Flaming Sun Collection 2
Marriages Made
in
INDIA
BOXSET
#HotRomance
Sundari Venkatraman
Her Boehmian HUSBAND
SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN
The Casanova's WIFE
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Her Secret HUSBAND
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His Drunken WIFE
SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN
The Smitten HUSBAND
SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN

Flaming Sun Collection 2
Marriages Made in India

(Box Set)

Romance Novella Series by
Sundari Venkatraman

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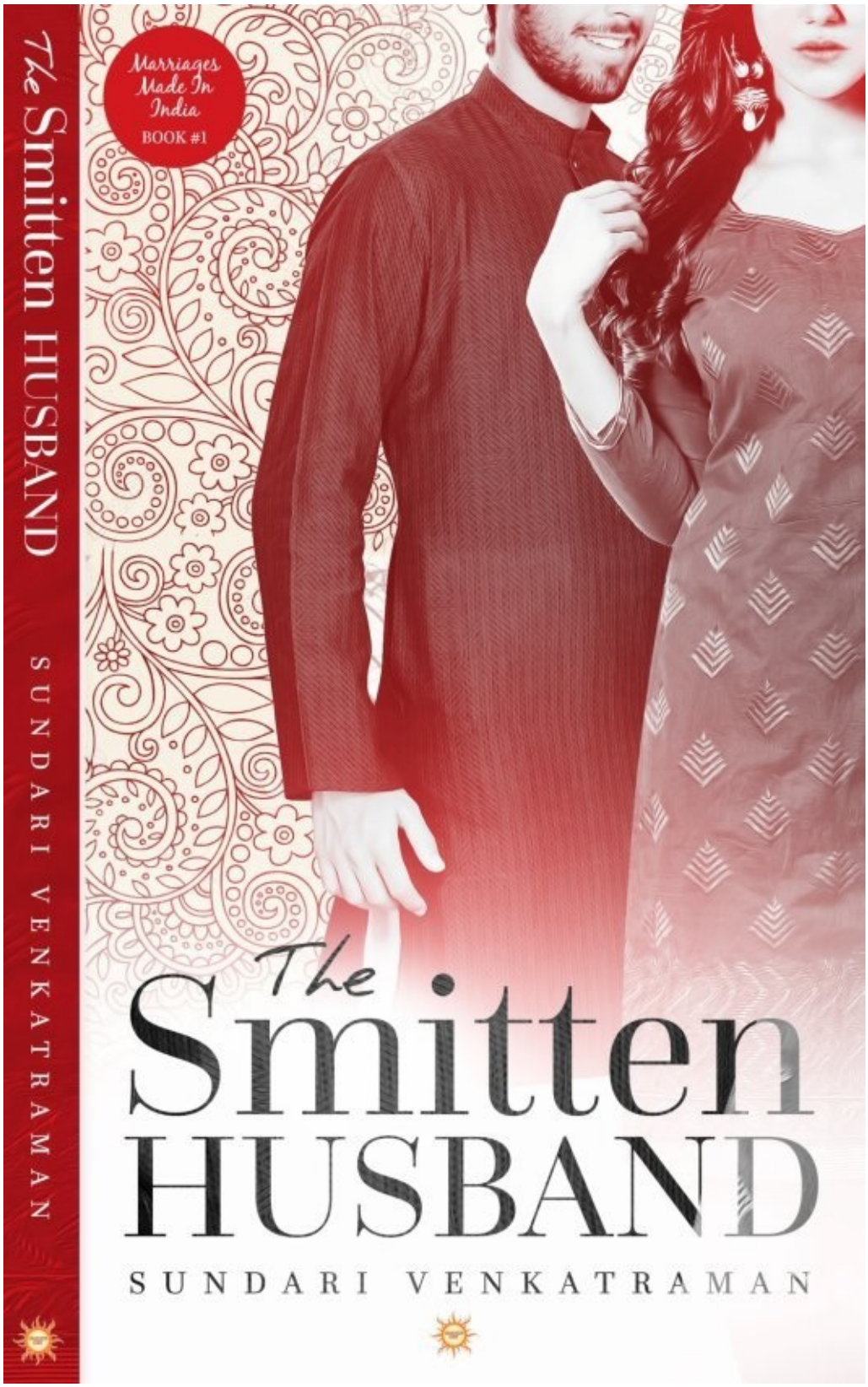

Marriages Made In India
BOOK #1
The Smitten HUSBAND
SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN
The Smitten HUSBAND
SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN

“Good morning!” said a sleepy voice. “What are you doing so far away?” called out Ram, before reaching out with a long arm to pull her to him.

A startled Sapna gave him a shocked look that was lost on her husband, whose eyes were still closed. His arms went around her waist like steel bands, his breath hot against her cheek. “Sapna...” he whispered in her ear as his hard lips pressed into her petal soft cheek.

Sapna tried to pull out of his arms, only to have them pull her closer. Her breasts were flattened against his solid chest. Her traitorous body seemed to enjoy the pressure as her nipples perked up. She did her best to hold on to the control that was slipping fast.

“Ram,” she called out loudly, hoping to wake him up. She couldn’t free her arms that were trapped against her own body, as he held her in a crushing grip. His mouth was busy exploring her face, moving inexorably towards her lips. His eyes continued to remain closed, while his hands moved restlessly at her waist. “Ram...” her voice came out in a whisper, as she felt his tongue trace the edge of her lips. Tortured, she made the final move to capture his roving lips, breaking free her hands to hold his face steady.

“Sapna...” sighed Ram, kissing her gently, his tongue first tracing her upper lip and then her lower one. He gently bit the luscious curve. Sapna instinctively opened her mouth to let him explore the velvety cavern with his tongue. Shyly, her tongue reached out to mate with his, making Ram groan with need.

His hands moved restlessly on her body, her nightie bunching up. His muscular legs tangled with her slim ones, making her sigh with pleasure as his hard and hairy skin brushed against her soft and silky one. His hands cupped her lush bottom, caressing it lovingly.

Sapna suddenly became aware of his hardness pressed against her belly. Coming to her senses, she turned her face away, breaking the kiss. “No Ram.”

His wet lips continued to caress her, his tongue exploring her shell-like ear. Even as her heart thudded loudly, Sapna pushed against him. “Ram, please, will you stop it?”

His black eyes opened a slit, desire and slumber at war in them. “Sapna?” If he hadn’t been fully awake before, he was now, as he stared at her lovely face that was so close to his. He slowly recalled what had been occurring over the past few minutes. He had at first thought he was dreaming about kissing the luscious woman in his arms. How had she landed there in the first place?

THE SMITTEN HUSBAND
(Marriages Made in India: Book #1)

A romance novella by

Sundari Venkatraman

1

The astrologer gave Ram's horoscope his complete attention, a magnifying glass held in his right hand. Meera looked at her husband Mohan anxiously. Why was Vidyasagar*ji* taking so much time? Was there a problem? He had been crystal clear in his predictions when they had brought Chanda's and Veerendra's horoscopes to him last year. An inadvertent smile broke out on Meera's face. It was thanks to this man that their daughter was happily reunited with her husband. A sigh broke out from deep within her the very next minute. What could be wrong with Ram's horoscope?

Did her husband know something? Why wasn't he looking at her? Mohan's eyes were half-closed as he stared down at his own feet, his calm demeanour in direct contrast to his wife's restlessness.

"Ahem!" The couple sat up with a jerk when they heard the astrologer clear his throat. "Ram is your eldest son. And just like Lord Ram, he will always obey his parents." The old man smiled, his eyes twinkling behind the glasses perched firmly on his sharp, hooked nose that reminded one of an eagle.

Though Meera and Mohan were aware of this trait of their son's, they couldn't help but feel proud when they heard the astrologer say it in so many words. They both nodded their heads. "That's so true Vidyasagar*ji*," said Mohan.

"He wouldn't have joined your *kirana* business Mohan*ji*. He must have set up something of his own." Vidyasagar studied the horoscope some more before continuing, "Does he do something creative or artistic? Hmm...something that also sells well."

Meera beamed as Mohan said, "You are right. He's a jewellery designer."

"Oh yes! And must be very successful at it too. Though, your son must have had a difficult time with formal studies. In fact, he must have just about passed graduation." It wasn't a query, but a statement and the astrologer was absolutely right.

Formal education had not been a priority in their village. While their children

had gone to school, it had been in the vernacular medium. The sudden move to Jaipur, when Ram had been around fifteen years, had created an upheaval in all their lives, especially under the circumstances. That was when little Chanda's bridegroom had runaway immediately after the wedding. It had been 2-3 years before the family got back to normal living, accepting that problems were a part and parcel of life. Being the eldest born, Ram had been the most affected by the scenario, next only to his parents. It had taken many years for him to regain his teasing nature. But thanks to the strong family ties the parents and children held, life had slowly got back to an even keel.

Having never been keen to attend school, Ram completed his college only because his parents were clear that he shouldn't regret it later on in life. Luckily, during the career consultation organised by his college, he learned about jewellery designing. Joining a private course, he had taken to it like duck to water and had never looked back. Today, he ran one of the most popular jewellery showrooms in Jaipur.

Mohan and Meera weren't surprised any more. The astrologer was an expert at his profession. They knew it from before, when he had helped them trace their Chanda's runaway bridegroom Veerendra turned Ranveer Singh.

"As you can see, sir, Ram is almost twenty-nine. We want him to get married and settle down. Can you see any prospects of a good match?" asked Mohan. Meera nodded her head even as her husband spoke, total adoration for the man she had married when she herself was a child.

Vidyasagar nodded his head, signalling his assistant for something. When the man stepped into the back room, he turned towards Mohan and said, "That's exactly what I was going to suggest. I know of this family who live in Pushkar..." Vidyasagar turned to receive the horoscope that his man had brought before continuing, "...Sapna is their daughter. She's the eldest and is followed by two sons, who are still in school. Let me be upfront. They are a poor family. Chitranjan Purohit is a *pandit* who's well-versed in the Vedas. He's highly blessed by Maa Saraswati, but unfortunately, Maa Lakshmi has abandoned him in totality. His family leads a hand-to-mouth existence with the meagre and erratic income he gets from the *pujas* he performs. I hope you don't mind my suggesting this family for your son. But they are really good people. And I can vouch for the girl's looks and character."

Mohan looked at his wife for a second before giving his answer to the astrologer. “It doesn’t matter that they are poor, Vidyasagar*ji*. I have enough wealth to last for seven generations. And by God’s grace, Ram is earning really well. We trust you implicitly and would go with your judgement. If you think this girl is right for my son, we would definitely like to meet the family. I suppose you must have already seen that the horoscopes match?” he asked.

A rare smile split the astrologer’s face as he gave a nod. “I have. And believe me, Ram and Sapna’s match is something truly made in heaven. You will never regret taking Sapna home as your *bahu*.”

Overwhelmed, the couple received Sapna’s horoscope from Vidyasagar with great reverence. They were thrilled that the time had arrived to get their eldest born married. They took leave of the astrologer and eagerly left for home to break the good news to their sons.

2

Sapna was lost in the world of dreams, just as her name suggested. Her hands automatically mixed the *mehendi* powder in the bowl to a smooth paste before she rolled it into handmade plastic cones. Even as her hands were busy, her huge grey eyes, framed by luxuriously long lashes, gazed out at the blue sky beyond the tiny window, a smile on her rosy red lips. She was twenty-five, and still unmarried, much to her parents' anxiety. But she knew that it won't be long before the Prince of her dreams would come in a *baaraat* to carry her away to his palace, after tying the knot.

Sapna was a diehard romantic. She was glad that she got to study in school, for no other reason than that it had taught her to read, in both Hindi and English. She devoured romantic novels like there was no tomorrow. And then there were the Bollywood films that gave her goose bumps. Sapna never took off the rose-coloured spectacles that she had donned since she was barely thirteen.

School had been free. But college was out of reach. Not that it fazed Sapna. She learned the art of *mehendi* and became an expert. She was thrilled to earn money by using her expertise on brides and wedding guests. Her art was in demand and she could help with the household expenses as her father's income was too less to feed five mouths and educate her two younger brothers.

While her parents worried themselves sick about finding her a groom, Sapna *knew* better.

Her unwavering faith had been proven correct when her best friend from school, Ritu, had fallen in love, with *Yuvraj* Yash, no less. While their respective parents had been doing their best to arrange a marriage between Ritu and Yash, they had met totally by chance on a flight to Jaipur. It had been love at first sight and they had got married within the month. Now that was what she would call true romance.

"Maa, I'm leaving for the engagement programme I told you about. I'm doing the girl's *mehendi*. I'll not be home before five," she called out, packing her *mehendi* cones in a cloth bag. Checking her face in the mirror and putting on her rubber chappals, Sapna walked out of the tiny house, shutting the rickety

wooden door behind her.

Purnima stared at the door, her dark eyes sad. Her daughter was so beautiful that she always worried of the “evil eye” being cast on her. And now, Sapna was still unmarried at twenty-five. The few alliances that had come their way, had fallen apart even before the boy-meet-girl stage, all because they couldn’t afford a dowry. They had become the ridicule of their neighbours. Their relatives were no less. Even the wealthier ones weren’t ready to help. Anyway, Chittaranjan was too proud to ask anyone.

Purnima turned towards the stove to get the evening meal together. It was thanks to Sapna’s income that they were having regular meals over the past few years. She also had this niggling worry of how they would survive after their daughter married and went to live in her husband’s home.

3

Ram looked at his parents in askance. “Why the sudden plan to get me married?” he asked softly, a smile in his voice.

“You are twenty-nine, Ram,” said his father Mohan. “It’s high time you get a life-partner and set up your family. If we had a choice, you know we would’ve arranged your marriage the day you turned twenty-five. But we were all waiting to get Chanda settled. Well, it’s been almost a year since she’s happily married to Ranveer. I think the time’s perfect for you.”

Meera kept nodding as she heard her husband talk. “And there’s Lakshman who’s twenty-seven. I’m sure he must want to settle down with a wife too. You are the eldest, and that’s why we went to the astrologer to look for a prospective bride,” she said.

“*Hahn* Lakshman, yes,” nodded Ram. He recalled Ruma, the receptionist at Ranveer’s office. Lakshman had seemed interested in her. Hey, could she be the reason why his younger brother had been making regular trips to Delhi? And here he had been thinking that Lakshman was visiting Chanda. A grin pierced his face as Ram said, “Okay, I think you know best. Tell me what you want from me.”

“That’s my boy,” said Mohan, an answering smile on his face as he looked at his handsome eldest born. “We need to go see the girl and her family at Pushkar. They don’t have a telephone, so we’ll just go there and stay in a hotel and send word for a meeting.” He had thought about it for a long time before arriving at that decision. “Since it will be just the three of us, I thought I’ll ask Chanda and Ranveer to join us too.”

“Why not take Lakshman and the twins too?” asked Ram, his tongue-firmly-in-cheek. “The more the merrier.”

“Don’t be silly Ram,” answered his mother seriously, not catching on that her son was teasing them. “We don’t want to confuse them by taking four young men to their home. They won’t know who the prospective groom is.”

Mohan looked into his son's eyes deeply, not giving his opinion on the subject. Ram had acquired his mischievous nature from his father. "Get serious Ram. To continue, I'll call Chanda tomorrow morning and will find out when they can join us. Once they are here, we will leave for Pushkar the same day. We can return the next day after seeing the girl. Is that fine with you?"

"So, we see the girl and come back home, that's it?" asked Ram. While he tried to tease, he was actually feeling nervous.

"Ram," said his father impatiently, "we can plan these things only up to a point. I've not even had the chance to speak to her father. This meeting will be the first. Let's see how things pan out."

"Won't it make better sense for you and Mamma to go visit them, Pappa? Why let me tag along at this point?"

"Ram, the wedding is yours or ours?"

Ram grinned, "Logic!"

"Now stop arguing and arrange to take a couple of days off the coming week," said his father firmly.

"Okay Pappa," said Ram, like the obedient son that he was. He sat with them in the living room for the next hour, pretending to watch TV. Not really interested in the drama serials, he just sat there, staring at the large screen, his mind in a quandary.

He got up to go to his room at 11 pm, pretending to be sleepy. He wasn't really surprised that his brothers weren't around. His father must have shooed them away, to talk to him in private. A deep sigh shook him to the core of his being as he went into his room. Feeling restless, he went down again by the staircase at the back, let himself out from the backdoor and took a stroll around the garden.

Taking deep breaths, Ram walked on the paved pathway, feeling peace steal over him as he took in the luxuriant shrubs and trees that surrounded the garden set in a couple of acres. The night was cool with a gentle breeze blowing, soothing his nerves.

Getting married was a major decision, and it looked like it was out of his hands. Yeah, he would like to have a partner. But he wondered how his life would change after marriage. For the better, he hoped. He wondered what kind of a woman he wanted to tie the knot with. Someone affectionate, who would get along well with his family, was his first thought.

Well, his father was smart that way. He had already constructed two duplex bungalows in the compound of *Nakshatra*, the main house they all lived in now. These were for Ram and Lakshman. The plan was to construct a couple more in the future, for the twins. So, while they would all be living in the same compound, they would also have their independence. But it would still be nice if his wife got along well with all the members of his family. They were a close knit unit and he was keen that they continued to remain so.

But what about Ram himself? He had an easygoing nature in general. But getting together with a stranger would mean a lot of adjustment. Did he have it in him? Another sigh broke to the surface as he turned back towards home. Only time would tell.

Marriage was the biggest risk a guy took in his life, it seemed.

4

Chanda woke up from a deep sleep when her cell phone vibrated at 7.30 in the morning. Well, it had been the monthly party at RS Software the earlier night and they had been late getting home. She saw it was a call from home. She was too cosy in Ranveer's arms, her back pressed close to him, her head resting on his shoulder and his arm around her waist. Looking at him from the corner of her eyes to make sure that the call hadn't woken him up, she gently prised his arm from around her. Getting up, she took her cell to leave their bedroom, so that she could talk to her mother without disturbing her sleeping husband. Only to be pulled back to bed by the same masculine arm that she had just taken off her.

A smile lit her features as she turned around to look at her husband of less than a year, even as she spoke into the phone, "Hello!" His eyes were closed, the thick lashes resting on his cheeks. He looked simply gorgeous, the morning fuzz adding to his attraction.

She turned away in a hurry when she heard her father's reply, "Hello Chanda *beta*, did I wake you up?"

"Not really Pappa. I was just getting up. How are you all?" she asked, a smile in her voice that reflected on her face. The next second, the smile turned to a scowl as she felt Ranveer's wet tongue slide down her back. Her body stiffening, Chanda tried to move away even as she made a conscious effort to talk sense. But Ranveer just moved closer.

"I have some good news to share. We have got an alliance for Ram." Chanda shrieked—her father thought it was in joy, while her husband grinned at her mischievously, his hands tracing the curves of her body relentlessly. Mohan had a smile in his voice as he continued, "I know you must be excited. So, the plan's like this. Your Mamma and I want you and Ranveer to accompany us to Pushkar to meet the girl and her family. Would this week be convenient?" It was obvious that he was eager to go ahead with the meeting immediately.

Chanda choked, her face a fiery red. "*Ek minute*, Pappa," she said, before putting the phone on hold, "Ranveer, are you crazy?" She glared at him or tried to, her frown fading into a smile on seeing the desire and mischief on his handsome

features.

“You know I am,” he said, pulling her closer to his chest.

“Ranveer, Pappa has something important to say. Can you keep your hands to yourself for a few minutes?” she requested, her black eyes pleading with his naughty brown gaze.

“There, whatever you say!” said Ranveer, spreading his arms wide, shrugging his shoulders. “Anything to make you happy.”

But she didn’t trust the mischievous glint in his eyes. The second he moved his hands away, Chanda sprinted out of the room with the phone, shutting the door firmly behind her.

“Sorry Pappa,” she said breathlessly. “The phone went on hold. Tell me, who’s the girl? What’s her name? Is she educated? Have you checked about the family? Did...”

“*Arre*!” said Mohan, grinning widely, his daughter’s enthusiasm catching up with him. “We don’t have too many details. But astrologer Vidyasagar recommended her highly for Ram. So, the plan is to go meet the people and find out more.”

“Oh, okay then. I’ll talk to Ranveer and we’ll come over as soon as possible.”

Even as she uttered the words, Ranveer took the phone from her and spoke into it. “*Namaste* uncle! How are you doing?”

“I’m fine *beta*. As I was telling Chanda, an alliance has come for Ram. We would like you and Chanda to join us on the trip to Pushkar to meet the girl and her family,” Mohan said.

“Uncle, I think it makes best sense if Chanda goes with you guys on the first trip. I’ll join you when the engagement takes place. What do you say? It’s best to save our leaves when the actual wedding takes place, right?”

Mohan couldn’t argue with his son-in-law’s logic. “You’re right, Ranveer. I hope you wouldn’t mind Chanda coming over here for a few days.”

“Not at all, uncle,” said Ranveer affectionately. “And how is aunty?”

“She’s fine *beta*.”

“We’ll call in an hour or so to confirm the dates and also talk to Ram. Is that fine, uncle?”

“Of course, of course.”

Ranveer disconnected the phone and threw it on a sofa, lifting his wife in his arms and carrying her into the bedroom.

5

Chittaranjan sat on the banks of Pushkar Lake, performing a *puja*, when he saw his son Suraj come running to him. He gestured to him to wait, before completing the *puja* diligently. It wasn't fair to the clients to keep them waiting in the middle of it. Taking the money they gave him, he turned to his son and asked softly, "What happened, Suraj? Is everything okay?"

"Pappa, Maa asked you to come home immediately. Someone has come from Jaipur to see Sapna *di* for marriage," said Suraj in a single breath. Excitement had run rampant at the Purohit home when Mishra*ji*, a contact of Vidyasagar's, had gone there carrying a message from the Maheshwaris. "Mishra uncle is at home. He asked you to come urgently."

Chittaranjan's dark eyes lit up when he heard that someone had brought an alliance for his daughter. He rushed along with his son in a half-run, to reach home as soon as possible.

His fourteen-year-old son continued to fill him in on all details. "The boy's family has come down from Jaipur. They are staying at a hotel," said Suraj in awe. "They must be very rich *nah*, Pappa? I hope they don't ask for too much dowry to marry Sapna *di*. If they have so much money, why will they want more from us, who have nothing?" asked the teenager logically.

Chittaranjan nodded his head absent-mindedly. He hoped so too. They reached home to walk in through the open door. Purnima was busy at the stove, preparing sweets and snacks for the guests who were to come later. Mishra*ji* was sitting on a stool, sipping a cup of tea, regaling her with details about the Maheshwaris. Sapna was seated on the floor, looking irritated, chewing on a finger nail.

Mishra got up the moment Chittaranjan walked in. "*Namasteji*! Your daughter's *kismet* has turned for the better. Mohan Maheshwari is a big businessman in Jaipur. His *kirana* shop in Tripolia Bazaar does business in crores. And you know, the boy Ram, he's their eldest son. He runs his own jewellery business. Not just rich, he's handsome too."

"But Mishra uncle," protested Sapna, "you know how these rich people are.

They only want more dowry than the others. Why are you making Maa waste her time and money making all that extra food?" She felt angry. This isn't how the man of her dreams would come, not introduced by an astrologer.

She had visualised her first meeting with her future husband in many different ways. He was sure to appear at one of the weddings while she was applying *mehendi* to the bride, as a friend of the groom or maybe even his brother. Maybe she would meet him in the local market. He would turn up in a big car and fall for her the moment their eyes met.

Not like this! She turned her angry eyes to her father, hoping to appeal to his kindness. "Let them not come, Pappa. We won't be able to afford a marriage with a rich boy," she declared.

"I..." Mishra tried to interrupt.

"Sapna, why are you being negative?" asked her father, his voice gentle. "We don't stand to lose anything. Vidyasagar*ji* and Mishra*ji* are our well-wishers. Let the Maheshwari family come and see you. What if the boy is floored by your beauty? He may even refuse dowry," he smiled, ever the optimist.

Purnima continued with her work, hoping against hope that her husband was right. That was the only way they could get their daughter married. It was all karma. The three abortions she had had after Sapna was born—all because the babies in her womb were girls—must have come back as karma. No wonder they were leading such a horrible existence. And it was no wonder they were unable to get even their only girl married off. She wiped the single tear that ran down her cheek with the edge of her sari. This alliance *had* to work.

Sapna didn't want to argue with her gentle father. What did it matter anyway? When the boy's family asked for dowry, he would automatically have to say 'no'. She could always go back to daydreaming and wait for her Prince in peace after that. Cheering up, she got up to go behind the old bed-sheet that was used as a curtain, to get dressed in the only *gaghra choli* that she possessed. It was made of rough cotton, but Sapna had managed to make it grand with a lot of mirror work and embroidery. She brushed her long hair that fell to her hips and plaited it in a single braid. She applied kohl to her large, almond shaped eyes and was ready to take on the Maheshwaris. She was completely unaware of how beautiful she looked, her stormy grey eyes sparkling.

In the meanwhile, Mishra*ji* had gone back to the hotel in the car he had come in. He was to return with the Maheshwari family within the hour.

6

Chanda looked at Ram with a smile on her face. Her eldest brother looked dashing in dark blue jeans and a brilliant white *kurta* of superfine cotton. He was an inch short of six feet and well built. “Are you nervous, Ram?” she asked softly.

“Totally! Can you imagine going to meet a prospective bride, without even knowing her name, let alone her face? How long do you think I’m going to have to say a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’? And on what basis do I arrive at my answer? Just by seeing her face?” Though chilled out most of the time, Ram had a temper that rarely surfaced. It looked like this was one of those exceptional occasions.

Chanda placed an arm around his waist, hugging him close. “Don’t worry. You’ll know.”

“What will I know?” he growled, his black eyes blazing. He wanted to break something. He only refrained because his gentle parents didn’t deserve it. But what the hell!

“You’ll know if she’s the one for you. It’s not just the looks. It’s the vibes. I’d suggest you cool down. If you’re in a temper, you might not be attuned to any.”

Ram looked down at his little sister. “Are you serious?”

She nodded her head vigorously.

“Is that how you knew that you were in love with Ranveer?” he asked, a small smile breaking out on his tempestuous face, like a ray of sunshine piercing through a dark cloud.

She nodded again. “Yes. I could feel it even the first time I laid eyes on him. Till then, I refused to show interest in any man, especially because I felt I didn’t have the right, having been married as a child and all that. But when I saw him give a lecture at our college, I could feel the powerful pull of attraction. I don’t think you should worry. And, if, by chance, you don’t feel anything, it’s okay to refuse the alliance. You know that, right?”

A deep sigh surfaced from Ram. He seemed to be sighing all the time nowadays. But he did look relieved. Though still not comfortable with the boy-meet-girl process, he felt better after the chat with his sibling. "*Chalo*, let's go and get done with it." He tucked an arm into hers and pulled her towards the door.

Chanda resisted. "Ram, I hope you realise that we aren't going to the dentist for a root canal," she teased, her face impish.

"Haha! Very funny," said Ram, dragging her out of the room they were sharing. By now, their parents had also stepped out of the adjoining room and the four of them took the lift to go down. It was time to go see the girl.

7

They had to leave the car on the main road and walk down the narrow lane for a few minutes before they reached the dilapidated structure that housed the Purohits. The door had been left open invitingly since the Maheshwaris were expected.

A beautiful *rangoli* graced the road outside the door. The four of them stepped around it carefully as Meera commented, “That’s so lovely.”

They went into the minuscule room even as Chittaranjan welcomed them with folded hands, “Welcome to our humble abode.” He invited them to sit on the mat spread on the floor, while guiding Mohan to the only stool that was available. Suraj brought a tray of tumblers filled with cool water from a pot even as Purnima instructed him to be careful not to spill the water.

After everyone settled down, Purnima brought a large steel plate filled with *jalebis*, *gulab jamuns* and *chaklis*. Chanda got up immediately to help the older woman. “*Namaste* aunty,” she smiled at her, her eyes searching for the young woman they had come down to see.

Chittaranjan spoke softly. “I work as a *pandit* and this is my small family. Sapna is my eldest born. She has managed to finish school. Nowadays, she’s learned to apply *mehendi* designs and has become an expert in the art. She’s much in demand during marriages in all of Pushkar.” He was obviously proud of his daughter’s achievements. “She’s our main responsibility. Once she’s married off, it’s our two sons—Suraj and Shyam. They are still at school.”

Mohan listened to the man in front of him, understanding more than what he actually said. It was obvious that the Purohits were poorer than even what he had imagined. Well, that was no deterrent if Ram and the girl—oh, yes, Sapna—liked each other. He nodded his head and said, “Ram is our eldest born. We have three more sons after him and Chanda here,” he gestured to his daughter, “is our youngest child. She’s married and lives in Delhi with her husband. *Bhagavan ki dua se* we have all things material. Mishra*ji* must have mentioned that Ram runs his own independent business. He’s twenty-nine and we believe it’s the right time to get him settled with a wife. Vidyasagar*ji* recommended your family to

us. We hold him in high regard and that's the main reason we were keen to see your daughter immediately."

Chittaranjan nodded his head in agreement, a beatific smile on his face. "Of course." He turned towards the curtain and called out softly, "Sapna, *aao beti*."

Sapna. So that was her name. Ram stared at the vision that stepped out from behind the curtain, his heart beating rapidly. He didn't care about what the others might think about him. He needed to know if she was the right girl for him. She was barely a few feet away as she stepped out, her bare feet making no sound. She wore no anklets. Nor were there bangles on her wrists. But the *mehendi* on her delicate hands called out to him. She was slim to the point of being thin. His eyes moved up further, taking in her figure, moving in a hurry as they encountered her shapely breasts. He saw narrow shoulders supporting a graceful neck on which sat a finely chiselled profile. Yeah, she was looking at her father and Ram was able to see only the side of her face.

"Come, Sapna," called out her father, "take Mohan*ji*'s and Meera*ji*'s blessings."

Sapna obediently touched their feet, her eyes flitting this way and that, unable to meet anyone's. The truth was that she was feeling too shy and awkward. With a sigh of relief, her gaze caught the dark eyes of a young woman and turned to her with a hesitant smile.

"Hello Sapna," said Chanda, looking at the nervous young woman. "I'm Chanda, Ram's sister. And this here is Ram," she introduced.

Ram looked into the striking grey eyes and was lost. He understood exactly what Chanda had meant. His heart thundered like a galloping horse. He got up from the floor to stand next to his sister."Hello Sapna," he said softly.

Being barely a couple of inches over five feet, Sapna had to look up a long way at him. "Hello," she responded, her voice just a whisper, refusing to meet his eyes.

Ram wasn't too surprised. Nor did he blame her. There were too many people around. Chanda held her hand and made her sit down next to her. She noticed the dark *mehendi* design on her hands and held one of them to check it out. Ram watched from a couple of feet away, rather frustrated with the situation. "Did

you do this design?” asked Chanda.

Sapna nodded her head, her gaze on the floor.

“Do you sing, Sapna?” asked Meera, refusing to acknowledge her husband’s frown. She herself loved to listen to Hindustani music though she couldn’t sing to save her life. What’s wrong in asking?

Sapna nodded her dark head, without raising her head.

“Why don’t you sing that *thumri* on Lord Krishna?” invited her father.

Sapna nodded yet again before she began to sing in a melodious voice. While Meera closed her eyes out of respect to Sapna’s beautiful voice, Ram watched avidly. Though he wasn’t a fan of classical music, Sapna’s rendition of the love song in the name of Krishna, struck a chord within him. There were no two ways about the fact that Sapna would become his wife. It didn’t strike him to wonder if she would also be of the same opinion.

Taking a sip of water to wet his parched throat, Ram waited for his parents to say something. They all tasted a bite of the snacks served, for the sake of formality, before Mohan got up from his stool. Meera, Ram and Chanda stood up too.

“Sapna has a delightful voice, Chittaranjan*ji*. I’m sure you must be proud of your daughter. We will get back to you by tomorrow morning with our decision. Mishra*ji* will contact you. In the meanwhile, you also ask your daughter about her opinion regarding a liaison between our families.”

Ram hid his disappointment. He had so wanted to talk to Sapna in private. Hopefully, the next time.

They left in the car they had come, leaving Mishra*ji* with the Purohits.

All four of them went to the parents’ room to talk about the meeting. Meera sounded excited when she said, “I think the girl—Sapna—is perfect for Ram. I have accepted her as my daughter-in-law.”

Mohan grinned teasingly, seeing the colour rush up his son’s manly cheeks. “My dear wife, it’s Ram who’ll be wedding her. Should we find out if he likes Sapna,

or is it enough if you have approved of her?”

Meera gave her husband a mock glare before turning to look at Ram. “Ram, you tell me. What’s there not to like about Sapna?”

“Mamma, are you trying to bulldoze Ram into marrying the girl of your choice?” joined Chanda in the teasing. As if the gentle Meera was capable of “bulldozing” anyone! It was obvious to Chanda that her brother was floored. But he hadn’t uttered a word. “Let’s hear what Ram has to say.”

“I think Mamma Pappa know best,” said Ram, in a non-committal fashion. He was too dazed by the powerful attraction he felt towards Sapna. Was it possible to fall in love at first sight? He wasn’t sure if this was love, but he did know that he wouldn’t object to spending the rest of his life with her.

Chanda shook her head vigorously. “It doesn’t work that way Ram. What do you think, Pappa?” She dragged their father into the conversation. “It’s not Mamma Pappa’s decision to make. If you aren’t keen to wed her, I’m sure they wouldn’t mind.” Mischief gleamed in her black eyes as she raised a brow at him.

Mohan held Meera’s hand when she opened her mouth to voice her protest. All three of them looked at Ram, wanting him to voice his opinion. “What? I’m okay if all three of you are okay,” he insisted.

Mohan winked at his daughter before saying, “Well, in that case, let’s not rush into this alliance. We have only seen one girl. And it looks like the family is also too poor. Let’s ask Vidyasagar*ji* for more contacts. I’m sure he must have a long list. We’ll meet a few more girls and then decide. What do you say, Ram?”

Ram was shocked. He hadn’t expected this. “But Pappa, why should we reject Sapna because they’re poor? Don’t we have enough wealth for both families? Do you really plan to ask for dowry?” He had turned pale under his tan.

“That’s also true. And no, I don’t want dowry at all. But you don’t seem sure. While we all think that the girl is alright, what if we find someone better?”

Ram looked at his family. While they were pulling his leg, they were obviously eager to know what he thought of Sapna. Well, she looked attractive, pleasing on the eye. But was that enough for a lifelong commitment? “I’d like to meet her

again and talk to her in private. Do you think her parents will agree to that?" he asked, addressing his father while looking at all three in turn.

Mohan nodded his head. "Why not? I'll talk to Mishra*ji* and see if we can invite them to dinner here."

Ram nodded, a smile on his face. He looked forward to meeting Sapna on a one-on-one basis. While Mohan called Mishra, Chanda and Ram went to their adjoining room. "Chanda, will you help me get Sapna alone?" Ram sighed. He wasn't worried that his parents will stop him. But what if Sapna's family objected?

Chanda grinned at him. "You don't worry. I'll organise it. Just go along with whatever I say, okay?"

Ram gave her a hug, "Righto, little sis. I swear I will."

8

The Purohits were extremely hesitant taking up the offer to dine with the Maheshwaris. Getting two regular meals at home was an everyday challenge. How could they, from the girl's side, agree to go have dinner at a hotel with the prospective bridegroom's family? What would the Maheshwaris think of them? Chittaranjan asked Mishra outright.

"The Maheshwaris aren't very formal, Chittaranjan*ji*. It would be disrespectful if you refuse this invitation. We need to change with the times. You all get ready and let's go. Their car's waiting for us." Mishra was insistent. The marriage broker was keen that the alliance clicked as he stood to gain a lot—both monetarily and in reputation. Moreover, the Maheshwaris had three more sons.

"Well, if you're sure. I'll go by your word. Let God's will prevail," said Chittaranjan. "Purnima, Sapna, get ready fast. We are going to have dinner at the hotel with the Maheshwari family."

Suraj and Shyam looked eagerly at their father and the guest. Would they get to tag along? They had heard about Gulaab Niwaas Palace from friends at school. It truly looked like a palace, they were told. And the food served there was out of this world. "Pappa?" said Suraj. "Should we..."

Even as Chittaranjan shook his head, Mishra nodded to the boys. "The invitation includes all of you."

"Yay," yelled Shyam as the two boys rushed to the single wooden *almirah* to pull out fresh t-shirts. They took barely a couple of minutes to get ready, their hair brushed back neatly.

While Purnima was aflutter as she wrapped a sari around herself, Sapna was a nervous wreck.

It was lucky that she had a few sets of *salwar kameez* that she wore when she attended *mehendi* ceremonies. Though made of cheap cotton, they looked smart. She wore a set in brilliant green that made her glow. Applying a line of kohl to outline her eyes, she was ready. Going to the big hotel was a great excitement.

But did she want to meet Ram again? He looked handsome. Only she hadn't felt any "zing" on meeting him. She didn't think he was the man for her. But what could she tell her parents? They were impatient to marry her off since twenty-five was way too old for a woman in their family. Her cousins had been married the same year they turned eighteen. She realised that she had no choice but to go along with them.

The boys were too thrilled riding in the air-conditioned car. The adults' silence went unnoticed due to their chatter. They reached the hotel in twenty minutes and were awed when a guard opened the glass door for them.

Mishra escorted them inside, where the Maheshwaris were waiting for their guests at the reception. Chilled fruit juice was served to all of them as they settled down on the comfortable sofas.

On Mohan's prior instructions, a duty officer escorted Suraj and Shyam to a small room off the reception where a video station was situated. The boys hooted enthusiastically as they settled down to play games.

Chanda got up suddenly and said, "Pappa, I think I'll go for a stroll with Ram and Sapna."

Ram rose immediately to oblige his sister while a visibly pale Sapna looked at her father. When he gave a small nod, she got up to go with the brother-sister duo.

The three of them walked out from a side door, into the huge gardens that surrounded the hotel. The grass verge beckoned to them as the three of them walked slowly. Chanda turned to Sapna and said, "Well, this is where I leave the two of you." She waved to Ram and left by another door to go up to her room.

Sapna gave a startled look towards her retreating figure before turning to look at Ram, her large grey eyes wide open. She didn't quite know how to deal with the situation.

Ram smiled gently. "I don't bite. Would you like to sit down at that table over there?" It was set up in open air and was the one furthest from the reception. He would have preferred to take her up to the terrace, but he wasn't sure she would go with him.

Sapna gave a small nod as they walked over to the table. As if she had a choice. Ram pulled a chair for her and waited for her to sit down before pushing it gently, close to the table. He sat on an adjacent chair and looked at her, his black eyes glowing at the lovely vision in front of him.

“Would you like to eat something?” he asked.

“Water,” said Sapna, her voice a croak. Her throat was parched as her heart beat a strong tattoo.

Ram beckoned to a hovering waiter and requested him to get water.

“Sapna.” He waited for her to look up at him before smiling at her. “Are you really scared of me? As I told you, I don’t bite.”

Sapna shook her head. “That’s not it.” The water came and she took a few gulps from her glass before setting it down. “Why are you playing with my family?”

Ram frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You people are so rich and you can see how poor we are. I don’t think an alliance between us would ever work. You are from the city and Pushkar is a small town. And even here, we live on the wrong side. Why us?” Her face was red by the time she finished talking. She had been burning to ask someone these questions and she was finally glad that Chanda had given her an opportunity to talk to Ram in private.

Ram shrugged as he took a minute to gather his thoughts. He had expected these questions to have been handled at the parental level and it hadn’t struck him that they were working so much on Sapna’s mind. “Do you object to us because we’re rich?” he asked.

Sapna shook her head. “That’s not the point, is it? You have your life to lead and we have ours. I don’t think it’s practical for our lives to be tied together,” she said firmly. It was obvious that she had thought a lot about the situation.

Not just beauty, but brains too.

“I don’t see a problem. Money is the same as energy right? It’s best used when it flows from a higher to a lower level. If you don’t have money, then ideally you should tie up with a rich family so that your life changes for the better.” Now why had the conversation deteriorated to discussing their wealth and lack? “Forget that for now. Tell me about yourself.”

Sapna stared at him. Wasn’t he autocratic? Here she was, genuinely worried if they could have a life together. And he had just *told* her to forget it. Gritting her teeth in frustration, she said, “I’ve finished school. I learned to draw *mehendi* designs and make a living out of it.” That was it. There was nothing more to say.

Ram looked at her mutinous expression, his own amused. “Okay. Let me tell you about myself. I’m a graduate—though I just managed to get through—and later I pursued jewellery designing. I run my own jewellery shop.” He didn’t think it was the right time to tell her that his monthly turnover ran to many crores. She had a thing about rich people, it seemed.

Sapna looked at him with pained eyes. “I can’t speak English. You’re bound to feel ashamed when you introduce me to your family and friends.”

Ram had to hold back his laughter. She was doing her best to dissuade him from marrying her. He wasn’t going to let her do that, unless she really disliked him. “I was almost fifteen when we shifted from our village to Jaipur. I couldn’t speak English to save my life. We all learned to, when the need arose. I’m sure you will, if you really have to. I don’t think that not speaking English makes you any less a human being. If you’re interested, you can always enrol in English conversation classes and learn the language.”

“I hate to cook. Okay, I know how to since my mother gave me no choice. But I can’t stand kitchen work,” she said vehemently.

“We have a *Maharaj* who lives in. Even my mother doesn’t cook all that much,” he said, a slow grin brightening his face.

Sapna got desperate. “What will I do after marriage? I can’t stay idle. Here in Pushkar, I have regular customers for *mehendi*. I keep busy twenty days in a month. I don’t think I’ll have much to do in Jaipur.”

“How will you know unless you find out?” asked Ram, his voice gentle. He

could understand that she wanted to be occupied.

Sapna got up in a rush, pushing her chair back, thoroughly irritated. “And how the hell will I find out? After our marriage? What if I don’t like any of the options and it’s too late by then?” She knew she was being rude. But the fact was that she was extremely scared of losing her identity. Here, in the small town, everyone knew her and vice versa. What if she got swallowed up in the big city among rich people?

“Why don’t you visit our home along with your parents this weekend? You can find out a little more about our lifestyle.” He raised a hand to stop her from voicing another protest. “Look here Sapna, I like you and am interested in marrying you. I don’t think money is a big issue. We don’t take dowry and we can bear all the wedding expenses. Jaipur has a lot to offer, more than Pushkar can. There is no dearth of opportunities if you’re ready to learn. You can learn to speak English. If *mehendi* designing is your passion, you can take it a step further and set up a beauty parlour after learning the trade. You’ll have all the freedom you want. After all this, if you still don’t like the idea of wedding me, then well, I can accept that.” Ram turned and beckoned to the waiter. “Get a plate of *mixed bhajjias*, a *strawberry milkshake* and an *iced tea*.” Once the waiter left, he looked at Sapna and said, “Sorry about that. I’m hungry. Do tell me if you want something else.”

Was he for real? Sapna’s grey eyes turned stormy. “No, I’ll have the *strawberry milkshake*. I can’t stand *iced tea*,” she snapped, making Ram grin. If they got married, there won’t be a shortage of entertainment. He had to admit that she was gutsy.

He nodded, his black eyes studying her red face, his gaze lingering on her mouth that was pouting just now. “Glad to know as I dislike both strawberries and milk,” he said, his eyes alight with laughter.

Sapna glared at him. “Very funny.”

Silence reigned as they both attacked the plate of *bhajjias* hungrily, while slurping on their chilled drinks.

“So, will you tell your parents that this marriage won’t work?” she asked him.

“Why should I? I think we’ll get along like a house on fire, once you see how well we both are suited,” he said, only half joking.

“Don’t be crazy. I don’t want to get married.”

Ram shrugged. “Fine, so tell your parents that. You should’ve done so even before we came down to Pushkar actually. It would have saved us all a lot of time and money.” He stressed the word “money” deliberately, just to rattle her. “And give me one reason why you don’t want to wed me,” he challenged. “Are you in love with someone?” he asked, a sudden thought crossing his mind, even as he paled. He hadn’t thought of that possibility.

“Of course not!” she said, without thinking.

Tch! She could have used that as an excuse. Why the hell didn’t she think of it before? She glared at him some more as a grin split his face. She refused to admit that he looked stunningly handsome. The man of her dreams would fall in love with her on first sight and be totally loving. Not like this man with his devilish grin. Ram drove her to anger with a mere smile. She won’t marry him and be under his control. No way!

Ram shrugged. “There you are then. I don’t think you’ll get a better match than me. So many girls find me hot and they fall for both, my looks and my success,” he said, his voice matter-of-fact. Well, if she couldn’t see his plus points, he had to point them out to her. “I don’t see what your problem is.”

He saw her pearly white teeth biting into her lower lip in vexation. He wondered how long it will be before she drew blood. His hands fisted as he controlled the urge to free her lip with his hand. “Maybe because I’m not like ‘most girls’,” she snarled. How dare he flaunt his attractiveness to other women? And why would she care?

“Exactly the reason why I’m keen to wed you.”

Sapna got up again to pace the area furiously, as she felt the situation slipping out of her control. If she couldn’t convince him to refuse the alliance, how the hell was she going to sway her parents to her way of thinking? Will they understand that her only objection to marrying Ram was that he didn’t *seem* like the Prince of her dreams?

9

It took a lot of convincing, but during dinner, Mohan persuaded Chittaranjan and Purnima that an alliance between the two families would definitely work. “Please don’t look at this as *your* daughter’s wedding. It’s a wedding between *our* families. We need a good wife for Ram. I think Sapna is perfect.” He looked at Meera, Ram and Chanda, as they nodded their heads in agreement.

Ram didn’t miss the mutinous expression on Sapna’s face. It looked like only he could see it. Was he making a mistake? Well, if she was so keen on stopping the wedding, she’d find a way. He mentally shrugged. He was convinced that he wanted to marry her and none else.

“If you have a serious objection to it, you are welcome to tell us what it is,” said Mohan in conclusion.

Chittaranjan cleared his throat, taking a sip of water. While he wasn’t ashamed of his monetary status, he was only worried not to take so big a bite that he couldn’t chew it in comfort. “Mohan*ji*, to tell you the truth, it would be an honour to have Ram as our son-in-law and you as our *sambandhi*. The main issue is that I have saved but a few thousand rupees for my daughter’s wedding. I’m not sure if that’ll be enough to do justice to a wedding with a family such as yours. I...”

Purnima’s eyes were damp with tears that she refused to let fall. Her daughter would be so lucky to be married to this boy and into this family. She would never face ‘lack’. But will the alliance work?

Mohan raised a hand to stop the other man from continuing. “If that’s the only reason, then please don’t worry about it. Ram’s keen to wed Sapna. Please do ask your daughter if she’s also interested in marrying him. Once we are clear about that, let me get back to Jaipur and consult Vidyasagar*ji* about a suitable date for the wedding...” He felt a touch on his shoulder and turned to look at his son. “You have something to say, Ram?”

“Yes Pappa. Why don’t we invite them all over to our home for the weekend? Won’t it be better if Sapna gets to see her future home before making a

decision?” While Ram spoke in a soft voice, everyone could hear him clearly.

Sapna held herself in check when all she wanted was to poke her tongue out at him. The man and his dumb ideas! She felt herself being caught in a net that was closing up on her slowly and steadily. Why the hell couldn’t he find himself another woman to wed? She couldn’t understand that his attraction to her was fast becoming absolute fascination, what with her “attitude”. The more she pulled at the bit, the harder he was falling for her.

Chittaranjan and Purnima were startled by the idea. Though it was unheard of in their circles, what Ram said actually made sense. They looked at Mohan and Meera expectantly, wondering what they thought about their son’s suggestion.

The Maheshwari couple nodded their heads in unison. “That’s perfect. Tell you what? We’ll arrange for a car to pick you up on this Friday, in the evening, after the boys finish school. It will take you less than three hours to reach our home. You can spend the weekend with us and get back to Pushkar on Sunday evening. In the meanwhile, if Sapna *beti* is agreeable to marrying Ram, we can also visit Vidyasagar*ji* and fix a date for the wedding.” Mohan rubbed his hands in pleasure, satisfied with the way things were working out.

Chittaranjan had no reason to say ‘no’ and hence nodded. There was a niggling worry at the back of his mind. But he decided to leave things to providence. There wasn’t much else he could do at this point. Looking at his wife to see if she was alright with the arrangement, he replied, “As you say, Mohan*ji*.”

Sapna’s grey eyes spat fire at Ram, endearing her to him all the more. She felt that she was on a roller-coaster ride to infinity.

10

Ram paced up and down the garden, on pins, waiting for Sapna to arrive. It was late Friday evening. The rest of his family was inside the house as he had told them severely off for teasing him mercilessly. And she had still not said ‘yes’.

Chanda had shushed her other brothers while taking Lakshman into confidence. Bharat and Shatrughan were convinced that the wedding was already fixed.

Ram stopped for a minute, staring down at a rose bush unseeingly. After all this effort, will Sapna agree to marry him? What if she said ‘no’? He shook his head in denial. No, he wouldn’t think of that option.

Just then, he heard the purr of a car engine and turned towards the gate that was 500m away. His heart beat hard. She was here—the woman he had been dreaming about since the past few days. He was going to do his best to impress her.

Ram walked towards the portico, reaching it at the exact moment when the car arrived. Opening the front door, he greeted Sapna’s father, “Hello uncle! Welcome to our home.”

Chittaranjan returned Ram’s wide smile with one of his own. The boy was extremely handsome and well-behaved. And their home was palatial. Would his daughter be so lucky?!

Ram also opened the back door and greeted Sapna’s mother. The boys stepped out next, while the woman herself got out from the other side.

“Hello Suraj, Shyam.” Ram shook the boys’ hands in turn before turning to the lovely Sapna. “Hi Sapna,” he said, his voice soft, for her ears alone. “Welcome home!”

She looked up at him, her grey eyes wide. Her breath stopped for a second as she took in his striking features. His deep-set eyes were as black as sin, set under a broad forehead and dark eyebrows. The eyelashes were thick and curly, underlining the masculinity of his chiselled jaw line. His upper lip was thin

while the lower one broader, a permanent smile on them. His sharp chin had a tiny cleft in it, making him all the more attractive. He was tall, towering above her, and broad too. The light blue linen shirt he wore, sat well on his lean frame. She took in all of this in a flash, confident that no one could notice her checking him out in the darkness of the night.

“Hello!” she said, her voice hesitant, putting her hand in his outstretched one. His hand was large, hers feeling lost in it. But his touch was gentle and non-threatening. She looked up again to meet his gaze, before lowering her own in a rush.

She was wearing a *salwar kameez* in a bright aquamarine that brought out the pearly sheen in her skin. Ram refused to let go of her hand as he guided her into his home. By now, his parents and Chanda had also stepped outside the door to greet the Purohits.

There was a lot of chatter as introductions were made between the family and the three younger Maheshwari brothers.

The twins took Sapna’s brothers away to the first floor, to allow the adults to talk in peace. Even as they all sat down on the sofas in the living room, Ram got up to say, “I’ll show Sapna around.” Without waiting for anyone’s reply, he pulled her along with him to a door on the side.

He stopped suddenly outside the door, bringing her up short. “I’m sorry. Would you like to refresh yourself? And maybe you are hungry.” He looked sheepish.

She laughed, unable to stop herself, surprising him. “Thanks. I did wonder how to tell you. Please lead me to a bathroom.”

With ruddy colour on his lean cheeks, Ram went back inside to take her down a corridor to the guest bathroom on the ground floor. “You take your time. I’ll wait outside the same door for you.” He surreptitiously crossed his fingers, hoping she wouldn’t ditch him.

Nodding, she stepped into the bathroom even as he walked back the way they had come. She came out the door within five minutes, looking good enough to eat. He had noticed her checking him out immediately after getting out of the car, though he had no clue to what she had been thinking.

Now, she refused to meet his eyes, feeling suddenly shy. With a hand at her elbow, Ram walked along with her, away from the main building. Soft lights showed them the way on the paved path as they walked for five minutes before they came upon a second building. “We all live at the main house as of now. But Pappa’s planned to build a separate bungalow for each one of us. There are two buildings to begin with. Yeah, there’s another one, further down. Each structure has levels, the ground and first floors. Since I am the eldest, I get to choose first.” He grinned, his white teeth shining brightly, his words guileless. Sapna nodded as he continued, “I’m okay living in either of the bungalows. You get to choose,” he said, his voice softening with the last sentence.

Sapna felt her heart thumping hard. Was he trying to impress her with his wealth? She mentally shook her head. She didn’t think so. He had been clear about that earlier when they met at the hotel. In that case, he must be serious about her getting to choose a home for the two of them. He was turning her head for sure. She had seen clearly how good-looking he was. She knew that he wasn’t proud of his wealth. Now, it looked like he was giving her first preference too. Her mind began to waver. Did it make sense rejecting him and waiting for a Prince? What were the chances of her getting to meet her ideal man? Wasn’t Ram as close to perfection as possible? Only she hated the idea of having to compromise and settle for second-best.

They went around the house. There was a large, square hall, with floor-length windows on three sides. The fourth side led to an airy kitchen that also contained a dining nook. It was a darling house and Sapna fell in love with it on sight. Smaller than the main structure, it was homely. A wooden staircase in a corner led them to the first floor. They reached a smaller square that was surrounded by three bedrooms. Each one was spacious and had an attached bathroom. A wraparound balcony connected all the rooms from the outer edge. The fourth door led to a terrace that was also accessible from the same balcony. She drew her breath in a rush when they stepped into a mini jungle. The greenery was so soothing to the eye, while a number of flowering bushes interspersed the grass verge and small trees. Imagine having a garden on the first floor! Sapna was excited with what she saw. After living in a small dingy room with a minuscule window along with four other people, this house seemed like heaven.

But...but, was it right to tie the knot with a stranger just so that she could live in a beautiful home? Then again, it’s a stranger that she would get married to,

whether it was Ram or someone else. So, why not him? The war continued unabated as she took in her surroundings in silence.

Even Ram wasn’t saying much as he opened and shut doors, taking her from one room to another. “Do you want to go home to eat something? We can see the other house tomorrow.” He looked at her, his right eyebrow up in query.

