

UNCORRECTED PROOF
NOT FOR SALE



NiNA SONi

HALLOWEEN QUEEN

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CHAPTER ONE

Every year I am set for Halloween long before it arrives. I always know what I am going to dress up as and I keep my costume ready. In the evening, I go out trick or treating with my little sister Kavita and my best friend Jay.

Not this year though.

It was already Friday and Halloween was on Sunday.

On my way to school, I wondered why I was not prepared for Halloween this year. Maybe I should make a list of reasons. I love making lists.

I even have a notebook where I write them down. I have named it Sakhi.

Sakhi means friend in Hindi.

Sakhi is not a diary, because I don't write long letters to her. It's a tell-everything-quick kind of notebook.

Reasons why I like Sakhi

- * She has a great memory. She remembers everything I have ever told her.
- * If I forget what I have told Sakhi, I can go back to her.
- * I never worry about our friendship.
- * She never spills my secrets.
- * Sakhi always has time for me.

Since I was walking to school with Kavita and Jay, I couldn't write down my list. That didn't stop me from making one though.

In-my-head list of why I was not ready for Halloween

- * I did start thinking about Halloween three weeks ago.
- * But then my brain changed from its Halloween track to its Diwali track. That was because this year Diwali fell on Thursday, three days before Halloween.
- * We celebrate Diwali (even though now our family lives in the United States) just like Mom and Dad did when they were growing up in India. We hang twinkling lights on our trees in the front yard. We decorate our home with gleaming copper and brass lamps and bright embroidered tablecloths, placemats, and other things. We get new clothes to wear, we eat delicious food, and we light

fireworks and spend time with our family and friends.

* So for the last two weeks, I was busy with Diwali preparation and celebration.

* On Diwali day, my sister Kavita and I took the day off from school. We talked to my grandparents and cousin Montu in India. We helped Mom and Dad prepare pastries filled with nuts and homemade cheese. In the evening, Jay and his parents came over. We had a delicious meal and then Jay, Kavita, and I lit some sparklers. It was fun.

* Now Diwali was over and I remembered Halloween.

What was I going to dress up as? I didn't have enough time to order a costume from the internet. Nothing would

be left in the stores. I wondered if Mom and Dad had bought any candy.

Jay and Kavita probably hadn't forgotten about Halloween. They were walking in front of me, busy talking. Maybe about their costumes? All of a sudden, I was right smack in the middle of their conversation.

Con-ver-sa-tion means to talk about something. Anything.

Jay: "We only use 10 percent of our brains."

Kavita: "I use all of mine."

Jay: "That can't be true. No one can use 100 percent of their brain."

Kavita: "Who says that?"

Jay: "The scientists who study human brains."

Kavita: "Even *they* can only use 10 percent of their brains?"

Jay: "Yes."

Kavita: “Well, I don’t believe them. I use 100 percent of my brain. So I believe myself.”

Then she covered her ears and sang, “*La-dee-da-dee-da.*” That meant their conversation was finished.

By then, we were at school. The first bell had already rung and the playground was empty.



“See you later, Nina,” Jay said and went toward our fourth-grade classroom.

I took Kavita to her first-grade class, then rushed to mine.

When I walked in, Jay was already at his desk, writing furiously in his notebook. I wondered what that was about.

I tried to peek as I walked past Jay.

He looked up, smiled, and covered part of the notebook with his hand. That made me even more curious.

Was he writing about his and Kavita’s conversation?

It certainly wasn’t a list. Jay is not a list-making, organized kind of person. He is more of a mix-it-all-up, doodle kind of person. So what was he writing about? Or was he doodling?

I sat at my desk and turned away from Jay to face Ms. Lapin. She was writing on the whiteboard.

“Nina,” he whispered.

My idea worked. When I paid no attention to him, he called to me.

I didn't answer. It is very hard to pretend to pay no attention to someone when you are actually paying *all* your attention.

"Hey! Nina!" Jay whispered again.

I looked at him. "What?"

"Did you finish the social studies homework? It's due today."

"I finished it the day we got it," I told him.

"Of course you did."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," he said. "You always get stuff done before you need to. Except when you forget. And you forget a lot."

It was true. And I knew that. I folded my arms. "Fine."

That Jay! One annoying thing about someone being your best friend is that they know most everything about you. Not fair.

