**Beauty Star**

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Goretti, the receptionist, often reminds me of an unlikable aunt. Hair held up by a tacky, glittery hairclip, crooked teeth, eyes always rolling, looking at clients from head to toe, with spectacles resting on her nose. She wears a long skirt with a slit, judges all clients like an old, sophisticated grandmother. The wind chime welcomes anyone who walks in through the glass door of ‘Beauty Star’ to the chatter, banter, and smell of Wella’s hair product. Everyone is rambling, throwing words like *Aga bai… Eyebrows badd gaya hain Maddum… Don’t put this colour; you’re dark; it won’t look good—suits fair people only… Ingrowth toh nahi hoga na? Aaj school dance hai… Please call Patsy; how much time does a cup of tea take?* etc. “Two minutes, haan. Alison is getting free,” Goretti informs me before I utter a word.

I sit down, fold my hands. My eyes are all over the place. The girl threading someone’s upper lips reminds me of bobbling pigeon heads, and in less than a minute the blow dryer fills my ears. Sudden shrieks of another pierce my gut; it’s probably one of those younger girls, new to waxing. Hot, honey wax and straps being pulled out with immense effort and a displeased face. No one likes women who can’t bear pain.

“Tch. Aree, left hand on top, hold tight,” Patsy says blatantly.

People who’ve natural, perfectly arched eyebrows are the blessed ones! A woman, probably in her late 20’s, is getting a pedicure done, and, though we have a curtain between us, from where she and I sit, her fair, toned feet are a delight to look at. It’s like those TV commercials where they wax hands without hair. Her feet are too neat and tidy for a pedicure. Her skin glistens silver under the salon’s tube lights. Her toes—soft and pink. Rounded nails. Easy, she’s worn the right footwear all her life! She gets a phone call. I plug my ears in. Her voice flows fluently like champagne on air-kissed nights. She’s talking to V about going to Pali Village café. Excited and chirpy, she slips in “Or you can come to mine; we can talk about that script you wanted help with.” It’s definitely a date. It’s a quick call but the way she spoke, has got to leave him thinking, wanting more? I know I’m left thinking even wanting more. I want to see what her date looks like.

“You’re going out from here?” Alison asks her intently.

“I was telling you about V, no? That writer… I was meeting with him for coffee, but we’re going to get some wine,” the woman tells Alison.

‘V’ sounds like ‘we.’ So intimate!

“Haan. Photo, I’ve seen. Tashu, open your hair when you go to meet him. You’ll look very pretty,” Alison says. I can hear them smiling.

The school-going girl is walking out of the vertical wax room. Her legs look three shades fairer than her face. Someone at school is definitely going to bully her, I think to myself, reminiscing, hoping to be wrong. And apparently, everyone around is getting threading done. It smells of lacto calamine and rose water. Goretti covers her nose with a handkerchief, and coughs.

There’s hair sprouting out of the pores on my fingers, around elbows, arms, I’ve chipped nails. Rubber chappals with a fading floral print. My skin, clothes, feet—nothing synonymous with ‘Beauty Star.’ The mole on my upper lip ceases to grab attention. If makeovers were real, I would’ve loved to slip into Tashu’s skin; that body could be my home, as if my entire body feels the need to look like that too. I open Instagram and images of women with hourglass waists, glowing skin, and fat in all the right places flood my eyes.

I receive a text from Varun. He’s nudging to get dinner tomorrow instead, something about a group meeting in Pali hill for a script he’s working on. My heart drops. A ‘group’ meeting, he’s calling it. He says he’ll drink to it if all goes well.

I only realize how real this is, when Tashu walks past me—Varun’s texts echoing in my ears. She’s taller, has broad shoulders. I feel small, timid, all its synonyms at once.

Tashu unties her bun, shakes her head, and her wavy hair falls spectacularly, like she’s stepped out of some Bollywood movie.

Alison’s words haunt my present. “What all do you want to do, today?”