Sapna’s head shot back towards him as if she had just realised that she wasn’t alone. “Huh? Hmm...okay,” she said, feeling disoriented.

It was obvious that she had forgotten that he was around. Ram’s smile vanished as he felt a deep sense of disappointment. He walked out of the bungalow with her, locking the doors behind them. He didn’t utter a word on their way back. Not that she seemed to mind.

He didn’t know that Sapna had reached a crossroad and was totally perplexed about which direction to take.

11

July 9 dawned bright as Sapna got ready for the *Muhurat*. The relatives and few friends of the Purohits who had come for the wedding from Pushkar, were put up in the third bungalow that had been constructed for Lakshman. There were about thirty of them and the arrangements were simply splendid. They weren't allowed to talk of money or jewellery or clothes. Mohan, Meera and Ram had provided for everything without making Sapna's family feel awkward at any point.

Sapna stood in front of the full length mirror, unable to recognise herself. Ritu grinned from behind. "I'm sure Ram is going to fall in love with you all over again when he sees you in your bridal finery," she teased.

Sapna's answering smile didn't reflect in her eyes. Did he love her? For that matter, she didn't love him either. Theirs was purely an arranged marriage, unlike Ritu's fairytale wedding to Yash. She turned back to look at her reflection.

The striking red wedding sari was of Benarasi silk and was tastefully embroidered in gold *zari*. Her long hair had been tied up in a low knot that was held together in a net made of fine 14 karat gold. She never even knew that such a thing existed. A *Kundan maang tikka* covered the top half of her forehead, hanging on a beautifully designed chain that ran over the middle parting of her hair. It was set with rubies and diamonds that glimmered in the soft lighting. Large *Kundan* earrings with matching stones hung from her earlobes. A diamond *Kundan* necklace graced her throat. She also wore two more gold necklaces, followed by another long necklace of rubies that hung down to her abdomen. She had been impressed to know that all the jewellery had been designed by her husband-to-be. A row of golden bangles tinkled on her wrists ending with a broad *kada* that was beautifully crafted, again in rubies and diamonds. It had filigree work with the faces of two elephants turned towards each other, their trunks entangled. Even the anklets she wore were made of gold.

Her make-up was expertly done by Ritu who had ensured it was light. The *mehendi* on her hands and legs had never been such a deep red.

Purnima walked in just then. Her eyes filled with tears of joy, looking at her only daughter. She hugged her and kissed her on her forehead.

Ram rode on an elephant during the *baaraat*, all the way from the ornate gates of *Nakshatra* to the garden at the rear where the wedding was to take place. Chanda, Ranveer, Bharat, Shatrughan, Suraj and Shyam danced the most while many of the guests joined in the revelry. The quiet Lakshman watched on with a smile, holding a camera in his hands, his excuse for not dancing.

Ram got off the elephant to look at his bride who was waiting for him under the *shamiana* that had been constructed. He blinked his eyes a couple of times to be sure that she was for real and not a figment of his imagination. The long nights he had spent, designing the jewellery especially for her, had been truly worth it. He had created each piece with love, visualising how they would appear on her. But all his imagination had not prepared him for the reality of the vision in front of him. And today she would be his. He swore to himself that he would love her forever. Their eyes met for a twinkling second before Sapna lowered hers, her long lashes curling over her blushing cheeks.

Was he maybe her Prince? He did look like one in the rich cream brocade *sherwani*. The *pagadi* that was an exact shade of red to match her sari, sat well on his head, making him look taller than ever. Diamonds winked on his fingers and ears while a thick gold chain hung down to the centre of his chest. Sapna's heart fluttered in excitement and nervousness. She prayed hard that she had made the right decision in agreeing to this wedding. At the end of it all, it hadn't been in her heart to say 'no'—not to her parents; not to Ram. All their expectations had been riding on her.

The wedding itself passed in a blur for Sapna as she took the *saat phere* with Ram. They took the blessings of all elders while the twins and Sapna's brothers ganged up with other youngsters to tease them mercilessly. Chittaranjan's heart flowed with love and joy at the unexpectedness of the grand wedding. He had never dreamt that a tenth of this would have been possible. Chanda enjoyed herself thoroughly along with her attentive husband. All members of Ranveer's family had also come down from Jaswantpura for the wedding. The wedding feast was truly appreciated by all the guests as they had a sit-down lunch for everyone.

Ram was thrilled to have tied the knot with his lovely wife. He couldn't wait to get her alone. He didn't know that Sapna's nerves were shot for the exact, same reason.

12

After a light dinner with the two families, Ram and Sapna walked to their new home, to all appearances, to celebrate their wedding night. Sapna was a bundle of nerves as she let Ram hold her hand on the walk to their new home.

Shutting the main door behind them, Ram turned to look at her. Her hands were toying with the edge of her *dupatta* while she was looking at the floor. He could sense that she was extremely tense. Actually, they needed time to get to know each other. And he thought it best to postpone consummating their marriage. He planned to talk to her about it, though he wasn't clear how to broach the subject.

"Sapna," he called out softly, walking closer. "Why don't you sit down?"

She edged sideways, avoiding his proximity as she walked to the sofa. His face darkening in hurt, Ram went to sit next to her, ensuring there was some distance between them. Clearing his throat, he said, "I was thinking..."

She raised a hand to stop him from saying anything further. "Wait, before you say anything, I can't sleep with you. You're a stranger. I married you because I had no choice, not because I wanted to. I can be your wife in name only." Her whole body was shaking by the time she finished talking. She hadn't meant to be so rude but didn't know how else to tell him that. And she had to convince him to wait, while she had no idea for how long.

She had accepted all the clothes and jewellery he had bought her. He and his family had paid for the wedding expenses. Sapna felt torn by guilt even as a tear ran down her left cheek, before she could stop it. She brushed it away in a hurry only to have another one follow immediately after. She was howling her heart out the next minute, her face buried in her hands. All the tension of the past month had finally caught up with her. It was truly a sin to be born a woman, especially in a poor family. Worse than that, she had dared to dream. What right had she? Self pity shook her up terribly.

Ram watched on helplessly. His instinct was to gather her in his arms and soothe her. But he knew that she wouldn't thank him for it. His wife of a few hours was a proud and stubborn woman.

And moreover, she had said that she would be his wife in name only. Did that mean forever? Was she planning to punish him for choosing to marry her? Ram felt angry and upset, a frown on his forehead. He waited patiently, willing her to stop crying, not knowing what else to do. As he could see her calming down, he went to the kitchen to get some cold drinking water and a wet towel. By then, she had stopped crying completely and was resting her head against the sofa back, totally exhausted.

“Here,” he gave her the towel and poured some water into a glass. After she had wiped her tears away, he offered her the glass to drink from. “Will you be alright sleeping on your own? Or should I ask your mother to come over?”

Sapna shook her head vigorously. She definitely didn’t want her mother to know that she and Ram were sleeping in separate bedrooms. “I’ll be alright,” she told him, her voice a croak.

“If you’re sure,” said Ram, getting up. “I’m going for a walk. You know your way upstairs. I’ll be using the master bedroom. You don’t need to stay up. I’ll let myself in.” He left the house in a hurry, before he said something they both might regret.

Yeah, the gentle and fun-loving Ram was generally slow to anger. But just now he was in a boiling temper, wanting to bash something. His hands were clenched into tight fists when he left through the front door.

He stood outside for a few seconds, taking deep breaths, trying to calm down. But what the hell! He accepted that they didn’t know each other well. But what Sapna had said was ridiculous. She hadn’t wanted to marry him. Then why did she? *She wanted to be his wife in name only*. Was she even aware of what she had uttered? Marriage was for keeps. They were both young. How did she think they would continue with their separate lives over the next 30-40 years?

Ram lifted a potted plant and threw it on the ground in exasperation. It broke to smithereens, the plant tumbling out along with the soil. It was too bad if someone heard him. Dusting his hands, he pushed them into the pockets of his knee-length shorts and paced the garden. It was difficult to believe that they had got married only that day.

It was 4 am when Ram let himself into the house. Even after that, he tossed and turned in his bed till it was morning. Yawning widely, he got up from his bed at half past nine. Wondering where Sapna was, he had a quick shower and wore fresh clothes. He was hungry and decided to go to the main house. Stepping out of the bedroom, he called out, “Sapna, where are you?”

She raised a hand from below, acknowledging him. She had been ready since a couple of hours and had been waiting for him to wake up. She had also had a sleepless night. With her bout of crying and lack of sleep, her eyes looked puffy, despite the thick outline of kohl.

Ram’s first instinct was to ask if she was alright. But ‘no’. Why bother? She obviously disliked him intensely. They needed to show a united front for the sake of their families. “Before we go... what’s between us is totally private. I’d rather my family didn’t know that our relationship’s in doldrums,” he said firmly, his eyes hard.

Sapna looked at him, feeling sad. The smiling and affectionate man she had married seemed to have disappeared. But could she really blame him? Why was life so complicated? She gave an imperceptible nod, without saying anything.

When they stepped out of the main door, Sapna was startled to see the broken flowerpot and rushed over to lift the sorry looking plant. “Leave it alone,” snarled Ram. “I’ll deal with it later.” Her face paled when she heard his harsh words, though she moved away immediately, not wanting to irritate him more than he already was. They walked in silence, their steps dragging, neither of them keen to meet the family who were still obviously celebrating.

13

They entered the main house that continued to hold a festive air, their steps hesitant. Meera came out of the kitchen, smiling widely. She was so happy to have all her children home. She loved feeding people and the *Maharaj* was the perfect man for creating sumptuous meals as per the menu she set out regularly, providing a rich variety.

"*Aao mere bachchon*," she welcomed them, hugging them lovingly. "You must be hungry. Come, everyone's at the dining table." She dragged them further into the house. She sat them down on one side while the chatter grew louder.

Ranveer got up from his seat and so did Lakshman. "*Arre saale saab*, how are you this morning?" grinned Ranveer, slapping Ram on his back.

"Very hungry," replied Ram, tucking into the *parathas* in front of him. He wasn't ready to meet anyone's eyes while he tried to smile, his lips wide. The quiet Lakshman, however, noticed that everything wasn't as it should be. He sat beside his brother, his hand on his shoulder, not saying a word. Ram felt choked with emotion as he met his brother's eyes for a second before turning to his plate again.

Chanda came up from the other end. "Sapna *bhabhi*," she said, bending down to hug her new sister-in-law. As the other woman made no response, Chanda didn't say anything more, sitting down on the chair next to her. All spoke at the same time—both sets of parents, the twins and Sapna's brothers. It was a relief for Ram and Sapna when their attention was diverted from the newlyweds.

Ram finished his breakfast in a hurry and got up. "We have a flight to catch in the afternoon. I'm yet to pack my bags. Sapna?" he turned in her direction, his eyes not meeting hers.

She too got up immediately. "Yeah, I need to pack too."

If anyone found their behaviour strange, no one spoke about it. Lakshman's eyes followed the newly married couple, worry in his eyes. He hoped that it was only a teething problem.

“Are we still going on the trip?” asked Sapna. They were both angry. What was the sense in going on a honeymoon, all the way to Kodaikanal?

Ram glared at her. “Do you have a better idea? You saw how they were. They expect us to behave like man and wife. How do you plan to face the lot of them over the next few days? I don’t know about your family. But everyone in mine will know within an hour that things aren’t as it should be. I’ve never lied to them.” There had been no need till date.

Sapna felt as if he had slapped her. She hadn’t thought that far. Her brothers were too young. But her parents would know that something was wrong. She wished she could go back in time, to live her life peacefully in Pushkar. Life had been way simpler then.

They packed fast and left after an hour, saying their goodbyes in a hurry. Ram wore a pair of dark shades that kept the pain in his eyes hidden. He noted that Sapna had also done the same and even managed to smile on seeing that. The hapless couple had no choice but to go on the honeymoon that Ram had planned with so much enthusiasm. He hoped they didn’t kill each other during the trip.

14

Their Jet Airways flight left Jaipur at 2 pm to reach Delhi in about an hour. After a stopover of an hour and fifteen minutes, the same flight had taken them to Chennai. After another wait of half an hour, they finally reached Madurai at five minutes past nine.

Sapna had been nervous before they boarded the flight. But she kept it to herself, not wanting to draw her husband's attention. But soon, excitement overpowered her nervousness that she enjoyed the trip thoroughly. Though, by the time they landed at Madurai, she was half asleep, having no clue about where they were going.

A taxi from Heritage Madurai whisked them to the hotel. After completing the formalities at the reception, the two of them went to have dinner at The Banyan Restaurant. It looked like they were the final stragglers in as the restaurant was taking the last orders for the day. They asked for two *masala dosas* and ate their dinner without really tasting it. Both had been speaking in monosyllables throughout the trip.

Stepping out of the restaurant, they went along with the bellhop and that's when it struck Sapna that she would be sharing it with her husband. Turning pale, she gritted her teeth in frustration as he showed them to their room, their luggage already having been delivered there.

Ram tipped the man before shutting the door. Well, too bad if she didn't like the arrangement, but he hadn't been prepared for the turn of events when he booked the hotel. Ignoring her, he turned to look at the huge room. It was the ultimate in comfort. He noticed that it consisted of twin beds that were separated by a table. A deep sigh rose up from the depths of his being. That was at least something.

Sapna stood frowning in the middle of the room, wondering how to deal with the situation. She didn't want to open her mouth, just in case Ram bit her head off. He somehow seemed capable of it right now. She also noticed the separated beds and gave a sigh of relief. She was too tired and just wanted to crash.

Removing a nightie from her suitcase, she went into the en suite bathroom. After

a quick wash, she changed and stepped out within five minutes. Her shocked eyes looked at Ram who had removed his shirt and was walking around in his jeans. Her eyes clung to his lean and muscled torso, the kind that she'd never laid eyes on. Her heart fluttered as her breathing deepened. This man was her husband.

But no, she wasn't interested. He wasn't the man of her dreams. Turning her face away, she quickly went to the bed that was furthest away from the bathroom and settled down on it. Her whole body ached, what with the sleepless night and more than seven hours of travel. Thank God for the luxurious bed. Turning on her tummy, she pulled the comforter over her head and went to sleep the moment her head touched the pillow.

Ram had stopped feeling angry many hours ago. It was difficult to remain in a state of resentment for a long time. It just wasn't in his nature. But that didn't mean he had forgiven Sapna. He turned to look at her and automatically smiled. She was fast asleep. Incredible!

He switched off all the lights and left only one bedside light on at his side. Changing into a pair of boxers and t-shirt, he plumped up the pillows and cushions at his back and settled down on his bed to open the Kindle app on his phone. Even yesterday, he hadn't foreseen to spend the first night of his honeymoon reading the life history of Abdul Kalam.

After seven hours of uninterrupted sleep, Sapna woke up, feeling completely refreshed. It took her a few seconds to recall where she was. She turned to look at the other bed to see Ram, sprawled on his back, his right arm hugging a pillow, while his left arm was flung out. His comforter was on the floor while he was clothed only in a pair of boxers. His wide chest that was liberally sprinkled with dark hair, rose and fell in an even rhythm. Fascinated, Sapna tiptoed closer to have a better look. Thick, dark lashes fanned out on his lean cheeks that were covered with dark fuzz. Her eyes travelled the length of his body, rushing over the strained boxers, to fall on muscular legs that ended in well-shaped feet. She felt tempted to tickle the underside of his feet. She almost reached out a hand, just stopping herself in time. Now where the hell had the thought come from?

"Good morning!" said a sleepy voice. "What are you doing so far away?" called out Ram, before reaching out with a long arm to pull her to him.

A startled Sapna gave him a shocked look that was lost on her husband, whose eyes were still closed. His arms went around her waist like steel bands, his breath hot against her cheek. “Sapna...” he whispered in her ear as his hard lips pressed into her petal soft cheek.

Sapna tried to pull out of his arms, only to have them pull her closer. Her breasts were flattened against his solid chest. Her traitorous body seemed to enjoy the pressure as her nipples perked up. She did her best to hold on to the control that was slipping fast.

“Ram,” she called out loudly, hoping to wake him up. She couldn’t free her arms that were trapped against her own body, as he held her in a crushing grip. His mouth was busy exploring her face, moving inexorably towards her lips. His eyes continued to remain closed, while his hands moved restlessly at her waist. “Ram...” her voice came out in a whisper, as she felt his tongue trace the edge of her lips. Tortured, she made the final move to capture his roving lips, breaking free her hands to hold his face steady.

“Sapna...” sighed Ram, kissing her gently, his tongue first tracing her upper lip and then her lower one. He gently bit the luscious curve. Sapna instinctively opened her mouth to let him explore the velvety cavern with his tongue. Shyly, her tongue reached out to mate with his, making Ram groan with need.

His hands moved restlessly on her body, her nightie bunching up. His muscular legs tangled with her slim ones, making her sigh with pleasure as his hard and hairy skin brushed against her soft and silky one. His hands cupped her lush bottom, caressing it lovingly.

Sapna suddenly became aware of his hardness pressed against her belly. Coming to her senses, she turned her face away, breaking the kiss. “No Ram.”

His wet lips continued to caress her, his tongue exploring her shell-like ear. Even as her heart thudded loudly, Sapna pushed against him. “Ram, please, will you stop it?”

His black eyes opened a slit, desire and slumber at war in them. “Sapna?” If he hadn’t been fully awake before, he was now, as he stared at her lovely face that was so close to his. He slowly recalled what had been occurring over the past few minutes. He had at first thought he was dreaming about kissing the luscious

woman in his arms. How had she landed there in the first place?

Removing his arms, he sat up with a jerk. “I’m sorry. I...” he rubbed a hand across his eyes. He didn’t really remember at what time he had finally gone to sleep, though it had been very late. Since he was still in his own bed, then how come his reluctant wife had found her way into it? A small smile appeared on his face as he stretched his arms above his head. He observed Sapna from the corner of his eyes as she watched his movements, her mouth open. It looked like his wife found him attractive. Well, he could wait. He was patient like that.

Looking at his watch that was on the side table, Ram exclaimed, “It’s almost nine. *Chalo*, time to be up and about. Do you need the bathroom first?” he asked, ever the gentleman.

Sapna nodded her head, before running over to hide herself there. What the hell had come over her? How had she ended up in her husband’s arms, being kissed thoroughly? She looked in the mirror, a finger tracing the shape of her swollen lips. And it was she who had initiated the kiss, she remembered, her shocked eyes meeting their reflection. She had enjoyed it too. Her gaze moved down to her breasts in the mirror, the tips still swollen and sensitive, from rubbing against his hard chest. It wasn’t even as if he had touched them. How would it feel to have those large hands cupping her breasts?

Sapna glared at her reflection. *Shut up!* She pushed her thoughts away, taking deep breaths.

The two of them got ready, Sapna was careful to stay out of touching distance from her husband. Ram’s charcoal eyes studied her at every opportunity, even as she refused to meet his eyes. He was happy with the way things were going.

After having a leisurely breakfast, they took a tour of the hotel, checking out its facilities. Sapna was fascinated by the spa. Gauging her interest, Ram asked the woman at the counter—Raksha—about the different treatments on offer. He patiently translated everything to Sapna who listened to him avidly.

“Would you like to try one of the therapies here?” he asked.

Sapna nodded her head shyly. “But won’t it be very expensive?” She had lifted the menu only to see that it was listed in English and Tamil, the local language.

Even then, she couldn't miss the prices mentioned. She had put it down immediately.

"You don't worry your pretty head about all that," said Ram, a small smile on his face. It made him happy to indulge her. "So, which one would you like to try?"

"*Aromatherapy*," said Sapna, without hesitation. While all the treatments —*Ayurveda, Swedish massage, sea-salt treatment* and *aromatherapy*—sounded fabulous, she was attuned to the smells of this therapy. She was keen to find out more about the essential oils they used.

Ram nodded to her before turning to Raksha and saying, "*Aromatherapy* for the lady."

Raksha inclined her head in acknowledgement, even as she asked, "How about you sir? Could I recommend the *Swedish massage*? It's the most popular among our guests."

Ram said, "Why not?" before presenting their room card key for billing.

A couple of hours later, the two of them emerged from their treatments, feeling more at peace then the earlier day. Ram's breath caught in his throat as he got a whiff of the aromas that wafted around his wife. She glowed even better than she smelled. He felt painfully aroused. He shut his eyes for a few seconds to gain control over his libido, making Sapna wonder what she had done now.

Ram opened his eyes to find her staring at him, her grey eyes perturbed. "Would you like to go shopping? We can have lunch at some local restaurant. Unless you'd prefer to eat here?" asked Ram.

Sapna looked at him. How could he be so cool after what had transpired between them that morning? Keeping her thoughts to herself, she asked curiously "What's special at Madurai? To shop and to eat?" Jaipur was the first place she had travelled to, outside Pushkar. The journey here—especially with her first experience on a flight—had been surreal and Tamil Nadu appeared like another continent. She had thought that their home, *Nakshatra*, seemed like a palace. But this hotel was out of this world.

"Well, we can have a *thali*, only the meal will be served on a banana leaf. All the

dishes will be typical of Tamil Nadu. Or we can find a restaurant that serves North Indian if you like."

"What would you like to have?" she asked.

"I'd like to try the local cuisine."

"Then let's have the food served on banana leaf," she said, a small smile on her face.

They left by car to go to *Sree Sabarees*, a restaurant specialising in Tamil cuisine. They had to wait for fifteen minutes before they could get a table at the crowded restaurant. The service was swift. Sapna eyes went wide when she saw the size of the banana leaf that was placed in front of her. Waiters swarmed around as they served four types of vegetables, two pickles, and a big plate of rice. They also brought three different types of gravies to have with the rice.

Unable to keep pace, Ram requested them to serve the gravies in separate cups for the two of them. Sapna relished the new tastes as she munched on the fried *papad* that tasted very different from those back home. The sweet served was called *jhangri* and was orange in colour. Sapna admired its perfect shape, before taking a small bite into it, her eyes closed as she relished the taste. Ram's dark eyes watched her avidly, the sensual expression on her face delighting him.

Sapna patted her full stomach happily, having tasted everything that had been served on her leaf. She was glad that they had gone there.

"Now, for the shops," said Ram, as they got into the car.

"What's the speciality of this place?" asked Sapna. He hadn't yet told her what there was to shop.

"They have some type of local cotton weave for saris and dress materials. I'm not sure of the name."

Sapna grimaced. "I don't think I need any more clothes. I have enough to last me a lifetime." Her trousseau, presented to her by the Maheshwaris, must consist of at least a hundred *salwar suits* and fifty saris.

Ram held back the automatic grin that formed on his lips. No, he had no plans to get too friendly. It's better to make her do the work. It was obvious that the lady liked to be in control. "Okay, don't buy for yourself. But we can get something for Mamma and Purnima aunty; and maybe a dress for Chanda. What say?" he quirked an eyebrow at her.

Sapna turned red with embarrassment. She hadn't thought of them. She gave him a small nod, her head bent low.

In the end, they ended up buying a dozen each of the saris and *salwar* materials made of *Sungudi* cotton, the local speciality. Ram organised for the lot to be couriered directly home. There was no sense lugging it along with them during their trip.

"Now we go to Meenakshi Temple. The city of Madurai is renowned for this temple of the Goddess. The Devi is a consort of Lord Shiva," explained Ram. He had found the information on the internet.

They got off at the temple entrance, leaving their footwear inside the car. Sapna raised her head a long way to gaze at the temple tower that was huge. It had wonderful carvings, the like she had never seen before.

They walked into the large compound and could see many more towers. They found out that there were ten in all. Despite being a week day, the temple was pretty crowded. They took *darshan* of the deities—the Goddess Meenakshi with a parrot perched on a shoulder, and Sundareswarar in the form of a *Lingam*—praying for a few minutes at each sanctum and partaking in the *aarti*. After that, they went to see the hall with a thousand pillars, a historical phenomenon that was in the same compound as the temple. It took them more than an hour to check out some of the amazing carvings and also the melodious notes that emanated on tapping the musical pillars.

Sapna was happy to walk along with Ram as he went around the *prakaar* in perambulation. At that moment, it felt like their married life had taken a positive step in the right direction.

15

It was raining when they reached Kodaikanal. Sapna couldn't believe how cool it was compared to the heat they had left behind at Madurai. The drive had been via *ghats* as the road climbed steadily in the mountainous terrain. They could see a few waterfalls coming down the face of the mountains, sometimes to their right and other times to their left. She couldn't get enough of the natural surroundings that were so pleasing to the eye.

After a point, the car they were travelling in, was riding through mist. The driver explained that what they thought to be mist were actually clouds. Sapna felt thrilled. Was it possible to touch a cloud? She couldn't wait to reach their destination.

It was past noon when they drove into Hill Country Resorts. She got out of the car and just stood there, staring in fascination. This surely had to be heaven on earth. There were a few buildings and many cottages, all surrounded by greenery. She had never seen so much green at one glance. Most of the ground was covered by grass, many trees intercepting their smoothness and oh, the flowering shrubs, did that many colours exist in nature? She couldn't believe her eyes.

Ram waited patiently for her to take her fill of the area. The drizzle was mild as the clouds played hide and seek with the green and brown of the surrounding hills. Perfect weather for a honeymoon! Would she let him make love to her? Frustration ate into him. It wasn't just the physical part of their relationship. Their life together had begun on a wrong note. Well, now the ball was in her court. He didn't plan to rush his new wife.

He called out, "Shall we go? We need to check in."

Sapna immediately noticed the change in temperature. Over the past three days, she had become an expert at reading his moods, or so she believed. She had no clue about how exasperated Ram was. He was doing his best living by the hour, refusing to think of the future.

The smile gone from her face, Sapna walked side-by-side with her husband, her

eyes looking down. The charm had gone out of the day. They checked into a luxury cottage that had a front view of a flowering garden surrounded by towering eucalyptus and cypress trees.

Ram knew there were two bedrooms. Will she sleep in the same room as him or will she insist on a separate room? He had booked the cottage for the sake of privacy. He hadn't expected it to backfire on him. Frowning darkly, he opened the mini fridge and was glad to see a couple of bottles of beer. His wife watched on in shock as he opened a bottle and drank from it directly. She had only seen guys drink in movies.

Ram and his brothers drank occasionally. It was no big deal. But this was the first time he had felt the need for alcohol in the middle of the day. Anyway, it was only beer.

He looked at Sapna who was standing in the middle of the sitting room, appearing confused, her eyes studying the beer bottle as he lifted it to his mouth again. "What, do you want some?" he asked.

She shook her head vigorously. "No, no. I don't drink."

One dark eyebrow went up mockingly. "Oh! That's really nice of you. Well, Chanda drinks." He wanted to shake her up. Well, since he wasn't given to physical violence, he subconsciously decided to play with her mind.

He was joking, of course. The Maheshwaris were such a nice family. Chanda would never drink. Her husband wouldn't allow it. Her parents would be scandalised if that were the case. Sapna shook her head to herself. Ram was fooling her for sure.

"You don't believe me? Here, let me call her. You ask for yourself." He took his cell phone out of his jeans' pocket.

"No, no," protested Sapna, horrified. Was she married to a family of drunkards? She didn't realise that she had spoken aloud.

Ram laughed, suddenly irritated as his patience wore thin. "Even if I wasn't one, you'd surely drive me to it," he accused.

Sapna turned red, her temper going up in a flash. How dared he! “For the hundredth time, I didn’t ask you to marry me,” she yelled.

“No, you didn’t. But you didn’t deny me either.” Ram’s voice was cutting. “You had a choice. I was honest with you right from the beginning. I liked you and wanted you to be my wife. You could have told your parents that you didn’t want to marry me. I suppose it was simply irresistible to wed all this wealth.” His hands spread wide, gesturing to their cottage that was soaked in luxury.

Sapna was terribly hurt as well as offended. She couldn’t help but notice the past tense when he said that he had wanted her to be his wife. But insisting that she had married him for his money was hitting below the belt. How could he think that of her? She turned her head away as a film of tears formed in her eyes.

Some time ago, Ram wouldn’t have believed that of her even if someone had told him so. But what other reason could she have had for marrying him? She didn’t like him. So, it must have been his money.

Wiping a hand across her eyes, Sapna straightened her shoulders and turned back to her husband who was removing a second bottle of beer from the fridge. “I don’t care what you say. Deep down, I’m sure you know that I didn’t marry you for your wealth. Did you ever think of the situation from my view point?”

“What the hell for? I’m sure you are managing very well on your own.”

“Of course I am. And you very well know I didn’t mean that,” she snarled. “My family’s poor. My father’s income is sporadic. We could have two square meals only because of my income. Then there are my brothers who are both still at school. Their education needs paying for. I’m twenty-five. There’s so much pressure from our relatives and friends that my marriage had been long overdue. I could still bear all this. Into this scenario walks in Mishra*ji* with an alliance that no one could refuse.”

Her voice bitter, Sapna continued. “The guy is handsome, educated and earning well. More importantly, he’s eager to marry me. His family is ready to bear all the expenses of the wedding and the trousseau. There’s no talk of dowry. I’m torn as I don’t know what I want. I dreamed of falling in love. But did I have a choice to continue dreaming?” She brushed away her angry tears.

Ram didn’t care to be spoken about as if he wasn’t there. But he felt compelled to listen without interrupting as she spoke so passionately about her situation. Her face was crimson while her eyes shimmered with the tears she was working hard at holding back. Only they wouldn’t stop.

“I begged the guy—you—to refuse the alliance. Did you listen? Do you really think it was possible to say ‘no’ to my parents in the face of the scenario I just described? Could I have lived with myself after that? Meeting their hurt and accusing eyes day after day? It was in my hands to get them out of the squalor. How could I say, ‘no’?” The last sentence came out in a screech.

The grey eyes pierced him accusingly. Ram stared at her, stunned by what she had said, his beer bottle forgotten.

Oh my God! What had he done! She was absolutely right. He’d never thought from her angle. It hadn’t struck him that at the end of it all, she hadn’t had a choice but to agree to the wedding.

All this while, he had thought that she had spoilt his life. But now it looked like he had destroyed her dreams. He turned pale, falling back on the sofa, unable to digest what he had done to her. “I’m sorry Sapna. I’m truly sorry,” he said in a whisper, burying his face in his large hands. How could he have been so stupid? He was so smitten with her that he never thought that she might not reciprocate his feelings, not one little bit.

In his family, everyone spoke their thoughts and generally meant what they said. There was no need to hide anything. But it must have been difficult for Sapna. She had been caught between a rock and a hard place. While he had been no help at all! The magnanimity of the situation ate his insides.

Raising his head, Ram said, “You don’t know how sorry I am, Sapna.” He patted the seat next to him. “Come and sit down.”

She walked forward slowly, her face still wet with tears. Looking at him warily, she sat down, wondering what he would do now.

“This is no excuse, but we can’t undo the wedding, at least not for some time. I promise you that I’ll help you learn to speak English and also get trained as a beautician or anything else that interests you. I’ll make sure that you’re able to

stand on your own feet, an independent woman. If, after all that, you still want to remain my wife, let's stay married. Otherwise, I promise to let you go the moment you tell me you want your freedom." It hurt him terribly to utter those words, but that was the least he could offer, after the way he'd messed up her life.

They formed a shaky truce over the next week—two people on a holiday together, though not friends—catching up with the sightseeing in Kodaikanal and making the most of the facilities their resort had to offer.

If Sapna felt bereft at the distance her husband maintained between them, she refused to acknowledge it. Being the dreamer that she was, there were times she couldn't help recalling the pleasure she had felt in his arms, and the way he had kissed her. Those were the times when she lost sleep, her body awake to needs that were not too familiar. But how could she bridge the gap? She shook her head to herself. It was up to the man to make the first move. She conveniently forgot that it was she who had gone to study his half-naked body as he lay asleep on that fateful day. Such an opportunity was completely lost with the two of them sleeping in separate bedrooms.

Before long, it was time to go back home and face the music.

It won't be easy for Ram to fool his parents and brothers. But he had no plans to tell them the truth about the state of his marriage. He didn't think his parents could bear the pain. It did seem as if the Maheshwari siblings' married lives were jinxed, going by Chanda's history and now his. Okay, Chanda's life had got back on track. But Ram knew that his never would. He only hoped his parents wouldn't expect him to get married a second time after Sapna left him. She was the only woman he loved and he didn't expect to fall out of love with her, not in this life.

16

Ram kept his promise and got Sapna enrolled in English conversation classes, soon after they returned from Kodaikanal. Nowadays, the breakfast sessions, when the family got together, was the time set aside for talking to Sapna in English. Now that she and Ram understood each other better, it wasn't difficult for her to get along with his family. The twins were boisterous while Lakshman was a silent rock. She got along only too well with Ram's parents, as they treated her like their own child. Mohan uncle loved to set up rules. Only no one believed in following any of them. Not that he was bothered about all that. The plump Meera aunty was simply adorable.

"Would you like to visit my shop?" asked Ram, his eyes gentle on his wife's face. She looked so fresh and innocent as she set the table. He knew that she had no classes today.

Her eyes lit up with a smile. She'd been dying to see his shop but had felt too awkward to ask. She felt she had no right. "Would love to," she said, nodding her head.

After breakfast, she rushed back to their house and got ready in a jiffy. She didn't want Ram to be late because of her. She was thrilled to sit in the front seat of their car and enjoyed the ride to MI Road where the showroom *Nakshatra Jewellery* was. Her jaw dropped when she saw how big the shop was. It was set in 2000 sq feet with separate sections for gold jewellery, gems and silver ornaments. There were twelve staff members behind the counters and already a few customers were being shown the wares. Ram nodded in greeting to each and every man and woman, walking towards the cash counter.

"Good morning sir, *Namaste* madam," greeted Ratanlal, his manager.

"Good morning Ratan*ji*," replied Ram, a smile on his face. He felt proud of his wife.

"Namaste*ji*," said Sapna, a shy smile on her face. Being addressed as "madam" was a first.

“You manage the counter today, Ratan*ji*. We’re going to check out the goldsmiths at work,” said Ram, guiding Sapna towards the back of the showroom. A large, single door opened into another room that was half the size of the showroom. Sapna gaped as she saw eight men working at separate stations. Each man had another one assisting him. They walked from counter to counter, standing and staring at each work of art. Ram explained everything that was being made. One was creating a bangle of fine filigree work. Another was fashioning a chain. A third one was setting emeralds and diamonds in a necklace. The delicate work needed a lot of concentration.

“What lovely designs!” exclaimed Sapna.

Colour ran up Ram’s cheeks at her fulsome compliment. That’s when it dawned on Sapna that all the designs had probably been created by him. If that was the case, then he was truly a genius.

“Are they all yours?” she asked, her eyes wide with astonishment.

“Yeah,” said Ram, turning to a worker and saying, “Rao, we’re going to my cabin. Get some water and two cups of coffee.”

He took Sapna’s hand to go back through the same door and walked towards the corner of the showroom where there was another door. They walked in to see an office room that was enclosed in glass on three sides. An easel held a piece of artwork, while a number of framed jewellery designs were mounted on the fourth wall, forming a mosaic. There was also a large desk where sat a computer.

“Take a seat,” invited Ram.

Ignoring him, Sapna walked to the wall, studying the designs. They were intricately and tastefully done. She recognised the necklaces she wore for her wedding. She turned when there was a knock on the door and went to sit on one of the two visitor’s chairs. She drank the water in a few gulps, feeling thirsty. She lifted the cup of coffee when she saw Ram doing the same.

“You have an awesome set up here. How long have you been in this business?” she asked, eager to know more.

“I trained under a famous jeweller during the years I was at college—to design

as well as to recognise gems and grading them. Later, I worked with a showroom for three years, to learn the trade and gain experience with designing. This place is five years old.” He had come a long way. It had been a lot of hard work. But he had enjoyed every bit of it.

It was Sapna’s turn to feel proud of her husband. Now that the pressure was all gone, she was beginning to genuinely like the man. But was that enough for a happy married life spanning many decades? Wasn’t love necessary?

That evening, after dinner, she called Ritu. They chatted for a while before Sapna asked, “How did you know that Yash was the man for you? And tell me what you really mean when you say you are in love with him.”

“Huh? Why the sudden questions?” asked Ritu, laughing. “Why don’t you ask your adoring husband that? He’s so obviously in love with you.”

Was he? Sapna didn’t think so. If Ram was in love with her, he wouldn’t have promised to let go of her after she became independent. He would have surely told her that he couldn’t live without her and insisted that she become his wife, in all aspects. Wouldn’t he?

She chatted for a few minutes longer before disconnecting the call. There was no help from that direction.

At that same time, Lakshman cornered Ram in the garden. “Well, bro, are things better between you and Sapna now?” he asked.

Ram frowned at him blackly. “What do you mean by that?” His voice came out in a growl.

Lakshman raised both his hands in a gesture of peace. “Chill man, just asking. You didn’t look too happy on the day you guys left on your honeymoon. You remember, at breakfast?”

Ram’s scowl grew darker. Of course he remembered that morning. “So?”

“Ram,” Lakshman placed an arm around the other man’s shoulder. “This is Lakshman, your best pal. Or have you forgotten?”

“Back off, will you? Unless you want your face smashed,” threatened Ram, feeling cornered.

“Go on, hit me all you want. It doesn’t matter. Tell me what the problem is,” said Lakshman, his voice soft. He hurt with his brother’s pain and could feel it deep down in his soul. What could have happened? Ram had been crazy about Sapna from the first time he met her.

Ram turned away, his fists clenched. He’d never had a secret from his brother.

“Want to go for a drink?” asked Lakshman.

Ram turned back to look at his brother and nodded. “Let’s go.” He sent a WhatsApp message to Sapna that he was going out and would be late while Lakshman booked an OLA cab. He planned to get his brother sloshed if need be.

After three pegs of whiskey and soda, the whole story came tumbling out—from when he met Sapna for the first time, till her outburst in Kodaikanal.

Lakshman listened to Ram, not interrupting once. His brother was so obviously in love with his wife. Somehow, Lakshman refused to believe that she had no feelings for Ram. Something was not in sync here.

17

Ram knocked on his in-laws' door at 3 pm that Wednesday. He knew that they must be up from their siesta by now.

A surprised Suraj opened the door, "Hello *jiju*," he said, smiling widely. "Where's Sapna *di*?" he asked, not seeing his sister.

Ram patted his young brother-in-law on his shoulder and gave a gift parcel to him. "I came alone, on business. I'll get Sapna soon."

Suraj placed the stool in the centre of the room, calling out to his mother who was at the stove, making tea, "Maa, see who's come."

Purnima had already heard Ram's voice answering her son. She smiled at her son-in-law. "*Aao beta*. How are you?

Shyam came running from outside where he had been playing with his friends. "Hello Ram *jiju*," he greeted, hugging the older man.

"Hello Shyam." Ram hugged him back. "And aunty, how are you? Where's uncle?"

Purnima nodded her head. "He just stepped out to buy sugar, should be here any moment."

Chittaranjan walked in even as she spoke. "*Arre*, Ram! Welcome, welcome." He held Ram's hand in delight while his eyes ran around the small room. "Where's Sapna?"

Ram smiled at his wife's father. "I promise to get her next time. I had to come on business and thought to meet you all."

"Of course, of course. Purnima, you are serving tea *nah*?" called out Chittaranjan.

"*Hahnji*," she replied, pouring the tea into five cups.

The boys had ripped open the gift packet to find a cricket bat and ball. They hooted in glee and couldn't thank Ram enough as they sat down to drink the tea.

After finishing his, Ram said, "I'd like to take you all out for a while."

While the boys scrambled to get ready immediately, Chittaranjan looked at his wife, hesitant. They had already taken too much from their son-in-law and his family. "Err..."

"I won't take 'no' for an answer, uncle," said Ram firmly. "Suraj, Shyam, come along. We'll wait for you on the main road where the car's parked. Please come as soon as you are ready." He walked out with the jubilant boys.

He drove for about ten minutes before they reached an area where the houses were well maintained. On the way, Sapna's parents had a lot of questions to ask about their daughter. Ram answered them patiently while navigating with his GPS on. He drove through a pair of iron gates and parked the car near the entrance. It was a colony of row houses. This is where they were to meet the house broker. A man walked up to them, asking, "Ram Maheshwari?"

Ram raised a hand to acknowledge him and said, "Sameer?" When the man nodded, he turned to his father-in-law and said, "Sameer is a house broker. He's going to show us a row house that's for sale."

Chittaranjan wondered if his son-in-law was planning to buy a property in Pushkar. Without saying anything, he nodded his head as all of them followed Sameer. The colony was lovely, with a lot of trees and plants. There was a large garden, covered with grass, where they could see children playing. Sameer opened a corner home that had an extra patch of garden on one side. Climbing four steps, they went into a living room that connected to an open kitchen. The house was furnished, with sofas and a dining table between the living area and the kitchen. The platform was made of polished granite while the storage units were made of wood and glass. Beyond the kitchen was a back door that opened into the garden. There was a bathroom at the back.

There was also a bedroom on one side that had its own attached bathroom. The boys rushed around here and there, pulling open the wardrobe to check it out.

They went up the stairs and entered a square that had three doors leading off it, each one into a bedroom. There was one bathroom to be shared between two bedrooms, while the third one had a bathroom of its own. The place was well ventilated with large windows.

“So, what do you think, uncle, aunty?” asked Ram, signalling to Sameer to wait for them outside.

“It’s a beautiful house,” said Purnima. She had fallen in love with it the moment they stepped in.

Chittaranjan nodded his head. “I can’t but agree.”

They all walked down and Ram gestured for them to sit down on the sofa there. “Well, uncle. My plan is to invest in a property. This is perfectly within my budget. Now that you all like the place, I’ll clinch the deal immediately. I’d like you to shift into this house immediately.”

The boys stopped fooling around when they heard what Ram said. They came and sat down quietly, unable to absorb what they had heard.

Chittaranjan shook his head in a daze. “But...but...how can we accept this?” He looked at his wife, bewildered. Purnima was no help as she was sobbing.

Ram got up to put an arm around his mother-in-law. “Aunty, please calm down.” He looked at Chittaranjan and said, “Uncle, you call me *beta*. Don’t you mean it?”

“Of course I mean it *beta*. But this is too big a thing. What will your parents have to say about it?”

Ram took his cell phone and dialled his father’s mobile on speed dial. “Hello Pappa, I just showed the house to Chittaranjan uncle. I’m giving the phone to him. He’d like to talk to you.” He handed the phone to Sapna’s dad.

“Mohan*ji*,” Chittaranjan’s voice trembled with emotion.

“Chittaranjan*ji*, how do you like the house Ram has chosen for you?” asked Mohan enthusiastically.

“It’s wonderful. But how could we...?”

“Do you really think your daughter and son-in-law will live peacefully in a big house, when your whole family is struggling in a small room? That too with millions in their bank account?”

Chittaranjan couldn’t argue with that kind of logic. “What can I say? We are truly blessed.” They spoke for a few more minutes before disconnecting.

Suraj looked at Ram. “Are we really going to be living here?” When Ram nodded, the boy hugged the older man tightly. “Thank you *jiju*.”

“There’s an excellent *muhurat* on Wednesday next. I think we should have a *havan* before shifting here,” said Chittaranjan, the others’ enthusiasm catching on.

“Perfect, uncle. I’ll bring Sapna over on that day. By the way, she doesn’t know anything about this. It’s to be a surprise.”

Purnima smiled through her tears. “Please do, *beta*.”

18

“Ram, you have missed the turning,” said Sapna, as her husband drove further down the highway.

Ram smiled, “Yeah, I know.”

She looked at him, surprise on her face. “You know? Then why?” She couldn’t wait to meet her parents and brothers.

“A little bit of patience? I’ll get you to your parents,” said her husband, mysteriously.

Sapna gritted her teeth and tried her best to follow his advice. They had come all the way to Pushkar. What did a few more minutes matter?

What was he doing, driving into this colony? Sapna had admired it many a time when she had walked nearby. The row houses looked so elegant. It’d be such a wonderful place to live in. Well, she could dream, couldn’t she? She was really good at that. Ram parked the car near a corner house, where a *puja* was taking place. The sound of the mantras could be heard from outside. There was a beautiful *rangoli* at the entrance while a garland of flowers decorated the doorway. Was her father performing a *puja* at this house today? Is that why Ram had brought her here?

She got out from her side of the car and waited for Ram to lock it. Placing a hand in his, she walked with him, her steps hesitant. Suraj and Shyam yelled out a greeting when they caught sight of the couple. “Sapna *di*, *jiju*.”

Sapna let go of Ram’s hand to hug her brothers. They dragged her into the house where her parents were performing a *havan*. They both smiled and waved as they continued with the ritual. Sapna noticed some of their relatives sitting on mats spread on the floor as well as on the luxurious sofas in the living room. *Whose house was this?* She wondered curiously.

She got her answer the next second when Suraj whispered in her ear, “*Di*, how do you like this house? *Jiju* has bought it. And we are going to live here from

today.” His young voice bubbled with excitement even as Sapna turned shocked eyes to her husband, her face pale.

Ram had bought this house? How? When? Why hadn’t he told her about it? How dared he keep it a secret? Her anger knew no bounds as her grey eyes spat fire at him.

Instead of upsetting Ram, her anger amused and excited him. While his wife pretended to be cool, he could see how passionate she was. He basked in her anger, his charcoal eyes looking mischievous.

Sapna was feeling extremely frustrated. With her relatives around while her parents were performing the *havan*, she couldn’t very well shout at her husband. And look at him! He was sitting there with a big smile on his face. What the hell did he think of himself? Sapna decided to ignore him. She went and sat with her maternal uncle and aunt, chatting with them. She moved on from there, talking to the 20-odd relatives, one by one, while her eyes kept going back to the man who was irritating the hell out of her.

It was 10 pm. Ram and Sapna were sharing a bedroom after that one night in Madurai. And this time, it was a double bed. She glared at it, waiting for her husband to come up. He had been playing carom with her brothers when she left them fifteen minutes ago.

She didn’t have long to wait as Ram entered the room a few minutes later. The moment he shut the door, Sapna turned on him. “Ram, how could you?” Her anger shot up as she eyed his serene expression, his very calmness acting as trigger.

“What?” he asked, peeling his cotton *kurta* off his body.

“I...” Sapna gulped as she gazed at his naked torso. It was a month and a half since she had been held against that sculpted body, but she could still recall the sensations with crystal clarity. She wanted to throw herself against him, with his arms holding her close. She shook her head as if to clear it off such thoughts. What was wrong with her? Recalling the words she wanted to utter with great difficulty, Sapna continued, “How could you buy this house without talking to me? It’s for *my* parents, right? Shouldn’t any of us be consulted?” Her voice rose in proportion to her anger as she shut her eyes tight, trying to obscure the

distraction he was creating, walking around the room, half naked.

Ram looked at his beautiful wife's face. Colour had rushed up from her neck, to bloom on her cheeks. Whether it was in temper or temptation was anyone's guess. He, for one, would bet it was the latter cause. Otherwise, why would she close her eyes? He grinned, walking closer. Standing right in front of her, with barely an inch separating their bodies, he whispered, "Look at me."

"Huh?" Sapna's eyes snapped open to see his wide chest up close. Resisting the urge to bury her face against him, she stammered, "Wh...what?"

"What's upsetting you?" he asked, his amusement obvious.

Sapna tried hard to hold on to her temper, failing miserably. Turning away from him, she gathered her thoughts together to ask, "What's the need for secrecy?"

Ram shrugged. "There's no secrecy. I bought this house only after showing it to your parents."

She whipped around, visibly hurt. "It was just me who didn't know anything about it." It was a statement. Raw anguish tore at her heart. Had he been lying when he said he loved her? If it was the truth, then why did he treat her so badly? He had consulted her parents, showed them the house before purchasing it. Why had she been left in the dark?

"Sapna..." Ram's voice was soft and pacifying. "If I had spoken to you about this, would you've agreed to it?" His dark eyes looked into her angry grey ones penetratingly. "Tell me the truth."

She held his gaze for a few seconds before looking away. Maybe not, but still...

"Exactly," he said, as if he could read her mind. "Don't you like the house?" he asked, tongue-in-cheek.

She raised her head to glare at him. "That's not the point, is it?"

"So tell me, what is?"

"You don't care for me, do you? You'd have told me otherwise," she accused,

not bothered about being illogical.

“Are you ready to *know* how much I care for you?” he challenged, desire blazing out of his eyes.

Sapna stared up at him, her temper disappearing in the face of a new threat. Was she? She didn’t know how to respond to him. Oh, she would love to know how much he loved her. But what after that? What will he expect from her in return? Was she ready to face the consequences? Sapna gave a tiny shake of her head. Not today! She had been roiling with resentment from the moment Suraj had spoken about the house belonging to her husband. She was too tired to face anything more.

She opened her travel bag to remove a nightie and was aghast to find that she had forgotten to pack one. Today of all days, when she was sharing the room with Ram. Damn!

Ram heard her swear and turned around, pulling on a t-shirt. “Now what happened?” he asked.

“I forgot to pack my nightie,” she said, glaring at him as if it was his fault.

Ever the gentleman, Ram pulled his t-shirt off and offered it to her. “Go on, take it. It’s sure to fall below your knees. And believe me, it’s probably more comfortable than your nightie.” His eyes twinkled with mirth.

Sapna snatched the t-shirt from his hand and went into the bathroom. Removing her sari and blouse in a hurry, she had a quick wash before donning his t-shirt. He had worn it for barely a few seconds, but it already smelled of him. She rubbed her cheek against the fabric, dreaming of being held in his arms. Her eyes turned slumberous when she looked at them in the mirror. Was she falling for her husband?

Ram settled down on one half of the bed, his hands folded below his head, his eyes half-closed, eagerly awaiting his wife’s appearance from the bathroom. He didn’t have to wait long. His breath caught in his throat when he saw her walk out wearing his t-shirt. It completely fell off one golden shoulder, hanging an inch below her knees. He shut his eyes the moment he saw her turning to check if he was awake. He wished he had pulled the comforter over his body as his

arousal was obvious. But then, did it really matter? She had wanted proof that he cared, didn’t she?

Sapna walked to the other side of the bed and stared at it. Even if it was huge, she still didn’t feel safe sharing it with him. Taking a couple of extra pillows, she placed them in a pile in the middle of the bed, before settling down on her side. Within a few minutes of her head touching the pillow, she was fast asleep.

How the hell did she do it? Ram frowned, turning on his right side to look at his sleeping wife. He lifted the pillows she had placed in the middle and threw them with all his might, to the furthest corner of the room. Moving close, he put an arm around her, burying his face in the fragrant hair that was spread on her pillow. With a deep sigh, he shut his eyes, willing for sleep to catch up with him, a smile on his face.

19

“Do you want to go to the main market with me? I have collected the addresses and phone numbers of a few high-end beauty salons. You can check out the treatments they offer, maybe even get a few things done if you want.”

Sapna looked at her husband in enquiry. Did he think she needed a makeover? Maybe he wanted her to sport a more modern look. She nodded her head, her face dull.

Ram frowned. “What’s wrong now?” he asked. He had been under the impression that she was interested in knowing more about the beauty business. “I thought you might want to know what’s on offer. You remember, we spoke about extending your skills beyond *mehendi* art...”

Light dawned on Sapna’s face as her eyes lit up in joy. He’d remembered. She nodded her head vigorously, loving the idea.

“Sapna,” he moved closer, stepping into her space. “Are you giving me the silent treatment today?” he whispered close to her ear, his breath teasing the tendrils of hair that had escaped her braid.

Sapna shook her head automatically.

“Hmm,” said Ram, nuzzling her ear, his tongue tracing the shape. He was careful not to touch her otherwise.

Sapna’s eyes closed as colour ran up her cheeks, her nerve ends on fire. She clenched her fists, trying hard not to cling to him. Her mind ran over the scene in the bedroom the other morning at her parents’ new home.

That morning...

She had come wide awake at six, to find a heavy weight pressed against her chest. Only it was too pleasant. Raising her hands, she encountered silky curls and realised that her husband was lying with his head settled comfortably against her breasts. Still in a state of half sleep, Sapna ran her fingers through his dark

hair caressingly. Getting bolder, she traced the shape of his head before her hands moved down further.

His shoulders felt so different from her own, all muscle and sinew. She loved the feel of it. And his back was so smooth compared to his hair-roughened chest. She ran her hands on all that bare skin, the nerves on her hands tingling. Completely unaware of what she was doing, she continued to give him a good rub, thoroughly enjoying the tactile sensation.

“Keep that up and I might become your slave for life,” said a soft voice close to her ear.

Sapna’s hands stilled as she slowly came down to earth. She opened her eyes a slit to look at her husband who was still plastered to her body. What had she been doing?

Ram kissed her on her cheek, a smile on his lips. “Looks like you don’t want a slave. Okay!” He shrugged, getting up abruptly, leaving her gaping.

Her cheek tingled from his kiss and she could still feel the scratch of his day-old beard. Why did he go away? She had thought he would kiss her like the last time they shared a bed, on her lips. That she was disappointed was putting it mildly.

Ram grinned to himself in the bathroom mirror. It looked like his patience was paying off. His wife wanted him. Let her stew some more.

Sapna came back to the present as she placed her hands on Ram’s chest. If she didn’t hold on to him, she just might fall down as her knees had turned weak with need. His lips were playing havoc with her cheek. She turned her head to meet him halfway as need tore through her.

Ram didn’t need another invitation as he pulled her into his arms, kissing her thoroughly. His teeth gently bit into her luscious lower lip. Sapna opened her mouth to accommodate him, sighing with pleasure as she felt his tongue explore her mouth. Going on tiptoe, she clung to him, her arms going around his neck.

“Shall we leave?”

It was like a splash of cold water. Sapna didn’t want to leave the cocoon of his

arms. But what could she do? He was getting late for work. Or that's what she told herself.

"Okay," she nodded meekly, refusing to meet his eyes, worried of what he might read there. "Please give me five minutes and I'll go with you."

"Sure," said Ram, placing two fingers on his mouth as if to blow her a kiss, and then quickly pressing the same fingers to her lips. "Come fast, I'll wait for you downstairs." He took the stairs two at a time, whistling under his breath.

Heat flooded her cheeks as Sapna stared behind him unseeingly before she became aware that she needed to get cracking. Wearing a new set of *salwar kameez* in a bright orange and pink design, she took her handbag and rushed after her husband, locking the door behind her.