Mom says I forget things, because I have too many ideas in my head going this way and that way, like traffic. But if that's true, then won't they create an idea jam? If that happened, then none of the ideas would be able to go

anyplace. But my ideas always have places to go, so I don't think they ever got jammed up. Sometimes, I just forget where I parked them.

Here is how my brain works. I think and think about something, but when a new thing comes up, I jump to a different track. That's when the first idea gets lost. Like Halloween did.

If we use only 10 percent of our brains, I wonder how many unused tracks there are in mine? If they all started working, what would I do? How would I keep them going?

Right now I should not worry about more ideas. I should think about my Halloween costume.

Jay leaned closer. "You're thinking of something else. You already forgot about our conversation!"

"I did not." Just as I turned away from Jay I thought of something. I turned right back. "Were you finishing your homework now?"

"No. That was not homework."

The bell rang. I waited for him to say what it was after the bell finished ringing, but he was silent.

“What were you working on?” I whispered.

Jay’s green eyes twinkled like shiny new marbles. “I designed my own Halloween costume. My mom made it for me. I was adding some details to it.”

I gasped. “What is it?”

“It’s a secret. You’ll see it on Halloween, when I have it on.”

Best friends don’t keep their Halloween costume secret from each other. Do they?

Jay’s mom, Meera Masi, was good with thread, needles, and a sewing machine. She could make anything Jay wanted.

Even though Jay and I are best friends, we like to compete. That’s probably why he was keeping his costume a secret. I wondered what he had planned. I didn’t want him to have the best Halloween costume while I was costume-less. I should be someone grand and important.

“What are you going to be?” Jay asked.

“Halloween Queen,” I blurted out.

“Wow!” Jay was impressed. “What does your costume look like?”

“You’ll see,” I said. I was worried though.

Halloween was on Sunday. With so little time left, a store-bought queen costume was my only choice. A flimsy, plasticky outfit, because unlike Meera Masi, Mom can’t sew.

Once I begged her to make me a dress. We bought a pattern, material, thread, and a zipper. When the dress was done, she asked me to try it on. But the zipper was inside-out. In order to zip it up, I had to stick my hand between my back and my dress, and try to pull it up from the inside. That was not an easy thing to do.

And the dress was tight on one side and loose on the other. I looked like a melting, lopsided ice cream cone.

That was the last time Mom ever tried to sew. After that I never asked her to sew anything again, and I don’t think she wanted to either. Another time I asked Dad to sew a button and it took him fifteen minutes. And then next day

it came off. So this weekend it was better to let Mom do fall garden cleanup and Dad rake leaves. They were good at that and happy doing it.

For the rest of the day, I kept thinking. I made an in-my-head list of possibilities.

- * Neither Mom nor Dad could sew. So I couldn't ask them to make a queen costume.

- * Maybe I could get a magical pumpkin. Then the pumpkin could turn into a beautiful queen's robe.

- * That was not possible. The pumpkin idea was a dumbkin idea.

- * I could decorate our yard and turn it into a Halloween palace. But I would still be without a costume.

- * And it is always dark when trick or treaters came, so no one would notice all my work.

- * No good ideas here.

It is frustrating when you have so many ideas in your head and yet you can't come up with one that will beat all the others.

At lunch I talked to my friend Megan. She is not in my class so we only see each other at lunch.

"What are you going to be for Halloween?" I asked.

"I told you three days ago," she said. "You were not paying attention."

"I'm sorry." I offered one of the Diwali pastries I had brought.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm going to be a cowgirl. I have a big hat and fancy boots and everything ready." She took a bite of pastry.

"That sounds great." I was happy for Megan, but I felt miserable.

"This is delicious," she said taking another bite. "What are you going to be?"

"I told Jay I am going to be the Halloween Queen. The only problem is I have no costume and no idea how I can get one."

“You can borrow my tiara,” she said.

“Thanks! But how can I get the rest of the costume ready in two days?” I asked. “Forty-eight hours?”

“Nina, make a list and write down your ideas. I’m sure you can come up with something.”

Megan was right. I could do it. I *had* to do something special. Something dazzling. As a queen, I needed to own this holiday. I needed to reign over the holiday. Like a real queen. A queen everyone had to listen to. A queen who was regal, brilliant, and definitely extraordinary.

Ex-traor-di-nary means something extra is thrown in, so it’s way more than ordinary.

The more I thought about it, the more I got excited about the idea.

Nina Soni, Halloween Queen!

I had to find a way to become one.