: Average height, fair, boyish, Keralite, divorced, was raised by a single mom)

A guy called Ajeet Padmanabh had liked my latest LinkedIn post.

On digging through his profile, I learned that he was a retired Indian naval aviator.

His profile picture was a headshot and I liked his boyish facial features.

We started texting and after a while, I asked him if he was comfortable moving to Whatsapp. He didn't mind and as soon as I shared my digits, texted me on the personal messenger app.

While serving in the Indian Navy, Ajeet had been sent to the United States of America for flying training and he had, in his own words, "lived the Top Gun dream".

However, ten years in, he hung up his boots and took a corporate job.

A visit to Mumbai was on the cards and we decided to meet.

From Leopold Cafe, we walked to the Gateway of India and, after spending some time there, drove to his apartment in my car.

This apartment was in such a conservative housing complex that he had told the guard at the gate that I was his **sister**.

It kinda felt weird to imagine him as my brother when I had strong romantic feelings towards him!!

In the evening, we cosied up on the living room couch and watched TV till late in the night. The next day being a Sunday, we slept in.

Ajeet was the first one to be up and prepared bread omlette and coffee for the two of us.

My coffee mug had pictures of fighter planes along with Ajeet's name and rank.

"It's a souvenir from the US Air Force," he said when he saw me looking at it closely.

Afterwards, Ajeet took me to watch a movie.

Soon, it was time to say goodbye.

As I started my car, Ajeet put his head through the open window and said, "I'll be moving to Delhi next month. I don't know when we'll meet again but I hope it's soon. Take care."

"I'll never forget this weekend... **ever**," I replied.

VIII

(Character Sketch: Short, fair, handsome, settled in Bengaluru)

I had been working at a 9-to-5 soul-sucking job in Bengaluru while Mrityuanjay had been working in the Indian Navy as a Sub Lieutenant.

His parents lived in that city and he had come home on leave.

And Bumble had played Cupid to make us meet.

It was a wonderful evening, one that renews your will to live and makes you hopeful about the good things to come.

Mrityuanjay came over to my apartment to pick me up for our first date.

When I saw him, I realised that he had lied about his height on his dating profile.

The fact that he was a liar left a bad taste in my mouth.

It would have been confrontational to bring it up with him face-to-face and I avoid confrontation at all costs, so, we drove to Robot Restaurant for dinner.

The date went well and by the time Mrityuanjay dropped me home, I was in two minds about going out with him again.

After a few days, when he asked me on a second date, I said yes.

I had nothing to lose, I reasoned with myself.

I could not imagine anything serious with him but a little fun never hurt anyone, right?

Mrityuanjay picked me up from work and we sped towards Hard Rock Cafe, one of the most popular clubs in Bengaluru.

It was windless and calm; the sky overhead was a deep black and was dotted with hundreds of stars.

I had a jolly time getting my pictures clicked by a staff photographer and singing *Cheap Thrills* karaoke.

That was the last time I met him.

IX

(Character Sketch: Super tall, lean, fair, flamboyant, hails from Chandigarh, police brat)

Lieutenant Sunpreet aka Sunny is a Sardar from Chandigarh.

He's exceptionally tall and his *pagdi* (turban) makes him look even taller!

His course at DIAT completed, he was leaving the city that night.

Sunny picked me up from my home by car and, on the way, he told me that his dad was a high-ranking police officer.

We went to a cozy restaurant.

Once there though, he didn't talk much and it seemed as if he had lost interest in me.

A little later, we returned to the car.

As we sat there beside each other, Sunny got in a good mood and I actually started enjoying his company.

Soon the temperature got steamy.

But Sunny didn't seem to care much about the car being parked on the side of a busy road.

When we broke off for a breath of fresh air, he asked me, "*Oyo chalein?*" (Shall we take a room?).

I smiled at him and winked.

X

(Character Sketch: Tall, lean, fair, with hazel eyes, chiselled facial features, hair crew cut, plucky, melancholic nature, hails from Shimla)

I met Lieutenant Siddharth through Defence Matrimony, a matrimony website for serving and retired Indian Armed Forces officers and their children.

At that time, he was posted to the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, as an instructor, himself being an alumnus of that academy.

I still remember... he blew me off my feet the first time I laid eyes on him.

It felt as though our souls had known each other for many lifetimes.