Shyamlal was driving the car. Ram sat with her in the back, saying, "Shyamlal will take you to the salons. I've given him the addresses. I've sent you all the names and contact numbers on Whatsapp. You fix appointments with them. It's best you get a treatment at every salon, so that you know how good they are. All of them take classes for beginners."

He'd been thorough. "Thank you Ram," she said, smiling.

He took her right hand in both of his, tracing his thumb on her palm. "You are welcome," he smiled, his eyes devouring her. "Do you have enough cash? And your credit card?" he asked solicitously.

She nodded. Recalling his teasing from morning, she said, "Yeah, I do," making him grin widely.

They reached his office first. When she got down, he asked, "Are you coming in?"

"Yeah, let me fix up the appointments and then leave."

"Okay," he shrugged, as they walked into the showroom. They went to sit in his cabin after greeting all the staff.

Sapna called the phone numbers one by one, and requested appointments for a

haircut, a hair treatment, a facial, a foot massage, a manicure and a pedicure at the final one.

Ram grinned again, busy at his computer. His wife's spoken English was improving by leaps and bounds. "I hope you're going to have a lunch break," he teased.

"Oh yeah, the salon offering foot massage will also provide me with lunch, at a cost, of course." She got up. "I think it's best if I leave now." Instead of walking to the door, she stepped towards Ram, surprising him. She placed her hands on his shoulders, bending down to place her lips on his cheek, her breath hot against his face. "Thank you again," she whispered in his ear, before nipping his earlobe.

"Sss..." said Ram, trying to hold her back.

But she escaped, walking swiftly towards the door, turning to give him a shy smile, her face red. She waved a hand to him, saying, "Bye," before shutting the door behind her.

Sapna enjoyed her day thoroughly, a permanent smile on her face. It did seem like her husband loved her. And maybe, just maybe, she was also falling for him.

The beautician discussed her hair treatment with her. She first had her hair massaged with almond oil, before she underwent steam therapy. Later, it was time to apply a herbal pack. Sapna sat back, running through some glossy magazines, trying her best to read. After half an hour, they washed her hair, shampooing and conditioning it. Then they set out to style it, without drying it out completely.

Sapna's hair was thick and fell down to her mid-thighs. They had agreed that it be cut to the level of her hips and layered in waves. After seeing the thick strands falling down on the floor with each snip of the scissors, Sapna shut her eyes, a mite worried. She opened them only when she felt the hot air from the hair dryer. So much of her hair had been shorn off. She looked at her reflection in shock. Was she going to look terrible?

The beautician continued to dry her hair, brushing it into shape. Once she was done, she removed the cape and brushed away the bits of hair that had fallen on Sapna. "Just a minute, ma'am," she said, before going and getting a mirror. She

held it behind Sapna's head from different angles so that she could check how her new hairstyle appeared. A slow smile lit up Sapna's face as she saw how gorgeous her hair appeared. It looked thicker than before and was stylish. She crossed her fingers, hoping that Ram would like her new look.

She thanked the hair-stylist sweetly, paying her bill and tipping her well. Yeah, Ram had mentioned how important that was.

The next stop was a facial, again a first time experience that Sapna thoroughly enjoyed. She was glowing by the time they were done with her.

Hungry by now, Sapna went to the next salon for the foot massage. She munched away at the *veg burger* that they had ready for her, sipping at a coffee milkshake. The foot massage was pleasant but Sapna wasn't too happy with the experience.

The last stop was for manicure and pedicure. This was a wonderful treatment too. Sapna stepped out feeling great, her finger and toe nails painted a vivid shade of plum.

She decided that she liked the hair-stylist best and would rather learn her skills from them.

Ram was late returning home that night. Sapna had got back at seven and received a lot of compliments from the rest of the family.

Meera looked at her daughter-in-law in admiration. "You're looking more beautiful than ever," she said.

Sapna turned red as the twins walked in just then. "Sapna," said Bharat. "I wouldn't have recognised you if I'd met you outside on the street," he winked. Yeah, none of them called her "*bhabhi*" unless they were teasing her and she was glad it was that way.

She placed her hands on her hips in a mock threatening stance. "Well, is that good or bad?" she asked, trying to look angry.

"Good, of course," replied Shatrughan. "You look awesome. Lucky Ram," he said, also winking at her, making her blush.

She poked her tongue at him before turning to look at Lakshman. He gave her a soft smile, putting the thumb and forefinger of his right hand together in a gesture of appreciation. Sapna smiled back at him, happy.

Lakshman sat back, looking relieved. It looked like Ram’s problems were coming to an end.

Ram had called to say that he was having dinner with a client. The rest of them had theirs, chatting their heads off. After hanging out with them for another hour, Sapna got up to wish them all goodnight.

20

Sapna went over to her bungalow and had a shower. On an impulse, she went into Ram's bedroom to pick up a t-shirt from his wardrobe. She had a towel draped around her as she checked the shelf where his t-shirts were kept, neatly folded. She turned guiltily when she heard the door open, an old t-shirt clutched in her hand.

Ram gazed at his gorgeous wife, his gaze unblinking. She looked amazing, her new hairstyle looking perfect, framing her oval face, tumbling over her naked shoulders and down her back. He liked this so much better than her braid. Better yet, here she was in his bedroom, wrapped only in a towel.

He opened his arms wide in invitation. The t-shirt fell out of her hands as Sapna took the few steps to fall into his arms. "At last!" Ram buried his face in the crook of her shoulder, breathing her scent deeply. "You smell so good. Let me go have a shower too."

"No," said Sapna, surprising both of them. Her arms were wrapped tightly around his middle as she refused to let go. She never wanted to be separated from him, ever.

Ram laughed, lifting her up in his arms, her towel falling down to the floor in the process. Placing her gently down on the bed, he stood back to remove his shirt in a hurry.

Sapna crossed her arms across her breasts, feeling shy all of a sudden. Ram stopped what he was doing to bend down and pull at her arms. "Let me look," he said, his charcoal eyes blazing with desire. She couldn't deny his request as he placed her arms at her sides. He teased the tip of a breast with a finger, his touch gentle.

Sapna lifted her arms to him, "Come to me, please. You're too far away."

Ram threw his shirt away before taking up her invitation. He bent down to take a nipple in his mouth, suckling on it gently. Sapna moaned, holding his head against her body, her own thrusting closer.

His large hands ran through her newly styled hair. “You look fabulous,” he said, his lips close to hers.

“So do you,” she said, holding his face with both her hands. She looked deeply into his eyes. “I’m sorry for...”

He placed his palm against her mouth to stop her from speaking further. “Don’t be. I love you exactly the way you are, temper and all.” His kissed her then, as if there was no tomorrow, his hands moving roughly over her restless body, her legs thrashing. As they came up for air, Ram raised his head to look at her blushing face, her luscious lips red. “If you’ll just give me a minute, I’ll remove my clothes fully,” he winked, his eyes running down her naked body. “You’ve the advantage over me.”

Sapna turned redder, if that were possible, but nothing in the world was going to stop her from looking as her husband stripped out of his pants and briefs. She stared avidly, drinking in his masculine form that was so different from hers.

Ram put out a hand to her, “Come on, let’s go have a shower together.” Sapna’s eyes widened, before they turned mischievous. She got up with alacrity and went into his arms. Ram lifted her in his arms and walked to the bathroom as if she was as light as a feather. They went into the shower cubicle as Ram set the water to the perfect temperature. He started the head and the side showers, making Sapna gasp in surprise and pleasure. This was better than a waterfall, the warm water spraying on their entwined bodies from so many directions. She stood on his feet, going up on her toes to reach out to his face, her lips tracing his chiselled cheeks. She revelled in her newfound freedom as Ram held her close. She explored the shape of his lips with her tongue. Then, she bit his lower lip gently, her tongue immediately stepping out to soothe the wounded spot.

Ram let her play, as she checked out the shape of his ear. His hands were splayed on her bottom, holding her tight against his masculinity. How many times had he dreamed of this, holding her naked body close to his own! His right hand moved up her back and then her front to cup her left breast, squeezing it gently. Sapna mewled like a kitten, loving the sensation of his thumb tracing the tip. Ram went on his knees, his mouth at her breast, while his left hand stroked her right breast.

Sapna felt an unfamiliar wetness between her legs, her arms on his shoulders,

holding his head as he suckled her breasts. “Ram...”

When he turned his head and attended to her other breast, Sapna raised her left leg to drape it around his waist. She felt dazed when she felt Ram walk his fingers up her thigh to reach the apex.

He slipped a finger into her vagina, caressing her gently. Sapna’s breath caught in her throat as she felt strange sensations bombarding her. Her newly painted nails dug into his back as he rocked her in his arms. The rhythm of his stroking hand matched that of his mouth at her breast. Sapna was transported to a whole new world as she felt herself being flung into a vortex, trying to reach out for solid ground. Her world shattered the next minute as she felt her soul soaring into space with a powerful orgasm that stopped her heart from beating for a whole minute, or so it seemed. She fell into his arms, sobbing, her head buried on his chest, her arms clinging to his waist.

Ram’s hand stroked her back as he held her close. He let her cry for a brief time, before lifting her chin towards him. Water continued to fall on them forcefully, as Sapna’s tears mingled with it. “Was it so bad?” he asked, a smile on his lips.

A small fist hit his shoulder as Sapna giggled through her tears. “Don’t be silly. You know it wasn’t.”

“So tell me how it was.”

“Fishing for compliments, are we?” teased Sapna, looking deeply into his black, black eyes. Her grey gaze turned serious almost immediately. “That was the most beautiful experience of my life,” she said, her hand cupping his cheek. “It made me feel proud and honoured to be born a woman, for the first time in my life.”

“Sapna...” said Ram in a whisper, absolutely touched. “Hey, what are you doing?” as she took the soap in her hands.

“I want to give you a bath,” she said, winking at him, her wet hair plastered all over. She soaped him leisurely, arousing him painfully.

And here he was, going slow, because it was her first time. “Sapna...”

“Shh...” she placed a soapy finger on his lips, her tongue poking out as she concentrated on reaching across his wide shoulders. Her hands moved down as she went on her knees in front of him, her eyes going round when they encountered his tumescent manhood. Ram watched her watching him, growing harder. Sapna touched him in wonder, her fingers tracing his shape. She moved forward suddenly to kiss him there and heard Ram groan.

Startled, she moved away to ask innocently, “Did I hurt you?”

He pulled her up into his arms, increasing the speed of the showers. “Playtime’s over. Let’s get on with business,” he said in reply, his voice guttural.

Sapna’s face fell. What had she done wrong?

He bit her lip and kissed it better immediately. “My dear innocent wife, you’re perfect. But my body craves you.” After washing off the soap, he dried them both in a hurry and carried her back to the bed. He placed her down gently and joined her. “I hope I don’t hurt you too badly, but it’s tough the first time for a woman,” he said apologetically.

Sapna didn’t care. She was confident he wouldn’t hurt her more than was necessary. She was finally convinced how much he loved her. Unable to stop herself, she caressed him with her hand, making him groan again. “You’re going to be the death of me, woman,” said Ram, spreading her legs wide. Without further ado, he entered her in a single stroke, and watched her mouth open in a small shriek. He paused, holding her face in his hands. “I’m sorry.” His body had a mind of its own as he moved inside her. Sapna’s eyes opened wide in wonder as she felt him. It was even better than when he had stroked her with his finger. Seeing the expression on her face, Ram moved again, pulling out before thrusting into her again. Catching on, Sapna held on to his shoulders as he pounded into her, forgetting to be gentle. At that moment, “gentle” was the last thing Sapna wanted. This time, they reached out to the stars together, Ram exploding within her, seconds after she had another intense orgasm.

They clung to each other, having no words, Ram’s face buried in her damp hair spread across the pillow. It had been truly worth the wait.

Their breathing came down to normal and Ram moved to the side, still holding Sapna close. He brushed away the hair from her face with a gentle finger to ask,

“You okay?” He looked serious for a change.

Sapna grinned at him, “Never been better.” Stretching lazily, she caressed his cheek, her thumb tracing his masculine lips. “And you?”

Ram grinned back. “Simply awesome. I enjoyed every moment of making love to you.” He took a bite of her thumb, making her heart go crazy.

“Ram,” she pressed her lips to his in an adoring kiss. “I think I’m in love with you.”

Ram’s smile disappeared. She’d better not joke about this. “Are you sure?”

She nodded her head slowly, her gaze never leaving his. “I want to spend the rest of my life in your arms. I want to have your babies. I want to grow old with you. More than that, I want your happiness. I want to fight and make up with you as often as I can. And...” her voice turned into a whisper, “I want to make love with you, every day. Do you think it is love? I don’t know any other...”

Ram swooped down to kiss his wife, overwhelmed. It looked like they both wanted the same. “I adore you, my darling wife.”

He sat up and pulled her along with him. “Did I tell you how lovely you look? I like your hair,” he said, running his fingers through it. Lifting her hand, he admired her painted nails, kissing her fingers one by one.

“Don’t miss my toes,” she said, thrusting a foot close to his face, her eyes mischievous. Her throat choked as he bent down to bite the pad of her big toe, his eyes clinging mischievously to hers. “Ram...”

He kissed her toes before placing her foot back on the bed. “No more for a couple of hours.” As she looked disappointed, he placed her hand against his manhood and said, “I’m ready. But you should give your body some time to recover, I think. Or, you’ll be unable to walk tomorrow.”

Light dawned in her eyes as she blushed at his words, her fingers refusing to let go of him.

“So, how was your day? Have you decided where you want to train?” he asked.

Sapna shook her head, her face buried on his chest.

“Didn’t you like any of the salons?”

“I liked the hair-styling place. But...”

“But what?”

“Forget it,” she said.

“Sapna.” Ram placed a hand under her chin to look at her face. “What’s wrong then?”

“Ram, they are asking for two lakh rupees to train me in everything. It’s way too much money...”

Ram laughed softly. “Is that the issue? You do want to pursue this line, right?” When she nodded, he said, “Then money shouldn’t be a problem.”

“But...Ram, you’ve already spent so much on me and my family...”

He pressed his forefinger to her lips, shutting her up. “You’re my wife and your family’s mine. Don’t you dare suggest otherwise.”

“But...”

“Okay. Let’s do it like this. I’ll give you an interest-free loan. You can pay me once you set up your salon. Does that work for you?”

Sapna nodded her head vigorously, loving the idea. “Perfect,” she said, throwing her arms around him. “I love you!”

Her Prince had found her!

THE END

Marriages Made In India

BOOK #2

His Drunken WIFE

SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN

His Drunken WIFE

SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN

It was at least another half an hour before Shikha returned to the party. She directly walked up to her husband and kissed him on his masculine lips. “Forgive me?”

Abhi pulled her close, kissing her deeply. “Always.”

“Did I tell you that you’re the best thing that’s happened to me?” she whispered in his ear, nipping at his earlobe.

“Shikha,” growled Abhi, “Are you even aware of what you’re doing to me? Position yourself in front of me till I gain control or I won’t be responsible for the consequences.”

Shikha gave a tinkling laugh, her hand on his fly, tracing his shape delightedly. “How did I ever imagine you were a staid guy?”

Abhi groaned. “Take your hand off, woman. Please!”

Shikha laughed again, kissing him. “How I love to hear you beg.” She winked at him.

She turned right around and got a waiter to get her another drink, much to Abhi’s chagrin. “Will you lay off the drink, Shikha?” he frowned.

“Why? You can’t afford it or what?” she challenged him, a shapely eyebrow up in query, sherry brown eyes dancing.

“You’ve already had four large pegs.”

“You’ve been counting.” The smile left her face.

“Do you plan to get drunk?”

“*Arre yaar,* Abhi! It’s our wedding, a once-in-a-lifetime event. I’m only celebrating. Give me a break,” she protested.

“The way you’ve been knocking down the drinks, anyone would think that

you’re in pain rather than celebrating.”

HIS DRUNKEN WIFE

(Marriages Made in India: Book #2)

A romance novella by

Sundari Venkatraman

Prologue

Abhimanyu looked up when Shikha walked into his cabin.

“What’s up? How come you’re still at work?” asked Abhimanyu, surprised to see her.

Shikha settled down comfortably on the chair that Samrat had recently vacated. “You tell me. You appear happy about something and I see that you’ve been conducting a number of strange meetings while the boss is away. What are you up to?” she accused, her body language aggressive. She was miffed that Abhimanyu hadn’t allowed her to be a part of anything that day. After all, she was Ranveer’s secretary and needed to know what was going on in the company.

Abhimanyu grinned, unfazed. “Will you go out for dinner with me? Any place of your choice,” he tempted.

Shikha glared at him, refusing to take the bait. “You haven’t answered my question Abhi. Are you doing something that you shouldn’t be?” she asked again, dying of curiosity. Wouldn’t she be thrilled to find that Abhimanyu had feet of clay! He strutted around giving the impression of Mr. Perfect and Ranveer seemed to trust his executive assistant completely.

“What do you want to know?” asked Abhimanyu, busy packing his laptop into its case. He was done for the day and was leaving whether Shikha went with him or not.

“Who were all those people who came to meet you today Abhimanyu? You’ve been secretive and now you look like the cat that’s got the canary. What’s up?”

“I don’t think it’s any of your business Shikha. Shall we leave? That is, if you want to go out to dinner with me. Otherwise, allow me to leave,” said Abhimanyu, getting up from his chair.

Shikha gnashed her teeth in frustration. “Sit down Abhi,” she ordered. She waited for him to seat himself before asking, “Why did you have to meet the two guys today afternoon? They had an appointment with Ranveer and I was going

to meet them in the boss's place. Couldn't you keep your big nose out of it?" Anger boiled within her as she glared at Abhimanyu. The whole of yesterday and today morning she had been looking forward to get to know the two men and Abhimanyu had spoilt her chances.

"You know very well that Ranveer's not in town this week. Where was the need to give them an appointment?" asked Abhimanyu logically.

Shikha lowered her gaze as she couldn't meet Abhimanyu's straightforward one. While she made her accusations, Shikha was well aware that she was just picking up a fight and Abhimanyu was too honest to cheat Ranveer in any way. But she did need a punching bag and he was available.

"Abhi, you do understand that I need to survive, right? I am trying to find a rich guy to get married to and I felt these two men fitted the bill perfectly. See what you have done! You destroyed my chances by meeting them yourself," she said honestly.

"If it's a rich man that you want to marry, then come on, let's get married," said Abhimanyu, seriously.

Shikha laughed bitterly, sure he was joking. For one thing, she didn't believe that Abhimanyu was rich and for another she was sure he was pulling her leg. "Just get lost Abhi," she said, before getting up from her chair.

Only to find him standing in front of her, too close for comfort. Shikha had never noticed how tall Abhimanyu was, at least six inches taller than her and she was 5' 6". He placed his hands on her shoulders and shook her, much to Shikha's shock. She had always thought Abhimanyu to be a mild person, insipid in fact. She would have never believed him capable of violence. She felt an unexpected buzz of electricity zinging between the two of them as she saw the temper in his eyes. Did she know the man at all?

"You get this straight Shikha. I'm not in the habit of repeating myself. I am the man for you. Not everyone will put up with your tantrums and attitude. While I'm extremely patient, it doesn't mean I'll let you drive me up the wall," he said, glaring at her.

Red colour flared up Shikha's cheeks. Was he threatening her? Then why was she

not scared? Shikha felt a sudden urge to be held close to Abhimanyu. She had had a couple of affairs and they had all been about sex and not hugging. She had neither friends nor family. Shikha shut her mind and followed her instincts and just pressed her body close to his.

A shudder went through Abhimanyu as his arms went around Shikha's slim figure and he held her close. That was a gamble he had taken and it seemed to have paid off. He had been a mite worried that she would walk out in a huff. Oh God, it was so blissful holding her in his arms and he had been waiting for this since the day he had set eyes on Ranveer's secretary.

They were the perfect yin and yang—he was cool and collected while she was brash and loud. While life together might not be easy, it would never be boring.

Abhimanyu put a hand under her chin to raise her face to his before placing his lips on hers. What followed was the most passionate kiss that Shikha had ever experienced. She shuddered as she tangled her tongue with Abhimanyu's, feeling feverish with ardour. How did she ever think he was boring? It was a while before Abhimanyu raised his head to place his forehead against Shikha's to ask, "Your place or mine?"

Was that a trace of disappointment he saw on Shikha's face? The sensitive Abhimanyu could see that she had mentally withdrawn from him even though her body was still close to his. What had he said wrong?

He ran his fingers through her hair as he studied her features minutely. "Shikha?"

For a minute there she had believed that he had meant it when he said that he wanted to marry her. Now it seemed as if he was just one more in a string of men who thought that she was good enough for his bed partner but not for life.

Shikha moved away from him to consider her options. Having an affair with Abhimanyu promised to be hot, even sizzling, considering the kiss they had shared. Their chemistry was simply mind-blowing. Why would she want to marry him anyway? He wasn't rich enough for her. Shikha came to a decision and replied, "Yours." After all, she was curious to know where he lived while her apartment was too tiny.

They went directly down to the car park to Shikha's surprise. She didn't know that he had his own vehicle. Her jaw dropped when he opened the white Toyota Fortuner that was parked in the slot for the company Vice President. Could that be true? And the shiny SUV seemed to suit Abhimanyu's personality somehow. An amazed Shikha got into the passenger seat as Abhimanyu held the door open for her.

He had a mysterious smile on his face as he got into the driver's seat and drove a silent Shikha home to his penthouse apartment. Shikha finally lost control and let her jaw drop when she saw the swanky interior decor in Abhimanyu's four-bedroom apartment. The hall itself could easily fit half a dozen of Shikha's whole flat within it. Then there was the kitchen and dining area. It was simply amazing.

All thoughts flew out of Shikha's mind when Abhimanyu walked from behind her to gather her within his arms. "Do you think I will make a rich enough husband for you, Shikha? This flat is all mine and I don't have any other family to share it with." He turned her around, removing his arms from around her.

Shikha watched in wonder as Abhimanyu moved a few inches away from her to go on his knees. With his right hand extended towards her, he asked, "Will you marry me?"

The hardheaded Shikha broke down as tears flooded her eyes. She nodded wordlessly as she placed her right hand within Abhimanyu's.

Abhimanyu got up to lift Shikha into his arms and walked to the master bedroom while Shikha felt an overwhelming sense of having arrived home after all these years.

1

Shikha was surprised by a wave of shyness when she met Abhi's intense gaze. Her eyes widened when she looked into—really looked into—his dark brown eyes. They were dark brown, shot with gold, the colour of premium whisky. OMG! And he looked so handsome. Abhi—staid and boring Abhi—handsome? But he was. And—colour ran up her thin cheeks—he was a dream lover. He had left her totally satiated, at the same time craving for an encore.

She abruptly got off the king-sized bed and bent down to pick up his shirt that was lying on the floor. She wrapped it around her body, buttoning it as she turned around. "Pass me a smoke," she requested Abhi.

He shook his head, as he leaned against the bedhead, his pose relaxed, obviously comfortable in his nudity. She brought her straying eyes to his face with difficulty. "What? Don't you have a cigarette on you?"

Abhi gestured with his palms facing up, shrugging. "Nope."

"Damn it. Let me go get my bag," she said impatiently, walking towards the door. Her bag was not in the bedroom. It must be in the living room, of course.

"Wait!"

Shikha yelped, startled to find a strong, muscular arm around her waist, holding her back. He must have moved fast and so silently too.

Abhi turned her around to give her a swift and hard kiss, leaving her lips tingling. "Forget your cigarettes, Shikha. Come back to bed," he invited. His hands cupped her breasts through the soft linen of the shirt, his thumbs caressing the tips.

Shikha's eyes glazed over, her brain scrambled. She groaned aloud, throwing her arms around his neck, her legs going around his waist, as he walked with her to the bed.

He drove her crazy with his lovemaking, making her forget her own name in the

process. “Abhi...” her voice came out in a shiver. She bit his neck hard, leaving her mark on him. Not that he objected to it as he thrust into her hard, determined to reach out to utopia yet again.

Abhimanyu looked down at the woman in his bed and smiled. He had wanted her from the moment he laid eyes on her a few months back. She was lovely and audacious. And he adored her. She was way sexier than he had imagined. A perfect partner in bed!

“Abhi.” A feminine hand was pushing at his shoulder, as he lay on her. “Will you move? I need a smoke.” She glared at him, her eyes running over his features. He had large eyes that were framed by long, curling lashes that any woman would kill to have. Now, why the hell had she never noticed that before?

“What’s with you and smoking, Shikha? Can’t you lay off the stuff for a few hours? Nobody smokes in this house,” he said firmly.

“What?!” shrieked Shikha. “What the fuck do you mean by that?”

Abhi moved his upper body a couple of inches away, her voice ringing in his ears; though he continued to trap her legs under his. “Just that. No smoking in this house.”

“Is your house a bloody temple or what?” Shikha’s amber eyes burned bright in a fine fury.

Abhi shrugged, bending down to kiss her. Only, she turned her face away and he moved his attention to her shoulder, nibbling it.

Shikha’s body sprang to life, agog for more of his lovemaking. But ‘no’, no way was she going to let him love her. She had to get to the bottom of this. How did he expect her to live here as his wife, if he didn’t let her even smoke in this stupid house? She gritted her teeth, doing her best to control her libido, even as her hands wove into his dark hair, pulling his head closer as he moved lower, taking bites of her luscious breasts.

“Abhi, let me go,” her order came out as a squeak.

“Hmm.” His mouth closed around the rosy peak of her left breast and she was

lost.

2

Shikha sat on a bar stool in the dining nook, sipping from a glass of whisky and soda, watching Abhi working in his kitchen. She'd have never believed it if someone had told her that the Vice President of RS Software was an accomplished cook. Her stomach rumbled as she inhaled the delicious aroma wafting from the saucepan as he lifted the glass lid to stir it. He tossed some pieces of chicken into the simmering curry, stirred again and shut the lid.

"How long for dinner?" she asked impatiently, drinking from her glass again.

He walked towards her, shutting the other stove on which he had been cooking rice. She stared at his bare chest that was lightly sprinkled with dark hair, her eyes moving down to the snug shorts that covered his privates. They were barely decent.

"Five minutes," he replied, picking up his glass of red wine, watching her sneer from the corner of his eyes.

"No ordinary whisky for the classy Abhimanyu Mehra," she declared sarcastically, tipping her glass towards her mouth and finishing off her drink in one gulp. His elaborate bar consisted of wines by the dozen and a number of premium whiskies and brandies. Yeah, he even had white rum.

Abhi took the empty glass from her hand and placed it on the nook, next to his half-full one, twisting her barstool towards him, bending down to kiss her.

She placed a firm hand on his mouth, saying, "Oh no! Not again. I'm starving after the three—or was it four—bouts of energetic sex. While 'twas thoroughly entertaining, I need something to boost my blood sugar levels."

Abhi grinned, biting her middle finger. "Entertained, where you?" he asked, his whisky coloured eyes looking into hers intently.

"Make me another drink," she ordered, shoving her glass towards him.

"I'll do better than that and serve dinner," he replied, taking her glass to the sink.

“Abhi,” she yelled, “are you refusing me a *second* drink? How ridiculous is that!”

He gave her a smouldering look over his shoulder that had her catching her breath. “Let’s eat before the food turns cold. And you need to replenish your energy,” he winked, even as he brought the pan of delicious smelling chicken gravy to the dining nook. He removed a couple of plates and placed them on the table. She watched him avidly, her eyes following his precise movements as he went back to the stove to get the rice.

Imagine being fed such yummy dinner by a delicious half-naked hunk, the same guy who had taken the trouble to cook the food too. ‘*Have I died and gone to heaven*?’ wondered Shikha as she forked a spoonful of gravy mixed rice and a piece of butter-soft chicken into her mouth. “Umm...this is fantastic,” she said, forgetting to be sarcastic for once.

Abhi spent the next few minutes watching her eat and found it a totally sensual experience. Shikha shut her eyes whenever she munched on her food, making the sexiest of sounds as she relished it. She could do with some more flesh on her bones, not that he found her any less attractive. But she was on the thinner side. He knew that she smoked and drank more than she ate. All that would have to change. Yeah, it’d be an uphill task, but if anyone could do it, it was he. He had to gain her trust and confidence and that would be the biggest challenge. But he was surely up to it.

“What are you staring at? Do I have some food sticking to my chin?” she growled, frowning at him.

He shrugged, shaking his head. “Just watching you eat. You look cute,” he smiled.

“Abhi, are you dumb or what? How can one look cute wolfing down food? *Tum bhi*.” She shook her head at him. “The butter chicken’s perfect, by the way. It’s even better than what my mom used to make,” she complimented, dropping her spoon on the counter and wiping her plate with her fingers, planning to lick them. Only, Abhi beat her to it, grabbing her hand and licking her fingers for her.

“Abhi, how could you? I so wanted to taste it with my hand.” She glared at him.

“Here.” He dipped his hand in the gravy and offered it to her.

He watched on as a pink tongue ran over his fingers one by one, licking every drop of gravy sticking to it, her gaze clinging to his. Shikha got off her barstool and leaned against him, her elbows on his thighs. “Are you done?”

“Not yet,” he said, helping himself to some more food, watching her from the corner of his eyes.

“Now I need a smoke. Or I might just *die*,” she declared dramatically, turning to walk towards the living room. She’d still not got a chance to get to her handbag.

“Shikha, how many times do I tell you that you can’t smoke here?” he asked, unruffled as he tucked into a third helping of the food.

She turned back to scowl at him. “Where the hell do you pack all those calories? They can’t all be converting to muscle, can they?” He didn’t have a spare ounce of flesh.

“I run, every day,” he said. “Six to eight km,” he added, for good measure.

“Ugh! Where do you get the energy from?”

“By leading a healthy life?” He looked at her, a dark and shapely eyebrow up in query.

“Don’t give me a lecture on health, please,” she begged, her eyes mocking. “And tell me, what’s this phobia you have about not smoking in your home?”

“My mother died of lung cancer that was caused by passive smoking, thanks to my father, who is a chain smoker. She died when she was barely forty and I was ten. My father’s still alive, smoking his way through life.” There was no expression on Abhimanyu’s face as he said this, though his voice had turned rough with emotion.

“Abhi,” said Shikha, hugging him from behind as he placed their plates in the sink. “I’m so sorry to hear about your mother.” She pressed her cheek to his bare back, trying to soothe his obvious pain. But did that mean she could never smoke

in her own house? He did plan to marry her, right?

3

“Let’s go for a drive,” said Abhi. “And you have your damn smoke,” he smiled.

Shikha pouted at him before rushing into the bedroom to wear the clothes she had discarded earlier. “Abhi,” she called out. “Can we go to my place and get some of my stuff? I can’t go to work in these tomorrow.”

He walked into the bedroom to get a t-shirt. “Why not?”

She turned to look at him as he pulled the t-shirt over his head. His muscles rippled, making her drool. “Abhi, are you going in those shorts? They’re barely there.” Her eyes were wide as she ran her gaze down his long legs.

Abhimanyu grinned as he walked close to her. “So?” He pulled her close, his hands cupping her bottom.

Shikha rolled her eyes, pulling out of his arms. “Let’s go before you distract me,” she said, pulling her shoes on.

Abhi tucked his wallet into his pocket, picked up his keys and walked out of the flat with her.

Switching on the ignition, he said, “By the way, you’ll be working as my secretary from tomorrow.” Ranveer had been clear that he wanted Shikha out of RS Software. It had only been on Abhi’s request that she still had a job.

Shikha scowled, drawing deeply on her cigarette. “Why? I was hired as Ranveer’s secretary, right?”

“I want you to work for me.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a possessive sort of guy,” teased Shikha, feeling pleased. She was surprised at her own reaction to his he-man attitude.

Abhi nodded, shrugging. “I ne’er knew it until you,” he winked. He was confident he could handle her.

And that settled the matter for Shikha.

In the end, she packed a suitcase full of clothes and an extra couple of bags. Well, there were the shoes, scarves, make-up and all that stuff a woman couldn't do without. She managed to smoke three cigarettes during this time.

Though he didn't say anything, Abhi shook his head to himself. The lady sure needed taking in hand.

"Where's your family?" he asked suddenly.

Shikha turned to him, shutting her wardrobe. "What family?"

"Your parents, maybe siblings," he said, looking into her eyes that had suddenly gone dull.

"I don't have anyone. I was an only kid and my parents are no more."

It was obvious that she didn't want to talk more on the subject. Abhi didn't ask anything further, respecting her privacy.

After her luggage had been packed into the SUV, Abhi frowned when he saw her lighting yet another cigarette.

"What? You don't approve. Abhi, let's get something clear. I respect you enough not to smoke in *your* house. But don't forget you aren't my mother." She dragged deeply into her cigarette, turning her head to blow the smoke in the other direction. "Don't you smoke?" she asked, her right eyebrow touching her hairline in query.

"Nope, never."

"Am I in a relationship with a saint or what?" she groaned, rolling her eyes, throwing down the cigarette stub to squash it under her foot.

"All that lovemaking seem saintly to you?" he asked, his brown eyes glowing in the street lights.

“Aah...yes.” She walked close and hugged him, reaching up to kiss him on his lips. “You’re just fantastic in bed.”

Ruddy colour ran up his manly cheeks as Abhi grinned down at her. “Finally! Thought I’d never hear you say it,” he winked.

She stood back to look up at him, her forefinger on her chin. “I thought it was us women who needed encouragement,” she said half-teasingly.

“Wonder who’d have put that thought in that pretty head of yours,” he said, bending down to kiss her hard. “Let’s go, woman,” he said, lifting her and placing her in the passenger seat.

“Oh my God! Abhi, you’re crazy. How the hell did you manage to lift me? I weigh so much,” she squealed.

He got into the driver’s seat and replied. “Oh really?! I don’t think so.”

Shikha sighed happily, placing her head against his shoulder. He really knew the right things to say to a woman.

Had her streak of misfortune turned for the better after all these years?

4

The next day at work, Abhi got in touch with Deepak from HR and informed him that Shikha would be working as his secretary beginning the same day. “I’ll get all the approvals once Ranveer’s back from his holiday,” he told Deepak.

Deepak nodded his head. “Of course Abhi. I’ll draw up a new contract.”

“Thanks man,” said Abhi, before going back to his office. He had a plan already charted out to keep Shikha busy. He had guessed rightly that her main issue was her apathy. She needed to be challenged. And he decided to do just that and called her to his cabin.

She walked in with a pout, looking bored, chewing gum. She took a seat, crossing her legs, checking out her newly painted nails.

Abhi ran his eyes over her, his heart thudding in excitement. He still found it hard to believe that she was his. And he wasn’t too flustered by the look she was giving him—as if he was something that she had unfortunately found under her shoe. “I see that you’ve spent a busy morning painting your nails. Nice colour, by the way.” He raised a hand to stop her from saying anything as her head came up sharply, in defiance. “I’ve instructed Deepak to give you a new contract...”

“Am I getting a pay hike?” she asked, looking at him slyly from the corner of her eyes.

“No way. And unless you pull your weight around, you just might get a pay cut,” he said firmly, his eyes looking deeply into hers.

“What the fuck!” snarled Shikha, pushing back her chair noisily as she got up in a rush, “you wouldn’t dare.”

“I dare a lot,” he said softly, turning to his laptop. “You come back when you’re ready to do some work,” he said dismissively, much to her shock.

“Abhi!” she yelled, walking up to him. “You’re insulting me.”

He looked up at the woman towering over him threateningly, her hands fisted against her hips, her elbows thrust out aggressively. Blood rushed to his groin, distracting him. He shook his head to clear it and said, “Shikha, it’s not I who’s insulting you. You’re doing well all by yourself. You’ve been with his organisation since three months. Do tell me what work you’ve done all these days,” he challenged.

“That’s none of your business,” she said, turning away, her shoulders hunched. She had been a glorified secretary, who had almost died of boredom. But she needn’t admit that to him.

“Isn’t it?” he asked.

“Now what the fuck do you want from me?” she asked, a sneer on her face as she turned back to him.

Abhi got up and walked her to the chair she had recently vacated. “Sit down,” he said, his voice brooking no argument. “First things first. You clean up your language at work. You answer to me from today and I’ll not tolerate indiscipline.” He looked at her, waiting to ensure that his words had sunk in.

She glared at him, wondering where the lover from last night had disappeared to. But she refrained from saying anything.

“I got an early appraisal done for you and...”

“But Abhi, Ranveer never wanted me to do anything. I...”

He raised a hand to stop her from continuing. “Well, that’s all in the past. The appraisal is being readied as we talk. I know enough to realise that you’ll need to work extra hard to continue working with this company. Unless you want to quit and be a rich and bored wife to the company’s vice president?” he suggested, his brown gaze sharp as he studied her reaction.

Shikha jumped up from her chair. “Oh no! Never! Don’t you dare make me quit.” She glared at him, her breasts heaving. She was going to kill him before the day ended.

“Good. I’ve mailed you a list of tasks. Get cracking,” he said, before turning

once more towards his laptop, indicating that the meeting was over.

5

Shikha went back to her cabin, fuming. He had dismissed her as if she was a nobody. How could he? She walked the length of her small office, up and down, up and down. He had mailed her a list of tasks, it seemed. So! As if she cared. She had always known what a pompous ass Abhimanyu Mehra was. Just because...just because they had had a good romp in bed, didn't make him less stuffy. Bastard!

He was getting her appraisal from the HR. How valid would that be without her signature on it? And Ranveer wasn't in town. What if she refused to work as Abhi's secretary? He couldn't force her. But then, Ranveer gave her no work at all. Shikha frowned, pausing in her pacing. Had Abhi been serious about her quitting? But she needed an occupation.

Well, she came with almost fifteen years of experience. Didn't that count? *But she had done no work at RS Software, unless you could count the few letters she had typed and the couple of calls she had made in a day.* She ignored her inner voice. It was no fault of hers. How many times had she gone to Ranveer's cabin to ask for work? He had always been too busy for her.

With a sudden change of mind, Shikha went to check her mailbox. She needed to know if Abhi had sent her some real work or if he was bossing over her simply to get on her nerves.

She stared at the computer screen, her irritation slowly turning to awe. He had sent a list of seven things for her to do and a time frame to complete them in. And, what the hell, each job was a challenge in itself. What did he think of her? She'd just prove to him that she was capable of finishing the work with her left hand tied behind her back. She refused to admit even to herself that she felt excited about her job for the first time in over five years.

Shikha worked non-stop, checking against her list as she ran through her tasks and was surprised when she heard her cabin door being opened.

"Lunch?" asked her lover of last night.

Shikha gave him an absent-minded look, her attention on her computer. “Later.”

“Shikha.” He walked up to her desk. “I’m hungry. Let’s go.”

She frowned up at him. “I’m not.”

“We had breakfast at eight in the morning. It’s past two,” he argued.

Shikha took her hands off the keyboard and leaned back in her chair. “Are you going to play the “boss” card again?” she asked him, mildly sarcastic. Her usual sting was missing as she was too satisfied by that morning’s work.

He shrugged. “If need be.”

She pretended to glare at him mockingly, getting up from her chair and stretching her arms above her head, drawing his eyes to her taut breasts. “What?” She automatically smiled, enjoying his gaze as it ran over her slender frame.

“Now I have two kinds of hunger clawing at me,” he growled. “Come on.”

“But sir, you can’t flirt with your secretary on her very first day at work, *sir*. It’s against office ethics,” she said with a provocative pout of her luscious lips.

“Damn these glass walls,” groaned Abhi. “Lunch. Now. Unless you’re prepared to be made love to in front of the whole office.”

“My my! The cave-man surfaces. Or is it boss-man? Okay, I’m coming.” Shikha blew him a kiss, picking up her bag. “May I take a couple of minutes to visit the washroom, *sir*? With your permission?”

“As long as you don’t forget that my cabin has concrete walls and I’m capable of turning you over on my knees and delivering the slap that your rear end’s begging for.”

Shikha rolled her eyes. “My rear end begs to differ. *Sir*. It begs for...”

“Shikha,” groaned Abhi. “I’ll meet you at the canteen.” He left, her soft laughter following him, tightening his already aroused body.

6

Shikha lifted her extension when the phone rang. She automatically checked her watch to see it was almost six.

“Hey, are you done for the day?” asked Abhi.

She looked at her computer before saying, “Fifteen minutes?”

“Okay! By the way, you’re doing a good job,” he said, disconnecting the phone without waiting for her response.

She frowned for a second, annoyed at the abrupt manner in which he’d cut the call. But then, his praise rang in her ears and she glowed with pride. She had actually completed all her work and was typing out a report to mail him.

Exactly fifteen minutes later, Shikha walked into Abhi’s cabin without bothering to knock on his door. “What a day! I’m ready for a few drinks, an elaborate dinner and some steamy sex, in that order,” she said with a straight face.

Abhi got up from his chair, walking close to her. He took her hand and placed it against his fly. “Are you sure?” he asked, bending down to nip the top of her breast that peeped above her neckline.

“Abhi.” Shikha placed her arms around his neck, pressing his head closer to her body. “Don’t think all is forgiven just because you’re sweet talking me now,” she threatened softly. She could feel his grin against her body even as his facial fuzz tickled her sensitive skin, arousing her to fever pitch.

He raised his head to ask, “Do you want to eat out or shall I make you dinner?”

“Let’s go out. Or we’ll just land up in bed and I’ll be on an empty stomach for a long time,” she grumbled.

“Okay, you get to choose the restaurant,” he said, picking up his laptop case.

“Benevolent boss,” she declared cheekily, as they left the office, hand-in-hand.

It took them almost an hour to reach the Lounge Bar at ITC Sheraton. Shikha was thrilled to be escorted by the handsome Abhimanyu and that too in the lap of luxury. “Will Scotch be too expensive?” she asked him in a loud whisper.

Abhi shrugged. “Go ahead and order what you want. I’m sure I can afford it,” he said indulgently. They relaxed on a sofa and placed their orders.

They chatted desultorily, watching people come and go.

“So, do you still want to work for me? Or...?” asked Abhi, playing with the fingers of her left hand.

“Or what?” she asked, finishing the drink in her glass, raising a hand to the bartender for a refill. She had already downed two large pegs.

“Or you can be a rich man’s idle wife. I did offer,” he said. He got up, not waiting for her answer. “Let’s go have that elaborate dinner that I promised you.”

“Sit down Abhi. Don’t be a pain. I’ve just begun to enjoy my drink. And see, my order’s come,” said Shikha, pulling at his hand.

He sat down reluctantly, noticing that her speech was slurred. It looked like her work that day hadn’t been exciting enough; or his lovemaking last night. She craved her whisky and soda. He signalled to the waiter to get their bill.

Their talk got around to office politics. “Oh, did I mention? Ranveer told me that he’s married. Just to escape my attention, I think,” grimaced Shikha.

“It’s the truth. He’s married,” said Abhi.

“What! The bastard wasn’t lying then?” Her eyes turned curious. “Wonder who the wife is!”

Abhi thought on his feet. He was serious about marrying Shikha; might as well treat her as family. “He’s married to Chanda,” he said, his face dead pan, watching her face minutely for a reaction.

He wasn’t disappointed when Shikha spluttered into her drink, placing her glass down on the table in a hurry. “What! Are you having me on? That chick from college is Ranveer’s wife? Don’t tell me.”

Abhi grinned, glad to shake up the cynical woman he had fallen in love with. She could do with lightening up. “It’s a long story. I’ll let Ranveer tell you about it.” He didn’t think it was fair to Ranveer or Chanda that he let out that they had been married as children. He wasn’t sure if either or both of them wouldn’t be ashamed of the fact.

Shikha gave him a curious look, but could see from the clammed-up look on Abhi’s face that he wouldn’t say any more. She still persisted, “Have they eloped to get married?” Neither of them had been coming to work since the past few days. But then, Ranveer had told her he was married even before Chanda began to work for their company. It was so damn confusing.

Abhi got up the moment he saw her finish her drink. “Let’s go Shikha. I’m damned hungry.”

Shikha went with him reluctantly when he escorted her to the Pan Asian restaurant. She gave the menu a cursory glance before saying, “You order the food for me, Abhi, and a refill of whisky and soda too.”

Abhi shook his head, not saying anything. He ordered for a *Barbeque Pork Bao—dim sums* served with *soy chilli sauce* for starters and *Roasted Duck in Red Pineapple Curry* for the main course.

“Abhi, you forgot my drink,” complained Shikha, her lips drooping petulantly.

“No, I didn’t. Here you go,” said Abhi, offering her the glass of water that was placed near her plate.

“Are you mad? You want me to drink water?” Her voice had gone up by several decibels and people turned around to look. Not that she cared. She wanted—no, *needed*—a drink.

Abhi was too confident to be bothered by strangers staring at them as Shikha made an exhibition of herself. “Yes, I do.”

“This is it!” Shikha got up, pushing her chair back. “I don’t think it’s going to work between us. I’ll leave.”

Abhi pinned her with his brown gaze. “You’ll break my heart, just like that?” he asked in a soft voice that shivered down her spine.

Shikha frowned, confused, wondering if she’d heard him right. His right hand was placed against his heart, the expression in his whisky coloured eyes that of a puppy that had been kicked hard, pulling at her heart strings. Was this the same guy who had ordered her about in the office that morning? What was he playing at?

“Please sit down and have dinner, Shikha,” he appealed, as the waiter approached with their order.

The aroma wafting from the serving bowl took the decision out of Shikha’s hands and she settled down in her chair to tuck into the food. She didn’t notice the twinkle in her lover’s eyes as he waved the waiter away, serving her the food with his own hands.

7

“Welcome back, Ranveer,” said Abhimanyu, entering the other man’s cabin.

Ranveer looked up and smiled at his second-in-command and friend, getting up from his chair. The two men hugged before Ranveer pointed to a chair, seating himself on the corner of the table.

“So? Are congratulations in order?” smiled Abhi, looking at Ranveer’s happy face.

“Oh yeah! Chanda and I got married again, actually,” he admitted, his face glowing with joy.

Abhi shook Ranveer’s hand, saying, “That’s awesome. I’m so glad that everything worked out perfectly for you both.”

Ranveer nodded. “Absolutely. Will you call for a brief meeting at around 5 pm? I’ll talk to the staff. I’ll give everyone the news and also personally invite them to the party we are planning end of week.”

Abhi nodded. “Sure, will do. Will you be taking off on a honeymoon soon after that?” he asked.

Ranveer shook his head. “Nope. Not for the next few months. We’re planning to wait till Chanda finishes her graduation. She can’t miss any more of college and exams.” But she had already left her hostel and shifted to their home and he was too happy about that to complain about the lack of a honeymoon.

“Well, in that case...I’d like to apply for some leave.”

“What gives?” asked Ranveer, his right eyebrow touching the lock falling on his forehead.

“Shikha’s agreed to marry me. We haven’t fixed a date yet. But soon.” Abhi turned a bit red as he shared his piece of news.

Ranveer slapped his friend's back. "Congrats, bro. I'm happy if you are." He grimaced. "I mean no offence. But I'm sure you know what you're doing." They had always been honest with each other and it had been only a little more than a week since Ranveer had told Abhimanyu to get rid of Shikha from RS Software.

"I do, and thank you. I love her, Ranveer. And she's perfect for me, exactly the way she is."

"That's great then. I wish you all happiness. So how long do you plan to go on leave?"

"Two months," said Abhi, much to Ranveer's surprise. "I know it's a long time. But I'll be in touch and do as much as I can while I'm away. I..."

"Well, Abhi, I don't quite know what to say. If anyone deserves his leave, it's you, since you haven't taken any long leave since we started the company. And it's not fair expecting you to work during your honeymoon. That's fine. I'm sure we'll work something out. By the way, where do you plan to go?"

"Thailand. I'm planning to get Shikha into a renowned rehab centre there, with 5-star facilities. I'll also be able to stay with her. She really needs help and it's like urgent. I'm planning to take her there in the pretext of a honeymoon. Otherwise, I can't see her agreeing to the treatment." He sighed. He straightened after a second and said, "Now you know why I'll be able to work from there."

Ranveer looked at Abhi with admiration. His company VP was truly a gem of a man. He only hoped Shikha valued what her future husband planned for her. "I'm sure, Abhi. I appreciate your offer. Go ahead and send a mail to me with your leave dates. I'll reply my acceptance along with a copy to the HR. And Shikha?"

"She's working for me since the past three days. So, she also will be needing leave. Maybe, she'll lose her salary since she's been with us only a few months." Abhi shrugged.

"Get her to send you a mail since you are her boss. I'm sure we can do something about the salary if she's doing a good job as your assistant. I'll take your word for it," Ranveer smiled.

“You have my word. She’s excellent,” grinned Abhi.

“That sure is a surprise. I’m glad to hear it though. You obviously understand her well.”

“Aah...that I do.” Abhi’s grin turned wider.

8

Every single member of the 54 staff was present in the large conference room of RS Software when their CEO walked in. The intermittent chatter came to a stop when they saw Ranveer take a seat.

“Hello guys! How have you all been?” asked Ranveer, smiling widely at them. If the staff were surprised by their boss’s over bright smile, they kept it to themselves.

They all nodded while some muttered, “Great, awesome, fine, not bad...”

Ranveer nodded before continuing, “Well, I’ve an announcement to make that’s actually personal.” A bit of colour ran up his cheeks as he said, “I got married last week.”

A roar went up across the room as everyone clapped and cheered, shouting their “Congratulations”.

Ranveer sat back with a smile, waiting for them to calm down. Once there was a semblance of quiet, he said, “Does anyone want to know who my bride is?” He gestured across the room for someone to step forward. Everyone turned in the direction he was pointing in to see Chanda get up and walk to the empty chair that was placed next to Ranveer. A surprised gasp broke from almost everyone. Shikha watched the scene unfold with cynical eyes, a sneer on her face. *What drama! And see how the simpletons lapped it all up. Suckers!*

Chanda sat next to Ranveer, blushing to the roots of her hair, a wide smile on her lovely face. Ranveer raised his hand again and the crowd fell silent. “Actually, Chanda and I had been married fourteen years back, as kids. Yeah, I know it sounds strange, but we both originate from villages in Rajasthan. She was eight and I was thirteen when we tied the knot.” He grimaced as he continued. “I ran away immediately after the wedding and we got estranged. By a quirk of fate, we met again when Chanda came to work for RS. And well, we just decided to get married again. And so, my friends, I invite you all to a party at Country Inn & Suites on Friday. More details by mail.” He nodded that the meeting was over.

Abhi noticed Shikha staring contemptuously as everyone rushed to offer their best wishes to Ranveer and his wife. When most of them had left the conference room, they went up to the newly married couple. “Congratulations!” gushed Shikha, her smile totally fake. “So, Ranveer, you *were* telling me the truth when you insisted that you’re married. And you, Chanda, are a deep one.” She hugged them by turn and air-kissed them.

Ranveer smiled back genuinely. If Abhi was going to marry Shikha, then she was a friend too, no questions asked. “I knew you didn’t believe me. And I hear that we’re to hear wedding bells again pretty soon. Congratulations to you too!”

Shikha was startled at the blush that stole up her cheeks. Ranveer *knew* that she and Abhi were getting married. That meant it was for real. She would never have admitted to a feeling of insecurity. But she was unable to believe that her life had truly changed with Abhi’s marriage proposal. She still hadn’t been sure that he had meant it. “Thank you,” she said in a choked whisper, a sudden shyness overcoming her when she felt Abhi’s strong arm go around her waist.

Abhi in turn congratulated Ranveer once again before giving Chanda a hug. “I’m so happy for the two of you, that you found each other after all these years.”

“Thank you, Abhimanyu,” said Chanda, smiling up at him. Her eyes were wary when they rested on Shikha. She never knew when that woman was going to bite. Was the gentle Abhi really going to marry this monster? “Have you both fixed a date?” she asked, more to keep the conversation going than out of genuine interest.

“Whenever Shikha’s ready,” said Abhi, his arm tightening around her possessively.

“So, Shikha, are you ready?” asked Ranveer. “Do tell us when.”

“Next week?” challenged Shikha, feeling reckless. The sooner they tied the knot, the more secure she was bound to feel.

This was exactly what Abhi had been hoping for. He knew that Shikha would rather run their lives and had wanted her to commit to a date rather than he suggesting it. At Ranveer’s raised eyebrow, Abhi said with a smile, “Next week it is. Will get a suitable date with the marriage registrar and keep you all

informed.” He pressed his lips to the top of Shikha’s head in a rare public display of affection.

Chanda was startled to see the transformation on the devilish Shikha’s face at Abhi’s gesture. She looked beautiful as a shy but genuine smile broke out on her face, her sneer having disappeared. It looked like Abhi was doing a good job of taming the beast.

“So, we can expect another party next Friday it seems,” said Ranveer. He slapped Abhimanyu on his shoulder. “It’s on me.”

Abhi smiled back at his friend, raising his hand in a high-five. “Thanks, Ranveer. We’ll look forward to it.”

9

“Imagine being married at eight and thirteen.” Shikha shuddered as she chatted with Abhi on their way home. “Are they mad?”

“I don’t think they had a say in the matter,” said Abhi.

“But still, it’s so ridiculous. Do their families belong to the Neanderthal age, I wonder?!”

Abhi chose not to reply. Shikha was on her high horse and in a judgemental mood. She had been scorned by Ranveer and it obviously rankled that he had chosen Chanda over her. He let her vent as she went on and on till he parked the SUV in the basement of the building they lived in.

“I can see they are your best friends and mean the most to you. That’s why you’re keeping quiet. What would you’ve said if it was someone else?” she grumbled, feeling cut up that he hadn’t sided with her.

They were inside the elevator when Abhi replied, “The same as what I say now, that it’s none of my business.” He pulled her into his arms, pressing his lips hard on hers. It hadn’t been easy keeping his arms to himself through the day when they worked in such close proximity. His laptop bag dropped to the floor a second before Shikha’s handbag fell on it as she threw both her arms around him. Abhi pressed a button to stop the lift midway. What the hell! It was past midnight and there were three more lifts for the others to use. He swiftly pulled her panties down, even as she opened his fly and freed him from his briefs. Abhi groaned as he buried himself in her in one swift stroke. “Shikha...”

She clung to him, her legs going around his waist, the very ground rocking as he pounded into her. This was a first indeed, making out in an elevator. She hadn’t imagined it even in her wildest dreams as she climaxed quickly. “Abhi...,” she moaned in response.

Abhi pressed his forehead against hers, grinning. “Don’t know what the hell they say about the excitement of making love in an elevator. It sucks. I can’t wait to get to bed.”

Shikha laughed throatily. “Bed is better. But this was fun too.” She went on tiptoes to kiss him on his mouth as he hit the button and the elevator began to move again.

They had a quick shower together before falling on the bed, both feeling needy as they explored each other. Abhi pushed her down on the bed, kissing her on her forehead. “Just lie down and watch me slave over you,” he said, his brown eyes slumberous as they feasted on her body that was laid bare before him. She was a perfect 36-24-34, her breasts inviting his touch. He pressed his lips to her eyelids, kissing them one by one before moving to trace the shape of an ear. Shikha moaned with need as the wet tip of his tongue ran over the whorl, bringing her nerves alive. Her hands moved restlessly on his muscular shoulders as he turned his attention to her neck. He nipped her there, saying, “You taste delicious, my love.” His hands caressed her breasts as he traced a tongue over her slender shoulders, his lips moving down further.

Shikha held his head in her hands, guiding him towards her breasts as her nipples perked up. She groaned as she felt his thumbs tracing the tips. “Abhi,” she called out demandingly. “Kiss me there, Abhi. I need your mouth on me.”

He obliged her by taking a hard nipple into his mouth, suckling softly, driving her crazy with need. Shikha felt tremors building in her womb as she felt him suck harder, her legs moving restlessly against his. His right hand moved down to her hip, his touch firm. Shikha held him tight against her body, feeling his hard manhood pressed against her stomach. She touched him, holding him in her hand as he turned his head to suckle her other breast. She felt wet with desire when she felt his hand reach the apex of her thighs. “Abhi...” she moaned as she felt his fingers within her, pleasuring her.

She came apart in the next few seconds, a cry on her lips.

Abhi raised his head to look down at Shikha’s flushed face, her eyes wild with his lovemaking. He moved down further, exploring her stomach, his tongue dipping into her navel, bringing a whimper of pleasure from her. The rough texture of his cheeks on her silky skin drove Shikha wild. She jumped off the bed when she felt him kiss her womanhood. “Abhi...”

He moved back up, locking his lips with hers, pulling her leg around his waist as

he entered her. This time he let it last longer as their lovemaking in the elevator had been rather dissatisfying to both. Shikha felt the powerful build-up as she felt herself soaring yet again as he rode her, their bodies slick with sweat, despite the air-conditioning.

She bit his shoulder hard to stop herself from screaming when she felt an orgasm rip through her. Abhi seemed to have no qualms as he roared his joy when he climaxed.

She held him tight as he fell against her, shaking her head when he said, “I don’t want to crush you.”

“You’re not,” she insisted, refusing to let him go.

After their breathing had settled down, Abhi moved, turning to the drawer next to his side of the bed. He removed a small jewellers’ box and handed it to her. “See if you like it.”

Shikha opened the box eagerly and gave a startled shout when she saw the ring nestled there against the velvet. A huge two-carat square-cut ruby surrounded by two rows of diamonds winked at her from their setting of gold. “Is that for me?” she squealed in delight, her eyes sparkling with joy as they looked up at him.

“Yes, my love. It’s yours,” said Abhi, removing the ring from the box and lifting her left hand to place it on her ring finger. It was a perfect fit.

“Abhi, it looks simply awesome,” said Shikha, her voice on the verge of breaking. She threw her arms around his neck to kiss him. “Thank you so much.”

“Thank *you* for agreeing to become my wife,” said Abhi sincerely, returning her kiss with equal fervour. He lifted her slim hand to kiss the finger wearing his ring, bringing a blush to Shikha’s cheeks. “It looks perfect on you.”

Shikha buried her face in his bare chest, almost in tears. She couldn’t believe that someone really cared so much for her.

Abhi turned around to open the drawer again, this time pulling out a bigger box. “There’s more,” he whispered into her hair.

Shikha shook her head against him. “I love the ring and it’s enough for me. I don’t want anything more,” she surprised herself saying that. His love for her had sublimed her greed for things, it seemed.

Abhi smiled. “I’m sure. Only I want you to have more.”

He clicked on the lock and the jewellers’ box sprang open to reveal a matching necklace, bracelet and ear-rings in the same design, bringing a gasp to Shikha’s throat as she turned to look at them. “This is too much, Abhi. Why do you want to waste so much money on me?” she sniffed, trying hard not to cry.

Abhimanyu laughed. “I don’t think it’s a waste. I know you look the most beautiful in your birthday suit,” he crooned in her ear, “but there’ll be times when you can look awesome wearing these with some matching clothes.”

“You’re crazy, Abhi.”

“Yeah, I’m crazy, *about you*.”

10

That Friday, the party Ranveer and Chanda threw for some 150-plus guests, was a roaring success. The Eden Lawn sparkled with fairy lights, decorated with huge bouquets of asters and gladioli. The multi-cuisine buffet included both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes that would tempt the most jaded of palates.

But it was the bar that attracted Shikha as she kept going back for refills. Abhi played the quiet escort, not saying much until she finished her fourth peg. That's when he stopped her on her way back to the bar. "I think you've had enough, Shikha."

She turned to scowl at him. "Fuck off, Abhi," she said, continuing to walk towards the bar. She came to an abrupt stop when he held her arm firmly and wouldn't let her move. "Are you mad?" she snarled, glaring at him.

"Let's go have dinner."

"Later," she insisted, making an effort to pull out of his tight grip. But he wouldn't budge. "Let me go," she ordered.

"You're going with me, either to have dinner, or back home. You choose." His voice brooked no argument.

How the hell had she landed up with the most pig-headed person on earth? He was anything but the mild guy he appeared at the first, second and third glances. Shikha gritted her teeth, trying to hold back the temper that gushed forth from within. She just couldn't stand anyone, *just anyone*, who came between her and her drink. Just because they were engaged, did Abhi think he owned her? "That's no choice, Abhi," she replied, choosing to be sweetly sarcastic. "You're probably in your dotage. But I'm still young and want to have some fun." She pulled at her arm again, to no avail.

"If having fun is making a drunken fool of yourself, then it's no go. Are you going to come with me? Or do I carry you?" His voice was menacing.

Shikha's light brown eyes went wide with shock. "Are you threatening me?"

“Nope.” He shook his head. “I’m giving you a choice. Either you come with me of your own volition or I carry you away,” he explained as if to a retarded child.

Shikha stamped her foot, rage overcoming her. She raised her free hand to slap him, only to have it caught deftly by his left hand. “Let me go,” she snarled, “unless you want me to make a scene. You don’t really know what I’m capable of. By the end of it, you’ll feel ashamed of being associated with me.”

Abhi looked down at her defiant face, amused by the way she threatened him, even as a sheen of tempestuous tears filmed over her eyes. He shook his head, bending down to kiss her, his lips touching her cheek as she turned her face away from him. “Shikha,” he whispered in her ear, turning her face with a finger under her chin, kissing her gently. “I’ll never feel ashamed of you. I love you, remember?”

She did her best to hold on to her temper in the face of the love shining in his eyes. He continued to hold her back, his expression adoring. Shikha melted in his arms, forgetting to be angry. In the end, the quietly stubborn Abhi had his way, getting her to the buffet and insisting on feeding her morsels from his plate when she refused to get food of her own.

11

Both Abhimanyu and Shikha decided to have a court wedding on the next Friday morning. Abhi had completed all the formalities required before they presented themselves at the marriage registrar office in Connaught Place at 10 am along with Ranveer, Chanda, Parth and his girlfriend Megha, and two of Shikha's friends—Dev and Syed.

Shikha appeared gorgeous in a golden silk sari, heavily embroidered in gold thread and a blouse of gold brocade. She also wore the ruby and diamond jewellery that Abhi had gifted her. She glowed with the inner fire of a woman truly loved. Abhimanyu looked dashing in a wine-red, sleeveless Nehru jacket over a rich cream *churidaar-kurta* of silk. Ranveer carried the matching wedding rings made of gold with a fine filigree design. The bride's ring was engraved with Abhimanyu's name on the inside while the groom's ring sported Shikha's name.

The marriage registrar checked that all the papers and forms were in order before he looked at the couple standing in front of him, along with their friends. "Are we waiting for anyone else or can we start the proceeding?" he asked.

The wedding was over in ten minutes when the couple signed the register along with the six witnesses. Shikha had moved her engagement ring to her right hand and sported the wedding band proudly. Abhi looked at his wife tenderly before bending down to kiss her on her lips. "Congratulations!" he whispered in her ear. "I love you."

Shikha threw her arms around his neck and clung to him. "Congratulations, husband," she whispered.

The whole lot of them left the registrar office to have breakfast at Hotel Saravana Bhavan. Immediately after, the others left to go to work, while the newlyweds went home. "See you all in the evening," called out Abhi to his friends, driving off with his new wife next to him.

"Well, Mrs. Mehra, welcome home," said Abhi, lifting her in his arms to cross over the threshold of their home. Shikha kissed him on his cheek, smiling

widely.

He took her directly to the bedroom and unwrapped her sari as if she were a delicate gift parcel. Shikha revelled in his lovemaking, matching his passion. He held her close later, kissing her forehead. “I love you, my wife.”

“You’re the best!” she said, burying her face in his chest.

He poured two glasses of chilled red wine and brought it to her in bed. He also took out the guest list for the evening to check that all had been invited. That’s when he noticed the list of names given by Shikha. There were eight of them, seven male friends and the wife of one of the guys. He turned to look at her, his right eyebrow up in query. “Have you missed anybody?”

Shikha took the paper from him and ran her eyes through the names, shrugging. “Of course not. Why?”

“You have no female friends?” he asked, grinning. “They are all guys.”

“Very funny,” she grumbled. “Can you think of any woman who’ll want to be my friend?” she asked.

Abhi shook his head in amusement. “Should I be jealous?”

She studied his handsome features, thrilled to bits to be his wife. “Maybe,” she said challengingly.

“Does that mean I can have girlfriends too?” he asked, needling her.

Shikha glared at him. “Do you have girlfriends? That too more than one? Be warned. I’ll pull every woman’s eyes out if she comes too close to you.”

Abhi burst out laughing. “So, the rules are different for me, are they?”

“Don’t be silly, Abhi. These guys are really good friends of mine. They’ve always stood by me, the badass Shikha. They’re my besties.”

“In that case, they are my friends too,” he smiled. “But that means I can have girls for friends, right?” he persisted.

“Not unless you want them to be maimed for life,” she said coolly, pouring the last mouthful of wine down her throat. “Come closer,” she beckoned to him. “Let me show you some moves that will ensure you’ll never need to look at another woman till I’m alive.”

Abhi sucked in his breath when she pushed him back on the bed and climbed over him to sit on his stomach. She bent over him, her breasts pressed against his manly chest, to kiss him on his mouth. A pink tongue peeped out to trace the outline of his lips, before pushing against his teeth, seeking entry. Abhi groaned, throwing his arms around her waist to hold her tight as she explored the contours of his mouth with her silken tongue, driving him crazy.

She sat up straight, pulling his arms from around her and keeping them down by his sides. “Your turn will come,” she winked before placing soft kisses along his jaw line. She moved to his neck and took a bite of his skin, making him jump. Shikha pressed him back on the bed, continuing with her lovemaking, rubbing a wet tongue over his flat male nipples. She traced a leisurely path down his chest, his navel and finally reached his hardened manhood. She caressed him with her hands, kissing him there. Unable to stop himself, Abhi pulled her close, lifting her in both his arms and entering her with a groan. “Abhi...” moaned Shikha, riding him vigorously till both of them reached out to the stars as one. She collapsed against him, breathing hard, with a wide smile on her face. “Do you still want girlfriends?” she challenged.

“God give me strength to keep one wife happy and satisfied,” laughed Abhimanyu, hugging her close.

12

The party had been organised at *Debate*, one of the smaller venues at Vivanta by Taj that evening. It was an intimate gathering of 75 people—office staff and some close friends of the bride and groom.

Shikha was resplendent in a flaming orange *ghagra* of organza, heavily embroidered in gold zari, worn over a silk inner skirt of ruby red, teamed with a silk *choli* of the same shade of red, also embroidered in gold thread and crystals, shimmering in the bright lights. A *dupatta* of gold tissue graced her left shoulder while dainty golden heels complimented the outfit. The handsome Abhimanyu wore a suit in steel grey with a white dress shirt and a deep red bow tie. A matching cummerbund of the same shade of red accentuated the V-shape of his body.

Abhi and Shikha mingled with the guests, his arm snugly draped around her bare waist. He did his best to keep track of the drinks she kept gulping, her laughter growing louder in direct proportion to the number of pegs she was downing.

Everything went smoothly till around 10.30 when Shikha turned to Abhi and said, “I need a smoke, desperately. Shall we just sneak out for a short while?” She pouted at him appealingly, like a naughty child.

Abhi shook his head solemnly. “We can’t Shikha. This is our party. It’s not fair to leave the guests and take off.”

“Don’t be so straight-laced, Abhi. Nothing will happen to them if we go away for a few minutes.” When he shook his head in response, she pulled his arm off her and stamped her foot. “Stay right here at your damn party if you want. I’m going.” She walked away and beckoning to Dev, took off from the hall.

Abhi watched her leaving with an irritated scowl on his face, just when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He wiped the frown off his face before turning to look at Ranveer. “All okay?” asked the latter.

“I suppose,” shrugged Abhi.

“The two of you make an awesome couple,” commented Chanda, joining them.

“Thank you Chanda,” said Abhi, his smile not reflected in his eyes.

It was at least another half an hour before Shikha returned to the party. She directly walked up to her husband and kissed him on his masculine lips. “Forgive me?”

Abhi pulled her close, kissing her deeply. “Always.”

“Did I tell you that you’re the best thing that’s happened to me?” she whispered in his ear, nipping at his earlobe.

“Shikha,” growled Abhi, “Are you even aware of what you’re doing to me? Position yourself in front of me till I gain control or I won’t be responsible for the consequences.”

Shikha gave a tinkling laugh, her hand on his fly, tracing his shape delightedly. “How did I ever imagine you were a staid guy?”

Abhi groaned. “Take your hand off, woman. Please!”

Shikha laughed again, kissing him. “How I love to hear you beg.” She winked at him.

She turned right around and got a waiter to get her another drink, much to Abhi’s chagrin. “Will you lay off the drink, Shikha?” he frowned.

“Why? You can’t afford it or what?” she challenged him, a shapely eyebrow up in query, sherry brown eyes dancing.

“You’ve already had four large pegs.”

“You’ve been counting.” The smile left her face.

“Do you plan to get drunk?”

“*Arre yaar,* Abhi! It’s our wedding, a once-in-a-lifetime event. I’m only celebrating. Give me a break,” she protested.

“The way you’ve been knocking down the drinks, anyone would think that you’re in pain rather than celebrating.”

“Says who? The great Abhimanyu?” A heavy scowl marred Shikha’s face, her voice turning sarcastic.

“Shikha...” Abhi placed a hand on her shoulder, trying to pacify her.

But she shook it off, too angry. He was stepping into her space. Just because they were married, did he think he owned her? “Don’t Shikha me,” she snarled. “I like to drink and I *will*. Try and stop me.” She walked away from him, directly to the bar counter and got sloshed, drinking as if there was no tomorrow.

Luckily by now, the guests had begun to leave as the hall was to shut down by 11.30 pm. The few that remained were witness to Shikha calling out loudly to Abhimanyu, “Hey hushband! Come here,” she slurred. When he went to her, she raised a forefinger at him threateningly, “Don’t try to shtop me, ogay? I love to drink...sic...” she fell into his arms, snoring softly, fast asleep.

Abhi lifted her and placed her on a sofa, taking her shoes off. He removed his coat jacket and covered her with it gently, when he noticed the goose pimples on her arms.

He walked up to the food counter and filled a plate, joining Ranveer, Chanda and a few others, munching on the delicacies as if nothing had happened. Well, he knew this is how Shikha was. But she didn’t know that her life was going to change drastically from the next week.

13

Shikha opened her eyes in a slit, unable to face even the feeble sunlight that poured into the bedroom through the heavy curtains. Her gaze was envious when she saw Abhi fast asleep on his side of the bed, his bare chest lifting and falling as he breathed evenly. This was probably the first night that she hadn't slept in his arms since the day she had moved into his home—their wedding night of all. An inadvertent sigh broke out from Shikha as she held her head in her hands, unable to bear the pain as it felt as if someone was using her skull instead of drums to play some raucous music.

Her throat was parched. Though she'd have loved to have a glass of chilled champagne that had been consumed like water at the party the earlier night, she settled for the water from the bottle placed on the side table. She drank almost half the bottle and ran to the bathroom as she felt an urge to throw up.

"Damn!" Shikha walked under the shower, turning it first to hot and then cold, trying to wash away the hangover. She ran a towel haphazardly to dry herself up before stepping out to see Abhi standing there in a pair of shorts, holding a steaming mug.

"Good morning," she grimaced. "What's that? I hope it's not something that'll make me want to puke again."

Abhi smiled, shaking his head. "Drink it in sips. It'll help with the hangover."

She took the mug from his hand and held it between both of hers, feeling the warmth creeping into her. The smell of ginger and lemon helped settle her heaving stomach. She took a small sip of the freshly made herbal tea with a shot of honey and heaved a sigh of relief, drinking it all up. She looked up at him and said sarcastically, "Abhi, you don't always need to be an angel you know. I know I really cheated you out of your wedding night. Go on, shout at me." Though she was being defiant, a small part of her felt wary of the situation.

Abhi went and sat next to her, hugging her close, removing the empty mug from her nerveless fingers. "We've been enjoying hot sex since so many days," he grinned, "so what if we took a break for one night?"

“Are you for real?”

He took her hand and placed it against his manhood. “What do you think? Am I real enough or...?” he winked.

“Abhi,” groaned Shikha, burying her face against his chest. A small fist beat against his shoulder. “I hate myself.”

He crushed her close. “I adore you. Now let me go. I’ll get you something to eat.”

“Don’t make me feel more guilty than I already am,” Shikha breathed into the crook of his shoulder.

Abhi rubbed his large hand on her head, calming her down. “Shikha, I hope we’re in this marriage business for the long haul, like until death us do part.”

She lifted her head from his chest to look up at him, crinkling her eyes that were still hurting. “Yes, Abhi.”

“So, what does one day or night matter? I’ve thought of you as my life partner from the day you agreed to wed me. What happened yesterday was only a public declaration. So...” he shrugged.

“I think I’m falling in love with you.” Shikha’s voice wobbled as tears threatened to fall from her eyes.

Abhi got up and pushed her back on the bed, making her lie down. “You stay put while I get us some hot breakfast in bed. Anything specific you’d like to have?”

“Just you for dessert,” she said cheekily, blowing him a kiss.

14

Shikha was excited when she got to know that the two of them were flying to Bangkok on Sunday by Thai Airways. Their flight was at 11.30 am from Indira Gandhi International Airport.

“Abhi,” she squealed excitedly, hugging him as they took an OLA cab to the airport. “This is the most awesome surprise.” Her smile vanished when she suddenly gave him a shocked look. “But Abhi, I’ve packed next to nothing. And you say we’re going for a long, long time,” she pouted.

Abhi held her hand in his, his fingers intertwined with hers. “Why do you want to carry stuff? That place is a shoppers’ paradise. We’ll buy all you want and more,” he said, smiling indulgently. He was glad that the cynical Shikha was truly enthralled with something for a change.

“Are you serious?” She threw her arms around his neck, not giving a damn about the driver.

They were carrying just a couple of trolley cases that they checked in at the counter, collecting their boarding passes. With time to kill before boarding, they took a walk around the airport, drinking coffee and munching on doughnuts.

They had the most comfortable flight as Abhi had booked them on business class. “*Arre yaar* Abhi, it looks like you’ve money to burn,” said Shikha, in a whisper, her eyes rounded in awe as he settled down beside her, stretching his long legs comfortably in front of him.

Abhi laughed. “Till now, I’ve been saving most of my earnings, living all by myself. I’ve never felt the urge to splurge on anyone.”

Shikha turned quiet, absorbing the magnitude of the compliment he had paid her. She laid her head on his shoulder, her arms wrapped around his right arm that was closest to her.

Abhi spoke to the flight staff in private and had only one glass of wine served for them along with their lunch. They relished the spicy *Thai chicken curry* that was

served with fluffy rice. It was followed by *Khao Neow Toorien*—sticky rice with a piece of durian served with coconut cream—a dessert typical to Thailand. Abhi watched a film while Shikha went to sleep, her head against his shoulder.

Abhi shook her shoulder gently a few minutes before landing as he didn't want her to miss the view of the flight coming down over the ocean. Shikha blinked sleepy eyes as she turned to look through the window when Abhi pointed it out to her. The turquoise waters glimmered bright as the sun seemed to sink into the sea, shading it with gold and orange.

Their flight touched down at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport at 5.35 pm Thailand time—an hour and a half ahead of Indian Standard Time. After they completed the formalities for immigration, they stepped out of the airport. Abhi had already received a call from the driver of the car that had come to pick them up from Cape Dara, the beachfront resort at Pattaya. The sun had set and a number of lights had sprung up when they settled into the comfortable seats.

The driver spoke broken English as he explained the sights to them during the ride that lasted a little less than two hours, till they entered the gates of the imposing structure that was Cape Dara. The reception had a high ceiling, reaching up to five floors, with impressive floor-length glass doors and windows. They were shown into comfortable sofas and offered welcome drinks—a delicious cocktail of fresh mango and orange juice spiked with white rum. The staff was friendly as they verified their passports. Abhi had already paid online for their suite on Dara Beachfront, the five-storey section of the hotel.

A bell-hop escorted them to their room, showing them the facilities. Shikha was especially impressed by the Jacuzzi tub that was comfortable enough for two, facing the beach. "Ooh, this is lovely."

Abhi sent off the bell-hop with a substantial tip before shutting the door behind him. "So, Mrs. Mehra, do you like the place?"

"It's amazing, Abhi." She hugged him tightly, placing a kiss on his lips.

They relaxed in the Jacuzzi, drinking from the complimentary bottle of champagne, watching the moonrise from the floor length window, showering its silver light on the gently shimmering waves of the Pacific Ocean.

Abhi sat back in the tub, holding Shikha on his lap, his hands cupping her breasts. He bent his head to kiss a silky shoulder. “Sweetheart.”

Shikha leaned back against his chest, her hands holding his arms, champagne glass forgotten, as her skin broke out in goose bumps. She could feel the thrust of his manhood under her, making her heart beat harder. She tilted her head to capture his lips in a mind blowing kiss. “Abhi, I want you now.” She bit his lower lip, pulling his head closer.

Abhi switched off the hot tub before stepping out, lifting her in his arms. He bundled her up in a bath sheet, draping another one around himself, drying off the excess moisture. He placed her on the bed gently, as one would a china doll.

She reached out to wrap her arms around his neck, pulling him close. Abhi’s hands caressed her body, arousing her to fever pitch. Shikha’s legs thrashed restlessly, her hands moving down his satin back. She guided his hand to her breast, inhaling deeply when his thumb traced a swollen nipple. He bent down to take the twin in his mouth, stroking it with his velvet tongue. His hand moved down to trace her abdomen before moving down further to her feminine core. He dipped a finger into her to find her wet and ready.

He traced a path down her body with his tongue, reaching down to taste her. “Abhi...” Shikha raked her nails on his shoulders, her body trembling with the orgasm building within her womb. Abhi was relentless in giving her pleasure, his tongue thrusting into her, as she held his head close to her body.

“Abhi...,” sobbed Shikha, her body shuddering when she climaxed.

He pressed his lips to a silken thigh before rising up to enter her in a single stroke. His jaw tightened as he pummelled into Shikha, as she hit the high spot once again. He kissed her hard, even as he peaked immediately after.

“I love you,” whispered Abhi, his perspiring forehead touching hers.

15

The next day morning, after gorging from the buffet breakfast of international cuisine at Radius restaurant at their hotel, Abhi and Shikha got into the car to visit the Bang Nam Pheung floating market. The car left them at the entrance where they got off to walk on the wooden bridge across the river. They paid the entrance fee and got into a narrow motor boat and took off.

They looked right and left at the many colourful wares on display in wooden structures built on stilts. Abhi had the boat stopped near a vendor selling straw hats and purchased a couple of them, placing one on Shikha's head. She laughed, insisting on taking a selfie along with him. It was truly fascinating to be able to sit in the boat and buy stuff without getting out.

The boatman took them to their first stop—a Coconut Sugar Farm. The whole area smelled sweet. It was from the boiling liquid sap that was collected after cutting the top of the flowers plucked from the coconut palm. They got to taste the yellow crystals of palm sugar that was the final product and even bought some to carry home.

The boat crossed the stalls selling a variety of spices—both full and powdered forms. There were red chillies, black pepper, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom and many more. They even sold mixed spices for flavouring Thai food items. It was Abhi who was keen to purchase a few spice mixes for his kitchen.

They stopped the boat at a stall selling *Phad Thai Noodles*, to which the woman added an array of veggies and boiled fish, topping the bowl with clear soup, adding her own spice mix. The result was simply delicious.

Further down, they stopped at a vendor selling fruits in a bowl. They could pick and choose from a variety of mango, durian, pineapple, strawberry and more.

Their last stop was *Wat Prok Charoen*, literally meaning the footprint of the Buddha. They jumped off the boat, taking off their shoes and went to visit the shrine. They bought some incense sticks to light in front of the Buddha idol.

Getting back into the boat, they stopped for yet another sticky, coconut-based

dessert—*Buad Fuk Tong*—pumpkin cooked in sugar syrup topped with coconut cream. It was so finger-licking good.

Their final stop was at a curio shop where Shikha fell in love with a bronze bell that was typical of Thailand, carved with motifs from Buddhist relics. Unlike other shops in Pattaya, the ones at the floating market were strict about no bargaining. Abhi paid the amount the vendor asked and they left the market, happy with a morning well spent.

Their next stop was the landscaped gardens of Thailand called Nong Nooch. It was a veritable jungle of trees, flowering plants, climbers, palms, bonsai and cactus plants. Shikha was particularly enamoured by the huge variety of orchids in the colours of the rainbow. They stopped for the elephant show and Thai dancing before returning to their room in Cape Dara at around five.

They left their hotel at seven to go to the Walking Street, the 'in' place for Pattaya nightlife. The road was called that since only pedestrians were allowed as all vehicles were stopped at the entrance to the street. Their driver explained that the whole place was shut during the day and came alive after 6 pm.

Abhi and Shikha got off to take a stroll through the street that had neon lights flashing in many colours from the entrances to beer bars, discotheques, clubs and restaurants. Flesh trade was obviously common in the area as women wearing next-to-nothing and lots of make-up called out to the men, especially those walking around with no woman in tow.

Shikha wrinkled her nose as she saw a woman eyeing the handsome Abhimanyu. "Shall I go punch her face? She won't be able to do business over the next couple of weeks," snarled his new wife, bringing a wide smile to his face.

He turned her around to kiss her soundly on her lips. "She's just doing her job, Shikha."

"And what's that? To make eyes at you?" Shikha turned around to glare at the woman who walked away in search of another customer.

"Do you want to go dancing?" Abhi did his best to distract her.

"Hmm... okay. But let's have some beer first."

They sat down at this quaint bar in the middle of the road that had a table that revolved along with the chairs. They guzzled a couple of beers each, watching the action on the street. The place attracted a large number of tourists from around the world. People of many colours thronged the street, soaking in the atmosphere. Loud music blared from discos, the sounds going up and down as people opened and shut doors.

“It looks like one huge *mela*, doesn’t it?” said Abhi.

“Truly! And high on energy too.”

When he noticed that she had finished her beer, he got up to say, “Let’s go.”

They went into Mixx Discotheque and blended with the crowd, swinging their bodies to the thumping music. After more than an hour of rigorous dancing and having downed a few more beers, Abhi and Shikha got out of the club, laughing.

They decided to go back to Cape Dara for dinner, only to find that the restaurants had shut down for the night. Luckily, they could still order room service and had a platter of *dim sums* delivered to their room. Abhi watched on helplessly as Shikha continued to drink from three bottles of beer from the mini bar in their room. “Not for me,” he shook his head when she offered him an opened bottle.

“More for me,” she grinned, swigging from the bottle.

It was late when they woke up the next day and went shopping, buying loads of clothes and accessories for Shikha. They even purchased a couple of suitcases to store all the new stuff.

“I’m so loving this,” declared Shikha, picking up two sets of beachwear—two-piece swimsuits printed in batik. The top had a halter neck matched with a g-string bikini and a wraparound sarong that flared down to mid-thigh.

After lunch, they visited *Wat Phra Yai* Temple, the Big Buddha Statue, soaking in the atmosphere.

Evening was set aside for Tiffany’s Cabaret Show that was spectacular. The hour-long show consisted of dances from India, Korea, China and Thailand, with

the dancers wearing such elaborate head dresses.

Their last day, the two of them mutually decided to spend on the beach, just outside their room. They had a decadent day of frolicking in the brilliant blue waters, sipping on delicious cocktails and munching into aromatic Thai dishes, lazing around in their swimwear.

16

They checked out the next day in the afternoon, packed their luggage into a tourist cab and left for Rayong. Unlike Pattaya, the name was unfamiliar to Shikha. Abhi shushed her when she wanted to know more. “Wait till we get there,” he said mysteriously.

After an hour and a half of travel, they entered the wrought iron gates of The Frangipani to ride for three more minutes down the long drive to reach the reception. “Wow! This place looks amazing. Just see the number of frangipani trees. The name is perfect for this resort. It is a resort, right? Or some kind of health farm?” asked Shikha, noticing a couple of sign boards reading, ‘Yoga centre’ and ‘Meditation’.

“It’s a combination of both,” said Abhi, getting out of the car. They walked up the few steps that led to the reception. Wide open windows brought in cool breeze unlike most places that are air-conditioned. Shikha also noticed that there were no tall buildings around. There were self-contained villas spread over a huge area, amidst a lush garden with very many trees. Of course, they were mostly frangipani trees and plants, the flowers in so many shades of pink and yellow, surrounding the area with a wonderful perfume.

Shikha sat back on a sofa, sipping the sweet water directly from a freshly plucked coconut while Abhi completed the formalities at the desk.

A man in uniform went along with them to show them to Villa No. 65 that was set way further, dragging their luggage behind in a trolley. Shikha noticed a few more name boards saying, ‘Physiotherapy’, ‘In-house doctor,’ ‘Massage centre’ and ‘Gymnasium’. Despite all that, the place was rather quiet. Where were the other guests?

“Have you brought me to a freaking health farm, Abhi?” frowned Shikha, not bothering to keep her voice down despite a stranger accompanying them.

Abhi shrugged. “Well, it is a 5-star health farm, with loads of facilities. I’m sure you’ll enjoy the experience.”

Before Shikha could say anything more, they came upon a charming swimming pool under the shade of more trees. The water looked so inviting while the deck chairs seemed decadent. “This is it. I’ll spend all my time right here in the pool while you take care of your “health”,” she said sarcastically, her fingers making quotation marks in the air. She wondered how long they planned to stay here but was too angry with him to show her curiosity. This must be costing him a bomb. Shouldn’t he have found out if she would enjoy something like this?

“I hope the food is great and the room comfy enough. Otherwise, this could be a waste of precious money,” she added for good measure.

Abhi didn’t reply as he took out an old-fashioned brass key to open the door to the quaint villa built of logs that fitted so well in the rustic garden. It had a tiled roof and could have passed off for a home from a fairytale.

Shikha found it difficult to hold on to her temper when they entered the cosy home away from home. It had a double sofa and two single sofas placed in the centre, piled with plump, colourful cushions. The wooden floor was well-polished and a joy to walk on with bare feet. A spray of orchids were placed in a vase that sat on a coffee table. Further beyond was a huge double bed. Shikha discovered a bath tub in the bathroom and cooled down a bit.

“I suppose it’s not really bad,” she said, no apology in her voice.

Once the man had left, Abhi hugged Shikha and said, “We’ve an appointment with Gamon in an hour. Would you like to rest or go for a walk?”

“I’d like a beer. I’m parched. There’s no mini-bar here. Is there room service?” She had her doubts, seeing how rustic the place was. But looking at the bath tub, the health facilities, the swimming pool and the size of the well-maintained gardens, it did seem a classic joint. And it had taken them ten minutes to get to the villa from the reception.

“They have room service. But they don’t serve alcohol,” said Abhi softly, waiting for the bomb to explode.

And explode she did. “What?” screeched Shikha, scowling ferociously, “What kind of godforsaken place have you brought me to? They don’t serve alcohol? I don’t believe this.”

Abhi shrugged, not replying.

“Abhimanyu Mehra, answer me,” she ordered. Her hands had begun to tremble in anger and also because her body craved alcohol. The last drink she had had was last evening before dinner. It was more than twenty hours.

“Well, it’s a health farm and they don’t want the residents to drink anything toxic.”

“You are serious.” Shikha turned away abruptly, reaching out for their luggage.

“What are you doing?” asked Abhi, guessing correctly that she was looking for the bottle of whisky they had bought the day before while shopping.

“Getting the whisky we bought. Will I get some soda or should I make do with water?” she asked, pulling all his clothes out as she searched frantically for the whisky. “Where have you buried the bottle, Abhi?” she snarled, glaring at him.

“It’s not there.”

Shikha whirled around to walk up to him, her hands holding the front of his shirt, trying to shake him. “What the fuck do you mean, it’s not there? I had packed it myself.” Her sherry brown eyes burnt in fury.

Abhi held her arms gently, saying, “I removed it. It’s not allowed on the premises here.”

“You knew the rules before we came, right?” asked Shikha dully, pulling her arms free of his hold. “You knew they wouldn’t let me drink? Then why the hell did you bring us here?” Her voice rose high again.

Abhi tried to pull her into his arms, only to have her move away from him, shaking her head. His hands fell to his sides, fisting up in frustration as he replied gently, “Please calm down Shikha. Come with me. Let’s take a walk before our meeting.”

“I’m going nowhere with you,” said Shikha, walking out of the villa in a huff.

17

Shikha sat down on a deckchair, hugging her trembling body. How dare he! She had wanted to swim. But right now, she was feeling too weak and didn't want to risk going in the water all by herself. She didn't care where Abhi was. She was done with him. The insensitive brute! He knew that she enjoyed her drinks. That was the one thing that grounded her and he was doing his best to keep her away from it. How unfair was that!

Who needed a health farm? She was sure that it was full of 70-year-olds who required a wheelchair to get around. No wonder the place was so bloody quiet. Some honeymoon!

"Hello, is that Shikha?" said a gentle male voice from behind her.

She turned around to see a man in his thirties standing a few feet from her. How did he know her name? "And you are?" she asked rudely.

"Gamon," he offered his hand.

Shikha reluctantly put her trembling hand in his, giving it a weak shake. She looked at him curiously. Abhi had mentioned a meeting with his man. But what was it about?

"Do you work here?" she asked.

"Yeah, I do. I'm a health consultant," said Gamon, sitting down on the deckchair next to hers. Abhi was nowhere in the vicinity.

"I'm thirsty and need a beer. Could you help me?" she asked outright.

Gamon smiled, shrugging. "I'm afraid I can't, Shikha. Hard drinks are not allowed at The Frangipani."

"It's a frigging beer that I want. Not premium malt whisky. Do you know that beer has barely two percent alcohol?" she asked him, still hoping to change his mind.

“What you say is true. But it’s still alcohol. We deal with a number of alcohol addicts here, Shikha. It’s not easy to kick the habit. Even that two percent could be someone’s downfall,” he explained.

Shikha eyed the stranger sitting next to her. What was he saying? “You deal with whom?” she asked, her voice going dangerously soft.

“Alcohol addicts,” said Gamon succinctly. Abhimanyu Mehra had warned Gamon that his wife Shikha was unaware that she had been brought here for a de-addiction programme; that he would never have been able to get her here if he had told her the truth upfront.

Shikha jumped from her seat. “What the fuck!” she yelled, losing it completely. “I want out, do you hear? I’m not sick and I don’t have an alcohol problem.” She tucked her trembling hands into her jeans pockets. “My husband’s brought me under false pretences. I want to get out of here.”

“Listen Shikha. It’s for your own good. Let me tell you...”

“I don’t want to hear what you have to tell me. If you people don’t let me out of here, I’ll call the police.”

Her voice had carried far and Abhi stepped out from behind the huge trunk of a tree from where he had been listening to the conversation between the two.

“Shikha...”

“You bastard!” She jumped in front of him, hitting him hard on his chest with her fists. “How dare you bring me to a de-addiction centre? Just because I enjoy a drink or two, it doesn’t mean I’m an addict. I want out.”

Abhi looked at her sadly, his brown eyes wounded. He waited for her to get the anger out of her system before holding her fists gently in his hands, saying, “Shikha, will you just listen to Gamon for a few minutes, before taking any drastic decision?”

“Decision,” she said bitterly, “what do I’ve to do with deciding things? You’ve decided the course that my life should take from now on. What say do I have?”

She refused to let fall the tears that shimmered in her eyes.

“Do you really think I’ll do something bad for you, Shikha?”

“I don’t know.” Shikha buried her face in her hands. “I don’t really know.” Her shoulders shook as she gave in to her weakness. Her head was buzzing by now, her life completely out of her control.

Gamon got a bottle of mineral water and offered it to her. “Take a sip,” he said.

Shikha took a couple of sips before placing the water down on the floor. “I want to be left alone,” she said softly, looking at neither man.

Gamon looked up at Abhimanyu and walked away when he saw his nod. Abhi walked a few feet away, giving her space, but still keeping a watch on her.

That night, the two of them went to bed without dinner.

18

It was Day Five and Shikha was still not talking to her husband. The butterflies that had been zooming in her head, had finally decided to take a break it seemed. She hadn't been eating well since the past few days. But that morning, she felt ravenously hungry. She attacked the breakfast buffet with vigour, ignoring Abhi who had accompanied her to the dining room. By now, she knew there were sixty-two other people staying on the premises, being treated for various addictions. It was a rarity that someone had a companion on the premises. She really didn't know or care if having Abhimanyu with her was a good thing.

Immediately after breakfast, she had an appointment with the psychotherapist, Dr. Dang. That sounded like the villainous role played by Bollywood actor Anupam Kher. Shikha couldn't stop the giggle that escaped her throat when the thought crossed her mind. She looked at Abhi from the corner of her eyes to see if he had noticed. He was busy on his laptop, even as he forked a piece of mango into his mouth. She missed him, not that she planned to admit it in the next hundred years. She missed the warmth between them and his steamy lovemaking. She shut her thoughts deliberately. She was going to meet a shrink. She might as well find a way to get her husband out of her mind.

Shikha wiped her hands on a cloth napkin, sipping a cup of hot coffee that tasted divine. She wished she could smoke at least. Not long now. Gamon had made her a promise. If she didn't like to continue after two weeks, he was going to help her get out of this madhouse. She planned to make him keep his promise. Only ten more days to get through.

She knocked on Dr. Dang's door with a smile on her face. A pleasant female voice called out to, "Come in," surprising Shikha. She had expected to see a Thai version of Anupam Kher and was startled to see a lovely young woman who seemed to be her own age.

"Hello Shikha," greeted the lady.

"Dr. Dang?" asked Shikha, wanting to be sure she had come to the right place.

"Yes," she smiled, "I'm Apinya Dang."

“Hello Apinya,” said Shikha, settling down on the chair in front of the desk. The doctor asked her a few basic questions about her present life before asking Shikha if she would like to relax on the couch.

“Oh yeah, the shrink’s couch,” said Shikha sarcastically, “why not?” She settled down comfortably. She was in a good mood after that wonderful breakfast and was also happy that her head was feeling better after four days of constant buzzing.

Despite working on his laptop during breakfast, Abhi had been aware of Shikha looking his way. But he had chosen to ignore it against his better judgement. The past few days had been the most difficult for him, with Shikha treating him like he was part of the furniture. Her hurt and pain pierced him more than her anger. The fact was that he had brought her under false pretences. But then, what choice did he have? She wasn’t even aware that she was addicted. And she’d have never agreed to rehab if he had mentioned it to her, the fiery woman that she was.

Gamon had clearly advised Abhi to ignore Shikha’s tantrums. She was in pain, both mentally and physically and was keen to use someone as punching bag. Who better than Abhi?

“If you argue with her or try to convince her otherwise, she would fight the situation all the more,” said Gamon. “Let her be angry. Everyone is, in the beginning. The withdrawal symptoms can be painful.”

Abhimanyu nodded, hoping against hope that he hadn’t bitten of more than he could chew. He didn’t want Shikha to hate him at the end of it. He had spoken his worry aloud without realising.

“She wouldn’t,” said Gamon. “The reverse, actually. She’ll not be able to thank you enough. The most difficult part of the exercise is to get someone to begin the treatment. Once they are here and accept that there’s no choice, the healing begins. Combined with psychotherapy, yoga, exercise, meditation, massage and group therapy, change is bound to set in.” He patted Abhi on his shoulder encouragingly.

Yeah, the schedule at The Frangipani was pretty hectic, keeping the inpatients on

their toes throughout the day, as if to ensure they had no time to think. The day began with meditation for half an hour and yoga for the next half an hour. The breakfast break happened immediately after, taking up about an hour with time given for a bit of socialising. Only, Shikha refused to talk to anyone. She sat by herself, munching a piece or two of the food items with complete lack of interest.

After breakfast, there was group therapy where people with similar addictions got together under one roof to share their experiences. There was a moderator available to keep the session going without any lag. This was followed by a leisurely walk amidst nature, before breaking off for lunch.

The second half of the day began with one-on-one counselling sessions and physical training. The value of regular exercise was ingrained into every resident, with a talk as well as personal training.

Then came the best part of the day for Shikha—a full body massage that she loved. The hour long massage helped her relax and kept the buzz in her head at bay.

Immediately after the massage, she relaxed in the bath tub, with her eyes closed. The trainers encouraged everyone to look a lot within. As if there was anything else to do!

There was another group session in the evening when someone spoke to them every day about the value of focussing on the blessings of life rather than the beatings. It was all fine to talk, but how practical was this? She sneered when they suggested that the residents maintain a gratitude journal that would help them shift their focus. As if!

Abhi got to know all this information second-hand as Shikha refused to even acknowledge him. Well, he was patient like that and he loved her with all his heart. He planned to see this through.

Today, when she had a proper breakfast, Abhi finally breathed a sigh of relief. Her appetite had returned with a vengeance it seemed. He hoped that she would soon forgive him too.

Shikha underwent five sessions with Dr. Dang, of two hours each, before she

was ready to talk about her life with her parents.

19

Shikha had been barely sixteen when she returned from college one day to see her father beating her mother black and blue.

“Pappa,” she yelled, jumping between the two of them, pushing him away from her mother. But Shlok just hit his daughter with the same stick he had been using on his wife, Antara. He pushed Shikha away and didn’t even turn to find out what happened to her. She had hit her head against a table and fallen down in a faint, bleeding profusely.

It was a while before her mother’s cries woke Shikha up. She didn’t really know she had such anger within her. Lifting a large brass vase, she hit her father on the back of his head, hard. He fell down like a log.

The worst was yet to come when Antara screamed louder than ever. “What have you done to him, you bitch?” she yelled, slapping Shikha.

Shikha gave her mother a shocked look, hurt tears falling down her cheeks. “But Mamma, Pappa has been hitting you so hard. Look at yourself, you’ve turned all black and blue. And this is not the first time, is it?” she wiped her tears with the back of her hand, looking at her mother with pity in her eyes. “He’s been doing it all the time, when you told me that you had fallen down at home or had an accident outside. How could you...?”

Antara glared at her daughter through her puffed eyelids, one side of her face swollen as blood dripped down her chin. She was holding Shlok’s head gently on her lap, sprinkling water on his face. “It doesn’t really matter. He’s my husband, do you hear? He will love me or kill me, what’s it to you? How dare you hit him so badly? If he dies, I’ll hand you over to the police. I hate you, do you hear me?”

Shikha’s young heart broke to pieces. Her mother loved her violent father more than she loved her daughter, who had gone to her defence. She got up and walked into the bedroom, her shoulders bowed down in agony.

Her father survived, but Shikha realised that she didn’t really belong with her

parents. About a month later, she got herself a job and moved into a hostel. She had a bit of money stashed away, a legacy from her paternal grandparents. She managed to complete her graduation, attending college in the evening. But she couldn't make friends. For one thing, she worked 18-hour days and for another, she couldn't talk of her shame.

Despite her hectic schedule, Shikha suffered from insomnia. The scene that day at her parents' home—yeah, she'd stopped thinking of it as hers—kept replaying in her head, making sleep impossible.

Catching a whiff of cigarette smoke during lunch break at work, she found it soothing on her nerves. That's when she bought a packet of her own and began smoking at night. Though it never helped her sleep, she realised that she felt calmer after a smoke. Shikha didn't really remember at which point she had moved to smoking almost three packets a day. Anger, guilt, frustration, irritation and more piled on to drive her more and more towards the addiction.

One evening, when she was barely nineteen, an office colleague insisted on dragging Shikha to a party at someone's home. She was introduced to beer and cheap whisky. Shikha was surprised to note that they helped her sleep. Within a few months she was an addict, though she'd never have admitted to it even at gunpoint.

The habit left a huge dent in her earnings. Craving for love that was always out of reach and for the good life, Shikha decided that she would settle for second best and marry a rich guy. She had even gone to the point of sleeping with a couple of her ex-bosses. The sex had been awful and that's why she'd had run away from those relationships too.

Finally, the brash Shikha had landed up at RS Software, hoping to make CEO Ranveer Singh fall for her. Fortunately or unfortunately, it had been Vice President Abhimanyu Mehra who had proposed marriage. He had professed to love her too. But did he, really? If he loved her, why had he lied to her while admitting her into rehab? Okay, it was a lie by omission, but a lie nonetheless. Shikha felt heartbroken and so craved her whisky and cigarettes. She'd been betrayed by the one man whom she believed had been in love with her.

Dr. Apinya Dang got the story out from Shikha Mehra in bits and pieces and finally was ready to begin her treatment. Her client had low self-esteem

triggered by the lack of love from her parents and her guilt at not being wanted. She was convinced that she wasn’t good enough. The pattern had continued into all her relationships. The excessive smoking and drinking binge had made her more negative, ensuring she slid further into depression. The temper tantrums and shouting matches were all part of attention seeking.

Dr. Dang had the full background history of her client from Gamon. She was aware that Shikha’s husband was right here on the premises. She decided to have a talk with Abhimanyu Mehra. It looked like Shikha’s issues were all psychological and her cure was imminent if her mind was set at rest.

20

“Take a seat, Mr. Mehra,” invited Dr. Dang. “I wanted to talk to you about your wife, Shikha Mehra. How long have you been married?”

“Less than two weeks,” said Abhi. “What’s wrong with Shikha, Dr. Dang?”

Apinya Dang caught his worried frown and smiled, shaking her head. “I don’t think there’s much to worry about. Please answer my questions first. How long have you known her before that? Do you have any idea about her life before you met her?”

“She’s a colleague from work. I’ve known her since three months. I know that she has no family or other relatives. She has a few friends though.”

“What do you mean when you say she has no family?”

Abhi frowned, wondering what the psychiatrist was getting at. “Just that, her parents are no more and she’s a single child. I haven’t heard her speak of relatives, so I suppose I presumed she’s not close to anyone.”

“I see. Please understand that what I’m going to tell you is highly confidential. We generally don’t discuss matters that are told to us by clients. But you’re her husband and according to Shikha you love her a lot...,” she raised a hand to stop him when Abhimanyu was about to interrupt, “though she also feels betrayed that you didn’t take her into confidence about bringing her here. I, for a fact, think that you must love her crazily to spend double the fees to stay here at The Frangipani to get her cured. I have spoken to Gamon and we have decided that it’s to Shikha’s benefit to take you into confidence.” Apinya Dang paused to wait for his reaction. When he nodded, she continued, “Did you presume that Shikha’s parents are no more or did she tell you that?”

“Shikha told me that her parents are dead.” He paused to recollect her exact words. “Well, her exact words were that she’s an only child and her parents were no more. Why do you ask?”

“Her parents are probably alive. It’s just that Shikha decided to cut them off from

her life and has convinced herself that they are no more." Dr. Dang went on to explain everything she had learned from her sessions with Shikha. "So, you see that it all boils down to a deep sense of insecurity. She must have used you as a punching bag pretty often."

Abhimanyu protested. "Yeah, maybe. But that really doesn't matter. She's in pain and needs to vent out."

"Exactly. She also needed to know that you wouldn't stop loving her however much she punched you, her way of confirming your unconditional love. She's been craving for love and was just beginning to gain confidence in her relationship with you. Only you brought her here without her by-your-leave."

Abhi nodded, shrugging. "I know it wasn't the best way but it needed to be done."

"You're absolutely right. I would have done the same for someone I loved too," said Apinya Dang encouragingly. "Now, Shikha is definitely on the road to recovery. All the old hurts have been brought to the surface. We have put her on a special diet, specific massages and psychotherapy. She's begun to respond and is healing. But then, in this safe environment, it's not really difficult. What happens when she gets out into the outside world is another story. A lot rests on your support. Her continuing to abstain from smoking and drinking is dependent on how convinced she is of your unconditional love. Are you able to grasp the implication of what I am saying? It's a mammoth task and not for the faint-hearted." Her face was grave as she was keen on drumming the importance of his role into Shikha's husband. "Are you up to it?"

"Yes!"

21

Almost three weeks were over since they came to stay at The Frangipani. Shikha refused to even look at her husband's face. Abhi kept his peace, completely focussed on getting her rehabilitated first. He took on a lot of office work and kept himself busy. He also participated in the yoga, meditation and other sessions.

That night, Shikha whimpered in her sleep, waking Abhi. He turned to see her curled into a ball under her comforter, her hands covering her face. She was keening, her body stiff. She was obviously having a nightmare.

He put his arms around her and hugged her close, rubbing her back gently. The keening stopped within a few minutes, even as her body relaxed in his hold. Shikha stretched her body from the foetal position, moving closer to him, seeking warmth. Abhi pressed her head against his chest, close to his heart, as a parent would hold a child. He'd read somewhere that the proximity of the mother's heartbeat brought about a feeling of security to the baby. She calmed down, her breathing turning normal as she snuggled close to him, deeply asleep. Abhi also slept way better that night, holding his wife in his arms.

Shikha came wide awake at six and was surprised to find herself in Abhi's arms. Not that she complained. Her anger towards him had long since gone but she was clear about not taking the first step towards bridging their broken relationship.

But now that she was where she belonged, Shikha felt more confident. She gave him a wet kiss on his rough cheek, open-mouthed. Her hands moved down his bare chest, revelling in the texture, her nerve ends tingling. How she had missed making love with him! She stroked the shape of his masculine lips with her tongue, gently biting the lower one.

Abhi came awake, opening his eyes a slit to look at the lovely woman in his arms. She was a woman on a mission, kissing his features one by one, her tongue playing hide-and-seek in his ear. "Shikha," he groaned, "I've missed you so."

He pulled her nightshirt off her to bury his face in her breasts, his body

shuddering as he tried to bring some semblance of control. Shikha held him tight, her hands moving down his smooth back, her face buried in his hair. “I missed you too, Abhi.”

They made fierce love, as if there was no tomorrow, not bothering to attend the sessions before breakfast. Neither was interested in foreplay. “Come inside me Abhi, now,” ordered Shikha, her nails raking his back. Abhi dipped a finger into her vagina to find her wet and entered her with a grunt. He buried himself into her, his heart beating heavily as her legs went around his hips. Light exploded behind their eyelids as they reached the stars as one.

“I love you, Shikha,” said Abhi, his face buried against her neck, his heart pounding.

“I know,” she whispered back, “the only reason that I’m still with you.” She felt him smiling against her neck, an answering smile on her face, her heart soaring. The world had turned into a beautiful place as she heard the chirping of birds outside on the trees. Colourful parakeets came regularly to feast on the mangoes that grew just outside their villa.

“Forgive me?” he asked, his teeth nipping her earlobe.

She moved away to look at him. “Are you apologising?” she asked, a raised eyebrow touching her hairline.

“Well, you wanna hear the truth?” he asked. When she nodded, he continued, “I’m sorry I brought you here without telling you first. But...”

“That’s the problem, right? There’s always a ‘but’.” While she wanted to jump with joy, feeling so free and healthy and good about herself, she wanted to let him stew a bit before she was ready to admit that he had been right.

He got up to sit, leaning against the bed headboard, pulling her into his arms. “I did promise you the truth, right? You’re my life partner and I want you to know that I’ll always tell you the truth. You can trust me.”

“Oh really! You mean you’ll always *tell* me the truth, but there may be times when you may not say anything, but do what you want, even if it’s a life-changing decision for me.” Her left hand traced the contours of his chest, as she

couldn’t keep her hands off him.

“I’m sorry Shikha. I’m really sorry about that. I know it wasn’t fair. But I just couldn’t sit back and watch you risking your health.”

“But we’d been married barely three days before you decided to bring me here. You obviously must have planned it at least a few weeks before that. What was the rush?”

“Hmm.” He was busy taking a bite of her shoulder and was completely distracted.

“Abhi!”

“Oh, yeah. That’s true. Yeah, we got married just before the trip. But I fell in love with you three months before that, the moment I set eyes on you. I knew about your addiction within a week. Believe me, it wasn’t easy watching you drinking and smoking your life away.”

Shikha stared at him in awe. He had loved her from first sight? She hadn’t even noticed him over the first few days. Even after that, she had thought he was a nerd and just an assistant and not bothered to get to know him. It had been Abhi who had been relentless in getting close to her. And now, it looked like he had been instrumental in transforming her life.

“I still think you should have asked me or at least informed me before bringing me to the rehab centre,” she said, just to bug him.

He obviously knew her as well as she knew herself or even better. He grinned at her. “Would you have agreed?”

“No way,” she grinned back. “I’d have refused to wed you if you’d told me before the wedding. I’d have fought with you tooth and nail if it had been after the wedding. However, I would’ve never stepped on the plane in the first place.” Yeah, it was time for the truth, from her side too.

“And now? Are you still upset with me that I brought you here?” He wanted it in words; that she was glad to have come here.