We started chatting and after he had overcome his natural shyness and doubts, he spoke about his work at NDA and family life.

So attentively was I listening to him that I was oblivious to what was happening around me.

I would have hugged him tight if we hadn't been at a crowded place and if it hadn't been our first date.

After some snacks, we walked back to his car.

It was a lovely royal blue colour.

We got in and Siddharth handed me a gift-paper-wrapped box.

Woah I hadn't expected that at all!

The gift was unwrapped to reveal a pair of scented candles.

"Thank you!" I said, and he replied, "It's my pleasure ma'am,".

Siddharth had the rest of the evening free so he asked what I wanted to do next.

I suggested a pub but he preferred a calm and peaceful place where we could talk properly.

After much deliberation, Dighi Hills was settled on.

We reached the foot of the hills and stood seeing the tiny twinkling lights of the city.

I could tell that Siddharth was really enjoying the moment.

Being a *fauji* (military officer) and *pahari* (inhabitant of the mountainous states of North India), he wasn't satisfied in just standing there and wanted to climb to the top.

It was pitch dark all around and there were no steps cut out into the hill which meant going up a steep, rugged slope overgrown with spiky thorny plants, without any ropes.

I tried to get him to change his mind but his determination was a 'do-or-die' one.

He led and I followed.

At one point, the climb became almost vertical and I dug in my heels and wouldn't take a step further.

Siddharth finally acquiesced and, sitting on a boulder, we talked.

After sometime, we climbed down carefully and jogged back to the car.

On our way back, he spoke about how firing happens on ship and what his responsibilities had been as a newly-commissioned officer.

I nudged closer to him and put my hand around his neck.

He turned and looked into my eyes.

Just when the world felt so right, the bad stuff came saying hi.

On his profile on Defence Matrimony, Siddharth had mentioned that he was strictly looking for a *manglik* (having mangala dosha in the astrological birth chart) girl.

I asked him about it.

For a moment, a shadow of sadness and tension passed over his face.

Then he replied, "Yeah... that's there but I'll handle it," and fell silent.

I had a gut feeling there were going to be problems down the matrimony lane with him.

Nothing much was spoken during the rest of the ride.

He dropped me at my apartment and drove back to NDA.

A few days later, I was at home when I got a call from Siddharth.

"I'm outside your housing complex..." he started.

I was like, "What?!"

"I don't have much time."

"Coming!"

I had been doing nothing much at that time but even if I had been busy, I would have left everything to go meet him.

Siddharth was standing outside the gate beside a Gypsy vehicle belonging to the NDA.

He had worn a white jacket over his white naval uniform and had zipped it up so that nobody could tell he belonged to the Indian Armed Forces.

It was a civilian neighbourhood and he probably didn't want to give people an opportunity to stare.

We greeted each other and I asked him what he was doing there.

"I had to take one of my cadets to Military Hospital (MH)... and your house was on the way so I thought I'll meet you..."

"Ohh I see..." I said. "Can you unzip your jacket please? I wanna see you properly in uniform."

"Well... okay."

And Siddharth removed his jacket.

When I saw the NDA Instructor badge pinned to his shirt on the right, my heart swelled with pride.

I was dating an NDA Instructor!

Let me tell you why that is a big deal.

Instructors in the Indian military world are like the cream of the crop; not every officer becomes an instructor but sure do they aspire

to it!

Then he opened the front door of the NDA Gypsy and brought out two Domino's boxes full of tacos.

"I picked these up on the way."

"Oh nice."

We consumed the food and soon it was time for him to leave.

"I've never taken a ride in a Gypsy before... can I sit on the front seat beside the driver for a minute?" I asked.

Laughingly he replied, "Of course ma'am, all yours!" and opened the front door of the vehicle.

I got in and sat down beside the driver who was also a uniformed man but not an officer.

Siddharth is so into me, I thought, and smiled to myself.

And then came the most embarrassing moment of my life: I was sitting in a military vehicle clad in pyjamas and a T-shirt!

But Siddharth didn't seem to care, and even if he did, he was thoughtful enough not to comment about my clothing in front of the driver.

"Ma'am ko main road tak le jao aur vapas le aao," (Drive ma'am till the main road and bring her back) he instructed the driver.

Without a word, the driver switched on the vehicle's ignition.