“Would I be in your arms if that were the case?” Shikha wrinkled her nose at him. “You know something Abhi?” She threw her arms around his neck, pulling his face close to hers. “You’re not just my lover and husband. You’re my saviour. It took me more than two weeks here and the many sessions with Dr. Dang before it struck me how much I was spoiling my health—both physical and mental. Did she talk to you about my early life?” Shikha got up to sit next to him, her head on his shoulder.

“Yeah. I hope you don’t mind. She...”

“Nope, I don’t. If anyone has a right to know, it’s you Abhi. There’s some more that I didn’t share with her. I didn’t leave my parents’ home immediately after that incident. I stayed back for more than a month, trying to convince my mother that I had only tried to protect her.” Her shoulders drooped. “It was no use. My parents were too involved with each other. Somewhere, his beating made her happy I think. I don’t understand what drove her, but she seemed to look at it as his way of giving her attention. It was so horrible, when I sat back and really thought about them. The last straw came when my father hit me again. He called me names, none that I want to repeat. I had been thinking about moving out of the house. That day, I did just that.”

Abhi hugged her close, pressing her head to his shoulder. It was tough controlling the anger that leaped within him in her defence. He wanted to throttle her parents. She had been a teenager, thrust out in the world all alone. His heart bled for Shikha. He would make her forget her hurt and spoil her with his love.

He lifted her chin with his forefinger, kissing her gently. “I love you Shikha.” Yeah, he would tell her that a hundred times a day, if necessary.

“I know Abhi. I don’t really know what I ever did in my life to deserve you in it. I’m not all that better than my parents. I have been mean, angry, rude and what not to everyone who came within speaking distance of me. I...”

Abhi placed a finger on her lips, shutting her flow of words. He shook his head. “I love you Shikha, exactly the way you are.”

Her eyes turned bright with a sheen of tears. “Are you sure? I can be a pain...”

“I think I know that better than anyone else,” he grinned, “you’ve been the

rudest to me.”

“Don’t you want to chuck me out of your life?” Though she was grinning, Abhi noticed the wary look behind the grin.

“No way. If you’re trying to get rid of me, you’ll have to think again. You’re stuck with me now that you’re married to me,” said Abhi, no smile on his face, totally serious.

“What if I piss you off?” she challenged.

“You mean you’ve ne’er done that before?” Abhi laughed out loud. He pressed his forehead to hers. “Shikha, if you piss me off, we’ll fight and then we’ll make up. Okay?”

“I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“As if you’d a choice,” he said, tongue-in-cheek. “Did you recently look at yourself in the mirror?”

“Of course, every day. Why?” she asked, wondering what he was getting at.

“You are glowing, more beautiful than ever,” he said in a whisper, kissing her on her velvet cheek. The many treatments at the rehab centre, along with the fruits, raw veggies and coconut water that she had been consuming; minus the alcohol and cigarettes, made her look gorgeous.

“I am loved!” she declared, turning her head to kiss him deeply.

Epilogue

It was their first wedding anniversary. Abhimanyu and Shikha had decided to celebrate it with a brief second honeymoon in Goa. It was almost a year since she had felt the urge to touch a cigarette. She had an occasional glass of champagne but preferred fruit juices nowadays. Shikha wondered how she had ever enjoyed beer. She couldn't even stand the smell now.

The two of them exercised together or jogged for a while almost every day of the week. She still had an occasional tantrum, more because she felt the urge to be reassured that her husband loved her despite it. And Abhi never hesitated even a second before assuring her of his love. As she got to know Abhi better, Shikha discovered that he wasn't exactly a docile husband. He had a temper that he lost rarely, but those occasions the fireworks blew up to the sky.

But the making up was truly worth the arguments. Shikha felt pampered and cherished. She raised a toast to him, holding up her glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, "To you, my husband and the love of my life."

Instead of drinking from his wine glass, Abhi carefully placed the glass on the table with a trembling hand, looking at her intently. "Say that again."

She also placed her glass down, getting up from her chair and going to sit on his lap. "You are the love of my life, my Abhimanyu."

Dinner was forgotten as he lifted her in his arms. He placed her on the bed and lay down on top of her, his elbows braced on the bed, his brown eyes intense. "I want to hear that again."

"I love you Abhimanyu."

He groaned, bending down to bury his face between her breasts. "Now she talks."

He peeled the transparent negligee that she was wearing, even as she pulled off his shorts. "I adore you," he growled, trailing kisses down her body. Her skin had turned luminescent and was flushed just now with all his attention. He

pressed his lips to her instep, his tongue peeping out to taste the skin.

“Abhi, you’re too far away,” complained his wife.

“In a minute.” He bit the pad of her big toe, before he took it in his mouth to suck it. She fisted the bedspread in her hands, loving the sensation. He took his time paying the same attention to her other foot, before moving up, tracing a tongue over the nerves behind her knee.

Her hands were in his hair, trying to pull him up. He pressed his face to her slender thighs, taking bites of the tender flesh. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she thrashed about, only to go still when she felt his tongue probe into her core. He was relentless in the giving of pleasure and didn’t stop thrusting till she found her release.

She jumped off the bed and pushed him down. “It’s my turn.” Her sherry brown eyes glowed as she looked at him.

“Get on with it woman,” he said, his hands under his head, an eager smile on his face. His wife was an innovative partner in bed and never failed to thrill him.

With a mischievous smile, Shikha sat at the far end, her hands running down his legs, from the knees down, her breasts brushing teasingly against his feet. He wiggled his toes, holding a hard nipple between his big toe and the second one.

“Abhi,” moaned Shikha, bending down to kiss the underside of his foot, her hair spread out on his legs.

“I want to see you,” objected Abhi.

Shikha obliged him immediately by lifting both arms to tie her hair up in a knot, her breasts jiggling invitingly.

She walked her fingers up his legs, her breasts trailing behind, her lips, tongue and teeth playing havoc. She soon reached his swollen manhood, her tongue tracing the shape.

“Shikha,” groaned Abhimanyu, “now!”

She climbed over him, guiding his manhood inside her, riding him hard. He cupped her breasts with his hands, teasing the nipples with his thumbs. It wasn't long before the earth shattered around them as they reached the zenith simultaneously.

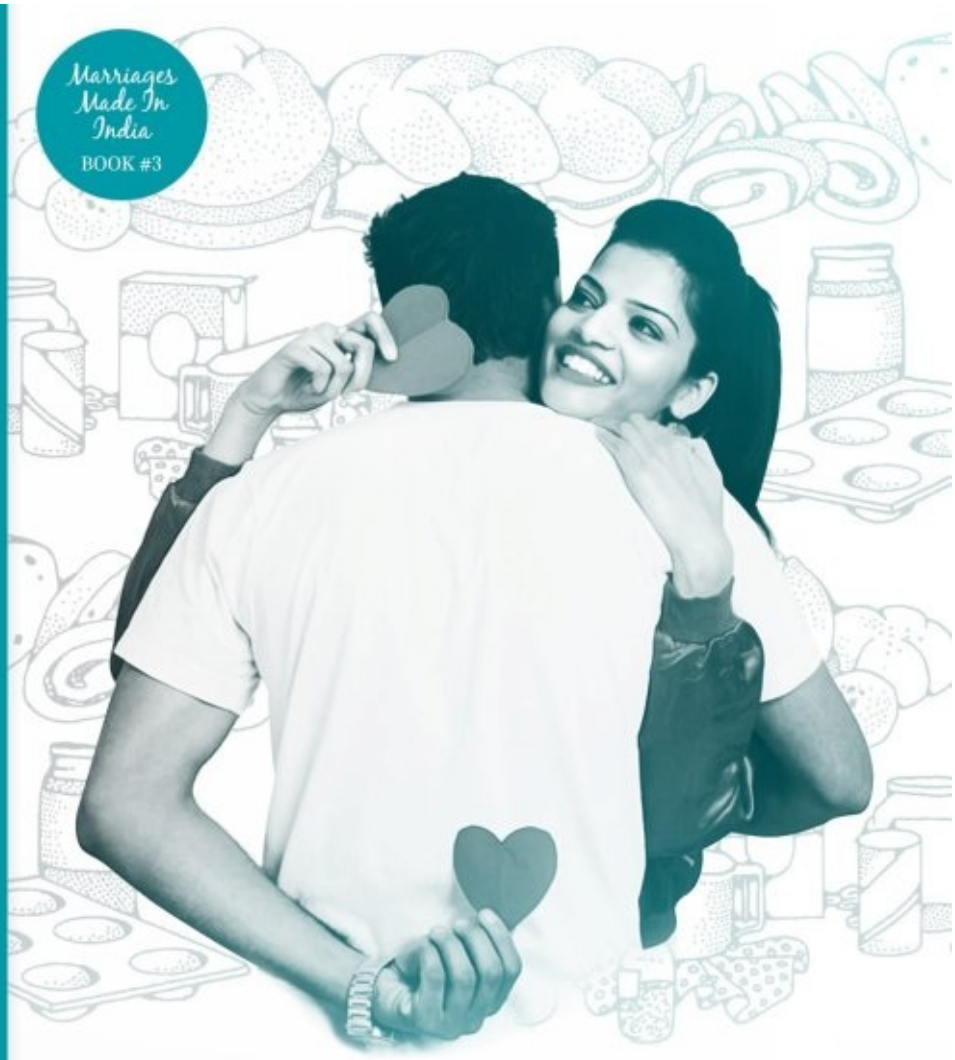
"I love you, Abhi."

He smiled. Yeah, his wife was drunk on his love these days.

THE END

Her Secret HUSBAND

SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN



Her Secret HUSBAND

SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN

“What’s up?” he asked, trying to keep the situation light.

She winked at him. “Shouldn’t I be asking that question?” she asked, looking pointedly down at his lower body.

Reacting to her flirtation, his manhood immediately sprang to action, making Lakshman swear. “Cut that out, Ruma,” he growled, sidestepping her as she would’ve wrapped her arms around him. “I need a shower,” he insisted, not meeting her eyes. He went into the bathroom and locked himself in. The place smelled of Ruma. Cursing, Lakshman stood under the cold shower to tame his libido. She looked like she meant business. How could he convince her to wait till they got married? He dried himself with the towel that was on a rack, glaring at the mirror. He needed a shave. But no, they weren’t going to make love, so it didn’t really matter. Just then he realised that he would have to step out in the towel as his clothes were in the wardrobe. Swearing again, Lakshman walked into the bedroom.

“Laki,” called out Ruma, eyeing him avidly. Fascinated, she got up from the bed and walked up to him. He appeared like a Greek God with his chiselled body that was still damp from the shower.

She stood close to him and raised her left hand to caress his rough cheek. Her right hand was hooked into his towel as if she was going to pull it off him any second. Lakshman clamped his hand on hers, his fingers holding the towel firmly. “No!”

“Huh?!” She looked deeply into his eyes, her brown gaze like melted cocoa, inviting him to make love to her. Her mouth was pouted deliciously, glistening wetly, begging for a kiss. Lakshman groaned deep in his throat, letting go of her hand to wrap his arms around her. He placed his lips on hers, sucking her upper lip. She tasted as sweet as honey, driving him crazy. His right hand moved down the curve of her hip to touch a thigh. He traced the curve, working his way under her nightshirt to encounter her bare bottom.

“Ruma.” He deliberately removed his hands off her and raised his head to look at her.

She stared back at him with slumberous eyes. “What?” A small frown puckered her forehead.

“We’ll make love after we get married,” he declared.

“What if I don’t agree?”

“I’ll have to beg, right?” he grinned weakly. “Please, my love. You know your parents won’t agree to a marriage between us. Doesn’t it make sense to wait until after the event?”

“What if I want you desperately?” She nuzzled his neck, her teeth taking a sharp nip.

Lakshman groaned again, his arms crushing her to his chest. “Do you love me or just lust after my body?”

“Can’t I do both?”

HER SECRET HUSBAND
(Marriages Made in India Book #3)

A romance novella by

Sundari Venkatraman

1

Ruma looked up when the two strangers walked in. While one could notice immediately that they were related, she found the taller man's personality striking.

"Hello, I'm Ram Maheshwari and this is my brother, Lakshman. We would like to meet Ranveer Singh."

"Good morning, gentlemen. Please take a seat. Let me check if Mr. Singh is free to meet you now."

After the two men settled down on the sofa in the reception, Ruma lifted the phone to call Ranveer's extension. As the phone rang, she checked the taller of the two men from the corner of her eyes, the one who had been introduced as Lakshman. While both were good-looking, Lakshman appeared handsomer.

The phone rang and rang but no one picked up. With a small frown on her face, Ruma had an office boy bring tea to the two men waiting to meet Ranveer.

She tried for a couple of more times and not getting through, Ruma called Shikha's cabin with reluctance. She did her best to keep out of Ranveer's secretary's way. The older woman had a lashing tongue and Ruma wasn't one who was keen to be at the receiving end. Shikha picked up the phone immediately and barked, "Yes?"

"Hi Shikha, there are two guys waiting at the reception—Ram and Lakshman Maheshwari—to meet Ranveer. They don't have an appointment, it seems. Should I—"

"Young or old?" barked Shikha again.

"Huh?" said Ruma, not sure that she had heard Shikha right.

"Are you dumb or what? I asked you whether the guys you're talking about are young in age or old," drawled Shikha, sarcasm dripping in her voice as she dragged out the syllables as if she was talking to a retarded child.

Ruma blanched. With great difficulty, she kept her face straight as she replied, “Why don’t you get your butt out here and find out for yourself?” before disconnecting the line. While she had been tempted to bang the phone down, she didn’t want to create a bad impression on the visitors who sat waiting to meet her boss. She gave them a sweet smile as she said, “Ranveer’s secretary should be here to meet you soon.”

Ruma sat back to update the files on her computer, while attending to a few more calls—all this while watching Shikha flirting with the men. She clenched her teeth as Shikha’s loud laughter broke out a couple of times, getting even more angry with the other woman than she already was.

What’s with Shikha and men? She never spoke to any of the women staff members of RS Software. Thinking about it, Ruma recalled that Ranveer’s secretary didn’t interact with the male staff much either. Yeah, she flirted with every one of them. But...but, there was something in her body language that changed around Ranveer, the same as right now when she interacted with the two guests. Was it because they appeared wealthy? Ruma just caught herself from snapping her fingers. That must be it! Her lips curled in disgust.

Shikha finally got up to say “bye” to the visitors and left the reception. Ruma was pleasantly surprised when Lakshman Maheshwari walked up to her desk and said, “Bye Ruma. We’ll see you tomorrow.” His throaty voice sent goose pimples chasing all over her body.

Ruma looked at the attractive man in front of her in surprise. Did she hear right? Ranveer wasn’t there the whole week. She had just received an email from his second-in-command, Abhimanyu, which said so. The mail had been sent to everyone in the office. Then how come Shikha had given them an appointment? Ruma decided it wouldn’t be right on her part to say anything. She nodded to Lakshman, who waved before leaving.

Ruma called Abhimanyu’s extension. She knew that he was the man in charge when Ranveer wasn’t in the office. She explained to him about Ram and Lakshman’s visit and how Shikha had given them an appointment to meet Ranveer the next day. “Did you say Maheshwari?” asked Abhimanyu. When Ruma answered in the affirmative, Abhimanyu left clear instructions that she was to send the men to his cabin when they arrived the next day.

“Sure, Abhi. I’ll do that,” said Ruma, disconnecting the call. A small smile played on her lips when she recalled Lakshman Maheshwari’s face. Though he seemed quiet, his black eyes framed by thick and curling lashes, were sharp. With a broad forehead and a head full of dark curls, an aquiline nose, chiselled, clean-shaven cheeks and a tiny cleft on his chin, he was enough to turn any woman’s head. And Ruma realised that she didn’t like the idea of Shikha getting close to the hunk. She would ensure that the Maheshwaris were directed to Abhimanyu’s cabin even before Shikha realised they were there the next day.

2

Lakshman woke up with a jerk from his dream. It was a recurring one about Ruma Malhotra. Yeah, he knew her full name. He also knew that she hailed from a rich Punjabi family and didn't really need to work. Her parents were probably biding their time before getting her married.

Yeah, he was attracted to her from first sight, but had decided to pursue her after Chanda's marital problems got sorted out. His sister had been married as a kid. The bridegroom had run away immediately after the wedding and was untraceable. Now, just when she'd met a guy she liked, the family astrologer had brought up a new confusion. Lakshman and his brother Ram were determined to get her life sorted once and for all before doing anything else.

But his subconscious seemed to have different ideas. He dreamt of Ruma most nights. Though each dream was different, it ended on the same note—their parting ways from each other.

"Tch." It was barely 5 am and Lakshman was wide awake and totally disturbed. The woman was giving him sleepless nights it seemed.

He went down to the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea, glad that no one was up yet. He took his cup and settled down on the cane swing in the garden, out of sight of the main house, staring at nothing.

Peace stole over him as the seconds ticked by, the birdsong soothing his nerves. Moping around was not in his nature. Lakshman decided to go to work early that day. His baking factory was open twenty-four hours and there was no dearth of work to do.

Meera was up when Lakshman walked down the stairs, dressed for work. "Are you leaving so early, *beta*?" she asked.

"Yes, Mamma." Lakshman hugged his plump mother. Her head barely reached his chest.

"Have a cup of tea along with me," she said. Unable to deny her, Lakshman sat

down on the sofa without protest, sipping his second cup of tea that morning.

“Is something bothering you?” asked Meera, sensitive to her children’s moods. Her second-born spoke little, but she was attuned to his body language. He had been restless over the past few weeks.

“*Nahi toh*!” Lakshman shook his head at her, not really meeting her all-knowing eyes.

Meera shrugged, raising a brow at him, a smile on her face. She knew he would tell her in his own time.

Lakshman got up with a jerk, placing his teacup on the table. He rushed out of the front door as he heard more footsteps coming down the stairs.

Meera gave him a mildly worried look realising that he was avoiding the rest of the family, before she got distracted by the twins, Bharat and Shatrughan, who had rushed down the staircase.

“Good morning, Mamma,” they chorused, hugging her tightly.

They looked exactly alike, except for the colour of their eyes. Meera wondered at the way of nature that had blessed four of her offspring with Mohan’s obsidian black eyes, while Bharat had her dark brown coloured eyes. That was the only thing that helped people to differentiate between the twins.

“Has Lakshman already gone to work?” asked Bharat, a scowl on his face. With his hectic schedule, mornings were the only time he got to meet the family. Suddenly, Lakshman seemed to be disappearing rather early nowadays. “What’s up, Mamma? Why is Lakshman rushing away in the mornings? Is he having any problem at his factory?”

Shatrughan poured tea into two cups, carrying them carefully over, handing one to his twin. He didn’t utter a word, looking at his mother intensely, waiting for her to reply. Suddenly remembering, he asked her, “Will you have another cup of tea, Mamma?”

Meera shook her head at Shatru in a distracted fashion, looking at Bharat, her brown eyes clouded in confusion. “I don’t think it’s a problem at work.”

“Do you think Lakshman’s in love?” queried Ram cheekily, having walked down the stairs noiselessly. He hugged his mother before getting himself a cup of tea.

“What?” asked three voices together as his mother and twin brothers stared at Ram.

He grinned widely, saying, “You heard me right.”

“Do you know who the girl is?” asked Meera, wonder on her face. Her sons weren’t kids any more, it seemed.

“I’ll let Lakshman give you the details,” said Ram, a smug look on his face. That was just a shot in the dark, but he so enjoyed teasing people. And now he was satisfied with his morning’s work of having set the cat among the pigeons.

3

It was almost a couple of months later that Lakshman walked into RS Software, twenty minutes before closing time. Ruma's heart stopped for a couple of seconds before picking up beat at double pace, as she stared at the man walking towards her. He had grown a thick moustache that sat well on his handsome features. She couldn't stop the wide smile of welcome that flashed on her features.

"Hello, Mr. Maheshwari, how can I help you today?" she asked.

"Hi Ruma." His sexy baritone sent a shiver down her spine. "Will you have a cup of coffee with me once you're done here?"

She stared at him, unable to believe her ears. She had given up on meeting him ever again after the day he had walked out of the office with his brother, following the meeting with Abhimanyu. Though, for a few days, she had hoped in vain that he would contact her. And here he was, after so long.

Ruma nodded her head vigorously. "Sure. Do you mind waiting? I can leave at 5.30."

"Let me do something. I'll wait for you at the Starbucks outlet nearby." He looked at her intensely, his black eyes studying her minutely. She looked gorgeous, her coffee brown eyes sparkling, her rosy-red lips free of lipstick.

Ruma nodded again, feeling breathless under his heated scrutiny. It didn't stop her from returning the compliment as she studied him from behind half-closed eyelids. He was leaner than before, appearing taller than ever. Dark fuzz covered his cheeks, giving him a rakish appearance. And she simply loved his luxuriant moustache. "I'll see you there in twenty," she said, crossing her fingers behind the desk. She hoped no one stopped her from leaving.

She watched his long strides towards the lift, her hands trembling with excitement as she began putting her things away. He stopped at the lift to turn and look at her, his hand rising in a wave, bringing colour rushing to her cheeks.

Ruma walked into Starbucks, her eyes darting around to check where Lakshman was, before she caught him standing near a table set next to a luxurious double sofa. Her long legs carried her swiftly in his direction.

“I hope you don’t mind having a *mocaccino* or a *caffè latte*. I’ve ordered both.” He smiled at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He didn’t want to waste time away from her, picking up stuff from the counter.

“I’m good with either,” said Ruma, settling down on one half of the sofa, tucking her long legs under the table, “as long as it’s hot. It’s so cold outside.”

“Would you like something to eat?” asked Lakshman politely, still standing.

“No, unless you want something,” said Ruma, impatient to know him better.

“Not for me,” said Lakshman, settling down beside her.

They pretended to sip their hot beverages, their eyes devouring each other. Fed up of waiting, Ruma asked him, “So, where’ve you been all this long?”

“I live in Jaipur. You know that, right?”

“Okay. No, I didn’t. I knew you were from outside Delhi, though.”

“Chanda’s my sister,” he declared baldly.

Ruma gave him a startled look, beginning to connect the dots. “Oh my God! You’re my boss’s brother-in-law.”

Lakshman shrugged. “That’s one way of putting it, I suppose.” He placed his half-full cup of coffee down before taking her hand in his. “I’ve been meaning to meet you since so long. But I was caught up in family issues. I...”

Ruma smiled, turning pink again. “I did wonder if I had imagined your interest.”

“You didn’t call me either.”

Her eyes clung to his, even as she felt the gentle brush of his thumb against her palm. “I...I wasn’t sure.”

“Of me or you?” he asked with a smile in his eyes. He lifted her hand to press his lips to the centre of her palm, shaking her to the core. The texture of his moustache against her skin drove her nuts.

“Laki...” she sighed, shaking her head. She didn’t know what to say. She had thought a lot about him over a couple of weeks. But she had pushed those thoughts away when she realised that he wasn’t coming back.

He sat back, still holding her hand between both of his. “I missed you, Ruma.”

She felt choked hearing the emotion in his voice. They had barely exchanged a few words. She pulled her hand out of his hold. While she was attracted to him, it was all happening too fast. “I...umm...” she looked up at him. She wasn’t the dithering type. “Do you think we should get to know each other better first?” she asked firmly.

“Of course. Go on, tell me about yourself.”

She shrugged. “I’m Ruma Malhotra, born and brought up right here in Delhi. My parents are pretty orthodox while my Grandma is a darling. I get my own way mostly because I’m kind of pampered,” she grinned. “My elder sister Saloni is married and lives in California. My brothers Ryan and Shaan are younger to me. Ryan is doing his third year BMM while Shaan is in final year ISC. I’ve done my B.A. and my job at RS Software is my first. I have loads of friends that I hang out with. I love to travel but haven’t had many opportunities. And...what else? Let me see,” she bit on her lower lip. “Oh yeah, I love Facebook and spend a lot of time there. Now, it’s your turn. I know you’re Chanda’s brother. You also have an elder brother who came with you the last time. Who else in your family? And what do you do?”

Lakshman watched her avidly, not missing her pearly white teeth digging into her luscious lip. She was quite the chatterbox. “Ram is the eldest while I’m second. I have twin brothers Bharat and Shatrughan after that. Chanda’s the youngest of us all. My parents are old school but pretty open-minded. And I’m a baker.”

Ruma gave him a startled look. “Baker means?”

Lakshman smiled, his eyes twinkling. “I bake breads and sometimes cakes.”

“You do? You mean you’ve made a profession of it?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Do tell me more. I’ve always been fascinated with baking. What all can you make?”

He shrugged. “The usual—white, brown and multi-grain bread, rolls, buns, croissants, puffs and a few types of cakes. I got to know that cakes aren’t really my forte. So, I hired a chef who makes them these days.”

“Hired a chef...how big is your operation?” asked Ruma, catching on that it was no small business he was talking about. She watched in fascination when the handsome dude turned a ruddy colour. “What?”

“Tell you what! Come over to Jaipur and I’ll show you what *Laki’s Bakes* does.” His voice had gone softer than ever as he gazed at her intently, as if he was willing her to accept his invitation.

“Hmm.” Ruma refused to reply to that one. It required a lot of thinking. They had met for a few seconds a couple of times with hardly any interaction before today. Yeah, they seemed to get along well. But she still needed to get to know him better before she decided to visit him in his hometown. He was a handsome devil and seemed to run his own business too! She couldn’t deny that she found him sexier by the second.

“It started as a fun activity, actually,” he continued, grimacing. “I always loved to play with dough, the different textures. And the varied aromas and tastes got me hooked for life.”

Sensual! Ruma nodded, totally fascinated. “How long do you plan to stay this time?” she asked.

“A couple of days. Do you work on Saturdays?”

“Nope.”

“Any plans for tomorrow?” he asked. She had lots of friends, she said.

“Yeah, there was this vague plan to go out with my gang. Nothing that I...”

“Oh, okay.” He should have called her first. But this was the first weekend he was free since Chanda’s wedding.

“Listen,” she placed a hand on his arm. “It’s nothing I can’t get out of. So what do you want to do?”

He smiled, his coal black eyes glowing with warmth at the touch of her fingers. “What would you like to do? Better yet, are you free to have dinner with me tonight?”

“Yes, of course.”

4

They took a cab to The Vapour Grill in Gurgaon. Ruma recommended it highly. On reaching, Lakshman excused himself for a few minutes to call Ranveer, while she went to study the buffet spread. “Hey man, how are you?”

“Hello Laki, I’m good,” answered Ranveer enthusiastically. He knew Lakshman was Chanda’s favourite brother. “So tell me, what’s up?”

“Would you newlyweds mind if I crash at your home for the weekend?” Lakshman came straight to the point. He wouldn’t have minded staying at a hotel. But Chanda would probably kill him if he did that.

“Of course *yaar*. Do you need to ask? When are you coming? Tonight or tomorrow?”

“I’m already here in Delhi, dining with a friend. I...”

“What’s up dude? Want to tell me?” asked Ranveer, a grin in his voice.

“Nothing to tell,” replied Lakshman, dead serious.

Ranveer caught on that he wouldn’t get another word out of his silent brother-in-law. “Here, talk to Chanda.”

“Lakshman,” The family always addressed him by his full name as Mohan didn’t much care for shortened versions. “You’re in Delhi already and are telling us now. And where the hell are you right now?” Chanda was miffed.

“Chanda,” there was a depth of affection in Lakshman’s voice as he addressed his little sister, “you and Ranveer have been married for a little more than a month. I wasn’t keen on disturbing you. But...”

“Lakshman, don’t you dare say that. And why aren’t you here already?” Chanda was turning angry now.

“I just touched down in the evening and I’m meeting someone for dinner. That’s

why called...”

“...to find out *if* you can stay with us. How could you?” her voice began to wobble.

“Chanda, please. You aren’t a kid any more. You’re Ranveer’s wife and I don’t want to butt into your privacy. You surely understand that.”

Ranveer’s phone was on speaker and Chanda turned red to the roots of her hair when her husband laughed. “Smart man, Laki,” said Ranveer, realising that his wife had gone speechless. “But that’s no issue. You please come on over once you’re done with your meeting. Unless you’d like me to pick you up from somewhere?”

“No, no. I can make it on my own. And I may be late. I hope...”

“Take your time. We rarely go to sleep before midnight. And today being Friday, it doesn’t really matter,” said Ranveer.

“Thanks Ranveer, Chanda. I’ll see you both later,” said Lakshman, cutting the call.

He walked back to the booth Ruma had settled in and sat down next to her, apologising, “Sorry to keep you waiting. I had to call my sister to tell her that I’m in town.”

Ruma nodded. “No issues. I just got here myself after checking out the food. Are you vegetarian?” She knew Chanda was.

Lakshman nodded. “Yeah, I’m. You aren’t,” he declared.

She grinned. “No way. I love all of them—poultry, seafood, pork.”

“So, shall we attack the buffet? Or would you like to have a drink first?”

“Let’s grab some food. I’ll have a fresh lime soda along with it.”

“I think I’ll have the same.”

They filled their plates with starters. Ruma got *Lebanese Fish, Ajwaini Jhinga* and *Gosht Sheekh kabab* while Lakshman opted for *Grilled veggies, Paneer Tikka, Crispy Potato* and *Cinnamon Pineapple*.

“Load up on some extra veggies, okay? I’ll take some from you,” said Ruma.

“I guessed as much,” said Lakshman, showing his overflowing plate to her.

Ruma grinned happily as they went back to their table, asking a waiter to bring them two glasses of fresh lime soda.

“So, do you drink? The hard stuff, I mean,” asked Lakshman, forking a piece of potato into his mouth.

Ruma munched on the *jhinga*, relishing the taste, her eyes closed, before replying, “Yeah, I do, but not too often. How about you?”

“Beer mostly. But, yes, I do drink sometimes.”

They chatted lazily about their lives, enjoying a leisurely dinner that ran over three hours. They went back a couple of more times to pick up items from the main course and later some desserts.

“You have a sweet tooth,” teased Lakshman, seeing the array of *gulab jamoon, jalebi, cheesecake, tarts* and *ice creams*. He had refused the sweets and opted to have a second glass of lemon and soda.

Ruma insisted on feeding him small bites from her plate. “You have to taste this cheesecake, Laki. It’s simply divine,” she said, carrying the scooped spoon to his mouth.

“If you insist,” said Lakshman, holding her hand as he bent down to take the spoon in his mouth. His eyes connected with hers and desire flared instantly. Ruma removed her hand from his in a hurry, leaving the spoon in his mouth, her heart beating rapidly.

She looked down at her plate, her eyelids feeling heavy because of the onslaught of shyness that gripped her at the burning look from his black gaze. It felt as if he was ensnaring her in a cocoon of heat.

Lakshman offered her the spoon just as she was about to pick up a new one. Giving him a corner-eyed brown glance, she took it from him and continued to dig into her dessert plate, refusing to look up at him. Her chatter had vanished as she finished her dessert in silence.

5

They agreed to spend the Saturday at Select CITYWALK, a shopping mall at Saket. “Let me pick you up tomorrow morning. Tell me what time,” said Lakshman, as they rode in the OLA towards Ruma’s home.

“Laki, listen. First of all, you’ll have to leave me a couple of streets away from my building. I don’t want my people to find out that I’ve been spending time with you. And as for tomorrow, I’ll meet you directly at the mall.” She was firm even as she refused to meet his eyes.

Lakshman frowned at her, getting irritated. Was she ashamed of being seen with him or what! He kept quiet, not saying anything.

She turned and looked at him, seeing the scowl on his face. She lifted his left hand that was lying between them on the seat and held it between both of hers. “Please understand that it’s nothing personal and I promise to tell you more tomorrow.” She turned to the driver and said, “Please stop at the side for a minute and I’ll get down.”

Lakshman was reluctant to let her go in the middle of nowhere, so late at night. But she was determined. “Ping me when you reach home,” he insisted.

With one foot outside the door, she turned to him and said, “Laki, I do this all the time. Please don’t worry. Okay, I’ll ping you,” she said, when she saw that he was about to argue. With a smile and a wave, she walked away from him.

Lakshman gave the driver the address to Ranveer’s home and sat back to think of his evening with Ruma, a serene smile on his face. His phone pinged after a few minutes. It was Ruma. “Thanks for the awesome evening. I’ve reached home. Eager to meet you tomorrow. Bye!”

“See you tomorrow, sweetheart,” replied Lakshman, adding a kiss emoticon. What the hell! He was deeply attracted to her and he wanted her to know.

Chanda and Ranveer were waiting for him when Lakshman reached their home. His sister glowed, obviously happy in her marriage. He hugged her, handing her

the parcel their parents had sent her, before shaking hands with Ranveer.

They chatted for a while, with Chanda doing most of the talking. “So, who’s this friend who’s so important that you forgot to call me on reaching here?” A small fist attacked his shoulder.

Lakshman gave her a mysterious smile. “Will tell you in good time.”

Ranveer grinned, winking at his brother-in-law. “Chanda, I think you should let him be.”

Colour ran up Lakshman’s lean cheeks when Chanda stared at him accusingly. “Lakshman?”

He shook his head, refusing to utter another word on the subject.

Respecting his reticence, Chanda changed the subject and asked about the rest of the family. It was past one when they all got up to go to bed.

“By the way, I’ll be out the whole day tomorrow,” said Lakshman softly.

Chanda felt torn. While she wanted to spend time with her brother, it seemed he was keen to be elsewhere.

Ranveer offered, “Since you are here on Sunday, why don’t you spend time with your friend here? Chanda and I plan to go out for the day on a picnic with some friends of ours.” He had made the plan on the go, sensing the need for his brother-in-law to spend some private time with his girl.

Lakshman’s face lit up. “Are you sure?”

Ranveer nodded firmly, his hand holding Chanda’s tightly, not letting her speak. “Absolutely. We’re out by 9.30 in the morning and we’ll probably return past eleven in the night.”

“And you’re welcome to use my car tomorrow, Lakshman. I won’t be needing it,” said Chanda, giving her husband a sideways glance. Ranveer had gifted her a Maruti Swift immediately on their return to Delhi after their wedding.

Lakshman nodded, overwhelmed. “If you guys are sure.” He hugged them both, wishing them goodnight before going into the guest bedroom across theirs.

The moment their bedroom door closed, Chanda turned on Ranveer. “What’s this picnic we are going on Sunday? Shouldn’t we spend time with Lakshman? He’s out the whole day tomorrow as well.” Why didn’t Ranveer ask her before deciding to go out for the day? He always consulted her about the way they spent their weekends. And it was so rude going away when they were having a family member visiting.

Ranveer shook his head, pulling her into his arms. “Sometimes Chanda, you can be such a baby,” he teased. “Can’t you see that Lakshman is a man on a mission? He’s not here to meet us. Don’t you think we should be helpful? I came up with that trip on the spot. He obviously needs to get to know his girl better. They’ll have more privacy here at home.”

Chanda’s eyes went wide as she pressed her hands on her husband’s chest, pushing back to look up at him. “Are you serious? Lakshman has come here to meet some girl?” Her silent brother—was he in love?

Ranveer nodded. “Yeah. So, tell me, what would you like to do on Sunday?”

6

Ruma went to bed with a smile on her face as she thought of her evening with Lakshman. Luckily, all had been asleep or at least in their rooms and she didn't have to face anyone when she let herself into their home. Her smile disappeared when she thought of her parents. Shyam and Rati Malhotra were keen to get their daughter wedded to a business associate's son. Ruma had disliked the man on sight. But they didn't give a damn. Tying the knot with the Vaswanis would strengthen their business ties too. And the boy was well-educated and smart. What more could Ruma want?

A bit of intelligent conversation? Someone who talked a little less about himself? Ugh!

Lakshman wasn't very talkative. But she felt so comfortable chatting with him. And the heated glances from his black-as-sin eyes sent her up in flames every time they touched her, which was pretty often.

It had been so unexpected, his turning up like that after two months. And they had conversed like old friends, talking about every damn thing under the weather. He was a baker. She was definitely curious to know more. And was she glad that he wasn't another boring money maker, running a dumb business of buy and sell!

What would her parents think of Lakshman? Her father was probably malleable. But her mother...Ruma knew it was next to impossible to change her mind. But then, she had to try, right? She wasn't going to give up on the chance of falling in love with a fascinating man like Laki and instead tie the knot with an idiot, just because her parents said so.

With that clarity in mind, Ruma plumped up her pillows and closed her eyes. She smiled automatically as scenes from the evening ran through her mind. She went to sleep, thinking of Lakshman.

They hung out at Select CITYWALK the whole day of Saturday, trying their best to keep away from the crowd, which wasn't easy. Since they had got in early, they managed to secure a corner table at Starbucks and chatted cosily over coffee

and snacks for a few hours. The more she spent with Lakshman, the better Ruma was convinced that she wanted him in her life. There was just no way she'd marry Bunty Vaswani now.

"Like I told you yesterday, my parents are old-fashioned. My dad's keen that I wed Bunty Vaswani, the son of his business associate."

"Do you want to?" came the soft question.

"Of course not." She glared at Lakshman as if he was responsible for the situation and was startled when he grinned widely, obviously pleased with her answer. She couldn't contain the answering smile on her face as she grumbled, "What's funny now?"

He took her hand in his, his thumb tracing the fast-beating pulse at her wrist. "Not funny. I'm just glad that you don't want to marry this Vaswani."

She poked a tongue at him rudely. "What does it matter to you?"

"Haven't you realised? I plan to make you mine."

Ruma's eyes rounded with shock. That was some declaration for a man as quiet as Lakshman. And not even a by-your-leave. Was he taking her for granted?

"And how do you plan to do that?" she challenged, glaring at him, her pointed chin thrust out aggressively.

"By wooing you," he smiled. "How else? You'll get so used to me and my adoration that you wouldn't want anyone else."

That sure knocked the wind out of her sails. Ruma turned a brilliant shade of red as she caught his ebony gaze on her. His adoration! Yeah, she could feel it in every single cell of her body.

They walked to Om Book Shop where Lakshman insisted on buying every book she browsed. "Laki, are you mad? I don't need so many books."

"I need to buy them for you," was the quiet reply.

She stopped arguing after that, enjoying being pampered. They took the two large bags containing the twenty-odd books and stored them in his car, before going to PVR Cinema.

They watched *Vicky Donor*, arguing a lot as they discussed the film during dinner at Punjab Grill. Ruma had never had so much fun. Lakshman had a quirky sense of humour that set her off every few seconds. Her ribs hurt from laughing so much.

He drove her home at past eleven, insisting on leaving her at her building gates. “The car’s windows are tinted. Just get out fast and go home before anyone gets a chance to see me.” She got out in a hurry when the car stopped, rushing through the gate, without stopping to say ‘bye’. Not that he minded. She was going to spend Sunday with him at Ranveer’s row house. Lakshman sighed happily, navigating the traffic to reach home. Life was damn good!

7

As promised, Ranveer and Chanda left by nine in the morning. “Let me make some breakfast for you,” offered Chanda, even as Lakshman shook his head.

“Don’t bother, Chanda. I’ll manage.”

“But...” Chanda was confused. Her husband was rushing her, which was pretty unusual for him. And Lakshman...what was wrong with her brother? He loved her cooking. But he appeared to be lost in a world of his own.

Ranveer started the car before talking to his wife. “Lakshman is in love and is still trying to woo his woman. He’s best left alone. You...”

“How do you know?” asked Chanda.

“Maybe because I underwent something similar a few months back?” said Ranveer, grinning cheekily at her. “Relax, sweetheart. Your brother will be fine.”

Chanda sighed, resting her head against Ranveer’s shoulder. “I suppose.”

They were gone barely forty-five minutes before an auto-rickshaw arrived, carrying Ruma in it. She looked up eagerly as the door opened even before she paid the driver. “Hey,” she waved, accepting the change before rushing towards the row house.

Lakshman pulled her inside, shut the door and hugged her. “At last.” He held her close, his arms around her slim waist, his head buried in the crook of her neck, taking deep breaths to calm his pounding heart. She felt perfect in his arms, her lush breasts pressed against his flat chest. She smelled amazing, with a citrusy fragrance that teased his senses.

Ruma’s arms were clasped around his hard back, her bags having fallen down. She could feel his hot breath on her neck and his arousal against her belly. She was falling for him, hard. And it felt so good being in his arms. Wasn’t she glad that they had the house to themselves for the day?!

They broke apart at the same time and smiled at each other. Ruma bent down to pick up her bags. “I got you the breakfast I promised. You’ve got the coffee ready?”

Lakshman nodded, taking her handbag and placing it on a side table. He helped her out of her parka and hung it on an old-fashioned wooden clotheshorse near the entrance. He stopped to admire her body-hugging, button-down, collarless shirt in a bright shade of aqua. A couple of buttons were left open at the top, giving him a view of her luscious curves. “You look gorgeous,” he breathed, bending down to place a soft kiss on her silky cheek, bringing colour to her face.

He guided her to the kitchen that also had a dining area. It was already set for two. Lakshman heated some milk before making coffee in two tall mugs and carrying them to the table. Ruma had already opened the food parcels and placed the doughnuts, croissants and vegetable puffs on a tray.

“I’ve gone vegetarian today,” she declared, picking up a mug of coffee and sipping from it. “Hmm...this is heavenly.”

They munched their way through breakfast as they chatted desultorily, even as their eyes held a separate dialogue at an altogether different level.

“Do you want more coffee?” Ruma got up to refill her cup.

“No,” said Lakshman, unable to take his eyes off her snug bottom encased in stretch jeans. The lady was all sexy curves. “Ruma...”

She turned as she heard him get up, her nerveless fingers leaving the coffee cup on the kitchen platform in a rush. A couple of steps and she was in his arms, her own clinging to his neck.

He steered her towards the sofa, sitting down and pulling her on his lap, her back against his chest, his arms around her waist.

He raised a hand to shift her long, silky hair to her left shoulder, his lips tracing her jaw line. His moustache brushed against her skin, giving her goose bumps. She was delighted by the sensation. Ruma’s head fell back against his shoulder as she gave him better access to her face and neck, a deep sigh shuddering through her. She took his right hand and placed it against her throbbing breast.

Lakshman’s hand squeezed the globe gently, revelling in the softness. His tongue traced the contours of her velvety lips, seeking entry into her mouth. Ruma pulled his head closer, opening her mouth to him, her tongue tangling with his. He tasted so good and all male!

His touch was feather light as he traced a finger down the opening of her shirt, his lips playing havoc with her mouth. He opened a few more buttons to palm her left breast that was almost spilling out of her lace bra that was a shade of blue, darker than her top. Her nipple turned taut under his caressing thumb as Ruma moaned into his mouth. His wet lips traced a path down her throat, settling at the top of her breasts as he took gentle bites.

Ruma buried her hands into his thick curls, pulling his head closer. Her eyes shut tight as she felt bombarded by the sensations created by his lips, teeth and fingers on her breasts. She felt his hand at her back, fiddling with the hook of her bra. She moved away from him to help him release it. The next second, both her top and bra were on the floor in a heap as Lakshman pulled them off in a single move.

She opened her eyes to look at his face as he stared in fascination at the twin mounds, his big hands supporting her back, his thumbs resting at the sides. While she was slim to a fault, she was well endowed in the breasts department and wore a D cup. She turned a deep shade of red as she saw the hungry expression on his face. He was eyeing a part of her body that no other man had set eyes on. She felt aroused by his hot black gaze.

He met her melting chocolate eyes, his own glazed with desire. “You look amazing.” He lifted a thumb, without moving his hand, to trace a flushed tip. It quivered at his touch, puckering up as blood rushed to that part of her body. “Laki...”

He bent down to touch the same nipple with the tip of a wet tongue, rubbing it tenderly back and forth, bringing a shuddering sigh from Ruma. His mouth closed over her breast and he sucked on it, as Ruma groaned deeply in reaction, her body aroused to fever pitch. She moved restlessly under the onslaught of his mouth, her womb calling out for a mate. She moved impatient hands across his back, pulling his shirt out of his jeans. She explored the satiny finish of his skin, her hands tensing as she felt the tug of his teeth on her breast.

“Laki, I...”

He lifted his head reluctantly to look down at her, his eyes half-closed behind heavy eyelids, his breath coming out in gasps. He realised what she wanted of him and pulled off his shirt, exposing his wide, hair-roughened chest to her wild eyes. She gazed her fill of him, running her eyes from his muscular shoulders to his narrow waist.

“You look so handsome,” she said, rubbing her hands across his chest, adoring the rough texture.

He pulled her close to his body, her soft breasts crushed against his hard chest. “I love you, Ruma. I know...” as she whimpered, “I’m asking for nothing. Just let me hold you.” He paused for a second, as if thinking, before continuing. “I’m sorry if I’m going too fast.” His body shuddered, as he fought for control. He had to give her time.

He removed his arms from around her and set her away from him. Bending down, he picked up their discarded clothes and handed her bra and top to her, before donning his shirt. “Please forgive me.”

Ruma watched him, holding her clothes against her body, not sure what had hit her. One minute there, he was making passionate love to her, and the next, he had stopped. Her left breast tingled, remembering his caresses, while her right one protested at the step-motherly treatment. But she could see that the moment was lost, at least for now.

Sighing deeply, unable to stop herself from admiring his restraint, Ruma wore her bra. She was startled when she felt his fingers at her back, helping her with the hook. “I’m sorry Ruma, both for arousing you and for stopping so abruptly. I want you too much. But I don’t want you to regret it later.” His gravelly voice was a rough whisper in her ears.

But it was she who craved his lovemaking. It was she who had taken his hand and placed it against her breast. He had only responded to her invitation. She realised that he was one of those rare breed in today’s generation—a gentleman.

She moved a couple of steps away from him and turned around deliberately, her

shoulders straight. She felt cherished by his fiery gaze on her lace-clad upper body as she thrust an arm into her shirt. “I think I’m falling for you too, Laki, especially the gentleman in you,” she said. She gave him a broad wink, hoping to bring some lightness into a situation that was suddenly fraught with tension.

Lakshman gave her a weak smile, his body still painfully aroused. It didn’t really matter if she was half naked or fully clothed, did it?

8

Lakshman and Ruma continued to be in touch long distance. They chatted a lot on WhatsApp during the day and invariably, he called her every night. He was simply adorable, making verbal love to her pretty often. Ruma was no less as she responded with alacrity, driving him nuts. Both their schedules were too crammed up for them to travel. Not that it stopped Ruma from falling in love with him.

It was almost three months before Lakshman and Ruma could meet again. It became possible only because Ruma decided to land up at his factory in the middle of the week. On an impulse, she took a couple of days off, told her parents that she was going out with her friends, packed a backpack with a change of clothes and took an early morning flight to Jaipur. She was going to surprise Lakshman.

“Hey, good morning.”

“Sweetheart, so glad to hear your voice, good morning.” He had tried her cell a few minutes ago and had found it unreachable. Only, he wasn’t aware that it had been on flight mode.

“Yeah, early, isn’t it? What are you doing?”

“On my way to the factory. And you?”

“I’m on my way too,” she said vaguely, curbing a smile. Let him presume that she was going to her office.

“I miss you, love. But this weekend is also taken up. Hey, do you want to come down?” asked Lakshman. She wouldn’t agree to stay at his place. But then, even he wasn’t comfortable. They were still getting to know each other and he didn’t want his family around.

“Let me see. Laki, I’ll catch you later. I’m getting a call.” Her OLA driver was calling her. She said a rushed, “bye” before taking the other call, excitement beating a tattoo in her heart. She was going to meet him after what felt like a

long, long time.

She gave the driver the address to Lakshman's factory. Perfect! She had been wary of landing up at his home. While she knew his family members were pretty open and forward, she wasn't keen to meet them yet. She hadn't had a chance to speak to her mother. Anyway, she didn't want to, yet. Their relationship was still in the fragile stage.

She had the OLA stop at the gates to a large compound, her heart bouncing inside her chest. She crossed her fingers, hoping that Lakshman would be happy with her surprise. What if she gave him a shock!

Ruma shook her head to herself. This wasn't the time for procrastination. She paid for the cab and started walking towards the entrance to the factory. Just then, she saw Lakshman about to step in and called out loudly, "Laki."

Lakshman turned with a jerk. That sounded like Ruma. Was he dreaming again? A wide smile split his face in two when he saw the woman of his dreams coming towards him in a half-run. "Ruma," he growled, pulling her into his arms. "What a surprise!"

He let her go, still holding her hands, gazing at her with his blazing dark eyes. She looked as gorgeous as ever.

"I hope I didn't give you a heart attack," she said, her eyes shining as she studied his handsome features.

"There are heart attacks and then some," he grinned, turning her towards his office, his left arm wrapped around her shoulder. "Am I glad you're here! I've been missing you like crazy."

It was barely eight in the morning and the office staff were yet to arrive. He signed her through security and took her up the steps, and directly to the back of the large office, to his cabin. The office boy had obviously cleaned the place and had switched the air-conditioner on. "Welcome to my den," said Lakshman, letting her walk in ahead of him into the swanky office.

"Some baker," said Ruma, eyeing the official looking table that had a plush office chair in black leather behind it. There were three visitors' chairs on this

side of the table. She took in the cabinets on one wall and the photos on the other. Before she could check them out, she felt his arms go around her, his lips brushing her ear.

“Sweetheart.” He turned her around in his arms, his lips seeking hers desperately. His hands spanned her waist as he pulled her closer.

Ruma threw her arms around his neck, so glad that she had made the trip to meet him. She could feel his hair was longer as she ran her fingers through the silky curls at his nape.

She buried her face on his broad chest when they came up for air. “I missed you too, Laki,” she whispered. Raising her head to look up at him, “Do you think I’m falling in love with you?” she asked, looking deeply into his black eyes, shivering at the desire burning in them.

His hand moved down to trace the shape of her lush bottom through her cotton pants. He pressed his forehead against hers and said, “You tell me.”

“I keep thinking of you all my waking hours. And dream of you when asleep. By the way, you distract me too much when I’m at work. You probably need to tell your brother-in-law not to sack me,” she said, tongue-in-cheek.

Lakshman grinned, holding her hand and walking towards his swivelling chair. He sat on it and pulled her on his lap. “So, you bunked work today?” he teased.

“And tomorrow,” she replied, nibbling his jaw, her hand tracing the shape of his moustache. It felt so good to be in his arms after all this long. Maybe she’d propose marriage. “Laki, will you marry me?”

“Huh?” his eyebrows went up, his gaze amused, “are you proposing to me?”

“What else to do? You aren’t asking me.” She pretended to be miffed. She felt such a sense of freedom with him, with absolutely no need for pretence. She couldn’t do it in her own home. Lakshman accepted her, exactly the way she was. Though they had spent just two days with each other, she had realised that much about him.

“Well, I’d love to. So where’s my ring?” he asked cheekily, grinning at her

startled look. “And shouldn’t you be on your knees?”

“Oh, it’s going to be like that.” She went on her knees right there on his muscular thighs, her face on a level with his. She held her hands to his lean cheeks and looked deeply into his eyes. “Lakshman Maheshwari, I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

With his right arm around her, Lakshman opened the top drawer on the left side of his desk. Ruma frowned at his strange action. Why the hell wasn’t he kissing her?

He pulled out a sleek jewellers’ box and handed it to her. “For you.”

She took it from him, a startled look on her face, and opened it. A delicate chain of gold nestled on the red velvet, winking at her. There were two tiny hearts of solid gold, strung from the chain. “Laki, this is so beautiful.”

He removed the chain from the box, and placed it around her neck, hooking it at her nape. The golden hearts settled comfortably against her throat, glowing against her skin. He pressed his lips to them, leaving her speechless.

“It must be expensive Laki. How can I accept such a gift?” she asked.

“I thought I just agreed to become your husband. Don’t I get to shower you with gifts?” he winked.

She smiled, fingering the tiny hearts, liking their small weight against her neck. “I owe you a ring.”

Lakshman nodded, before pushing her off his lap and getting up. “Do you want to have some coffee or shall we go see the factory?”

“Laki.” Her eyes were accusing. “We’ve taken such a major decision. Don’t you want to seal it with a kiss?”

“Ruma, the staff must be arriving as we talk. Maybe later?” His eyes glowed like black gold, full of promises.

“Just one kiss?” she pretended to beg. “Please,” she added for good measure.

He shook his head, pulling her into his arms. “Naughty Ruma,” he said, before bending down to take a soft bite of her upper lip. Ruma bit him right back, stepping on his feet, pulling his head down to her. Silence reigned in the room for the next few minutes as the couple was lost to the world.

“You might need to comb your hair to become decent,” she teased, proud of having been the cause of his messed up hair.

“And it’s best if you added a coat of fresh lipstick. Anyone can make out you’ve been thoroughly kissed,” he came back. She pouted at him. “Cute,” he said, pressing his lips to hers once again. She was simply irresistible.

“Laki,” she called again, as he was walking towards the locked door, her hand on his arm, stopping him in mid-stride. “My right breast is fuming with the way you’re ignoring it. I...”

Lakshman frowned, not quite catching on.

She hit him on his shoulder. “That Sunday, you loved my left breast, but ignored my right. It’s crying out for attention,” she said, her face straight.

Lakshman couldn’t help but look down at the said anatomy in fascination. He recalled her lovely breasts with absolute clarity. He also remembered being painfully aroused. He had had a tough time bringing his libido back in control. The woman was a witch, tempting him like this. But...he bent down to press his face against her right breast. “I’m sorry, love,” he addressed her breast, and unerringly pressed his lips to the engorged tip that called out to him through the layers of her clothing. He opened his mouth to bite her gently, making Ruma groan in delight. Raising his head, he took Ruma’s hand to press it against his fly. “See what happens when I make love to your beautiful body,” he complained.

She fingered him in delight, before going down on her knees in front of him. Without stopping to think, Ruma pulled open his fly and gently removed his manhood from his constraining briefs. Lakshman’s breath caught in his throat, as he stared down at her in morbid fascination. He couldn’t help remembering that

it was his office, even if she had forgotten.

She held him gently in her hands, before pressing her lips to him. “I love you.”

Lakshman groaned, one hand in her hair, the other gently prising her hands off him. “Are you crazy, Ruma?” he said, pulling her to her feet.

“I suppose I’m,” she grinned. Not seeing an answering smile on his face, “Are you a virgin?” she asked, her eyes mischievous, trying to reach down to him.

Lakshman held her hands tightly within his, refusing to let her. “No, I’m not. Are you?”

“Why don’t you find out for yourself?” she invited cheekily.

“You’re surely going to be the death of me, woman,” groaned Lakshman, before biting hard on the curve of her breast, just below her neckline.

Ruma welcomed the pain as it felt so delicious. She moaned, trying to free her hands. Lakshman pushed her away and moved a couple of feet. “You call ‘nine’ on the extension and order coffee before opening the lock on the damn door. I’ll see you in a few minutes,” he said, as he rushed towards a door behind his chair.

“Your fly is still open,” she called out, laughing, her hand rubbing against the area that he had bitten. He was sure to have left a mark. Was she thrilled about it!

“Shuddup,” said Lakshman, shutting himself inside the bathroom.

He came out soon to see her sitting on his chair, swinging this way and that like a small kid. “Have you asked for coffee?”

“Of course.”

“And the door?”

“Laki, wait. I want you to see something.” She pulled down the neckline of her top to show him the reddened skin. “I’ve a hickey.”

Lakshman stared down at the curve of her breast, his gaze shocked. “Oh my

God! Did I do that to you?” He bent down to brush his lips against the spot, his tongue stroking the area gently. “I’m so sorry, love.” There was genuine regret in his voice.

“*Arre*, but why? I’m not. I love it.” She got up and hugged him. “I felt powerfully aroused when you did that,” she whispered in his ear. Before he realised what she was up to, she skimmed her hand over his fly. “Hey, I can’t find you. Did you chop yourself off in a temper?” she asked, laughter in her voice.

“It’s your head that I’ll be chopping off if you don’t take your hands off my crotch, right now,” he growled, removing her hand off his pants.

“Don’t you like my touch?” she pouted.

“Too much!” He groaned, making her laugh out loud.

9

He gave her a grand tour of his factory. “This is where the breads are made mid-morning. Most of them are used up in sandwiches, pizzas, burgers and rolls sold by our outlets. Some are packed and sold.”

Ruma looked around, fascinated. It was a huge operation. “How many outlets do you have?” she asked.

“Thirty-two, as of now. We own two outlets. The rest are franchises.”

“What?! Your business is huge.” Her eyes were wide with wonder when she glanced at him.

Lakshman smiled at her, colour running up his manly cheeks. “Yep, you can say that.”

There were 15-20 people working like busy bees. One was measuring the ingredients and adding them to a plastic tray, each one for one particular type of bread. Another was running an electronic mixer where he poured the measured ingredients and kept adding ice-cold water till it reached the right consistency.

“How old is your operation?”

“Almost four years.” Lakshman checked the texture of the mixed dough for multigrain bread and passed her a piece too.

Ruma understood what he had meant by falling in love with the texture of dough. It was so fluffy and soft that she wanted to run her hands through it.

The dough was then removed and cut off into portions and weighed. “Why would they do that?”

“A full loaf of bread weighs 400 gm while a half loaf weighs 200 gm. The dough for each loaf is separated and weighed before they are placed into baking tins. The dough loses weight while baking. So we add extra weight so that the customer gets the correct weight of the bread that’s mentioned on the label.”

Two men removed the weighed pieces of dough and placed them on an aluminium work table that was ten feet long. They dusted it with flour before rolling the pieces, beating them with their hands for a couple of minutes, ensuring there were no air bubbles in them, placing them in rectangular baking tins. These tins were covered with lids, stacked on trays and stored on metal racks.

“The dough needs to rise for about 30-40 minutes. In the meanwhile, we preheat the ovens.” Lakshman gestured towards four machines that looked nothing like ovens to Ruma. She could see metal racks rotating within.

“Where are the ovens?” she asked, looking this way and that.

Lakshman smiled. “You’re looking at them. We need to bake four hundred loaves at one go. Each oven can accommodate a hundred.”

Ruma stared, her hands on her cheeks, an expression of awe on her face. “And what else do you make?”

“We make a few hundred *pav*. There are the half-pound and one-pound sponge cakes. These are baked in another section. The temperature maintained in each section is different. We also have people who come to decorate these cakes. This is a department that we’re still improving upon. So far, we’ve only simple cakes. We’re hoping to get into designer cakes in the future. Let’s see. I need to get the right person who can study the whole field and work on it. I, personally, am not too interested in that line.”

“Hmm...” He had set Ruma thinking. She’d need to do a lot of homework on this, of course, before she said anything.

He showed her the rest of the factory. The sponges for cakes were already ready. They had been sliced across in three layers. Yeah, a machine did the job, it seemed. Plastic sheets were spread across work tables where the first layers were all placed. There were half a dozen such tables. Ruma was told that each one had cakes made in different flavours. That was the cream and ingredients that went into the fillings. The sponge itself was common.

There were coffee cakes, black forest cakes, chocolate cakes, chocolate mousse

cakes and more. Ruma lost track after a while. The aromas were extremely tempting though. “How do you manage not to put on weight? You must get to hog such a variety,” she asked Laki, looking at his taut stomach.

He grinned. “Not really. After a while, the smells can get kind of nauseating. People working in such a factory probably consume the least number of cakes.”

“May I have a piece, pretty please?” she fluttered her lashes at him. “I love the smell of coffee.”

“Of course you may.” He told a worker to get a half-pound of coffee cake readied and sent to his office as soon as possible. “Any other flavour?”

“Maybe later. What else do you make?”

“A lot of action takes place at night. We get the orders for croissants, rolls and other stuff at around 9 pm. Based on that, these are made through the night. The vans go out for delivery at eight in the morning to ensure that the goods reach the shops by nine or so.”

“Could you do with an assistant? I’d like to apply for the job, if your answer is ‘yes’,” asked Ruma. She had fallen in love with the place. The employees looked happy as they worked. A stereo system played Bollywood music. Some of them sang along as they went about their work.

Lakshman looked at her. “Why as assistant? Be my partner.”

She raised a hand in a high-five against his. Yeah, she was definitely considering baking as an alternate career when she moved to Jaipur as his wife.

10

Lakshman woke up suddenly to check the time on the wall clock to see that it was five in the morning. A strange but not unpleasant weight was holding him down on the bed. He came fully awake to find Ruma half sprawled across him as they slept on the king-sized bed in the bedroom behind his office.

Her arm was across his chest, her lush breasts squashed against his shoulder, a slim leg wrapped around his middle. A smile broke out on his face as he realised that he simply loved having her draped on him.

Last night had been a tug of war between their personalities. They had gone out for dinner and returned at around ten. Ruma had been tired as she had left home pretty early that morning. “Would you mind terribly if I don’t stay in your home? I’d rather check into a hotel,” she said.

Lakshman shook his head at her, opening his office door. “There’s no need for either. We can stay right here in the office.”

Ruma followed him as he walked further inside and opened another door that was beside the bathroom. “Oh my God!” She couldn’t believe her eyes as she saw a bedroom that was large by any standards. It was kitted out with a huge double-bed that was made up with a clean sheet and had a large pile of pillows at the head. “This is simply awesome, Laki.”

He smiled. “Yeah, pretty convenient as I work late into the night on many days. You get comfortable. There’s a shower in there, just in case you want to have a bath. I’ll make a quick check of what’s happening with the night shift and return in maybe half an hour.”

She nodded, her eyes shining with excitement, her sleepiness having disappeared. “I’ll have a shower and get into bed.” She kissed him on his rough cheek. “This is perfect.”

He turned his head to press a hard kiss on her lips, saying, “See you soon,” and left in a hurry.

She plugged her phone for charging and opened her bag to remove a nightshirt. She found a couple of fluffy towels on a table outside the bathroom, took one for herself and went in. He had called it just a shower. But it reminded her of a five-star hotel's bathroom. She bundled her hair into a knot at the top of her head and wrapped it in a shower cap. She set the temperature to hot and had a leisurely shower. The fragrance of the bath gel was simply divine and reminded her of Laki. Twenty minutes were gone before she switched the shower off. Not long for him to return. She dried herself before pulling on the nightshirt.

Standing in front of the mirror, she combed her silky hair until it crackled. She twirled around in front of the mirror to check herself out. Not bad! The pale yellow nightshirt was made of superfine cotton and followed her curves faithfully. She grinned to herself imagining Laki's reaction to it. She was going to make him hers tonight.

Lakshman entered the bedroom just as Ruma stepped out of the bathroom. He drew a frenzied breath when he saw her. While she was covered right down to below her knees, she had never looked sexier. She was obviously wearing nothing under the garment. Damn the woman!

"What's up?" he asked, trying to keep the situation light.

She winked at him. "Shouldn't I be asking that question?" she asked, looking pointedly down at his lower body.

Reacting to her flirtation, his manhood immediately sprang to action, making Lakshman swear. "Cut that out, Ruma," he growled, sidestepping her as she would've wrapped her arms around him. "I need a shower," he insisted, not meeting her eyes. He went into the bathroom and locked himself in. The place smelled of Ruma. Cursing, Lakshman stood under the cold shower to tame his libido. She looked like she meant business. How could he convince her to wait till they got married? He dried himself with the towel that was on a rack, glaring at the mirror. He needed a shave. But no, they weren't going to make love, so it didn't really matter. Just then he realised that he would have to step out in the towel as his clothes were in the wardrobe. Swearing again, Lakshman walked into the bedroom.

"Laki," called out Ruma, eyeing him avidly. Fascinated, she got up from the bed and walked up to him. He appeared like a Greek God with his chiselled body

that was still damp from the shower.

She stood close to him and raised her left hand to caress his rough cheek. Her right hand was hooked into his towel as if she was going to pull it off him any second. Lakshman clamped his hand on hers, his fingers holding the towel firmly. “No!”

“Huh?!” She looked deeply into his eyes, her brown gaze like melted cocoa, inviting him to make love to her. Her mouth was pouted deliciously, glistening wetly, begging for a kiss. Lakshman groaned deep in his throat, letting go of her hand to wrap his arms around her. He placed his lips on hers, sucking her upper lip. She tasted as sweet as honey, driving him crazy. His right hand moved down the curve of her hip to touch a thigh. He traced the curve, working his way under her nightshirt to encounter her bare bottom.

“Ruma.” He deliberately removed his hands off her and raised his head to look at her.

She stared back at him with slumberous eyes. “What?” A small frown puckered her forehead.

“We’ll make love after we get married,” he declared.

“What if I don’t agree?”

“I’ll have to beg, right?” he grinned weakly. “Please, my love. You know your parents won’t agree to a marriage between us. Doesn’t it make sense to wait until after the event?”

“What if I want you desperately?” She nuzzled his neck, her teeth taking a sharp nip.

Lakshman groaned again, his arms crushing her to his chest. “Do you love me or just lust after my body?”

“Can’t I do both?” she argued.

“Please sweetheart!” He rubbed a large hand down her back, doing his best to calm her down.

Her hands moved restlessly on his chest, as if she had no control over them. She so enjoyed the tactile sensation of her palms on his manly chest. “Will you at least let me sleep in your arms?” She appealed to him sleepily.

He pulled her closer, kissing her forehead. “Of course, my love.”

And that’s how they landed up on the bed, wrapped around each other.

Lakshman felt Ruma move her leg down, her foot on his crotch. Just when he thought that she was moving in her sleep, he felt her toes brushing against him in a caress. What the hell! He looked at her. Her eyes were closed, even as a smile stretched on her lips. “Ruma...” He shifted her leg away from him and turned on his side to trace her features with his lips. His hands moved of their own volition to caress her thighs. “Do you want to elope?”

She opened her eyes wide and stared at him. “What an idea!!!” She nodded vigorously. “Let’s do it.”

“You are too dangerous to be let loose,” grinned Lakshman. “I was just thinking aloud and you immediately want to run away with me. Do something. Why don’t you talk to your mother? Or maybe your grandmother? Let’s see what they have to say. We’ll elope as a last resort.”

“Tch!” Ruma wrinkled her nose at him. “And here I thought you’re being so romantic.”

Lakshman kissed her nose, unable to resist.

11

The next day at work, the moment she had a few minutes free at her desk, Ruma checked out cake decoration classes on the internet. From the time she had checked out *Laki's Bakes*, she had had an idea. Lakshman's business was predominantly into breads, savouries and regular pastries. It could do with some designer cakes, made to order. For that she needed to learn the craft, and create a market in Jaipur. She had spoken to Lakshman about it and he had been extremely encouraging. "That'll be perfect. You go on and learn the basics. I'll help you get the extra hands on board. We'll work out the list of raw materials required. I'll also let out feelers into the market for the demand."

There were a number of classes in Delhi for this. She copy pasted the addresses on her phone and decided to check out the four places she had zeroed on.

That evening, she tackled her mom as Lakshman had suggested. "Mom," she hugged her from the back as her mother was sorting through her wardrobe.

"What's up, Ruma?" asked Rati Malhotra, smiling. "So when should we invite Bunty over? His parents are eager to make you their *bahu*."

Ruma grimaced. "That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. I don't like Bunty Vaswani. I don't want to marry him." Tch! It had all come out wrong and negative. Why the hell had she argued about Bunty? Wasn't she supposed to convince her mother about the advantages of marrying Laki? Ruma reproached herself.

"What? Are you mad, Ruma? Are you even aware of what an opportunity you're trying to throw away? Bunty's the only child of the Vaswanis who are billionaires. He's highly qualified and helps his father run his business. He's good-looking and so many families are keen to have their daughters tie the knot with him, while he's keen to wed *you*. Do you understand that you're an extremely lucky young woman?"

Ruma turned away, rolling her eyes. She turned back to her mother and said, "But Mom, I can't stand the man." She shuddered as she recalled the only time she had spent half an hour with him. First of all, the man couldn't converse

intelligently. Over and above that, his roving eyes had irritated the hell out of her.

Rati looked at her daughter with pitying eyes. “I think you’re just being a spoilt brat. I’m not going to listen to you. You’d better accept that you don’t have a choice. We’ve been postponing the meeting, waiting for you to come around. If this is your attitude, then it’s best we go ahead and plan your engagement.” Her mother turned away this time, letting Ruma know that the conversation was over. Yeah, her mother could be pretty cold-blooded when it suited her.

It was time to tackle Grandma.

“*Daadima*,” said Ruma, squatting on the floor next to her grandmother Ganga who was relaxing on a couch in her room, reading.

“Ruma *beta*,” said Ganga, hugging her grandchild, smiling.

“*Daadima*, I don’t want to marry Bunty Vaswani. He gives me the creeps. Why don’t you talk to Dad?”

“You don’t like him either? Thank God!” said Ganga, much to her granddaughter’s surprise. “What? You think I don’t have eyes in my head? Or I’ve become senile or something? That boy is an idiot if there was one. An idiot without manners,” she declared vehemently.

Ruma grinned widely, holding on tightly to her grandmother’s arm. “Then you’ll talk to Dad?”

Ganga’s smile disappeared. “When has your father listened to reason?”

“But *Daadima*, it’s not just that I don’t want to marry Bunty. I like someone else.” Ruma turned red as she confessed.

“Oh, you do? Who’s this young man? I’d like to meet him.” She knew that Ruma had her head tightly screwed on her shoulders. The boy must be good.

“His name’s Lakshman Maheshwari. He lives in Jaipur with his family. He runs his own business, *Daadima*. Maybe not as big as Bunty’s, but it’s a flourishing one. He’s handsome and smart too.”

“So, how did you meet him?” Ganga was curious to know and she did have all the time in the world.

Grandma and grandchild chatted for the next couple of hours as Ruma gave her the details. “So, he didn’t agree to run away with you?”

“Well, he told me to talk to Mom and you first.”

“Smart fellow, I think. I’d like to meet him. Will you arrange for it?” That was an order cloaked as a request for sure.

“Of course, *Daadima*. I’ll ask him to come over to Delhi. But you’ll have to come out with me to meet him. I don’t think I should bring him home.”

Ganga nodded. “Of course.”

12

Grandma studied the young man who came into the restaurant and greeted a blushing Ruma with a bear hug. He was so obviously in love with her granddaughter. And was he impressive! So tall and handsome! Even better than that, he was well-mannered. He bent down to touch her feet in respect before giving her a warm hug and a peck on her wrinkled cheek.

“Hello, *Daadima*, it’s lovely meeting you. Now I know where Ruma gets her beautiful looks from.”

Ruma heard him in surprise. This was the man who spoke so little. Look at him chatter with her grandmother. She sipped at her cold drink, listening to them talk.

Ganga laughed, pleased with the compliment. “So what do you do *beta*? I know you run your own business, but don’t know what.”

He spoke to her about *Laki’s Bakes* in detail. Later, also about his parents, his brothers, his little sister who was married to Ruma’s boss. Ruma got to know more about the man she loved that day.

“What happens to the food that goes unsold? That must be something you need to deal with on a daily basis in this perishable industry.” Grandma was extremely wise. She had helped her husband set up the family business initially. She used to be on the advisory board of the company when her husband had been alive. Later, she quit as she and her son Shyam seldom saw eye to eye.

“The shops close at 8 pm. We work in tandem with a few orphanages. They have volunteers who go to the outlets to collect all leftover items that’ll not survive the night. They do it between 7.30 and 8 pm. My company bears the cost, of course. The food is distributed to the orphans and sometimes to the poor, depending on the quantity.” He didn’t add that special 3 kg cakes were baked for every single kid in those orphanages on their birthdays. He had a long list with names and dates nailed to a soft board in his office.

Ruma’s jaw dropped. Was it possible to fall more in love with Laki?

Grandma held Lakshman's hand in hers, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "It's my granddaughter who's the lucky one, Lakshman. God bless you! So, what do your parents say? Ruma tells me that she's not met them yet." Grandma knew about her trip to Jaipur.

Lakshman shrugged. "I haven't spoken to them yet. I know they'll agree to my getting married to the girl of my choice. If I mention anything now, I fear my parents will insist on meeting Ruma's to convince them of our match and life might just get more complicated. And then there's my elder brother, Ram. They are working at arranging his wedding."

Grandma nodded. "You've a point there. Well, if push comes to shove, we'll get you both married at a temple right here in Delhi, in secret. We'll break the news to both sets of parents later. There's nothing much that Ruma's parents can do, after the event. What say, Lakshman? Are you open to that? Or do you think your parents might get too upset?"

Lakshman grinned, a light of mischief in his eyes. "My parents are adorable and I've never crossed them. Sometimes, a bit of adventure can be fun, right?" He winked at Grandma and Ruma shut her eyes in horror. Was he flirting with her grandmother?

Ganga's laughter rang out through the restaurant.

13

Ruma couldn't escape a meeting with Bunty and his parents. "Aren't you looking beautiful, Ruma dahling!" gushed his mother Bhanu, admiring the young woman who was dressed in Indian ethnic at her mother's insistence. Ruma wore a *salwaz kameez* of Tussar silk in the colour of a peacock's neck—blue shot with green. It was heavily embroidered with gold *zari* and pearls. She wore a matching necklace of emeralds and sapphires that glittered at her throat. She hadn't wanted to remove Lakshman's gift and wore it like a talisman under the necklace, close to her skin. Matching chandelier earrings grazed her shoulders as she turned her head this way and that, trying to take in the conversation going on around her.

Everyone was in high spirits, literally, when Bunty waylaid her. "Why don't we take a walk around the garden?"

Ruma withheld the shudder that went through her at his proximity. Not having a choice, she went along with him, pretending not to see the hand he extended towards her. "So, are you all set for marriage?" he asked, arrogantly confident that she was his for the taking.

Ruma nodded. Well, she didn't have to tell him that her bridegroom had another name.

He gave her a stupid grin, thinking that his father would be so happy and proud of him. The Malhotra finances would go a great way to bolstering the Vaswanis' dwindling business prospects. "Shall we seal it with a kiss?"

Oh my God! Ruma turned the other way, doing her best to appear shy.

"Ruma." He took her hand in his. "Come on, we're going to be married soon." He put his other hand on her chin to turn her face towards him.

She kept her eyes lowered, not wanting him to see the temper building in them. "Please," her voice came out in a whisper. "Can't we wait till the engagement?"

Bunty sighed. It looked like he was going to get an extremely shy bride. He

shrugged, dropping her chin and her hand. It was a good thing that he hadn't yet said 'goodbye' to the woman he was having an affair with. And if he was getting a cold fish for a wife, maybe it would be for the best if he didn't part ways with that woman at all.

They walked back to the part of the garden where their respective parents were seated, planning the engagement party. Grandma was also there, as she kept nodding and shaking her head weakly, pretending to feeling old and tired.

Rati looked at her daughter proudly as she walked into the circle of light. Ruma had obviously come to her senses. Bunty and Ruma did make a smart-looking couple.

"We're planning to hold the engagement six weeks from now, after we get a date from our family *pandit*," declared Shyam Malhotra. "We need the time to ensure that the affair is grand enough. I think we will stick to just two hundred guests. What say, Deepak?"

Deepak Vaswani nodded his head, a greedy smile on his face. "But of course, Shyam. I'm sure you know what's best for your daughter."

Ganga gritted her teeth as she saw Bunty walking closely beside her granddaughter. The man was unfit to kiss the ground Ruma walked on. It was time to plan her secret wedding to Lakshman. That night, Ganga had a long chat with him, keeping his cell phone engaged, much to Ruma's frustration.

"Why the hell was your phone busy till now?" Ruma's voice broke when Lakshman finally called her past midnight. She had tried calling him so many times.

"Sweetheart, I..."

"Don't "sweetheart" me. Didn't you hear the beeps from my calls? I called you twenty-two times." Ruma's voice almost broke as tears sprung to her eyes. Today, of all days, she needed him. She so needed his arms around her. While Bunty had just held her chin, she still felt besmirched by his touch.

"I know, love. I'm sorry. But, you might want to hear what I've to say. It just might cheer you up." Lakshman's voice was soothing. He knew she had met the

Vaswanis as her parents had insisted, even if he didn't know what had taken place between Ruma and Bunty. Grandma had updated him on the meeting and the plan for the engagement party.

"Nothing can cheer me up right now." She paused, before saying, "Unless you're here in Delhi." Knowing full well that it was simply wishful thinking, she continued, "Let me tell you what happened today. Bunty wanted to kiss me." She declared dramatically, confident of shaking up his calm demeanour.

"He didn't succeed," declared Lakshman, a smile in his voice. How he wished he had her in his arms! Ruma was so obviously upset by the evening's events. And over that, he hadn't taken her calls. But then, the chat with Grandma had been the need of the hour.

"How do you know?" Ruma was miffed and wanted to pick a fight with him.

"Well, he's not in the hospital. So, I presume..." he laughed softly, "I love you Ruma."

"Now he tells me," complained Ruma, doing her best not to smile. "Laki, why aren't you here, holding me in your arms? I miss you. I want you. I love you."

"Whoa! Aren't I lucky? Okay, that wasn't a pun." He laughed again.

"Haha! Very pun-ny. So, you said you have something to say that might cheer me up. Or do you want to hear my bad news first?"

"You tell me. Let's save the best for the last."

"I'll be engaged to Bunty Vaswani after six weeks; will give you the exact date once I have it." She hoped she had wiped the laughter from his face. Laki could be so 'duh' at times, easygoing about everything. There was a time to chill and there was a time to get angry. Life can't be all fun, can it?

Well, she didn't know the Maheshwaris. "If you're done with your bad news, here's my good news..."

"Laki, did you even hear what I said?" Ruma yelled on the phone. She wanted to throw something at him. Why the hell did he have to be so far away?

“Of course, my love. You were loud and clear.” Lakshman’s voice was amused.

“Don’t you have anything to say about it?” Her lips trembled in anger and self-pity. Shouldn’t he be feeling sorry for her? She could do with some tender, loving care right now.

“Well, I was trying to give you some great news that’ll most definitely cheer you up. I...”

“I don’t want to hear it,” yelled Ruma, before cutting the call. She jumped off her bed, fuming. How could he be so insensitive to her pain? She had told her boyfriend, the man who had promised to wed her, the man she loved, that she was going to be forced into an engagement with another guy. And all he did was laugh. How could he? Had she misunderstood his character? She lifted the pillows and cushions on her bed and threw them forcefully one by one, her temper going out of control.

Even as she turned to pick up the lamp at her bedside, she heard a knock on her bedroom door. Grandma came in even as Ruma replaced the lamp on the side table. Saved by the knock indeed! “*Daadima*.” She rushed to Ganga and hugged her tightly, tears flowing down her cheeks. “I think I’ve made a mistake. Lakshman...”

“Did you speak to him? He must have given you some wonderful news.”

“*Daadima*,” yelled Ruma, stamping her foot in rage. “I don’t care about his news, wonderful or otherwise. I...” She stopped mid-sentence when Ganga laughed softly. And her Grandma was anything but cruel. Ruma calmed down enough to ask, “What did I miss?”

“Lakshman’s brother’s wedding is next week...”

“I don’t give a damn. Ask Lakshman also to get married on the same day. I hate him,” said Ruma in a loud whisper, tempestuous tears pouring down her face. She didn’t like losing control of her life. If she had her way, she’d leave her home right now. Maybe she would, at that.

“Ruma.” Grandma hugged her. “Why don’t you let me finish?” She stroked her

granddaughter's head. "You obviously didn't let Lakshman tell you either." Ruma's phone had been ringing continuously. "Do you want to take his call?"

"I don't." Ruma was vehement. "He doesn't care about me. He laughs too much and is too insensitive to my situation." She walked to where she had left her phone on the bed and cut the call.

"What is your situation?" asked Grandma.

"You too *Daadima*? How could you? I'm going to be engaged to the moron of the century in six weeks and you're asking me that?" Ruma's voice rose with her temper.

"Anything can happen in six weeks, Ruma. Do you know, a kangaroo gives birth to a joey in lesser time? The gestation period..."

"Will you get to the point, *Daadima*? I'm not interested in how a baby kangaroo is born." Ruma sniffed. Did no one care about her?

"If you'll let me, yes." She looked at her cell when it rang and switched it on, even as she continued to talk to Ruma. "That's your boyfriend on the phone." She raised a hand to stop her granddaughter from saying anything. "You know I got back to my room before the Vaswanis left. I thought it best to keep Lakshman updated on what's happening. That's when we came to a conclusion that it's best you both got married in secret soon after his brother's wedding." She'd left her phone on so that he could also hear them.

But Ruma had stuck her fingers in her ears, shaking her head wildly. "I don't want to know." She paused when she heard the words 'marriage' and 'secret' and removed her fingers. "*Daadima*," her voice turned soft. "You're planning to get us married secretly, way before the engagement that Dad's planning." A smile broke out on her face as she walked towards Ganga.

"Yes, my dear. And that's what Lakshman and I have been trying to tell you. I'm sorry that I spoke to him for so long. But then, I hadn't realised you were back in your room."

Ruma had the grace to look sheepish. "I'm sorry *Daadima*, for yelling at you." She hugged her grandmother before taking her cell and speaking into it, "I'm

really, really sorry Laki.”

This time, she joined him when he laughed.

14

Ram and Sapna's wedding had been yesterday and the couple had left on their honeymoon that morning. Lakshman had sent a WhatsApp message to Chanda that he needed to talk to her and Ranveer in private. They decided to go for a drive in the afternoon after lunch when most of their families were settling down for a nap.

Chanda insisted on driving Lakshman's new car— a white Volkswagen Ameo—from their home in Vaishali Nagar to the Cafe Coffee Day outlet at Yudhister Marg that was about twenty-five minutes away. "You're driving really well nowadays, Chanda," complimented Lakshman from the back of his car.

They gave the car to a valet and walked into Hotel Shikha to find an empty table in a corner of CCD. Lakshman insisted on getting their orders—two cappuccinos and a strawberry smoothie for Chanda.

Lakshman sat down across the couple who were seated on a sofa and cleared his throat, smiling.

"Okay, Lakshman, do tell. What's cooking?" asked Chanda, grinning at him as she took a sip of her smoothie. Though he was the quietest of the Maheshwari siblings, she of all people knew when he was up to some mischief. Though rare, he loved to have his fun.

"I'm getting married next week, in secret." Lakshman sat back to enjoy his coffee as he watched Chanda almost choke on her next sip.

Ranveer patted her back even as he turned to give his brother-in-law a mock glare. "Why the cloak-and-dagger?" he asked outright. As far as he knew, Mohan and Meera were the most outgoing parents. He couldn't understand why Lakshman needed to be secretive.

Lakshman grinned. "I know what you mean. But a marriage takes two, right? Ruma's parents wouldn't hear of it. We..."

"Wait a minute. You said Ruma. Would that be Ruma Malhotra?" asked Ranveer,

his face widening in a grin.

Lakshman nodded. “Yeah.”

Chanda raised a small fist to hit him on his shoulder, before getting up and hugging him close. “Congratulations Lakshman, even if I’d like to kill you for all the secrecy. It’s obviously Ruma who you’ve been meeting on those visits to Delhi.” She tried to glare at her brother, but failed as a happy smile insisted on breaking out on her face.

Lakshman hugged her back. “So, it’s like this. Ruma’s grandmother insists that the only way Ruma could become mine is if we get married in secret, before the engagement they are planning for her with Bunty Vaswani.” He grimaced as he mentioned the name that he had begun to vehemently dislike.

“Have you decided where? I suppose it’ll be in Delhi, right?”

Lakshman nodded again.

“Let’s do it at our place,” said Ranveer, “unless you’ve fixed up elsewhere?” He raised a dark brow at his brother-in-law.

“Not yet. I don’t think Ruma or her grandmother has thought of a place either. Are you sure?” He was so glad of Chanda and Ranveer’s support.

“Yes, man, of course. Congrats bro. You guys rock!” he grinned.

“I hope Ruma’s grandmother will get hold of a *panditji* for the ceremony. I’ll take care of the rest of it,” said Chanda.

“One important thing though. This is between only the five of us, okay?” said Lakshman, his eyes shining with mischief. He was enjoying this secretive adventure too much. He wasn’t worried about his parents. He knew how to cajole them into accepting his wife when the time came.

Chanda nodded vigorously, loving it as much as her favourite brother. She was also confident that they’d be able to bring the family around.

“You guys are just amazing,” said Ranveer, shaking his head. “Why not tell your

parents? They are pretty cool.”

Brother and sister shook their heads. “Of course they are,” said Chanda, “so cool that they’ll land up at Ruma’s place, asking for her hand. They can’t believe that other parents could be tyrants. I’m sure Lakshman’s trying to avoid exactly that.” She turned to look at her brother who nodded his head in agreement.

“Exactly. Mamma and Pappa think that all parents give absolute freedom to their kids.” He shrugged. “I’m confident they can be brought around. They know I’d never hurt them.”

Ranveer nodded in understanding. He adored the Maheshwari family—all of them. He gave Lakshman the “thumbs-up” and said, “So give me a date and we’ll organise stuff. And do you have a plan after the wedding?”

“July 21. It’s a Thursday. We go on a honeymoon immediately after that. Ruma goes back to work on the following Monday morning and I’ll be back in Jaipur. She’ll continue to live with her parents. They are planning her engagement on August 20. We’ve a vague plan in place. I’ll be gate-crashing the event. Let’s see.” Lakshman shrugged, not appearing too worried.

Ranveer shook his head, grinning. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Of course I am,” said Lakshman, grinning back.

“Didn’t Ruma talk to her parents? Okay, strike out the question. Of course she must have. Can’t imagine parents interfering so much in their adult children’s lives.”

“I’m glad of *Daadima’s* support in all this. And she’s planning to get some reinforcements from Mumbai. Her husband’s brother—Mr. Raj Malhotra—and his family. They are hoping that he and his son Akshay will make Ruma’s parents see sense.”

“This surely calls for a treat. Let me get some dessert.” Ranveer got up from his seat. “What would you guys prefer?”

“I’ll have an ice-cream,” said Chanda.

“I’ll take a bite from hers,” said Lakshman, not a fan of sweets. Ranveer nodded before walking to the counter.

Chanda looked at her brother. “Thank you Lakshman. I’m thrilled I’m going to be there at your wedding. We’ll make it a memorable affair. I’ll get together with Ruma about the little things that need arranging.”

He hugged her. “I need one more favour. I want to buy Ruma some jewellery from Ram’s showroom. Only...”

She nodded. “No issues. We’ll go there directly from here, pretending to buy jewellery for me.”

“You want to go jewellery shopping?” asked her husband, having returned with their orders.

“Yes,” she said, hooking her arm into his, “for Lakshman’s bride-to-be.”

15

Chanda stopped at the reception the next morning to talk to Ruma. She hugged the older woman, whispering in her ear, “Welcome to the family.” She smiled when colour bloomed on Ruma’s face. “Two things. I’m playing messenger girl from your boyfriend. Will give you a call closer to lunch. Let’s meet in Ranveer’s cabin.”

Ranveer walked up behind his wife and put out a hand to shake his receptionist’s hand. “Congrats Ruma. I’ll be sorry to let you go from RS Software, but I’m glad you’ll be family.”

Ruma felt absolutely touched by their words. She smiled at them both shyly, nodding. “Thank you so much.”

It was past twelve when she left her post to meet Ranveer and Chanda in his cabin. “Sit down,” said Ranveer, showing the visitor’s chair next to Chanda.

Chanda lifted a shopping bag that was on the table and handed it to Ruma. “Go on, open it and see what it contains,” she smiled, rather proud of her brother who had bought a sari as well as jewellery for his bride.

Ruma was pretty excited as she pulled a cardboard box out of the bag. Opening it, she gasped. It was a Benarasi silk sari that was in a shade of mango yellow. The border and *pallu* had both maroon and green and was worked over heavily in gold *zari*. The sari was heavy and came with a matching blouse. There was more. She found a large jewellery box. Her eyes went wide when she opened it. It contained a multi-layered *kundan* necklace of diamonds with a circular pendant that had an uncut ruby the size of a pigeon’s egg at the centre. It was surrounded by concentric circles of emeralds and diamonds. A pair of matching *jhumkas* was part of the set as was a broad bracelet. There were four pairs of gold bangles, two set with diamonds, one with emeralds and diamonds and the fourth with rubies and diamonds. There was also a matching *maang tikka*. Ruma was completely overwhelmed.

She turned to look at Chanda, turning emotional as she hugged her sister-in-law-to-be. “These are too beautiful. I need your help. I can’t take these home. Can

you please keep them for me till the wedding?”

Chanda nodded. “Yes, of course. You just take the blouse material with you and get it stitched. Oh, by the way, I don’t know if Lakshman told you. Your wedding will be taking place in our home.”

Ruma nodded. “Yeah, Laki told me. I don’t know what to say.” Her smile included Ranveer. “Thank you so much.”

Ranveer grinned. “Don’t. We’re family. We’d like to meet your grandmother. I hear she’s quite a feisty lady. Do you think we can arrange something this week?”

“Of course. I’m sure *Daadima* would love to meet you all.”

“Why don’t you bring her home for lunch on Saturday?” suggested Chanda. “You can check out the wedding venue at the same time.” She caught Ranveer’s look and said, “Oops!” with a smile in her charcoal eyes. It had been Ruma that Lakshman had been entertaining at their home on that Sunday when Ranveer had taken Chanda out for the day. That had completely slipped her mind.

Ruma turned a fiery red. She nodded slowly, not meeting Chanda’s eyes. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

Chanda put her hand on Ruma’s that was on her lap. “I hope you are up to some teasing. We siblings are all the same, we so love to pull people’s legs.”

Ruma smiled. “Yeah, I know. I think Laki’s probably the quietest of the lot and still he...”

Ranveer laughed. “You got that in a nutshell. Welcome to the Maheshwari madness.”

Chanda gave him a mock glare. “Very funny.”

Ruma laughed, feeling truly happy. She couldn’t wait to get married to the man of her dreams. And the secretive nature of the event excited her no end.

“And Ranveer, on a different subject, about my job. I hope you wouldn’t mind

my continuing to work for such time till I shift to Jaipur. I...”

“Of course. And I understand you don’t have a fixed date. Not an issue,” Ranveer assured her.

“Actually, I’m hoping to join cake decorating classes as Laki is planning to take me as a partner in his business. I...”

“Wow! That’s just awesome,” said Chanda. “He must love you absolutely if he’s doing that. I’m impressed,” she winked at the other girl.

Ruma turned red again, smiling at the compliment and continued, “The classes are from 3 to 6 pm four days a week. I’m wondering how to deal with it. If I quit the job now, my parents will want to know ‘why’ for one thing. And I’ll be forced to spend more time at home which I want to avoid at all costs. Could you please help me out here?” Ranveer was boss as well as family now and hence Ruma had no qualms asking him.

“Let’s do one thing. We’ll scout for your replacement immediately and take someone on board. You can train the person in the mornings and she can takeover in the second half. While you get your afternoons free, the company wouldn’t suffer when you leave in a month or two or three. Works?”

Ruma gave him a wide smile. She could have hugged him. “That’ll be perfect, Ranveer. Thank you so much. You don’t have to pay both of us. I can...”

“I know you’re going to be one rich woman, Ruma. But that doesn’t mean you’ve to work free for RS Software. And after all, you’ve been with us right from the beginning. Do something. Write an email to me, copying Abhimanyu on it, resigning your job. You don’t give a reason as we don’t want to spread word of your upcoming nuptials. I’ll take it with the HR from there.”

“That’ll be awesome, Ranveer.” She got up to take their leave. “I’ll bring *Daadima* to your place for lunch on Saturday. Thank you again, both of you.”

Chanda and Ranveer got up too. Chanda hugged Ruma, saying, “Looking forward to it. See you.”

16

Guess who was there at Ranveer-Chanda's home on Saturday to greet Ruma and her Grandma? It was none other than Lakshman. He greeted Grandma before pulling Ruma into a bear hug, kissing her on her blushing cheek. "All set for the secret wedding, sweetheart?" he whispered in her ear.

"Oh yes," she replied enthusiastically, giving him a brief kiss on his lips. He hadn't breathed a word to her about coming over. "I love you," she whispered back, smiling up at him.

With his arm snug around her waist, and another around Grandma's shoulders, Lakshman led the two women into the living room and introduced Ranveer and Chanda to Grandma.

They all sat down to lunch, discussing the details of the wedding. "I've organised for an *Arya Samaj Pandit* to perform the wedding. He'll bring all the materials for the ritual," said Chanda.

Ganga nodded her head. "Thank you Chanda. I'm glad you're taking care of it. If we approach our family *Pandit*, talk would get back to Ruma's parents immediately," she smiled.

"I guessed as much, aunty. You don't worry about anything. It'll be the five of us. Will any of your friends be coming, Ruma?"

"Yeah, two of my besties." She'd known Sandy and Tammy since nursery.

"Right. That's the venue, ritual, clothes and guests taken care of. We've organised lunch through a caterer we know. Anything else?" asked Ranveer, referring to Chanda's checklist. The two of them had picked Lakshman from the airport that morning and had gone shopping for the bridegroom's clothes—a resplendent *churidar-kurta* in cream and gold.

"Do we hire a beautician, Ruma?" asked Chanda.

Ruma shook her head. "My friends and I'll manage. The lesser people who

know about the wedding, the better. What say?”

Lakshman nodded. “Absolutely. And you look gorgeous anyway,” he winked at her, even as she pouted at him.

“The *muhurat* is at 10.30 am. You’re welcome to come the earlier day itself...”

Ganga thought for a minute before turning to Ruma. “Do you think it makes sense for you to be here from the earlier night? I’ll come in the morning. That way, we both won’t need to leave the house together in the morning, facing unnecessary questions. What say?”

“Yes *Daadima*, since you rarely stay out at night, it’s best you come in the morning as we don’t want to raise any suspicion. I’m anyway going to tell them that I’m out of town for four days. So, I’ll be here the earlier night.” Ruma’s eyes shone in anticipation. “Will you be able to get out in the morning? What if...?”

“You don’t worry about that. I’ll manage,” said Ganga, with a determined lift to her chin. She was enjoying this too much and planned to see it through.

Ruma turned to Chanda and said, “Thank you Chanda. It’d be best that I come here the night before the wedding. It’s really nice of...”

Chanda raised a hand to stop her mid-sentence. “I thought we’re a family? Don’t keep thanking me for everything,” she smiled.

After lunch, Lakshman took Ruma upstairs on the pretext of showing her his wedding clothes, leaving the others to discuss the finer details. He pulled her into his arms the moment he shut the bedroom door. “I love you, Ruma. Been missing you badly,” he said, smothering her lips with a deep kiss. Silence reigned in the room as their tongues mated. His hands moved restlessly at her waist, lifting her *kurti* to caress her waist above the flared cotton skirt she was wearing. “Did I tell you how sexy you look?” he whispered in her ear, tracing its shape with the tip of his tongue.

Ruma shivered, her nerve-ends alive, turning her head to give him better access. “Tell me more.”

He continued to whisper, telling her what all he wanted to do to her during their honeymoon. She almost swooned in delight, listening to him making verbal love to her. Her breasts were taut with desire while the tight buds grazed against his firm chest. Lakshman could feel her reaction against his body and took care to keep his hands at her back.

“I was planning a honeymoon in Kasauli. We’ll leave immediately after the wedding lunch and catch a flight to Chandigarh and take a cab to Kasauli, spending three days and nights there. We’ll take a return flight on Sunday evening, first stop at Delhi where you get off, and I'll take the same flight to Jaipur. Works for you?” He didn’t much care for the idea of her having to go home on her own. But then, he wouldn’t be able to escort her to her home anyway. Though the secrecy was fun to an extent, it was also a strange experience for Lakshman as he’d never felt the need for it, ever before.

Ruma lifted her head that had been buried in his shoulder, to look into his dark gaze. “I suppose. Though I’m going to miss you terribly after that.”

He ran a hand through her soft, silky hair. “Not for long. And that’s another thing. How are we going to break the news to your family?”

“We aren’t. *Daadima’s* going to handle it. She’s planning to invite you to my supposed engagement to Bunty. Close relatives of ours from Mumbai, will also be there. She plans to take their help. We’re hoping when presented with the news of our marriage, in front of so many relatives and friends, my parents will have no choice but to accept it.”

“But won’t it get too awkward that way? What if your parents feel too ashamed and get angry because of that?” He didn’t much care for this kind of drama.

“Let’s go down. I’ll let *Daadima* explain it all to you. I think she knows her son best.”

“Sure. But give me two more minutes before that,” requested Lakshman, bending down to capture her lips in a fiery kiss.

17

The house was filled with soft *shehnai* music that played from the hidden speakers in the living room. Ruma was getting ready in the room next to Lakshman's, with the help of her two friends.

She was sitting on a small leather stool in a yellow petticoat of superfine cotton and a bottle green silk blouse with a slim golden *zari* border at the neck and the edges of the sleeves that reached below her elbow. Her back was almost bare except for an inch of silk material that covered her bra strap.

Sandy was applying foundation to Ruma's face and back while Tammy opened out the silk sari and spread it on the bed, ready to be draped around the bride. The jewellery was also set out next to the sari.

Lakshman walked in just then, already dressed up. "Hey, aren't you ready yet?" His eyes met Ruma's via the mirror as he gave her a small wink.

She turned around to look at him, her mouth wide. "Laki, you make an awfully handsome bridegroom," she winked back. He looked good enough to eat, his longish curls brushed back neatly, his face clean shaven except for the luxuriant moustache that she adored. His *kurta* of dull gold fit snugly on his broad shoulders that needed no padding, falling down to below his knees. She hugged him close when he walked up to her. Looking up into his black gaze, she promised, "I'll be down in fifteen minutes."

He kissed her on the tip of her nose and nodded before leaving the room, closing the door quietly behind him. The girls worked fast and Ruma was ready in lesser time. She looked at herself in the mirror, smiling at her reflection. "Sandy, Tammy, I'm off now. Do get ready and come down soon." *Daadima* must have arrived by now, though there was still half an hour to go before the *muhurat*.

She ran down the stairs, her bare feet making no noise, and entered the hall. Who was that tall guy, sitting next to *Daadima*? "Akshay *chachu*." Ruma rushed to Akshay Malhotra. Akshay was her father's cousin, though much younger. "This is a surprise," she said, hugging him when he stood up.

Akshay hugged her back, moving her away a few inches to look down at her. “Ruma,” he grinned. “I’m glad that I’m part of this secret ceremony.” He’d already met Lakshman and was totally impressed with Ruma’s groom. “I was just telling Lakshman how lucky he is to wed my favourite niece.”

Ruma pouted at him, blushing. She turned to Grandma and hugged her tight. “How come Akshay *chachu’s* here?” Not that she minded.

Ganga said, “I called him for moral support. I got a bit jittery yesterday at what we’re about to do,” giving her granddaughter a wide smile. “You look gorgeous, my child.”

Ruma grinned, kissing her grandmother’s cheek. “Thank you *Daadima*. So do you.” She turned to greet Chanda and Ranveer before going to sit beside Lakshman. They all chatted amicably, waiting for the *Pandit* to turn up. “How is Sunita? You should have brought her too.”

Akshay shook his head. “Not if you want to keep this wedding a secret. One of us has to be with Akshara and Suryansh as they’ve become too much of a handful for Mom and Dad to manage. They’ve become very naughty nowadays.” There was immense pride in Akshay’s voice as he spoke about his kids. “And if they come to the wedding, it won’t be a secret anymore,” he grinned.

Ruma smiled back at him. Both his kids—her second cousins, actually— were adorable. “How old are they now?”

“Akshara’s seven and Suryansh’s almost four. His birthday is in a couple of months.”

Lakshman sat back, listening to the conversation between the surprise guest and his bride-to-be. The man had thoroughly grilled him before Ruma came down. If he had been Ruma’s *chacha*, he would have done the same. But that still didn’t stop him from resenting it. And he didn’t like Ruma’s obvious closeness to her relative. He saw that Akshay Malhotra was probably in his mid-to-late thirties, not all that much older than Ruma. Yeah, he was her father’s first cousin and married with kids too. But Lakshman still felt jealous. Sandy and Tammy’s familiarity with “*chacha*” was the last straw. Lakshman got up from his chair, feeling restless and irritated. He walked away to stand at the window. He turned

when he felt a soft touch, as Ruma entwined her fingers with his. She pressed her head against his shoulder, and said, “Are you nervous?”

He turned a frowning face to her, a light of battle in his obsidian eyes. “Not at all. Should I be?” His voice was gruff.

“Laki, is something wrong?” asked Ruma, her smile disappearing. Her bridegroom looked angry. Was he getting cold feet?

He shook his head. “Nope.”

She knew him better. Uncaring about the others in the room, she placed her arms around his neck, pressing her soft lips to his in a gentle kiss. She nipped his lower lip and whispered only for his hearing, “I love you and can’t wait to become your wife. Do you love me?” She moved away to gaze intensely at him with her melting chocolate eyes, her feelings for him obvious.

A smile broke out on Lakshman’s tense face at her gesture. “I love you too, absolutely.” He crushed her in his arms, kissing her right back. “And I so want to be your husband.” He didn’t care if he was wearing her lipstick now as it had obviously disappeared from her lips.

She grinned, wiping his lips with a tissue. “You seemed a bit angry before.”

“Yeah, I feel jealous of the closeness you share with your uncle,” admitted Lakshman. He was too honest to hide it.

Ruma’s laughter tinkled across the room as she shook her head at the man she loved. “*Tum bhi* Laki. You know I love you too much. Akshay *chachu’s* more like a brother than an uncle as he’s only fifteen years older than me. And he’s too crazy about his wife to look at another woman in that light.” She hugged him again. “There’s no need to feel jealous of any other guy in my life. I don’t need anyone else when I have you,” she declared passionately. “The wedding ceremony is but a ritual for the sake of society as far as I’m concerned. I’m already yours.”

Lakshman fell more in love with Ruma at that moment. “As I’m yours,” he said, his eyes glowing with love and passion.

The *Pandit* came and the wedding took place over the next one hour, quietly beautiful and wonderfully touching. Chanda missed her parents and other brothers as she watched Lakshman place the *sindoor* at the top of his bride's forehead. As Ruma was wary of wearing a *mangalsutra* in secrecy, they had decided to exchange rings. The matching wedding bands were circles of diamonds, closely set in gold and a gift from Chanda and Ranveer.

Lakshman wiped his scowl with an effort, mindful of his bride's words, as Akshay placed a gold chain around his neck and a bracelet on his right wrist. "A gift from the bride's family," the man insisted. Lakshman thanked him graciously, "Thank you, sir."

"Do call me Akshay," smiled the guest.

Lakshman nodded his head, giving the other man a small smile. "Sure."

The new bride watched the interchange between her two favourite men and smiled widely. The wedding ceremony over, the bride and groom got up from their seats to take *Daadima's* blessings. Ganga pulled them into her arms as they touched her feet and kissed them in turn on their foreheads. "Have a wonderful life, my children. I must thank you for making me part of this secret wedding. It's been thrilling, I must say." She was all smiles, glad of having brought the young lovers together. She wasn't too worried about her son and daughter-in-law's reactions now. The deed was done and the knot was tied.

Chanda hugged her brother and her new sister-in-law. "Congratulations." Ranveer also hugged the two, wishing them well. Ruma's chattering friends came forward to hug the bride and groom.

"This is such fun. I think I'm going to have a secret marriage too," said Sandy. "Our weddings are usually so crowded and noisy that we don't really know what's happening. Yours was so classy, Ruma."

Tammy nodded. "Truly amazing." She turned to hug Ruma's grandmother. "I wish I'd a Grandma like you. So supportive. Ruma's so lucky to have you *Daadima*."

Ganga turned red on hearing that, hugging Tammy back.

The wedding brunch was noisy and fun as all of them attacked the lavish and sumptuous spread with relish.

18

Lakshman and Ruma were tired and famished after the long journey. The flight to Chandigarh had lasted less than an hour. But the cab ride from the airport to the Birds View Resort in Kasauli had taken a little more than three hours.

Lakshman had booked a private cottage there that was set far away from the reception and gave them all the privacy they needed. After checking in, they ordered room service. The food arrived fast. The two of them stepped out of their cottage to take a walk after dinner, checking out their surroundings. The place boasted of a number of trees and flowering shrubs. There was a square grass verge and they took a few rounds there.

They returned to the room after half an hour. “I’ll have a shower, I think,” said Ruma, going into the bathroom. Her heart beat wildly when she realised that they would be making love soon. She couldn’t help but recall the scene at the bedroom in Laki’s factory. Unlike that day, she felt nervous. She had a hot shower, washing away the traces of their long journey. Ruma refused to look Lakshman in the face as she stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towelling robe.

“Hey.” Lakshman lifted her chin with his forefinger. She was gorgeous. He had to control himself from pulling the robe off her and making love to her there and then. When she continued to look down, he said, “My darling wife,” and pressed his lips to her cheek.

She buried her face against his chest, her arms going around his waist, not saying anything.

“Is something wrong, my love?” he asked, his lips against her ear, the moustache brushing against the sensitive area behind her ear.

She shook her head. “No.” Her voice was muffled.

“Are you sure? Why won’t you look at me?”

Ruma lifted her head off his chest and turned her face up. Her eyelids weighed

heavily as she seemed to have difficulty in raising them, looking at him through half-closed eyes.

Was this the same woman who had insisted on being made love to in his office? Lakshman smiled gently. “What happened? You’re already regretting becoming my wife?” he asked, tongue-firmly-in-cheek.

Her eyes opened wide as she shook her head vigorously. “No, of course not. Don’t be silly. I...” She stopped, seeing his grin. “You’re pulling my leg.”

Lakshman laughed softly. “What else to do? You can’t go all shy on me on our wedding night,” he declared, his black eyes roving her lovely features.

Ruma felt the heat of his gaze and shivered. She raised a hand to caress his rough cheek. “I hope I don’t disappoint you.”

“Hmm.” He nibbled at the corner of her mouth. “And what if I disappoint you?” he asked softly.

“What?!” Ruma jerked her head away and stared at him. Was he maybe teasing her again? But he looked so damn serious. “How could you disappoint me?” she asked.

He smiled as he shrugged wide shoulders. “Exactly.”

Light dawned on Ruma’s face as she blushed a soft pink. “Oh!”

“Hold that thought. I’ll be out in a jiffy,” he said, walking into the bathroom.

Ruma rummaged in her bag to remove a cotton nightshirt and pulled it on. She brushed her hair and checked herself out in the mirror, turning first this way and then the other. Not bad! Yeah, she was busty, but otherwise her figure was near perfect. Okay, maybe the thighs could be slimmer. Still, not bad at all. She twirled in front of the mirror and stopped, her breath catching in her throat when she saw her husband walking out of the bathroom, wearing a towel around his waist. She stared at him, her eyes rounded. His chest glistened with droplets of water. Fascinated, she walked up to him, bending her head to lick a drop that was sliding down his stomach.

“Ruma...” Lakshman’s hand went to her hair, pulling her head up to his. He kissed her fervently, locking his tongue with hers. His arms went around her as he pulled her close, his hands caressing her lush bottom, squeezing them gently.

Ruma went on tiptoe, standing on his feet, giving him better access. She couldn’t miss the bulge pressing against her stomach. She drew a caressing hand down his chest and reached his waist. Encountering the towel, she gave a soft laugh. Looking up at him mischievously, she asked, “I hope you aren’t going to stop me this time?”

Lakshman grinned at her. “I’d never say ‘no’ to my wife.” He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her back on the pillows, joining her. One hand toyed at the neckline of her nightshirt, while the other caressed a cheek. His tongue traced the pulse at her throat, leaving a hot trail as he moved down her body. Ruma felt breathless at the assault on her senses, tracing a caressing hand on his cheek. “You shaved,” she exclaimed, enjoying the smooth texture against her palm.

“Hmm.” he nuzzled against the curve of her breast, taking small bites. Ruma whimpered, loving the sensation. Her nightshirt felt too hot against her skin. Lakshman lifted her up to a sitting position and gently removed her clothing, his eyes feasting on her. “You look beautiful,” he said, bending down to kiss a silky shoulder.

Ruma held his head close, her hands weaving into his dark curls, her body shuddering in arousal as she felt his tongue trace a path down the middle of her chest. His hands had curled around her breasts, the thumbs tracing her turgid nipples. Heat pooled between her legs as she thrashed them restlessly. Lakshman moved, to lie sideways next to her, his mouth at her right breast. She could feel his smile against her body and asked, “What?”

He lifted his head to give her a twinkling glance and said, “This is the discriminated breast, right?” before bending down to continue with his caresses.