I looked at Siddharth who was standing outside and said, *"Tu bhi aa na! Saath mein challenge,"* (You also come along dude! We'll drive together).

He hesitated a moment and then swiftly climbed into the back seat.

I had been on that road a million times but never before in an NDA Gypsy with an Indian Naval Lieutenant on the back seat!

I turned to see whether Siddharth was enjoying the drive as much as I was.

He didn't look at me though.

He pulled up his mask (those were the times of Covid-19) and adjusted his peak cap while looking towards the road.

Then we took a U-turn and reached my housing complex.

In the blink of an eye, Siddharth jumped out from the back seat and came to open the door for me.

I climbed down, gave him a side hug (lest the driver be scandalised) and then walked back trying to process what had just happened.

Every now and then, Lieutenant Siddharth would open up about his work life to satisfy my burning curiosity.

"At NDA, there are two instructors appointed to each squadron.

I'm the instructor to November squadron but during my days in the academy as a cadet, I was in Juliet squadron.

I would have loved to be an instructor for my own squadron...

The position looks very prestigious from the outside but with great power comes great responsibility.

I'm accountable for the personal and professional matters of my cadets like their health and fitness, family issues, finances, and academics."

Whenever we would be out on the town, he would invariably get phone calls from his cadets.

Then he would be like, "Sorry Ipsitaa. I have to take this call," and I would reply, "Sure go ahead,".

Add to all this, Siddharth had his own career to think about.

It was a full moon night.

Siddharth had left a casual get-together at NDA to come see me.

His fellow officers probably knew there was a girl involved; if not, which person in his right mind would happily travel an hour's distance in the dead of the night to meet someone?!

We had climbed halfway up Dighi Hills and were sitting on the steps (a different hill this time!), drinking wine and looking at the city-lights.

It was cold and I shivered a little.

Noticing that, Siddharth put his arm around me and we snuggled into each other.

After sometime, we got up and continued to the summit.

We waited to view the sunrise and then made our way down.

Siddharth wanted to have something light, so, we went to a roadside tea stall and ordered *chai* (black tea) and *samosa* (a fried snack with potato stuffing).

Then he dropped me home as usual and made his way back to the academy.

We had gone for dinner to Atmosphere 6 and come back to the parking lot.

In the car, we were embracing one another madly, as if it was the last time we would do that.

And it was indeed.

Siddharth put his arms around my waist and squeezed me towards himself as mine tightened around his neck.

Then he gently broke the news, "I talked to my father about you.

I tried a lot to convince him but he did not agree.

I'm *manglik* which made things more difficult.

I also tried talking to my mother but she admonished me for falling in love with a non-*pahari* girl and advised me to respect my father's decision.

And she's right.

My father has made many sacrifices for me and it's my duty as a son to obey him...

I'm going home next week and arrangements have been made for my engagement.

Please forgive me...

I didn't have the heart to tell you earlier."

For a few minutes, I didn't understand how to react.

Tears started welling up in my eyes.

Siddharth drove us out of the parking lot.

A short while later, he parked the car at the side of the road and climbed out of the driver's seat to sit beside me.

I whimpered, desperately willing myself to regain my composure.

He held my head to his chest and tried to soothe me.

But I was inconsolable.

It felt like all the happy moments we had spent had been cruelly blacked out and all that was left was sadness and hopelessness.

My soulmate was leaving me, never to come back again.

Siddharth took a puff of smoke and looked away into the distance.

His jaws were set and he was gritting his teeth to hold back the tears.

We lost track of time and just sat like that, neither wanting to say our final goodbyes.

Then a policeman approached our car with a suspicious look in his eyes and Siddharth told him that we were almost leaving.

We hugged one last time before he drove away the way he had come, but this time, forever out of my life.

Epilogue

"That's all of it, doc.

I didn't date any naval officer after that.

In fact, I haven't dated ***anyone*** in a long time."

"How do you feel now?"

"Lighter...

Freer...

I've got my closure I think.

Phew...

Thank you so much for your time, doc.

See you soon."

"You're welcome here anytime, dear.

Lots of luck."

Acknowledgement

A big thank you goes out to you, dear reader, for supporting and encouraging me by reading my books!

The names of all the characters in this book have been changed to protect their identity.

Would you please rate and review my book before moving on to your next book? Thanks.

Happy Reading!

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Vaishnavi Nagaraj is a tweenager based in Pune, India.

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