Ruma forgot to smile as she felt his teeth graze the tip of her breast, arousing her to fever pitch. He nipped, he stroked and sucked at her breast, his hand moving down her body, even as he moved to give the same attention to its twin. His hand stopped when it reached her navel, his finger tracing the strange object. “What’s this?” Lakshman got up to look at the miniscule diamond stud that graced her

belly button. “Why didn’t I notice this before?”

She smiled at him shyly. “Do you like it?”

“You look damn sexy with that little diamond on your navel.” He bent down to kiss her on the spot, his tongue dipping into her navel, even as Ruma choked on her next breath. “Does it hurt?”

She shook her head. “Not now, it doesn’t. It hurt like crazy for a couple of days after I got it done, though.”

Lakshman grimaced, pulling her body close to his. “Aww, you poor baby. If it’s any help, it looks damn cute.”

She raised a hand to trace a path down his chest, the nerve-ends on her palms crackling with electricity. She walked her hand down his flat abdomen to reach out lower. Encountering his towel, she looked up at him. “May I?”

Lakshman nodded, his gaze sizzling all over her body. He shut his eyes as a groan left him when he felt her touch on his shaft. Her fingers stroked him in a feather light caress, making him painfully hard. He put his hand on hers to stop her.

“You don’t like it?” she asked, looking at him with eyes the colour of melting chocolate, her lips in a sinful pout.

He smiled, a pained expression on his face. “I love it. But you’re going too fast. Now tell me, are you a virgin? Not that it matters to me. Only, I don’t want to hurt you if it’s your first time.”

Ruma pulled him close, burying her face in the crook of his shoulder. “No man has seen me in my birthday suit,” she whispered.

Lakshman hugged her tightly, burying his lips on hers. His tongue stroked her lips, seeking entry before tangling with hers. He gently sucked on her tongue, driving her nuts. Ruma pressed closer, revelling in the feel of his rough chest against her soft, swollen breasts.

He traced a hand down her stomach to touch her thigh, caressing her from hip to

knee. When they came up for breath, she asked, “Do you think I’m fat?”

“Hmm.” He was busy nipping her ear lobe when he heard her. “I love your shape, exactly the way you are. Why?” She forgot to answer with the sensations flooding in her as he nibbled on the pulse at her neck.

Ruma decided to explore too as she traced a tongue on his ear lobe. When she heard him moan hungrily, she got bolder and took a bite, loving the taste as her tongue flicked out to ease the pain. Her eyes glazed when she felt his hand touch her mound, caressing it gently.

Lakshman parted the lips of her sex to gently stroke a finger within. She was all wet and ready. He moved, preparing to enter her. “I’ll try my best to not hurt you, though you might feel some pain.”

Ruma didn’t care. She needed him to do something, urgently. Her legs thrashed wildly, her hands moving on his back. “Laki, I need you. Please...”

He positioned himself above her, lifting her left leg to drape it around his waist. He entered her in one hard stroke and paused, hugging her close as he heard her scream. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry,” he said, kissing her on her forehead, then her nose and her cheek.

She felt the pain reduce and moved restlessly, her body calling out for more.

And Lakshman moved, in and out, in and out, his heart and lungs bursting with the pressure building up in his body.

Ruma gasped, picking up the rhythm as she clung to him, wrapping her other leg also around his waist. As the tempo built up, she thought she might stop breathing. Was she dying? If she was, she was surely going to heaven. And then the stars exploded behind her eyelids, even as she called out his name. “Lakiiiii...”

Lakshman came apart a few seconds later, his body convulsing as he spilt his seed within her. He fell against his wife, his breath coming out in a whoosh. That had been explosive.

“Did I hurt you badly?” he asked softly. They had been lying quietly in each

other’s arms, her hand stroking a line down his shoulder.

Ruma opened her eyes to look at her secret husband and smiled. “Nope. Not all that much.” She pressed her lips to his throat where a pulse was beating hard. “Is it too soon for an encore?”

19

Ruma hugged her secret deliciously to herself as she took an OLA cab from the airport to her home on Sunday evening. The past three days had been the most beautiful ones in her life. What a honeymoon!

They had barely stepped out of their room, only for a walk each day. Was she lucky to have a lover like Laki! She stopped counting the number of times they made love after the first three. She felt refreshed and alive even after sleeping barely 3-4 hours a day. She placed a hand over her mouth to stop the giggle that wanted to surface, checking quickly in the rear view mirror to see if the driver was watching.

It was back to work from tomorrow. She was also joining the cake decoration classes. She had been watching a lot of Youtube videos over the past couple of months, checking out cake designs for different occasions and varied recipes. The subject truly excited her and she was glad that the business model had already been set up by Laki. Another couple of months max, and she planned to shift to her secret husband's home.

She walked into her flat at 8 pm, calling out, "Hello, I'm home." Her parents and grandmother had sat down for dinner when she walked into the dining room. "Hello everyone! Let me get a plate and join you guys. Where are Ryan and Shaan?" She picked a plate from the side table even as her brothers walked in.

Her father Shyam grunted, concentrating on his plate. Rati asked, "So, how was your trip to Kasauli? Did you do a lot of trekking? I'm sure it must have been tiring." She shuddered. She didn't understand the modern generation's penchant for climbing mountains.

Ruma gave her silent grandmother a twinkling glance before answering her mother. "We had a wonderful time, Mom. The weather was simply beautiful and yeah, we did a lot of trekking."

Ryan turned to look at his sister. "What fun! I can't wait to finish college and enjoy myself the whole year around like you, Ruma."

“Idiot! I work the year around, just in case you’ve forgotten. Yeah, I also enjoy my trips.”

“But what a life—no home work, no projects.” Though Ryan complained, she knew how much her brother loved his course. Ryan worked hard, but loved to give the impression of being totally lazy.

“I hate climbing mountains,” declared Shaan. “Give me a beach, any time.”

Ruma chatted with her brothers, sitting down next to her grandmother. She pressed her left hand reassuringly on Ganga’s shoulder, letting her know that everything was fine. Only then did Grandma smile.

“Do you plan to go to work, *beta*? Why don’t you take an off if you want to recover from your hectic trip?” asked Ganga.

Rati nodded her head. “Yeah, why don’t you? There’s less than one month before your engagement. I don’t think the Vaswanis will let you work after that, anyway. Call and tell your office that you won’t be going tomorrow.”

“*Daadima*, I actually feel rejuvenated after my trip to the hills. Do I look tired to you?” asked Ruma, addressing her grandmother.

Ganga looked at Ruma’s radiant face and shook her head, smiling into the young woman’s eyes. “You’re right. You are glowing with good health. I suppose the mountain air has done you a lot of good.” She hugged her granddaughter, so glad for her. They had obviously done the right thing in marrying her off to the man she loved.

Ruma turned to her mother. “Mom, I’ll continue to work even after my marriage. I won’t let anyone dictate to me,” she said quietly.

Though Shyam appeared to be in his own world, he’d been listening to the conversation flying around him. “Ruma, you know that won’t be possible. If Bunty and his parents feel you cannot work, then it’s best you fall in with their wishes,” he said.

“But Dad, that’s sick,” said Ryan. “Isn’t it Ruma’s call whether she wants to work or not?”

Shyam gave his elder son a sad smile. “It doesn’t work that way in our homes, my son. A girl should fall in with the wishes of her men folk. Why do you think I’ve given your sister all the freedom she wants before marriage? Let her enjoy life now. After that, she’ll have to listen to what Bunty and his family says.”

Rati nodded while Ganga looked silently at her son. Ruma gritted her teeth and refused to say anything. What did it matter anyway? She had her life to lead and that was definitely not with Bunty Vaswani.

But Ryan couldn’t keep quiet. At twenty, he was a strapping young man with pretty clear cut goals in his life. “But Dad, that’s so unfair. I know it’s too early. But I want to know what happens when I get married. Will you insist that my wife plays housewife?” he grimaced, thoroughly disliking the idea.

“What’s wrong in being a housewife?” asked Rati, a frown on her face. She had opted to remain at home even while her mother-in-law had led a busy life working along with her father-in-law. Rati was pretty old-fashioned that way.

“I don’t know about your mother, Ryan. But it really doesn’t matter to me,” said Shyam. “I think people should live the lives they want to.”

“Dad, then why are you making me marry Bunty?” asked Ruma.

“Huh?!” Shyam frowned at his younger daughter. She was feisty and a handful. “I don’t understand. You and Bunty like each other and that’s why the wedding is happening, right?” He looked at his wife. “What’s this Rati? You told me that Ruma’s ready to wed Bunty Vaswani.” His frown grew fiercer.

“Of course she does,” insisted Rati, glaring at her daughter. “Ruma, what’s wrong with you? Of course you want to marry Bunty.”

“Mom, are you asking me or telling me?” asked Ruma, her heart thumping in her chest. Had she been stupid in not talking to her father before now?

“What’s the difference? Anyway, everything is fixed. There’s no going back. The invitations for the party are being sent even as we talk,” said Rati, her face mutinous. The Vaswanis were a rich and influential family. Being connected to them through this marriage was very important to Rati.

Ruma shut her eyes for a few seconds, doing her best to calm down. Thank God she had had the presence of mind to talk to her mother before the invites were printed. She had convinced Rati that the engagement should itself be announced as a surprise and the cards should mention only a party hosted by the Malhotras.

She opened her eyes when Ganga pressed Ruma's hand, giving an imperceptible shake of her head, discouraging her from arguing. The matriarch of the house quickly changed the subject, asking Shaan about his exams. The subject of Ruma's choice of partner was closed for that day.

20

Ruma went to Grandma's room after 10.30 when everyone had settled down in their respective rooms. She sat down on the floor next to the bed where Ganga was leaning against the bed head, reading. Holding her grandmother's hand, Ruma said, "Thank you so much *Daadima*."

Ganga smiled. "For what, *beta*? It was you who found Lakshman or maybe, he found you. I must say he's a wonderful person. I'm so happy that you are married to him and even more than that I'm glad you don't have to marry that Bunty." She ran an affectionate hand over the top of Ruma's head.

Ruma nodded. "Tell me about it, *Daadima*. He gives me the creeps when he comes within two feet of me."

"Just forget him, Ruma. So, tell me, are you happy?" asked Ganga.

Ruma nodded again, colour flooding her cheeks. "Yes, *Daadima*."

Ganga sighed. "I can't wait for the day you'll go to live in your husband's home."

"Me too, *Daadima*. But I'm going to be too busy over the next few weeks. I'm taking up cake decoration classes." She spoke to her grandmother about how she planned to add value to *Laki's Bakes*.

"I'm so proud of you, my child. This is a splendid idea. And I'm so glad you have such a supporting husband."

"So am I. I love him *Daadima*," said Ruma passionately.

"And it's so obvious that he loves you too. And by the way, I forgot to mention. Akshay is totally impressed with your husband. He said that Lakshman is truly a gem of a man."

Ruma grinned, turning redder if it was possible. "Really? Wow! I hope he's coming for the party. We'll need all possible support."

“All are coming. His parents, Raj and Tanuja, Akshay, Sunita and the kids will all be here. And another thing. When I mentioned the Vaswanis, Akshay mentioned that they don’t have a good reputation in their business dealings. He’s promised to unearth more information regarding that.”

“What? Are you serious, *Daadima*? Mom swears they are one of the greatest business families in Delhi.” Ruma frowned.

“Rati’s right. They used to be that when Bunty’s grandfather was in charge. His father hasn’t kept with the times. They are still running the company by methods that are five decades old. And I don’t know about Bunty himself. Let’s wait for Akshay’s news. I’ve sent Lakshman an invite for the party to his office address. I’m wondering how to get the rest of his family here at the same time. I think I’ll collaborate with Chanda and Ranveer.”

Ruma grinned widely. Her grandmother was so obviously enjoying the scheming, cloak-and-dagger style. She decided to leave it to her. “I think you’re loving this, *Daadima*. Would you mind if I leave all the planning to you? I’d rather concentrate on my classes. And I also have to work off my notice period at RS Software.”

Ganga smiled. “Of course, my dear. It’s given me a whole new purpose in life.”

The next day, Ruma was so excited about her cake classes that she didn’t have the opportunity to miss Lakshman. She called him on her way. “Hey husband,” she whispered into her phone.

“Hello, my darling wife. How have you been?”

“Awesome. Did I tell you how much I enjoyed our honeymoon? You’re an awesome lover. I adore you!”

“Oops!” said Lakshman, grimacing. He had kept himself extremely busy to not miss her too much. And then she comes up with such comments. “Ruma sweetheart, I’ve been thinking of our honeymoon too. I want to...”

Ruma turned red and hot, listening to what all her husband planned to do to her the next time they came within touching distance of each other. She listened, not

saying much, just in case the rickshaw driver was listening. At the entrance to her classes, she said, “I’m going in. Will text you.” By the time the classes began, she had sent Lakshman half a dozen messages in reply to his verbal love making. With a mischievous grin on her face, Ruma put her phone on silent to turn towards the chef.

21

Akshay Malhotra let his kids hold his hands as they went down the escalator on the Friday before Ruma's supposed engagement party. Suryansh noticed his mother sitting at the coffee shop ahead and yelled, "Mamma."

Sunita waved, smiling, putting her iPhone inside her handbag. Her heart swelled with love for her husband and their two kids. They were in Delhi for two reasons. One was the party hosted by Shyam and Rati Malhotra and the other was the meeting Sunita had had that morning with a client.

Suryansh ran to his mother, chattering. "We saw *Angry Birds*. I had popcorn and ice-cream."

The snooty Akshara followed sedately, giving her mother a toothy smile when she got closer. "Nice film, Mamma. I missed you."

"Aww baby." Sunita hugged them close, even as she eyed her handsome husband. The decade of marriage had simply been wonderful and Akshay had kept his promise to her. Today, she was a successful interior designer, running her own business. She was making a name for herself in both Mumbai and Delhi.

"And how was your meeting?" he asked, his throaty baritone giving her goose bumps even after all these years.

"It was a success. They have given me the advance cheque and I have a month to come up with ideas." This was the first time she was venturing into the corporate world, designing office space for a client. The fee would be twenty lakh rupees at the end of it.

"I'm proud of you," said Akshay, hugging her. "Let's go have lunch. I need to have a long talk with Shyam *bhaiya* and Rati *bhabhi* about Bunty and his father."

"Something's wrong?" Sunita knew about Ruma's secret wedding and had even called to congratulate her.

Akshay shrugged, as they walked towards the Chinese restaurant on the same floor of the shopping mall, the children skipping ahead of them. “Maybe something is absolutely right.” He grinned. “The Vaswanis’ business is in doldrums. Their only hope of getting it back into black is to tie up with Shyam *bhaiya’s* business. The sad part is that Rati *bhabhi* is insisting on this wedding because she believes the alliance will improve their status in society,” he grimaced. “Suryansh,” he called out as the little boy was going to walk into the McDonald’s outlet.

“Pappa, I want Happy Meal,” said Suryansh, “with Ninja Turtle.”

Akshara stopped beside her brother, one of those rare occasions she saw eye-to-eye with him. “I want Hello Kitty.”

Sunita looked at her husband, an appealing look behind her long, curling eyelashes, “Please Pappa.” Her grey-green eyes shone with mischief.

Akshay capitulated and walked into the fast food joint along with his family.

After lunch, they went back to Ruma’s home where Sunita took the kids to their room for a nap while Akshay went in search of Shyam and Rati. He found his parents—Raj and Tanuja—and Ganga also there. “Where’s Ruma?” he asked, sitting down.

“She’s working today,” said Rati, a scowl on her face. “The girl just refuses to listen. We are planning to announce her engagement tomorrow and she insisted on going to work today.” But then, she wasn’t aware that her daughter wanted to become the best cake designer this side of the country and was working hard towards her goal.

“Okay. Listen, I’ve something important to discuss with you people. Shyam *bhaiya*, what do you know about the Vaswanis’ business?” asked Akshay, coming straight to the point.

Shyam looked at his young cousin and said, “They are into construction and extremely successful too.”

Akshay shook his head. “Bunty’s grandfather was successful. Can you recall any

of their recent projects?" He knew there hadn't been any over the past two decades.

Shyam frowned, doing his best to think of their latest work, but unable to recall any.

Rati looked at Akshay, anger in her eyes. Was he trying to ruin the alliance? How dare he? "Akshay, the Vaswanis are renowned builders and Bunty is the third generation in this line. They have a great name among their peers. I can't understand what you're getting at."

Raj sat back and listened to his son explain the situation to Shyam and Rati and felt proud of him. Akshay had obviously studied the situation thoroughly, though he was curious to know what had triggered his interest.

"*Bhabhi*," said Akshay, "You know I was here in Delhi last month. When you guys told me that Ruma's wedding was going to be fixed, I spoke to some business associates and I didn't hear anything good about Bunty and his family business. I'm sorry to say this, but he's totally unsuitable for Ruma."

Shyam's jaw dropped while Rati snarled, "What the hell do you mean by that?" She didn't care what her husband's *chacha* and *chachi*—Akshay's parents—thought of her. She had been planning this wedding since six months. How dare did Akshay throw a spanner in the works one day before the engagement party?

"Please don't be angry *bhabhi*. Isn't it a good thing that we know of the facts before the event? I..."

"Akshay, aren't you being irresponsible, demeaning your cousin's *fiancé* like this? He's..."

Akshay interrupted Rati. "I'm sorry to bring you bad news, but Bunty is a drunkard and a womaniser. He's facing two charges of molesting women who work for Vaswani Constructions. How they managed to keep this away from the media is the biggest wonder. There's more *bhabhi*. But I..."

Rati howled like an animal in pain. She had so looked forward to the alliance. Though she'd be the last person to admit it, she was a thoroughly bored housewife, searching for excitement all the time, like a drug addict looking for

her next fix. She had spent two years scouting for an NRI husband for her elder daughter Saloni and another eight months preparing for the grand wedding. She had returned only four months ago after staying in the USA for six months, caring for Saloni during her first childbirth. Right from the day she returned, she'd been hunting for the perfect bridegroom for her second daughter. Relying on Saloni's successful match, Rati had been confident of her skills at arriving at the right choice. She had refused to listen to her daughter's protests when Ruma kept saying she was revolted by Bunty. And now, Akshay was insisting that Bunty Vaswani was totally unsuitable.

What would she tell her friends? Even if all the guests for the party weren't aware of the engagement plan, her close friends knew about it. These high society ladies would never let her live with the shame. What was she to do? Rati sobbed.

Shyam seemed to have aged over the past half an hour. He sat there slouched, his face in his hands, not able to decide what to do. His mother and uncle came and sat on both sides of him, their hands on his back.

"Shyam," said Ganga in a soft voice. "Don't take this to heart. It's a good thing we haven't mentioned to people what the party tomorrow is about. We can..."

Shyam turned to look at his mother, his face pained. "But that's not the only thing, Mamma. How do I tackle the Vaswanis? I know Ruma won't be too upset. I sensed that she's not too keen on the wedding."

Raj spoke from the other side. "Don't worry Shyam. Whatever happens, happens for the best. I know it sounds trite, but that's the truth. You aren't alone. We'll face them as one, all the Malhotras together. You have Akshay and me on your side."

"Oh my God!" wailed Rati. "The shame of it. What will all my friends say? I'll be a laughing stock by tomorrow evening if Ruma doesn't get engaged."

"I have a suggestion," said Akshay. He paused, waiting to get Rati's complete attention as the others' turned to look at him. "I know of this young man from Jaipur. He runs a multi-crore business, first generation. Well, his father is also a businessman and so is his elder brother. But they all run their own independent operations. Actually, I was going to suggest Lakshman for Ruma, only you all

had already planned her wedding.” Yeah, he was capable of telling a few white lies if he could bring happiness to his niece.

Rati wiped her eyes, asking, “Are they rich? What’s the surname? What caste are they? Will...”

Akshay grinned. “*Bhabhi*, the Maheshwaris are probably ten times as rich as you. Mohan Maheshwari is the father. He runs a provision shop. Their elder son, Ram, is a jewellery designer with a huge showroom in Jaipur’s main market, with a turnover of more crores in a year than we can count. And Lakshman runs a bakery chain that...”

“He’s a baker?” Rati’s face fell. What kind of income would a baker make? Even if his father was rich, the boy must be making less than fifty thousand a month. And the name Maheshwari meant they were probably *Marwaris*. She didn’t like the idea.

“Yeah, he is. Listen, he runs a baking factory, no less. There are thirty-two outlets of *Laki’s Bakes*. It’s a major brand in Jaipur, *bhabhi*. He must be making at least a couple of crores every month.” And Akshay was proud that his niece Ruma was taking classes to join her husband’s business.

“Are you sure, Akshay?” Hope dawned in Rati’s eyes.

The whole family knew that it was Rati who needed to be convinced. Shyam was easygoing and happy-go-lucky, falling in with people’s wishes. He was at peace when his wife was happy with her pet projects.

“Of course, *bhabhi*. I’ve met Lakshman and even been to his factory. It’s a mammoth operation.” The last was the truth as Akshay had made it a point to check out Lakshman’s business. The two men had developed a kind of truce after the visit.

Rati’s mind worked fast. Her only issue was saving her face. It didn’t matter if Ruma’s engagement didn’t happen with Bunty Vaswani if they could produce a new, richer groom for Ruma. She thought quickly on her feet. “I trust your judgement, Akshay. *Maaji*, Shyam, what do you both think? Shall we invite this boy—Lakshman Maheshwari—tomorrow? Maybe it’ll be too early to announce the engagement. But at least we can set the ball rolling.” What she meant was

that she would have enough meat to feed the sharks that she called friends. She turned to Akshay and asked, “Do you think it’s too much of a short notice to invite this boy for the party tomorrow? I hope his parents won’t mind with this level of informality.”

“I can surely find out,” said Akshay, hiding a grin. Ruma owed him a special treat.

At this exact same time, Meera and Mohan were knocking on Astrologer Vidyasagar’s door with Lakshman’s horoscope.

22

It was less than two months since Ram's wedding and Meera had begun to bother her husband about finding a bride for their second son. "Lakshman is twenty-seven, not all that young. I think it's time to find a girl for him."

"But, Meera, let's take a breather. Can't you wait for six months at least? It's only last month that Ram was married," protested her husband.

"Am I saying that the marriage should take place immediately? We can start searching for a girl *nah*?" Her brown eyes were disturbed when she looked at her husband. "I'm worried for Lakshman. He's keeping such strange hours and has been travelling a lot too. He's spending less and less time at home and with the family. Something is not right. It's better he settles down soon with a wife."

"*Tum bhi* Meera. Our children are all adults, in case you haven't noticed. Lakshman is running a large-scale business, and so successfully too. Of course he's been working odd hours and also travelling. But that's the life he's chosen, right? Is that a reason to get him married immediately?" Mohan laughed at his wife. Then seeing the irritated look she gave him, he asked, "Do you want me to talk to him?" His wife had a mild disposition and almost never got upset. But something seemed to be bothering her.

Meera's motherly instinct told her clearly that something strange was up with Lakshman. Like most women her generation, she decided that the best way to tackle this issue in her bachelor son's life was to get him married and that would solve all problems. She shook her head at her husband. "You think I haven't tried it? He's been as slippery as an eel. Let's show his horoscope to Vidyasagar*ji*. Maybe he'll be able to throw some light on what's happening with Lakshman."

Mohan realised that she was serious. Well, he shrugged, what was there to lose? "Okay, let me check when the astrologer can give us an appointment. Will you smile now?" he teased his plump wife.

"Very funny," said his wife, giving him a small smile, happier now.

And that's how the couple landed up at the astrologer's residence that Friday.

They waited patiently while the learned astrologer studied their second son's horoscope. "Did you want to know something specific?" asked Vidyasagar, looking up at the couple from above his spectacles.

"We're thinking of finding a bride for him. That's why we brought his horoscope to you to check out the prospects," said Mohan.

Vidyasagar frowned, turning to study the horoscope once again. After a few minutes of silence, he asked, "But isn't Lakshman married already?" not realising the impact his question had on the stunned couple sitting in front of him.

23

Meera was in tears and nothing Mohan said would console her. While she wanted to talk to her other sons about it, Mohan would hear none of it. “Let’s first talk to Lakshman and find out what’s happening. The astrologer could be wrong, you know. And even if he’s got married in secret, I’m sure he must have had his reasons. And why are you crying? Shouldn’t you be happy if our son has got married?” Mohan was serious. He knew his sons were responsible boys and would never do anything to hurt their parents. He put his arm around Meera and patted her shoulder. “I don’t want you crying when we speak to Lakshman, okay?”

Meera nodded, wiping her eyes. Could the astrologer be wrong? But he’d never failed them before. It was five in the evening and the rest of the family was still out at work, including Ram’s wife Sapna, who’d gone for her training with a hair-stylist. Mohan had called Lakshman and told him to come home immediately.

“Is there some kind of emergency?” asked Lakshman to his father, starting the car. He had left everything at the drop of a hat when his father called.

“Not at all, *beta*. Only your mother’s throwing a tantrum. I need your help sorting it.” Mohan winked at his wife as he said that.

Meera gave her husband a mock glare, before going into the kitchen to check if the *Maharaj* had made tea. She considered tea the panacea of all ills. Pouring the freshly brewed concoction into two cups, she carried them on a tray into the living room.

Lakshman arrived a few minutes later and said, “Hello, Mamma, Pappa,” smiling, “where are the others?”

“At work,” said Mohan. “Will you also have tea?”

“Not for me. I just finished a cup when your call came. So what happened?”

Meera couldn’t stop the tears that gushed out of her eyes. “Lakshman, are

you...?”

Mohan stopped her with a look, before turning to his son who was hugging his mother.

Lakshman asked, “Mamma, is something wrong? Why are you crying?”

Mohan cleared his throat, wondering how to tackle this. The words he uttered should not cause a rift in their relationship. What if the astrologer’s prediction was wrong? Would he be alienating his son by asking him if he was married?

“Your mother and I visited the astrologer today to check your horoscope,” said Mohan, looking at his son’s face.

“Ohkay! *Mera bhanda phoot gaya*,” grinned Lakshman, to his parents’ amazement. “I’ve been wondering how to break the news to you both. Yeah, I’m married. I hope you guys will forgive me. The problem is there was an issue with Ruma’s people and that’s why the secrecy. I...”

“You could have brought her home and we would have got the two of you married,” said Meera, miffed with her son.

Lakshman hugged her closer. “I know Mamma. But...” he looked at his father, “you’d have insisted on talking to her parents Pappa. And things would have blown out of control.”

“Where’s your wife now?” asked Mohan. He couldn’t find anything wrong with his son’s behaviour.

“She’s still with her parents, hoping to change their minds.”

“Then why get married in secret? You could have waited, *nah*?” asked his father mildly.

Lakshman sat down at their feet, holding their hands in his, and explained the situation from the beginning. “So, they are planning to announce her engagement with another man tomorrow. Ruma’s grandmother advised that it’s best if we ensured that her parents were left with no choice. Getting married seemed the only answer. I’m sorry Pappa. I’ll never hurt you and Mamma. I...”

Mohan hugged his son. “I know my children too well. I know you must have done what you did since that was for the best. Did you both run away to get married?” he was curious to know.

Meera kept turning this way and that, listening to both men in fascination. Lakshman had got married in secret, neither telling his parents nor his siblings and her husband was sitting there listening to the story. Were they crazy?

“But Lakshman, how could you not tell us?” she asked, before her son could answer.

“Mamma, I just explained to you. It was an awkward situation and I didn’t want Ruma to suffer. Please understand, Mamma. If I’d told you, you and Pappa would have insisted on talking to Ruma’s parents, and that would have made the whole situation worse.”

Mohan nodded. “You’re right Lakshman. We would have done exactly that. Our children know us well, Meera,” he grinned at his wife.

“How can you grin like this? It’s such a big issue...”

“Why not? Shouldn’t I feel happy that my son is married?” asked Mohan cheekily. “Come on Meera. Lighten up! Does it matter? If you want a grand wedding for your son, we can get them married again, can’t we? What say, Lakshman? He got married secretly. So what? He says he couldn’t do anything else in the circumstances. Why can’t we just accept that? Congratulations Lakshman. I’m truly happy for you,” he said, hugging his son.

Meera gave her husband another irritated look even as she hugged her son. “I’m very happy for you Lakshman. It’s not that I don’t want you to be married. But doing it without anyone in the family and all that...”

“Err...” Lakshman gave them both a guilty look, wondering if he should say anything further now.

“Was it Ram or Chanda?” asked Mohan, a twinkle in his eyes. “You never did tell me if you both ran away to get married?”

Lakshman grinned at his father. “No Pappa. We had an *Arya Samaj* wedding at Ranveer’s home. Ruma’s grandmother, her uncle and two of her friends were also present during the ceremony.”

Meera hit her big son on his muscular shoulder with her tiny hand. “I don’t think I’ll talk to you. How could you do this to me?”

“Mamma, I’m truly sorry. I never meant to hurt you. Forgive me, please?”

“I’ll think about it after I meet my daughter-in-law,” declared Meera, giving him a mock glare. Yeah, it was difficult to digest. But then, what was done was done. She wanted only happiness for her children. Her husband was right as usual. Lakshman must have obviously done what he did because he had no choice.

Lakshman’s phone rang just then. Seeing Akshay Malhotra’s name on the screen, he took the call. “Hello Akshay.”

“Congrats man. I’ve convinced Ruma’s parents to meet you as a prospective groom. Will it be possible for you to attend their party tomorrow? I know it’s a last minute invitation. But...”

“You’re a magician,” said Lakshman, a smile in his voice. “Could you extend that invitation to the rest of my family?” he asked.

Akshay gave a shout of laughter. “I suppose the marriage isn’t a secret any more at your end.”

“You’re right and I’m glad for it.”

“Will you give me your father’s contact number? I’ll give him a call. Better yet, I’ll get my dad to give him a call.”

“My dad’s right here. Let me give him the phone,” said Lakshman, handing his cell to his father.

“Hello sir, my name is Akshay Malhotra. I’m Ruma’s uncle. I’d like to invite you and your family to a get-together at our home tomorrow. I hope it’s not too short a notice.”

“Hello,” said Mohan. “Nice to hear from you. Well, we can’t wait to meet our daughter-in-law. Of course, we’ll be there. Please do expect seven of us from here and...”

“Thank you so much sir. If you’re going to ask about Ranveer and Chanda, we’ve already invited them. That’s really nice of you, sir. I’ll send a car to the airport,” he promised, before disconnecting the call.

“Ruma’s parents still don’t know about the marriage,” warned Lakshman.

Mohan waited for the rest of the family to arrive to break the good news. Luckily, the twins, who travelled a lot, were also home.

“I’ve an announcement to make,” said Mohan, a smile in his eyes. “Lakshman is married.” He sat back to watch with a grin as pandemonium broke out.

Meera sighed softly, a genuine smile breaking out on her face as she watched her other sons bombarding Lakshman. Where was the need to stay angry when life was so good!

24

Ruma looked resplendent in a *ghagra-choli* in a brilliant shade of pink. Diamonds winked at her throat, ears and wrists. Her face glowed with the inner light of a happy woman. Her brown eyes kept going towards the entrance, searching for the face of the man she loved, her secret husband. Akshay had kept her updated about the recent developments and now she was ready to meet Lakshman's family.

She frowned when she saw Bunty walking in with his parents. All three went up to where Ruma was standing next to her parents, greeting the guests. Still believing that her son's engagement was about to take place, Bunty's mother hugged Ruma. "I can't wait to have you in the family." She didn't notice Rati's frown and greeted the others before mixing with the guests. "*Chudail, besharam,*" muttered Rati, making Ruma laugh under her breath.

She turned again towards the entrance and her breath caught in her throat when she saw Lakshman standing there, scouting the crowd. Their eyes connected and her heart bounced in her chest. She didn't notice the others who were with him as she had eyes only for her husband. He was wearing a three-piece suit in black, teamed with a pristine white shirt and a dark red tie. She lowered her eyes with great difficulty. She wasn't supposed to know him.

Akshay walked forward to greet the new guests, giving Lakshman a hug. The younger man introduced Ruma's *chacha* to all his family members.

"*Namaste* uncle, aunty." Akshay greeted the parents before he shook hands with the other Maheshwari siblings, hugging Ranveer and Chanda. "I'm so glad you could all make it at such short notice," he smiled, guiding them towards Ruma and her parents.

More introductions took place. Shyam liked the Maheshwari family members on sight. Lakshman looked so handsome and would make a perfect match for his younger daughter. Rati studied them all as if from under a microscope, looking for faults. Finding none, she was still unhappy, as if she had lost control over her life. She could see her friends hovering around, like vultures seeking prey. She straightened her shoulders. She'd show them!

Akshay turned last to Ruma and began the introductions. She touched Lakshman's parents' feet. Meera pulled her up to enfold her in a hug, kissing her on her forehead. Ruma was perfect for Lakshman, thought his mother.

"You know Ranveer and Chanda of course," said Akshay, his face straight.

Ruma nodded. "How can I not know my boss and his wife?" Smiling, she hugged them both.

"And this is Lakshman Maheshwari. Lakshman, this is my niece Ruma."

The world came to a standstill as they eyed each other, the people around them disappearing for a few seconds. Akshay placed a hand each on their shoulders to bring them back down to earth. "Hello," said Lakshman, his voice hoarse, his heated black gaze boring into hers.

"Hi," said Ruma, unable to stop the colour rushing up her cheeks. She lowered her gaze to the level of his chest, worried about what someone might read into it otherwise.

Deepak Vaswani walked up to Shyam who was chatting with Raj Malhotra. "So when should we announce the engagement?" he asked, a worried frown on his face. His son was an idiot, drowning himself in whiskey at the bar. The girl was flirting with a stranger. What the hell was happening? His wife Bhanu had insisted that he seek Shyam Malhotra out and get the show on the road.

"There isn't going to be one," said Shyam in a quiet voice.

"What?" The other man's voice was like the crack of a pistol shot. "What the hell do you mean by that?" His stance was threatening. Well, he was a desperate man with his dwindling finances.

"I think you heard him," said Raj, menace in his voice.

"But they promised us," Deepak whined, fear on his face. Bhanu Vaswani stood glaring as she listened to the conversation.

Raj gave him an evil smile. "When they promised you, they believed you ran a

successful business along with your son. Now we know that's just not true. Shyam?" He looked at his nephew.

"Exactly. I don't want my daughter to marry a good-for-nothing," said Shyam. He was angry enough to use strong words.

"How dare you?" growled Deepak, his florid face turning red with temper. "I'll drag the Malhotra name through mud if you don't announce the engagement right now."

"You will leave right now, sir, unless you want your person dragged through mud," said another voice behind him.

Deepak turned around in a flash—not easy, considering his girth—to face Akshay Malhotra. "And who the hell are you?" he snarled.

"Akshay Malhotra is the name, one of those you threatened to drag through mud. I'd advise you to take your family and leave the premises right this very minute, unless you want me to call the police."

Deepak looked at the three men who surrounded him and his wife. Well, it seemed best to walk away with his head held high. As long as they didn't announce the state of the Vaswani finances to the rest of the world. "*Chalo* Bhanu, let's not waste time with people who have no respect for us," he said, taking out his cell phone to call Bunty.

"Give me a minute," said Bhanu, walking to Rati who was chatting with some guests. Her daughter was also there, making eyes at a handsome guy. Bhanu gritted her teeth. The Malhotras had obviously found a richer boy for their daughter. "We're leaving Rati," she declared, then turned to the other woman who was obviously the mother of the boy Ruma was flirting with. "I don't know you well, *didi*, but I'll give you one good advice that you'll surely thank me for. Don't even think of making a match for your son with this family. They are shameless people," she snarled, glaring at Ruma.

"How dare you?" Rati turned red with anger even as she felt a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Allow me, aunty," said Lakshman, giving the intruder a firm look. "I think you

should leave while the going's good, ma'am. I can see the Malhotra men walking towards us."

Bhanu bolted, looking for her husband and son.

When the three men reached them, Lakshman looked at Ruma's father and asked, "May I have a few words with your daughter in private, sir?"

Ruma held back her dropping jaw with difficulty, turning to look at her father, wondering what he would say and was surprised when Shyam nodded agreeably. "Ruma, why don't you take Lakshman upstairs? No one will disturb you there."

She looked at her mother, who nodded too. Biting her lip to stop herself from grinning, she turned to look at Lakshman. "Shall we?" Her voice came out in a whisper as her heart beat like a drum.

Lakshman took her hand in his and walked along with her towards the marble staircase.

Mohan said, "I think they're a perfect match. Lakshman likes your daughter. So, you can take that as an 'yes' from our side." He addressed all the Malhotra men.

Ganga had also joined them by now. She nodded, speaking for the others. "You're right, Mohan*ji*. Ruma and Lakshman *ki jodi khoob jamegi*."

Rati gave Meera a nervous look. What could she say? She only hoped that her daughter will not spoil this alliance too. The girl was too headstrong.

Rati felt a tap on her shoulder. It was her friend Damini who dragged her aside. "What's happening? Why have the Vaswanis left? Have they rejected Ruma?" Her eyes gleamed with glee at her friend's predicament. She couldn't wait to gossip about the dire situation the Malhotras faced now.

That put Rati's back up. "The Vaswanis are paupers; unfit to worship the ground my daughter walks on. Ruma's going to marry Lakshman Maheshwari, a *crorepati* based in Jaipur." She crossed her fingers behind her back. God should only give her daughter enough sense to accept the proposal. "You'll have to excuse me. Those are his parents that I was talking to. I'll catch you later," said Rati, escaping her friend's clutches.

Damini’s face fell. It looked like Rati had fallen, landing on her feet.

25

With great difficulty, Ruma walked slowly up the stairs along with Lakshman while all she wanted to do was take the steps two at a time along with him. She could feel his thumb tracing the pulse on her wrist, the touch driving her crazy. This was the first time they were meeting after their honeymoon.

The moment they reached the first floor, she turned and pressed her mouth to his, running her tongue over the seam of his lips. Unable to resist, Lakshman opened his mouth to her invasion and rubbed his tongue roughly against hers. His arms went around her, pulling her close to his aroused body. When they came up for air, he begged, “I need you, now. Show me the bedroom.”

Ruma didn’t need to be told twice as she took his hand and pulled him to the corner room on the left. She went in along with him and locked the door before falling into his arms. “Laki...”

Silence reigned as husband and wife reacquainted themselves with each other’s body, their hands in a frenzy. Lakshman spread his legs wide and pulled her between them, pressing his arousal against her stomach. She rubbed a hand against his manhood, stimulating him to fever pitch. “I need you now,” growled Lakshman. “I hope no one’s going to interrupt us for at least a few minutes. If I don’t have you now, I might just stop breathing.”

Ruma looked up at her husband’s strained face and smiled. That was quite a speech for a quiet guy. “Come here,” she invited, walking towards her bed, even as she pulled her *choli* off with one hand and removed the knot that tied her *ghagra* with the other.

Lakshman was out of his suit in less than a minute before he joined her on the bed. He pulled her body close, saying, “You aren’t wearing a bra.” He grinned widely, caressing her breasts with both his hands.

“I didn’t want to waste time peeling off too many layers of clothing,” she giggled, helping him out of his briefs. Her hand moved over his shaft, up and down, making him harder as he bent down to take a swollen nipple into his mouth, his other hand stroking the twin.

Unable to control himself any longer, Lakshman walked a finger down her abdomen, rubbed a gentle finger over her belly button before exploring her feminine core. Finding her ready and wet, he braced himself on his arms, before entering her in a single stroke with a grunt of satisfaction. Ruma clung to him, her legs going around his hips, holding him as close as was possible, loving the feel of his turgid manhood grinding within her. Her breath came out in gasps as he pounded into her, his mouth suckling at her breast, driving her faster and faster towards an orgasm. Ruma thought her heart would stop when she climaxed, the waves crashing around her in a crescendo, even as he followed her almost immediately, his heartbeat thunderous against her chest.

“I love you, Laki.”

“And I love you, sweetheart.” He fell against her pliant body, his own shuddering as he took deep breaths.

She ran a soft hand over his muscular shoulder, loving the touch of the smooth skin. “How I wish you could stay the night.”

“I don’t know about staying, but I promise you that we’ll make love again before the night is out.”

She gave him a startled look that soon turned into a mischievous glint. “Now this I need to see. I so look forward to it. I never knew that being married in secret could be such fun.”

He swatted her bottom. “Get dressed, woman. I don’t want your family accusing me of rape.” Lakshman got up to hand over her clothes to her before donning his own. But she sat on the bed, watching him as he pulled on his pants, refusing to oblige. “Ruma, what are you waiting for?”

“I like watching you, even if you are covering that wonderful body layer by layer.” She pouted at him.

He shook his head at her, the shirt falling down from his hands. “Come here.”

She rushed to him in her naked glory, hugging him tight. He crushed her body into his manly chest, revelling in the softness of her breasts pressing against him.

He kissed the pulse at her throat, whispering, “You look best when you wear no clothes, but will you please dress up? See what you are doing to me.”

She was already exploring him without that invitation. “I want to take you in my mouth.”

Lakshman removed her hand from his crotch, placing it on his shoulder. “I promise to let you have your wicked way with me in a few hours. But do wear your clothes for now.” Seeing the mutinous expression on her face, he said in mock threat, “Do you want me to walk out of that door and tell your parents that you don’t want to marry me?” He buttoned his shirt, having moved away from her, giving her a naughty grin.

“Now you’ve challenged me. Wait and watch me getting my back at you,” said Ruma, giving him a broad wink as she wore her *ghagra*.

Lakshman helped her tie the knot behind her *choli*, unable to stop himself from kissing her bare back, even as his hands moved to the front to cup her breasts. “You look absolutely sexy.”

“Not as hot as you, I’m sure,” she whispered, her eyes meeting his through the mirror. “I think it’s best you let me go and keep those wayward hands to yourself. I need to set right my hair and make-up.”

“I can try,” grinned Lakshman, taking a hairbrush from her dressing table to run it through his dark curls. He watched her as she pulled down her topknot, brushed it and put it back expertly. She ran a makeup brush with some compact powder over her face before applying a fresh coat of lipstick. “Sinfully sexy. Hey, why get angry?” he asked, looking at the fire in her gaze. “My hands are right here with me.”

She poked a tongue at him, still gazing at him through the mirror. “I think it’s best you go and sit on the balcony. I’ll open the door and join you there.”

And that’s how Ram and Akshay found the couple, chatting quietly in the balcony, holding hands. “Phew!” said Akshay. “You guys had me worried. So, what do you say, Ruma? Do you think Lakshman will make you a good husband?” His tongue was firmly tucked in his cheek, as he pulled her from the chair to hug her.

“*Chachu*,” said Ruma, feeling too shy to meet his eyes, burying her face on his chest. She nodded, “yes.”

Ram slapped his younger brother on his shoulder, giving him a grin. “We did our best to give you guys enough time. Everyone’s waiting to announce the engagement. Come on!”

“Does the Hindu law allow a couple to celebrate their wedding night immediately after the engagement?” asked Lakshman of no one.

The other three stopped in their tracks to look at him. Akshay shook his head. “I can do you a favour and request Ruma’s parents to get the wedding performed tomorrow morning. The *muhurat* tomorrow morning is good—yeah, I checked with the family *Pandit*, just in case—and the selling point would be that all the family members are already here. What do you say?”

Lakshman grinned widely. “You’re my best friend, Akshay *chachu*,” he said, hugging him.

“I won’t do it unless you cut out the *chachu*,” threatened Akshay. “What do you say, Ram? Do you think your parents will agree?”

“I’m sure they will. They know the actual situation anyway.”

Ruma gave Lakshman a startled look. “You never told me,” she accused.

“Only last evening, and it’s a long story,” said Lakshman. “I promise to tell you later.”

Ruma gave him a heated glance from her melting brown eyes before turning to Akshay. “But *chachu*, will Mom and Dad go with the idea? Lakshman and I are supposed to have met today for the first time.”

Akshay reassured her. “It’s all how one presents the package, my dear. Allow me. Your mother’s worried that you might slip out of this alliance too. I’ll convince her that this is the best way it can be done. Saloni has also come down with her husband and baby. There’s no better time like tomorrow. If we want your sister to travel down from the USA again, the wedding might need to be

postponed to next year." He turned to look at Lakshman when he heard him groan. "Exactly my point. Leave the whole thing to me."

Rati turned with both fear and eagerness in her eyes when she saw the quartet coming down the stairs. All were smiling, so it must be good news. She gave her daughter a hesitant smile when Ruma walked closer. "So, *beta*, what do you say?"

"If you like him, I'm okay, Mom," said Ruma, burying her face in her mother's shoulder. Her shoulders shook with uncontrollable mirth. But her mother took that to be emotion, patting her daughter's back awkwardly.

Rati smiled widely at her mother-in-law Ganga. "It's a 'yes', Mamma." Tears poured down her face through the smile.

They announced the engagement between Ruma and Lakshman. Ram handed over the matching set of diamond solitaire rings that the couple exchanged. Ruma had stars in her eyes as she placed the engagement ring on her husband's finger. He placed her ring and lifted her hand to his lips, his moustache brushing against her knuckles, enflaming her nerve ends.

Damini had 'Google'd all about Lakshman Maheshwari on her smart phone. There was pure envy when she caught hold of Rati for a private moment after dinner. "Your daughter's so lucky. *Laki's Bakes* is a huge chain and your son-in-law has established it all, single-handed."

Rati preened.

It was past midnight by the time the guests left.

Akshay could be a bull-dozer when he chose to. He gathered together the Malhotra and Maheshwari families and explained to them the pros of having the wedding ceremony the next day and the cons of postponing it to a later date.

"It will be difficult for Saloni to travel down with her baby again in the next few months. And Rati *bhabhi*," he gave her a small shake of his head on an aside, "I don't think it's all that practical to wait for a whole year. Ruma..."

Rati nodded vigorously. "You're right Akshay." She was worried that her wilful

daughter might change her mind. “But what about Mohan*ji* and Meera*ji*? Will they agree?” She looked at them anxiously. It was obvious that she presumed that her husband would fall in with her wishes whatever they were. Shyam looked on, a smile on his face. As long as peace and happiness reigned, he was okay with anything.

“My whole family is right here in Delhi today. We are perfectly fine having the wedding performed tomorrow,” said Mohan. Meera nodded her head, in complete agreement with her husband.

“But what about the arrangements for the wedding?” wailed Rati, biting her nails. Oh my God! Will she become a laughing stock?

“I think you aren’t aware of the latest trend, *bhabhi*,” said Akshay. “Have an intimate wedding, record the ceremony on video and broadcast it on Youtube. Share the link with your near and dear and make them truly envious.” He looked towards the other young men for support.

“Oh yes, aunty. That’s the latest trend.” Ranveer added his two cents.

Shyam stood up. “I think we should do it. What do you say, Mamma?”

Ganga said, “This is the most sensible idea I’ve heard in years,” as she beamed, turning to give her granddaughter a small wink.

And that settled the matter.

26

Lakshman and his parents accepted the Malhotras' invitation to spend the night at their home while the rest of their clan left to go to Ranveer's home.

Meera and Mohan had settled down for the night in a bedroom on the ground floor, right next to Ganga's room.

Akshay showed Lakshman into the guest bedroom right across Ruma's. "Here you go. This is the most I can do for you. You're on your own from here."

Lakshman hugged the other man, the initial animosity all forgotten. "Just one thing. Does anyone else share Ruma's room?"

"No. Give it another fifteen minutes and everyone should be settled. G'night." Akshay left.

Lakshman had a quick shower and shaved. Wearing his *pajama* bottoms, he opened his door a crack to check if there was anyone around in the corridor and wasn't too surprised when he saw his wife coming out of her bedroom towards his. She walked fast, pushing him back into his bedroom and locking the door behind them.

"I thought you'd forgotten," she accused, nipping his shoulder, her hands spread on his wide chest. "And I was going to rub it in your face that you'd lost the challenge."

Lakshman shook with laughter, his hands pulling up her nightshirt and removing it off her. "Your Akshay *chacha* warned me to wait for some time till the others settled down." He nibbled on her ear, trailing a wet tongue down her neck. He breathed in her perfume, liking the citrusy fragrance. "You smell awesome." He continued to nibble on the curve of her breasts.

"Laki...that feels so good. Bite me some more."

He obliged her willingly, moving from one side to the other, his hands caressing her silky back, all the way down to cup her lush bottom. He closed a mouth over

a hardened nipple, stroking it roughly with his tongue. “You taste so good.” He sucked hard, making her jump. She took his hand and guided it to her other breast. He plucked the nipple with hard fingers even as he squeezed the globe, playing her body like a violin.

“Now it’s my turn,” declared Ruma, going down on her knees, pulling his *pajama* down to his feet. His shaft sprang forth in invitation as she buried her face against him, rubbing her face like a cat on the rough surface of his pubis. She held him in both her hands, dragging her nails gently down the velvety hard surface. When she heard Lakshman’s groan, she gave him an upward smile before bending down to place her lips at the tip, tracing it with her tongue. “Ruma...”

She opened her mouth to take him within, sucking gently, savouring the sensation. She felt Lakshman’s hand in her hair, holding her against him as he threw back his head, moaning in delight. She nibbled him gently before getting up to press her body against his, a hand still holding on to him. “Did you like it?” she asked in a whisper.

“I loved it,” said her husband, lifting her legs around his waist, before thrusting into her eagerly awaiting body. He pushed her against the closest wall, holding her tightly as he pounded into her. “I’m crazy about you, sweetheart,” groaned Lakshman, as they climaxed as one.

Epilogue

Ruma walked into their office at 9 pm, a satisfied smile on her face. She was tired but happy as her designer cakes had become a super hit from day one. It was six months since she had moved to Jaipur, to her husband's home, after their second wedding ceremony. She had tried out the various flavours and designs on her new family who had been all appreciation. She had experimented with many recipes, using less of refined floor and more of multi-grains, more fruits and less sugar to come up with a healthy line of cakes. She also made them look attractive in her unique style, adding value to her husband's brand.

Lakshman looked up from his desk when he heard her at the door. "Are you done for the day?" he asked, opening his arms wide in invitation.

She gladly parked her bottom on his lap, snuggling into his shoulder. "Yep. Can you imagine? We'd an order of eighty-seven special cakes just for today."

Lakshman nodded, his chin pressed to the top of her head, his hands kneading her shoulders and arms. "I know. Your cakes are in such great demand. I think it's time to get you an assistant."

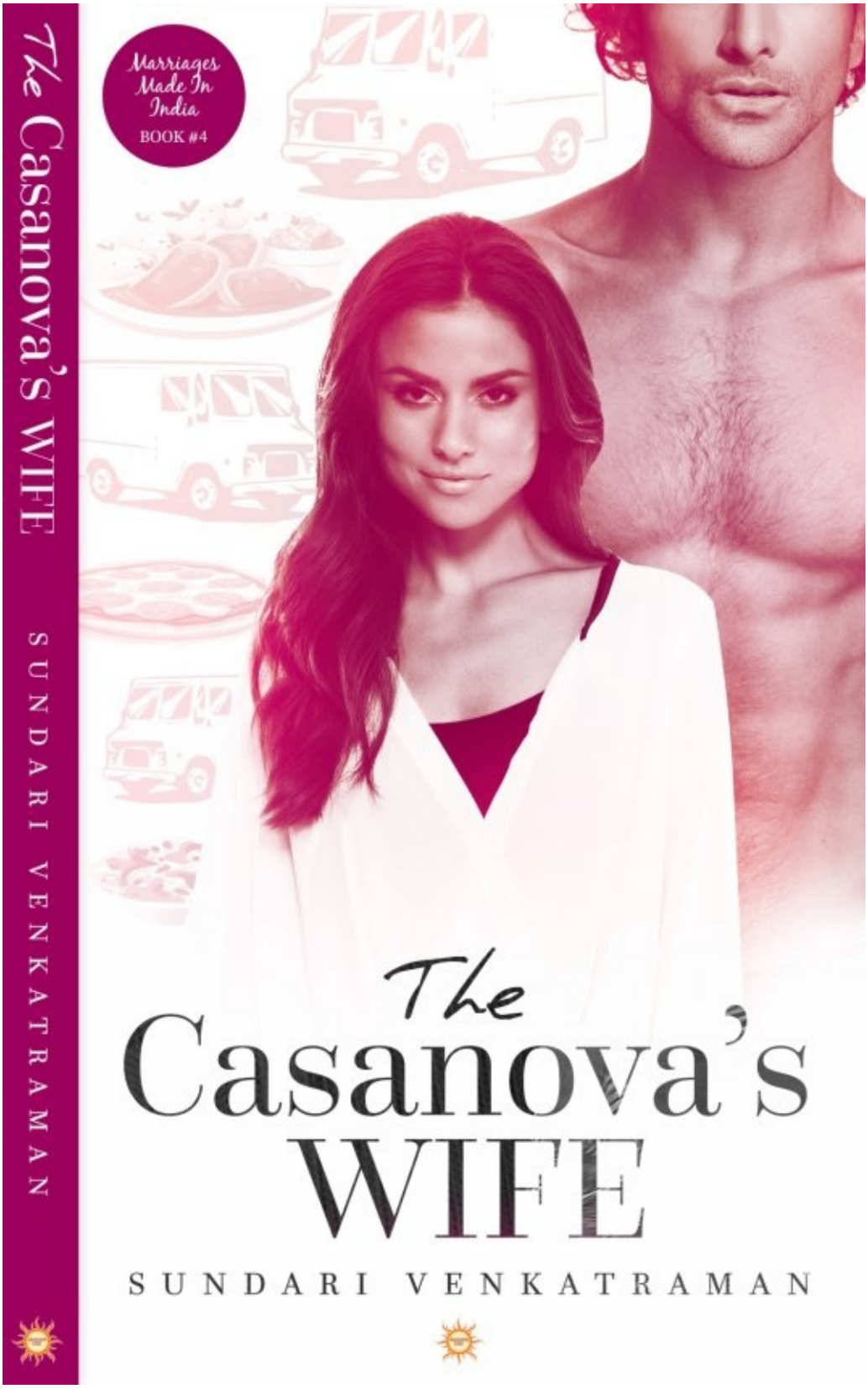
Ruma raised her head to look at him. "But Laki, why? I'm managing well, aren't I?"

"Too well, my love. But this'll only get bigger. I don't want you to work yourself to the bone. Let's begin looking for someone. It's bound to take some time anyway."

"Hmm..." She put her head on his shoulder again, exulting in the massage he was giving her tired muscles. Silence reigned for a few minutes as Ruma relished the sensation of his large hands relieving the ache in her muscles, before whispering, "There are other parts of my body that are aching for your touch, Laki. Can we...?"

Lakshman stood up, lifting his wife up in his arms in a single movement, and carried her into the bedroom, to oblige her every whim.

THE END


Marriages Made In India
BOOK #4
The Casanova's WIFE
SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN

He moved, his eyes opening a slit, a smile on his handsome face. “Is it morning already?”

She shook her head, “Not really.”

He turned her to him, kissing her on her forehead. His lips lazily traced her features, moving on to her eyelids, her nose, her cheeks and then her chin.

Frustrated, Dia protested, holding his head in her hands and taking a bite of his lower lip, making him laugh softly. “Kiss me,” she ordered, keen to feel his mouth on hers.

Bharat obliged her, taking a taste of her lips. The kiss grew deeper as their limbs tangled, his shaft growing thicker and harder against her stomach.

Dia moved a hand down his waist to reach out to his manhood, caressing him lightly, making him growl deeply in his throat.

He, in turn, trailed his lips down her body, his tongue playing havoc with her nerves as he slowly reached the core of her femininity.

Dia moaned, her hands holding on to his head tightly as he pleasured her vagina with his tongue. His hands held her thighs down as she thrashed her legs restlessly, a roaring filling her ears even as a climax built within her womb. “Bharat...” she groaned, reaching out for she knew not what as she felt the surge of an orgasm splitting her in two. She fell back on the bed, his head between her thighs, her breath coming in gasps. That had been explosive!

It took her more than a couple of minutes to feel the blood flow back into her veins. Her breathing got back to normal and she found the strength to lift her hands to caress the silky soft curls on her lover’s head. She hugged him close, whispering in his ear, “That was simply awesome. Show me how to love you, please. I don’t know.”

Bharat smiled adoringly at the woman in his arms. What an innocent! He took her hand and placed it against his erection. “You’re a natural,” he complimented her, kissing her deeply.

THE CASANOVA'S WIFE
(Marriages Made in India: Book #4)

A romance novella by

Sundari Venkatraman

1

Bharat's breath came out in gasps as he made love to her; his jaw clenched as he held back his climax, waiting for Dia to hit the high spot. His locked his lips with hers, gently sucking on her tongue while his hands caressed the soft mounds of her breasts, his thumbs stroking the hard nipples.

Dia moaned as the orgasm hit her in waves, stars exploding behind her closed eyelids. She hadn't ever imagined that making love would be like this, so explosive, so mind-blowing. She trembled in the aftermath of passion, her hands caressing the muscular shoulders of the man she had met barely a couple of hours ago for the first time.

Bharat groaned as he followed her closely. That was the best sex he'd had, ever. The woman was damn responsive. And she had been a virgin at that. A deep sigh wrenched through him. That had been a bolt out of the blue. The women he hung out with knew the score. But it had been too late by the time he knew it was the first time for Dia.

He pulled out of her and lay down at her side, holding her gently. Dia! What a beautiful name. It sat so well on her, her face softly lit like the lamp that her name suggested. The moment he looked into those silver eyes, he'd decided he'd make her his. Bharat didn't believe in love. But yes, he wanted her for his partner.

"Did I hurt you badly?" he asked against her ear, his voice gravelly.

"A bit," she replied in a whisper, shivering as his hot breath blew into her ear. She cuddled closer, revelling in his touch.

He kissed the pulse beating hard at her throat, stroking it with a velvet tongue. "I'm sorry I didn't find out if you were a virgin before bedding you."

She turned to look at him, drowning in the velvety brown of his gaze, her own silver eyes half-closed. She traced a hand over his chiselled cheek, the five-o-clock shadow feeling rough against her smooth palm. "Does it matter?" she asked softly.

“I don’t do virgins,” he said, continuing to nibble the corner of her lips.

She got up with a jerk, pulling a sheet around her, her silver eyes spitting temper. “What the hell do you mean by that? Do you “do” experienced women every day?” She raised her hands to draw quotation marks in the air, forgetting to hold the sheet that slipped down to her waist, leaving her breasts bare.

He ran his gaze lazily over her breasts, bringing colour rushing up her body, the tips turning into tight rose buds, inviting his touch. He bent down to place his mouth on her left breast, stroking the tip with his tongue, making her gasp. His left hand caressed the twin as he gently suckled her.

Her hands went to his head, planning to tug him away from her. But weakness assailed her limbs as she pulled him closer to her body without meaning to. The anger turned to passion as he turned to pay the same amount of attention to her other breast. Looking down at his dark head against her pale skin as he made love to her, a deep sigh came from the depth of her being even as she rubbed her slim legs against his muscular ones.

Bharat lifted his head to look at her flushed face, and found her eyes closed tightly. Sitting up against the headboard of the bed, he pulled her into his arms and held her loosely. “There’s no need to be angry, Dia. I enjoy sex and women throw themselves at me. And I’m not complaining.” He grinned when she raised her head from his shoulder to look at him. “And I practise safe sex.”

“I didn’t throw myself at you,” she glared, miffed.

His grin turned wider, as he shook his head. “You didn’t.”

“Then...”

“Didn’t you like the experience?” He studied her features avidly, enjoying her temper. Her face glowed incandescently, as she gave him a disgusted look from her silver eyes.

“I did,” she admitted, looking down at his naked chest, her thick, long eyelashes hiding the expression in her eyes, even as her face turned red. And that was the truth. Though it was her first time and she didn’t have any other to compare it

with, she had so relished his lovemaking. And he'd been thorough. She vaguely recalled reading somewhere that not many women actually experienced an orgasm.

"So why are you angry?" He pulled her closer, his hand running through the long, straight and silky hair in a caress. He nuzzled the crook of her shoulder, breathing in her scent deeply. She smelled awesome, all woman, with a hint of fresh roses.

"I don't know," She admitted, being her honest self. She turned her face to give him better access as he nibbled along her jaw, working towards her lips.

"This night with you is truly the best experience of my life," he said softly.

Her eyes went wide as she stared at him. Was he being serious? Or did he say that to every woman he had sex with? She pouted at him. "And so says the Casanova."

Bharat looked at her lovely face in fascination, even as he gave her a small nod. "Guilty as charged," he agreed, kissing Dia gently, his tongue tracing the shape of her lips, before wandering into her mouth and mating with hers.

She moaned, throwing her arms around his neck, clinging to him. It seemed that she didn't really care if he was a womaniser. She wanted his hands all over her.

His hands moved down her back to caress her curvaceous bottom. "Hmm...you taste amazing. But I think we should stop."

"Why? I don't want to."

"I don't either," he grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he pressed his forehead to hers. "But I don't want to hurt you more than I already have."

A Casanova with principles it seemed.

2

Dia rested her head on Bharat's shoulder and closed her eyes. She would never have believed it if someone had suggested to her that morning that she'd be so comfortable in a stranger's arms. She closed her eyes, breathing slowly and deeply, willing for sleep to claim her.

But her mind insisted on wandering back to the evening.

Dia and her best friend Avantika had gone to the party held at the suburban five-star after the week-long fashion show had concluded. Avantika, who was a dancer, had performed on three days during the event and hence had the coveted invite for two. She had insisted on taking Dia along. Working as a management trainee for a private company, Dia rarely got to go to stylish parties. She had tagged along at her friend's insistence, hoping to have a good time. What she hadn't expected was to meet a hunk, who had turned her head from the moment she set her eyes on him. She was unaware that Bharat Maheshwari had been trailing the modelling circuit since two years and was a famous ramp model.

"Hi, I'm Bharat. Care to dance with me?" he asked in his gravelly voice that she found absolutely sexy.

Leaving her glass of champagne on the tray carried by a passing waiter, Dia placed her hand in his, her gaze mesmerised by his melting chocolate eyes. "I'm Dia."

He nodded, running his eyes from the top of her sleek head to the tips of her painted toes. Her oval face was perfectly made up, her eyes framed by long, curling lashes. Her thick, straight hair, like a dark brown curtain with gold highlights, shimmered all the way down to her waist. She had a sharp, tip-tilted nose, her silky cheeks ending in a determined chin. Her cupid bow lips, coated in a deep shade of red, called out to him invitingly. She wore a short black sheath that hugged her slim, but curvaceous figure, stopping many inches short of her knees. Her only ornaments were silver hoop earrings that dangled down to her shoulders and a slim silver watch on the left wrist. Bharat thought that he'd love to have her for dessert, as he gazed into her silver gaze.

She returned the compliment in full, checking out the silky dark curls that tumbled down to his shoulders, carelessly brushed back from his broad forehead. He'd obviously removed the make-up that he'd worn during the show. He had thick, dark eyebrows, eyes the colour of coffee framed by short, curling lashes, slashing cheekbones and a sharp chin. He had an aquiline nose above well-shaped lips, the upper one thin while the lower was broad and sensual. His wide, muscular shoulders were tucked into a white shirt that was open at his throat, teamed with a casual jacket of dark grey. He must definitely be a few inches above six feet, she concluded, as she leisurely checked out his long, muscular legs that were encased in a pair of branded jeans.

They swung to the music, looking deeply into each other's eyes, switching off from the rest of the crowd. After a few dances, Bharat excused himself. "I need to talk to the press," he grimaced. "Promise me you won't disappear."

She smiled. "I won't." She took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter before going in search of her friend.

"Dia," said Avantika. "What's come over you? Do you know who you were dancing with?" Her voice was teasing as she knew very well that Dia wasn't one to read fashion magazines.

"Yeah, his name's Bharat," said Dia, sipping on her drink, a smile on her face. "Doesn't he look gorgeous?"

Avantika laughed. "Of course he does. Bharat Maheshwari is a super model. Are you even aware that you are the envy of every single woman here?"

"What?" Dia looked genuinely puzzled. "Is he that big? He seemed so nice and friendly. But...okay, maybe. He's hot." Colour ran up her cheeks before draining away abruptly, leaving her pale. "Oh my God! Do you think I should stay away? I don't much understand the world of fashion. Maybe I should..."

"Whoa! Chill. You like him. And he obviously likes you too. Why don't you see where it takes you? I don't think he'll expect you to be an expert on the fashion world," said Avantika cheekily, smiling at her friend. Twenty-two-year-old Dia had never shown interest in a man before now. It was high time!

Dia gave her best friend a hesitant smile. "I suppose. I really like him."

“So there. And I’m sure he’ll come looking for you soon.”

Bharat walked towards the women even as Avantika uttered the words. “Hey, sorry to keep you waiting,” he said, sliding his arm around Dia’s waist. “I hope you don’t mind if I take your friend away for a while,” he said to Avantika with a charming smile.

“Not at all,” said Avantika, giving Dia a small wink on the aside.

He swept her off her feet that evening, giving her his undivided attention. Dia didn’t know what hit her as the handsome Bharat charmed her with his conversational skills. Added to his sexy looks, she was floored. She was especially awed after getting to know who he was. They chatted a lot during dinner before Bharat told her softly, “I want to make love to you.”

Giving him a startled glance, Dia thought on her feet. They didn’t run in the same circles. They might never meet again. She didn’t want to miss the chance of a lifetime. Yeah, she had fallen for him hook, line and sinker. She nodded, looking deeply into his hot brown eyes. “So do I.”

3

It was late in the morning when Bharat woke up. Without opening his eyes, he turned around to pull Dia into his arms, his hands encountering an empty bed and crumpled sheets. Opening his eyes, he realised that he was alone in the bed. He got up, running a hand through his tousled hair, wondering if she was in the en suite bathroom. Her clothes weren't there, neither was her clutch. He got up to check the bathroom and found it empty. A deep sigh shuddered through him. She had left and he hadn't even got her cell number. And what was her surname? Bharat frowned, thinking hard, as he rubbed his hands over his unshaven cheeks. Nope! He didn't know. She had been with another girl, a dancer. He didn't know the friend's name either. Shit! He walked up to the table to see if she'd left a note. No, there was no trace of Dia.

And he had a flight to catch at noon, for an assignment in Delhi. It looked like his search for Dia would have to wait. He didn't even know what she did or if she even lived in Mumbai. He swore before walking under the shower. He couldn't help remembering reaching out to her in the middle of the night. They had made love again and it had been even better than the first time. With all those other women, it was Bharat who had been the giver. But Dia was such a generous lover that he so wanted to treasure her. Was she probably staying in the same hotel? He dressed quickly, packing his single luggage swiftly and efficiently. He decided to check at the hotel reception. Damn it! He hadn't even bothered to take a selfie with her.

There was no one staying at the hotel with Dia as her first name. He didn't have time to linger. Bharat called for a cab and left to go to the airport. He'd find her, definitely. Just then, it didn't strike Bharat what an impossible task he'd set himself.

Dia Mathur had left Bharat's hotel room at 6 am, taking a cab to her studio apartment. Luckily, none of the neighbours were up and about so early as it was a Sunday. It was rather awkward running about town in her slinky evening

clothes in the morning. She hugged her secret to herself as she let herself into her flat, a smile on her face. She was glad she hadn’t held back when he asked to make love to her.

While the first time was a wonderful experience, he'd blown her away when they made love for the second time. Dia blushed, recalling the scene. She had surprised herself with her boldness. It had been around 4 am when she woke up in his arms, her bare back against his naked chest, his arm around her waist even as a large hand curled around a breast. She felt so cherished and all woman, revelling in her femininity.

She turned her head to kiss him on his arm, her tongue peeping out to touch the satiny skin. He moved, his eyes opening a slit, a smile on his handsome face. “Is it morning already?”

She shook her head, “Not really.”

He turned her to him, kissing her on her forehead. His lips lazily traced her features, moving on to her eyelids, her nose, her cheeks and then her chin.

Frustrated, Dia protested, holding his head in her hands and taking a bite of his lower lip, making him laugh softly. “Kiss me,” she ordered, keen to feel his mouth on hers.

Bharat obliged her, taking a taste of her lips. The kiss grew deeper as their limbs tangled, his shaft growing thicker and harder against her stomach.

Dia moved a hand down his waist to reach out to his manhood, caressing him lightly, making him growl deeply in his throat.

He, in turn, trailed his lips down her body, his tongue playing havoc with her nerves as he slowly reached the core of her femininity.

Dia moaned, her hands holding on to his head tightly as he pleasured her vagina with his tongue. His hands held her thighs down as she thrashed her legs restlessly, a roaring filling her ears even as a climax built within her womb. “Bharat...” she groaned, reaching out for she knew not what as she felt the surge of an orgasm splitting her in two. She fell back on the bed, his head between her thighs, her breath coming in gasps. That had been explosive!

It took her more than a couple of minutes to feel the blood flow back into her veins. Her breathing got back to normal and she found the strength to lift her hands to caress the silky soft curls on her lover's head. She hugged him close, whispering in his ear, "That was simply awesome. Show me how to love you, please. I don't know."

Bharat smiled adoringly at the woman in his arms. What an innocent! He took her hand and placed it against his erection. "You're a natural," he complimented her, kissing her deeply.

She caressed him with both hands, loving the velvety texture, her silver gaze seeking his eyes. His brown eyes were glazed with passion as he pulled her close. He gently shifted her hands to his shoulders and pressed his manhood against her vagina, seeking entry.

She was all wet and inviting, welcoming his hardness into her as she could feel him right within her womb. Then he rode her, and how! She held on to him for dear life, her face pressed into his chest, her lips tracing a flat male nipple while her slim legs wrapped around his waist. The tremors from within her core shook her up as Dia felt another orgasm building within her.

Bharat groaned as he climaxed, burying his face against her neck, his heart thundering. That had been mind blowing. He pulled out of her and moved to his side, drawing her close. He'd never felt the need to hug his sexual partner before now. He went to sleep, his head against her breasts, revelling in her gentle hold.

Dia opened her eyes to notice that she was sitting on the single sofa in her apartment, day dreaming. She got up to make herself a cup of coffee, a wide smile on her face. No, she didn't need to sleep. She felt completely energised after all the wild lovemaking.

4

Dia had finished cooking and baking for the whole week and left the food to cool down before storing it in her fridge. Sitting down for a cup of coffee, she opened the Sunday newspaper. It was usually the business and financial pages that got her attention. But today, she was curious about Page 3. Would she get to see Bharat Maheshwari featured there? She opened the society pages to check the pictures of the post event party that she had attended with Avantika the earlier night.

She turned pale when she saw a picture of her lover of last night, his arms around not one, but two gorgeous-looking women, who were obviously models too. He was so bloody not in her league. How did she even imagine that Bharat might be as interested in her, as Dia was in him? Just because he wanted to spend a night with her in bed, didn't automatically follow that he had fallen for her. It was a one-night stand and she'd better accept it. And well, she had gone into it with her eyes open, after all.

Before leaving his hotel room, Dia had given herself a missed call from his cell and saved his number, hoping to be in touch with him. But now, she knew that she had been chasing after an impossible dream. Bharat would never be hers. He was too big, too popular and a ladies' man as he had admitted himself. Why the hell would he want to be with someone so ordinary like Dia?

A deep sigh shuddered through her. Their lovemaking had been nothing short of volatile and she had fallen in love with him. But that would mean nothing to Bharat. He moved in a different circle and probably slept with a different woman every night. The models who were seen hanging on his arms in the photo would definitely be more entertaining in bed, unlike her own inexperienced self. Dia's lips began to droop, same as her shoulders.

That's when she gave herself a thorough talking to. This was ridiculous. When she went to bed with Bharat, it had been with her eyes open. Yeah, she had done it because she was too deeply attracted to him. By the end of the night, she had fallen in love. So what?! She was glad she hadn't missed the one chance to be with him as she knew their paths would never cross again.

She took her phone and erased his number. Bharat was a lovely memory and that was it!

Later in the evening, Avantika called her. “Hey, did you spend the night with Bharat? Tell me all!” Her friend’s voice was excited. “I’d have come over, but I have an event today and just managed a couple of minutes to talk to you.”

“Of course I didn’t,” lied Dia through her teeth. It was her secret to keep, buried deep within her heart, and nobody else’s business, even if Avantika was her closest friend.

“Oh!” Avantika sounded disappointed. “The very air sizzled around the two of you. I was sure something was cooking.”

Dia laughed. “*Tum bhi* Avi. You let your imagination run with you. Yeah, the party was fun and I really enjoyed myself. Thank you for taking me along.”

“Stop being so formal Dia. *Chalo*, I need to go. Will catch you later.” Avantika disconnected the call, leaving a shaken Dia alone with her memories of Bharat that just refused to go away.

5

That week was too damn hectic for Bharat to think much of Dia. But he couldn't deny that he craved her body like a man in a desert would yearn for water. Three of the female models he was working with made it obvious that they would like to take their relationship with him further into the bedroom. He had actually slept with one of the girls before and had even enjoyed the sex. But he couldn't garner the interest now. It looked like Dia had spoilt them all for him. He smiled inadvertently, recalling their lovemaking. Well, he would have to find her soon.

"Hey." Bina tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "You look lost to the world."

Bharat looked down at the gorgeous model he worked regularly with, shrugging. "I suppose."

"What's up? Don't tell me!" She looked at him, wide-eyed with surprise. "Are you in love?"

Bharat grimaced. "Is that what it is? I miss her terribly."

Bina grinned. "And how the mighty fall!" She hugged him. "Do I know her?"

"I don't think so. I've met her just the one time."

"What's her name?"

"Dia..." A deep sigh shuddered through Bharat as he uttered her name. Had Bina realised what hadn't struck him? Was he in love?

Bina laughed softly. "It looks like you've caught it bad. Does she have a surname?" she teased.

Bharat frowned, trying hard to remember, before shaking his head. "None that I recall."

"How long did you take to fall in love? You must have spent very little time with

her if you don’t even know her full name.”

Bharat looked at Bina with stormy brown eyes. “You don’t know.” Yeah, he had caught it bad, it seemed.

His shoot over, Bharat left the studio abruptly, rushing back to his hotel to pack up. He had a flight booked to Jaipur that evening and planned to spend the weekend with his family. He missed them, especially his twin Shatru who was jet setting around the globe nowadays.

And Dia! Looks like that woman had stolen his heart. How was he going to find her?

After the weekend with his family, Bharat flew back to Mumbai in search of Dia but gave up after the many failed attempts. Actually, he didn’t even know where to look for her. His instinct was to rush to a private detective. But there was something that stopped him. She knew who he was. If she was even half as interested in him as he was in her, she would surely know how to get in touch with him, wouldn’t she?

Yeah, he did feel hurt when he finally acknowledged that. It looked like Dia had used him to gain some experience in bed. But to him, it felt like she had made him impotent. He seemed to have lost interest in both women and sex. Feeling bitter, he’d gone on a drinking binge for three days in his hotel room, not answering phone calls.

Bharat had been in a drunken stupor when the doorbell to his room rang on the third day. He buried his face under the pillow, choosing to ignore it. Only the ringing wouldn’t stop. Cursing viciously, he got up to open the door to see Ram and Lakshman standing outside. Looking sheepish, Bharat walked back into the room, letting the two of them in.

Lakshman handed Bharat a bottle of water even as Ram asked, “What happened to upset you? You aren’t answering calls. You know Mamma and Pappa would be anxious.” He scowled at his younger brother. Hearing Ram, anyone would have thought that he wasn’t personally worried about his brother. They couldn’t have been more wrong.

Bharat turned around angrily. “Why can’t you all mind your own business?

Can’t you see I’m an adult? I’m twenty-five, for God’s sake.” He buried his face in his hands, refusing to look his brothers in their eyes.

Lakshman went up to Bharat and hugged him close, not uttering a word. Bharat burrowed his face in his brother’s shoulder, his body shuddering with emotion. Ram walked up to them and put his arms around both his brothers.

That was it! No more questions asked. Their very silence acted as a trigger and slowly Bharat opened up enough to tell them what had upset him so badly. Not everything, maybe. But the gist was more than enough for his brothers to realise how much their kid brother had been affected by the disappearance of Dia. The young man, who was a confident model, who was chased by women in droves, did have a soft heart it seemed. Ram and Lakshman could feel it bleeding for the loss of this one woman who had obviously touched the said heart. They just listened as Bharat rambled, not all that clear at times. But talking about his feelings began the healing process and was enough to bring Bharat out of his self-pity and put him back on his feet.

By the time Ram and Lakshman left that evening, Bharat was stone-cold sober, had spoken to both their parents, and returned every single call that had gone unanswered on his cell.

He was back to the world of the living, signing up for all the assignments that came his way—still advertisements, film ads, ramp modelling—every single project, keeping extremely busy as he did his best to push Dia out of his mind. He even did some photo shoots for *Laki’s Bakes*—Lakshman and Ruma’s bakery chain; *Nakshatra Jewellery*—Ram’s designer jewellery and his wife Sapna’s beauty centre called *SaRa Salon*.

While his days were busy, it was during the nights that memories of Dia came to haunt him. Bharat blazed through the party circuit, attending every single shindig, with more than his share of enthusiasm. It worked, though only to some extent.

Through all this, Bharat realised one thing, Dia was the one for him. If he couldn’t have her, he’d rather go without a partner.

6

Dia worked longer hours than ever. So much so, that in just a few months she got a big hike in her salary and her own office cabin, much to the irritation of her immediate boss. She refused to think of her personal life, doing her best to forget Bharat. But it wasn't easy when his face stared at her every other day from the society pages of the newspaper. Yeah, she was addicted to those pages since meeting him. He appeared leaner and meaner; handsome right from his curly mop of carelessly styled dark hair to his feet encased in branded shoes. Dia, who had always stayed away from fashion magazines, seemed to have acquired a morbid fascination for them. She scouted her office library for glossies, checking out the advertisements and a rare couple of interviews of Bharat Maheshwari. It was obvious that he had forgotten her. A bitter smile broke on her face as she acknowledged what a fool she had been, to have fallen in love with a Casanova like him.

That night, sitting on her bed, Dia stared at the middle page spread. It was a screenshot of Bharat playing volleyball with a bevy of beauties—each female model more gorgeous than the other. And he was the only guy. The setting was a beach in foreign shores, obviously. No, she didn't recognise it as Andaman. They were all dressed in skimpy outfits, looking tanned and fit and perfect. It was an advertisement for a fashion brand. Like an addict, Dia took a photo of the spread on her phone, before picking up another magazine.

Bharat was dressed in a natty three-piece suit in steel grey in this one, with a royal blue tie that had tiny grey motifs in it. He had teamed them up with a brilliant white shirt, a silver tiepin and matching cufflinks. The background was a five-star ballroom. He was holding a glass of red wine that he raised in a toast. A lady in a full-length blue gown held her own glass against his. The blue of her gown was the exact shade as his tie. It was a vineyard advertisement. Dia couldn't take her eyes off Bharat. She tore her gaze away to study the woman's face. She vaguely remembered seeing that particular model at the party the other day. Was he sleeping with her as well? Dia turned pale.

She threw the magazine away and picked up another, rushing through the first few pages till she reached the one with Bharat on it. He was dressed up as a bridegroom in this one. She checked to see that it was for a jewellery brand

called *Nakshatra*. While the main focus was on the bride next to him, Dia's eyes were only for the man. He wore a *sherwani* in a deep shade of red that made his face glow, his melting brown eyes gazing at the camera. The pants he wore were shaped like a dhoti of rich cream coloured superfine cotton, the folds falling perfectly. A *pagari* of gold cloth with a red *bandini* border, the same shade as his *sherwani*, graced his curly hair. The buttons on his *kurta* were made of diamond solitaires set in gold; a matching diamond-studded paisley patterned pin, with a huge ruby in its centre, set on the turban. There was a heavy gold bracelet on the hand that held his bride's, along with two gold rings—one a plain band and the other set with diamonds and rubies. No, Dia didn't want to see what the bride wore. Good she couldn't see the woman's eyes as she had pulled her sari *pallu* down on her forehead. Otherwise, Dia might have been tempted to tear them out of the page.

How could a guy wear so much jewellery and still look so masculine? Bharat looked like royalty and Dia wanted to kiss him so badly. Her hand involuntarily caressed a clean-shaven cheek. Disappointment stung as her fingers encountered glossy paper.

Some weeks later, she went to catch a movie with Avantika. Bharat came to haunt her in not one, but two advertisements. One was for a brand of deodorant. She almost drooled as he took centre stage on screen, his upper body bare. The top button of his low slung jeans was open. Her imagination went haywire as she recalled with absolute clarity what the jeans hid. She raised her eyes in a hurry to stare at his chest. What startled her was his smooth, hair-free chest. Huh! She knew from personal experience that he had a hairy chest. Then how...? Dia's brow cleared as she recalled reading an article on metro sexual men. Dia curbed her mind that was running away with her imagination when Bharat appeared yet again in another ad ten minutes later. Briefs! She shut her eyes as colour flamed on her cheeks and opened them again to see him wearing one in another colour. Each time, he had a different woman hanging on his arm. WTF!

And Bharat had himself admitted that he made love to many women. His exact words were, 'I don't do virgins'. Dia gritted her teeth as she felt pain in the region of her heart. Of all people in the world, why did she have to give her heart to this man?

But that's how it was! Till a few days ago, Dia hadn't known that a man called Bharat Maheshwari had even existed. After that party and the night spent in his

bed, she could see him all around her. Was there no escape?!

7

Bharat didn't know where the two years had gone. He worked harder than ever, doing his best to keep memories of Dia buried deep within him. He went home at least once a month for a long weekend. He would have preferred to go every weekend, but his mother's eyes were all seeing. He didn't want her to know that he wasn't happy.

That weekend, Shatru had also got back from his six-month sojourn in Europe and the twins were happy to reconnect. Mohan was ecstatically happy that all his children were home.

Bharat grinned at the heavily pregnant Sapna. "You're looking beautiful Sapna. When is the baby due?" He clapped a hand on Ram's shoulder.

Sapna grinned back, colour blooming on her cheeks. "Three weeks to go."

"And how's the dad-to-be?" he teased Ram.

"A tad nervous," said Ram, surprising everyone.

"I can't believe that we're soon to become uncles," said Shatru, hugging Ram and Sapna.

The Maheshwaris sat down to dinner together, Ruma and Lakshman getting the dishes from the kitchen.

"Do we get to taste some new cake, Ruma?" asked Shatru, rubbing his stomach.

"Of course, I've baked a blueberry cheesecake for your homecoming. Would you like to cut it after dinner?" she asked.

"Cheesecake? Yummy," grinned Shatru even as Bharat grumbled.

"I protest," said Bharat. "Why only for Shatru and not for me?"

"That's because Ruma loves me more," declared Shatrughan, grinning evilly.

Bharat got up from his chair and hugged Ruma. “No, Ruma loves me more.”

When Shatru pushed his chair to get up, Lakshman said, “Cut it out, guys. Ruma loves only me. She made the cake for me, but I’ll let you both cut it together.”

Meera laughed, enjoying the bickering between her grown up sons.

Sapna said, “I think I should cut the cake as the baby wants to have the first bite.”

Shatru replied with a smile, “I suppose we uncles can’t compete with the little one. You get to cut the cake, Sapna.” He planned to stay back till his niece or nephew was born before getting on with his next trip.

Bharat shrugged, sitting back with a smile on his face.

All of them chattered away as they ate their food. When there was a lull in the conversation, Mohan said, “The Mathurs are visiting us tomorrow. They are here for the whole day. I hope you will all stay at home to spend the day with them.” Looking around, he asked, “Do you all remember Paresh uncle and Daksha aunty? It’s been many years since we met. Paresh and I grew up together. We lost touch when we moved to Jaipur. They have also been living in Meerut since the past thirteen years.”

Ram nodded. “Yeah, I remember them. They have two little girls.” His forehead puckered as he thought deeply before he snapped his fingers in recollection. “Pia and Dia.”

“Okay, you remember the girls,” laughed Sapna, teasing her husband.

Lakshman chuckled. “They must have been babies, I think.” He didn’t remember the family.

Meera said, “Not really. The elder one was almost ten if I remember right.” She winked at Sapna, making her daughter-in-law laugh out loud. “Their full names are Dipali and Piali. The girls shortened them.”

Ruma and Sapna laughed as they could relate to that.

“Can’t really blame them,” said Ram.

Mohan raised a hand. “So, the whole family, Paresh, his wife and his daughters, are coming tomorrow. I’d...”

Shatru groaned. “Pappa, I am planning to meet some friends and also spend time with Bharat since he’d rush back on Monday morning. Can I be excused? Please.”

Mohan looked at him before turning to Bharat. “Bharat, you move your appointments further down the week and spend a couple of more days here with Shatru.” That was it. No one argued. Their father rarely demanded anything from his children. So, when he asked for something, the boys chose to fall in with his wishes.

They continued to chat while Meera consulted her family about the next day’s lunch menu. They were having guests after a long time. She was looking forward to meeting Daksha again. The girls must have grown up too. They were obviously not married. Well, what if one of her twin sons liked either Pia or Dia? The wheels turned in the mother’s mind.

When they were alone in their room, Meera spoke to Mohan. “Do you think we can speak to Daksha and Paresh about an alliance for one of our boys with either of their girls?”

Mohan looked at his wife, a mischievous smile on his face. “Let’s meet them first. It’s been so many years. What if you dislike the girls on sight?” His wife was too mild to take an instant dislike to anyone. But Mohan so loved to tease her at every opportunity.

Meera mock glared at her husband. “What will you do if Bharat or Shatru likes one of the girls?”

Mohan nodded. “I’ll give them my blessing.”

8

Dia never stopped loving Bharat. She worked hard at being happy and almost succeeded. That one night with him had given her such wonderful memories that would have to last a lifetime. And she wouldn't let her parents talk about marriage. Thank God, the Mathurs lived in Meerut while she had shifted base to Mumbai. No way was she going to marry the guy they chose when she was in love with another.

Dia had kicked up enthusiasm with great difficulty when her younger sister Pia organised a family trip to Jaipur. It had been more than two years since the four of them had been on a holiday together. Twenty months younger than Dia, Pia worked for a cosmetic brand in their marketing department and was based in Delhi.

The idea was to spend some quality time as a family. Their parents, Paresh and Daksha, were both enthusiastic about the trip, especially as they had planned to spend a day at their best friends' home.

Dia vaguely recalled the plump Meera aunty who used to be their closest neighbour so long ago. She remembered they had a houseful of children, four boys and a girl, if her memory served her right.

So, on the first day, they went sight-seeing to *Pink City* in the older part of Jaipur, painted that colour in the honour of the Prince of Wales' visit in 1876. They toured the *Hawa Mahal* in the *Pink City* that had a whopping 953 windows built over five storeys. The next stop was *Birla Mandir*, the temple dedicated to Laxmi-Narayana at the foot of the *Moti Dungri fort*. Their final stop had been *Chokhi Dhani*, a five-star restaurant set in the middle of a village-like ambience – with rustic decor and a number of village artisans to enthral the visitors in the likes of those from Rajasthan.

Tired, but happy, the family called it a day before going to *Amber Palace* the next day. The girls insisted on going up the fort by elephant. Laughing, Paresh and Daksha also went along. It was truly adventurous and they got to see more of the fort that way. They had hired a guide for the tour of the palace and had a wonderful time travelling down history.

The third day was spent shopping for Jaipur silks and cottons. The women thoroughly enjoyed themselves while Paresh patiently tagged along with them. They also bought a couple of gifts to take with them to Mohan and Meera's home.

Their last day was to be spent at the Maheshwaris' home. Paresh and Daksha looked forward to meeting their old friends after more than a decade, while the girls were rather indifferent, not really knowing what to expect. They tagged along as there wasn't much of a choice, giggling to each other as they chatted on their way in the cab after breakfast.

Both Dia and Pia were utterly impressed when their taxi entered the wrought iron gates with a name board that said *Nakshatra*, to drive towards the sprawling bungalow. The garden was so beautiful with trees and flowering shrubs that were pleasing to the eye. As the vehicle stopped on the portico, their hosts stepped out to greet them. Mohan opened the front door of the taxi, taking Paresh's hand, his eyes wet with emotion. The men hugged while Meera greeted Daksha equally enthusiastically.

Dia and Pia said "*Namaste*" to Mohan uncle and Meera aunty, looking further as some more people appeared at the entrance. Walking up the few steps, they entered the hall that seemed full of people.

Dia turned pale when she noticed Shatrughan, the youngest son of the family. Her shocked gaze desperately studied his features, finding them so familiar. And then she noticed his black eyes, realising that he wasn't the man of her dreams. Her heart beat slowed down painfully, colour returning to her cheeks even as she noticed another man striding down the staircase from the first floor.

Blood rushed to Dia's head as her heart thundered yet again, even faster this time. The adrenaline rush left her weak and pale, her hands trembling in the aftermath.

"Sorry I'm late," said the newcomer. "Hello, Paresh uncle, Daksha aunty. I'm Bharat. And you must be Dia and Pia..." He stopped in his tracks, staring at Dia, his jaw dropping. He was completely unaware when Pia shook his hand, his gaze refusing to leave Dia's pale face. Was he dreaming or maybe imagining things? It couldn't be *his* Dia.

“Hello,” said Dia, placing her hand in his, trying hard to blank out her expression. She hoped no one had seen her response to first Shatrughan and then to Bharat, the man she loved with all her heart.

Luckily, everyone was talking at once and nobody noticed Bharat’s and Dia’s reactions to each other.

Bharat blinked before saying, “Hello,” in his gravelly voice that came out in a rough whisper. His eyes ate her up, having missed her with every cell of his being. Two years had gone by! But he still remembered the few hours they had spent together with absolute clarity. He let go of her hand when she pulled at it, becoming conscious of the rest of their families. At that moment Bharat realised that the universe would give one exactly what one sought deeply from the heart. He gave Dia a wide smile and a small wink before turning to talk to the others.

Dia went to sit on the sofa, her legs feeling too weak to hold her. She gratefully accepted the glass of water a servant brought on a tray, gulping it down her parched throat. How?! How was it possible that their paths had crossed today when they never so much had set eyes on each other even once during the past two years? She felt dazed. And she could see from the expression in his melting brown gaze that he remembered her. Wasn’t he a Casanova? He must have bedded a dozen women after they parted ways. Then how was it that he remembered a woman he had met for barely a few hours? She held her hands tightly together, curbing the need to bury her face in them.

Her past had come back to bite her, it seemed. What would he do?

9

While the day rushed ahead for the others, it moved at a snail's pace for both Bharat and Dia. Neither of them was inclined to move within a few feet of the other. But that didn't stop Bharat's gaze from following her movements. She seemed to get along well with everyone else, chatting comfortably. But her smile was strained. Maybe only he could see it as he was totally attuned to her.

It was past ten when the Mathurs decided to take their leave. Dia got up in a rush, her relief obvious to him. Just as she was going to book a cab, Bharat got up from the sofa to say, "Shatru and I will drop you all at your hotel."

Shatrughan looked at his twin's face and immediately nodded. So did Mohan and Meera. "That's a good idea, Bharat," said his father approvingly.

Paresh looked at the young man and said, "That's really nice of you, Bharat. Are you sure it's no trouble?"

"Not at all, uncle," said Bharat, refusing to look in Dia's direction. If he didn't catch hold of her in private today, she'd definitely slip out of his radar again. That's one thing he wasn't willing to risk.

They all got into the Maruti Ertiga after a flurry of goodbyes, Shatru taking the wheel with Paresh beside him. Bharat offered to sit right at the back, letting the three women take the middle seat. As they rode to Hotel Anuraag Villa, Dia could feel the back of her neck prickling with nerves as she felt his gaze on her. Her hands were clenched into tight fists. The slight headache that had begun from the moment she set eyes on Bharat, had slowly developed into a heavy clanging in her head. Her appetite had been almost nil through both lunch and dinner while she had sat on pins, as if awaiting the explosion of a time bomb. The ride lasted for barely twenty minutes and Dia couldn't wait to get away from him.

They all got down from the car. Just as Dia turned to leave, she felt a masculine hand tug at hers. "I'll be waiting. Come down once your parents are settled," he said softly, for her ears alone. Pia turned to give them a curious look, but walked ahead with their parents. Dia's eyes reminded him of a deer caught in headlights

and a gentle smile appeared on his features as he pressed her hand reassuringly. “See you.” She rushed into the hotel after the rest of her family.

Shatru looked at his brother curiously. “Do you think she’ll be back?”

Bharat nodded confidently. “Oh yes, she will.”

Shatru grinned, slapping his twin on his shoulder. “Shall I make myself scarce then? I think I’ll go visit my friends.”

“Go on and take the car with you. I don’t know how long I’ll be.”

“You’ve caught it bad, have you?” teased Shatru.

“Really bad,” grimaced Bharat, walking through the reception into the garden to wait for the love of his life.

10

Dia wished her parents ‘goodnight’ before walking into the room she shared with her sister. She refused to meet Pia’s eyes, rushing into the bathroom. Splashing water on her face, she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her expression was tense, her eyes bloodshot. But how long could she hide in the bathroom? She was sure Bharat was capable of coming up to the room. Wiping her hands and face on a towel, she stepped out of the bathroom to see Pia sitting on the bed, waiting for her.

“What’s up? Having trouble, Dia?”

Dia shook her head. “Not really. I’m going down for a while. I’ll see you soon. You go ahead and sleep if you want. I’ll take the key with me.”

Pia went close to her sister and put an arm around her shoulders. “Is everything alright? Can I help you in some way?”

Dia gave the other girl a pathetic glance before looking down at her feet. “I don’t think anyone can help me.” She walked out in a rush, taking the steps two at a time. It was time to face the brooding man waiting for her downstairs.

Bharat got up when he saw Dia walking towards him. The main lights had been switched off as most of the guests had settled down for the night. There were a few candles burning on the dining tables in the garden, giving them all the privacy required. He pulled her into his arms, burying his face in the crook of her shoulder, his body shuddering with emotion. “Dia...” he groaned, “You don’t know how much I’ve missed you.”

The tension of the whole day disappeared as Dia felt his arms go around her. This was exactly where she belonged. She had known that since two years. But...right now she didn’t want to think anymore as she hugged him back tightly.

He raised his head to look down at her pinched features. He traced the outline of her face with a finger, looking deeply into her eyes. “My life hasn’t been worth living without you.” He bent down to press his lips to hers. When he felt her tongue peeping out to taste his mouth, he groaned again, kissing her hungrily.

They fell back on the garden sofa, as he held her close, his trembling hands running over her back.

It was a long time before they came up for air. Dia pressed her head against his chest, listening to his heart thud loudly. Did he really mean what he said? It was so difficult to believe her ears.

“Why did you disappear like that, baby?” he asked lovingly. “Did I upset you in some way? I thought we connected so powerfully.”

Dia raised her head to look up at his melting brown gaze, wondering if she had been wrong about him all this long. He appeared so sincere. She shook her head. “I don’t really know. Bharat, you are a super model, moving in exalted circles.” Her hand seemed to have a mind of its own, pushing the shirt flap out of the way to trace his collarbone in a caress. “I’m from an ordinary working class family, going to a 9-5 job. We...”

Bharat grinned. “Do you know I work 12-14 hours on some days? And many of the weekends too. I’m not trying to impress you or anything, but modelling is a damn tough job. No complaints, but it’s also work at the end of the day.” He kissed her nose. She looked so adorable.

She looked at him in awe. Even presuming what he said was true, he moved with people way out of her league. And there were the girls who fluttered about him like bees around honey. He was too handsome for his own good. Today, she’d met all four brothers and still felt that Bharat was the best looking of the lot. That was saying a lot since each one of them was a hunk. But then, she could be partial as she loved him from the bottom of her heart. Without realising what she was doing, she opened a couple of buttons on his shirt, stroking a soft hand on his rough chest. It felt so good to touch him again after so long. And an inadvertent smile appeared on her face as she recalled his clean-shaven chest in the advertisement for briefs.

“I’m sure you know what I mean,” she said, reaching up to kiss the cleft on his chin.

“Nope,” he shook his head, the curls on his head bouncing, wondering about her sudden smile. “Why don’t you tell me?”

She raised a finger to twist a curl around it, exulting in the silky texture. “Bharat, you enjoy your affairs with so many women. I...” She stopped, seeing him shake his head again. “What?”

He smiled softly. “I used to, before I met you. Will you believe me if I tell you that I’ve never been to bed with another woman after you? I don’t want to.”

Her silver gaze studied his velvety brown eyes searchingly, wonderment slowly dawning on her face. What if he was telling her the truth? “But Bharat, it was you who told me that you have affairs regularly.”

“Yeah, I did. But that was before I met you. I love you, Dia.”

Her eyes went wide, the pupils dilating, appearing almost black. “Are you serious?” she gasped.

His large hands framed her face, “Oh yes, baby! I’m damn serious. The past two years have been the worst in my life. I know it’s too much expecting you to love me too. But let me in your life. Allow me to woo you. Give me a chance is all I ask.”

Dia smiled, her headache having disappeared completely. “You know that morning, I had to leave early. But I had taken your cell number and was planning to call you. But...” her lips drooped. “I saw the society pages in the newspaper for the first time that day. It had pictures of the party where we met. I...”

Bharat moved his ear closer to her mouth as her voice had deteriorated to a whisper. “And?”

“There were pictures of you posing with such lovely women. I really didn’t know what to think.”

Bharat didn’t even know what pictures she spoke off. After the first few exciting times, he’d stopped looking at such photos of himself. The press liked sensation, but he didn’t much care for that. Well, gossip sold tabloids. “But how could you believe that after the night we spent with each other? Didn’t it mean anything to you?”

It had meant everything to her. But her feelings were too raw. She needed to

know him better before admitting that. “I was worried that it didn’t mean anything to you,” she said, evading a direct answer.

“Dia...” He kissed her ear, his tongue touching the pulse behind it. “Will you promise not to disappear from my life?”

“I do,” she whispered, turning to capture his lips in a shattering kiss.

It was another half an hour before Dia parted from Bharat with great reluctance, turning around to give him another hug. They had already exchanged numbers and now he had her Mumbai address also stored in his phone.

“I’ll see you on Wednesday,” he promised, his eyes glowing with joy.

“I’ll look forward to that,” she said, blowing him a kiss as she walked up the stairs.

When she let herself into the room, Dia tiptoed around, picking her nightshirt from the wardrobe. She hoped not to wake up her sister who was already in bed. She was startled when she saw Pia getting up to sit against the headboard.

“So,” said Pia, switching on the bed lamp. “Bharat loves you.”

“What?” Colour flamed on Dia’s face as she stared at her sister. “How...?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to overhear. But I was worried when you left. When you didn’t return after twenty minutes, I came down to check if everything was okay. That’s when I heard him declare his love for you.” Pia smiled widely. “Congratulations Dia. And do you love him too?”

“With all my heart. But shh...,” Dia placed a finger on her lips, “He doesn’t know that yet.”

“But why?” asked Pia, curious.

“Actually Pia, Bharat has the reputation of being a Casanova. Even he admitted to it when I met him first. Though he insists that he’s changed since he met me and is in love with me, I’m still not sure about him. What if he’s confusing lust for love?”

Pia saw the wary look in her sister's face and got up to hug her. "I know what you mean. I really, really hope that everything works out for you. He's one charming guy for sure."

"That he is," said Dia, smiling, her look of caution replaced by a dreamy expression.

11

Dia sat on her bed, leaning against the headboard, and patted the space next to her. “Sit here with me.”

Bharat didn’t listen as he sat on the floor, crossed-legged, gazing up at her in adoration. He took her hand in his, kissing each finger diligently, nibbling on a couple of them.

Her heart thudded furiously as she gazed into his melting chocolate eyes as he studied her with a wicked smile on his face, as if...as if he wanted to eat her up whole. “Why are you sitting down there on the floor?”

He grinned. “For one, I like the view from here.” His gaze ran over her body before returning to look into her silver eyes. “And for another, we need to talk and sharing a bed with you could get distracting.” He winked, making her go red.

She ran a hand through the soft, silky curls of his head, before caressing a rough cheek, her thumb tracing the shape of his lips. She moaned when he bit her thumb gently with his teeth, making her heart go thumping. “I want you to make love to me.”

“So do I. But don’t you think we need to know each other better? What if you disappear again once I satisfy you?” While he teased, he was half-serious. He loved her. But maybe she just lusted after him. He still didn’t know what her life had been over the past few years. What if she had taken a lover or two during those days? He personally knew that she was amazing in bed. Yeah, even if it had been the first time for her.

Dia stared at him in a daze. What was he saying? “Why would I disappear?” she asked.

“You did, the last time.” He ran a hand down her leg, tracing the silky skin left bare by her shorts. His eyes were serious as he looked at her intently.

Dia sighed. “I told you why I did. I was insecure. I...”

“If you could have talked to me instead of arriving at your own conclusions...” He felt hurt.

Dia sat up from her reclining position, turning to face him. She placed her feet on his bare thighs, relishing the rough texture. She held his face between her palms. “I’m sorry. Terribly sorry.” She kissed him on his forehead. “I was immature. And Bharat, I still can’t understand what you see in me. The models who work with you are so glamorous, so beautiful. And I’m so ordinary. I...” She stopped when Bharat placed a finger against her lips, arresting her words.

He shook his head at her. “Don’t you realise I love you, exactly the way you are? Anyone can turn stylish with the right accessories. Glamour is great clothes and make-up. Actually, I like you more with neither on.” He winked as he moved closer to the bed and her, kissing her bare thigh, making her flesh tingle.

Dia looked down at his bent head. She caressed his nape, unable to keep her hands off him. Could he be right? She had the tendency to wear casual clothes outside working hours. While in the office, she wore trousers teamed with formal shirts. But she didn’t think they could really be called stylish. Functional, more like.

Bharat raised his head suddenly to look up at her. “What’s running in that lovely head of yours? I can almost hear the wheels turning.”

She shook her head at him, a tense smile on her face. “Nothing.”

He pulled her down from the bed and into his arms, rolling on the floor with her. She was insecure. He could see it now. The only way to help her out of it was to convince her of his love. He kissed her gently, his lips sucking her lower lip, his tongue tracing its shape. “Hmm, you taste so good.” He trailed his tongue on her upper lip, before probing further inside to rub it against hers.

Dia clung to his wide shoulders, glad to be lying down. Her legs wouldn’t have supported her if she’d been standing just now. She returned his kiss with equal fervour, her slim legs tangling with his muscular ones. She was thrilled to feel the expanding bulge of his manhood against her stomach.

Bharat raised his head to look down at the woman in his arms. Her face was

flushed and her lips were a dark, wet red, looking thoroughly kissed. “You know something?” He paused.

She opened silver eyes that had gone almost black with desire and looked at him. “What?” Her voice was a soft whisper as she traced a hand over his masculine shape, loving the freedom.

He smiled into her eyes. “That’s the first time in two years that I have had a hard on, only for you.”

Dia blanched.

12

A visibly shaken Dia stared at Bharat, not really knowing what to say. And here she had been thinking that he must have bedded so many women after they parted ways. “I...I’m sorry. I didn’t know, didn’t realise...” she got stuck for words. Becoming conscious of her hand touching him intimately, she removed it.

He protested loudly, taking her hand and placing it back on his crotch. “I need your hands on me.” He bent down to smother her lips with his. “And don’t be sorry. I’m not.” He kissed her throat, his tongue tracing a rapidly beating pulse. “Hmm,” he breathed in deeply, “you smell so good.” He traced a wet tongue below her throat, pressing brief kisses on his way down. He lifted his head suddenly to look at her flushed face, with her eyes shut, her long, curling lashes resting against her cheeks.

Dia opened her eyes a slit, wondering what had stopped him. “Why did you stop?”

He grinned. “This is exactly the reason why I didn’t get into your bed. See what you do to me.”

“And what do I do to you?” she asked, a smile on her face, her hands pulling his t-shirt out of the waist band of his shorts to caress his back.

“For one, you give me a painful hard-on after two years. For another, you make my heart beat go wild.” He pulled her hands from his back and guided one to his chest and the other to his privates. “See?”

Dia caressed him with both her hands, before complaining, “You’re wearing too many clothes.”

“Dia...” He got up from on top of her to remove his t-shirt swiftly. She helped him out of his shorts, pressing soft kisses on his manly chest, rubbing her face against him, relishing the rough texture, before giggling suddenly.

“Hey.” Bharat clutched a handful of her hair to prise her face away from his chest, his hold gentle but firm. “What’s funny?” His brown eyes studied her face

curiously.

“I saw the ad you did for some branded briefs. Your chest was free of hair.” Her hand moved caressingly over his chest, even as she spoke. “It made me wonder if I was seeing things. Did you shave it all off?” she asked, her silver eyes amused.

Bharat grimaced, pulling her on his lap as he squatted on the floor. “Don’t remind me. I had to have my chest waxed before that particular shoot. Ouch! It was damn painful. Thank God they wrapped up the shoot in a couple of days. Can’t imagine what more torture I’d have had to undergo if it had taken longer.”

Dia laughed outright while he pretended to glare at her. She shook her head at him. “We women do have a better pain threshold it seems. We do this month after month.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Bharat, his hand running down a silky thigh. “Will I be a MCP if I say I like your skin silky and free of hair?” he asked, his eyes serious.

“Nope. I do it because I like my body this way. Why blame you?” She reached out with her tongue to trace a male nipple, making him groan.

Bharat moved her away, got up and pulled her to bed. “This time, I’ll let you have your wicked way with me. But we need to talk after that.”

She rolled on top of him and looked deeply into his eyes. “And will you love me again after we finish talking?”

Bharat growled, kissing her hard, his hand swatting her bottom. “Whatever you want.” He pushed the noodle straps of her thin top off her shoulders with an impatient hand, nibbling his way over her collarbone. When his hands encountered her bra straps, he sighed loudly, much to Dia’s amusement.

“What?” she asked, grinning down at him, “Don’t tell me you need help undressing me,” she teased, “Not Mr. Casanova.”

He took his hands off Dia and held them up for her inspection. “See.” When she looked at them, he continued, “See how my hands tremble in excitement when I’m this close to you. I need you too much. And yeah, you’ll have to help me.”

Looking at his serious expression, Dia sobered, before sitting up on his stomach. She unhooked her bra swiftly and threw it down on the floor, along with her top. Colour ran up her body when she felt his feverish brown gaze on her pert breasts, the nipples tightening in anticipation.

Bharat almost choked when he drew in a sharp breath, his body screaming for her. He raised his hands to cup her breasts even as she shimmied out of her shorts. “What are you doing?” he growled when she moved this way and that on his stomach.

Dia laughed. “Getting naked.” Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the expression on his face. “Only for you,” she whispered, putting her hands over his to hold them firmly against her body.

He pulled her down to stroke his tongue in a circle round the aureole of her right breast, even as a hand caressed the other one. Dia moaned, her hands holding his head tightly against her, moving her body down his stomach, closer to his pelvis and his jutting manhood.

Bharat dipped a hand into her vulva to find her hot and wet. He lifted her up by the hips and brought her down against his hard shaft, entering her in one single stroke. They groaned as one before Dia rode him, a frenzied excitement building within her womb. Faster and faster she rode, his hands on her hips, helping her find her rhythm, until an explosion ripped through her. She felt as if she had been blown into pieces that floated away in a vacuum, before they all came back together in slow motion, making her whole again. She felt like a rag doll as she continued to ride him.

And then Bharat’s life came apart as he shattered into a million pieces, his climax stopping both his heart and lungs from functioning for a few seconds. It was after a while that he regained his consciousness to understand why the French called it a little death.

He felt reborn.

13

Dia continued to lie on Bharat, taking deep breaths to calm down her racing heart. Her fingers continued to stroke his manly shoulders, revelling in the texture of his rippling muscles. She felt happy and at peace with his arms around her, her legs clenched, still holding him within her. She didn't plan to let him go anytime soon.

Bharat ran a gentle hand down her back, his fingers caressing her silky bottom. "I love you."

Dia whispered against his chest. "I love you too."

His hands stopped their stroking and went to her shoulders, prising her off his chest. "Say that again." His molten chocolate eyes bored into her slumberous silver gaze.

"I love you."

He groaned, pulling her down to kiss her hard on her lips, his tongue demanding entry into her mouth, even as he went hard within her.

Dia's eyes went wide in surprise, before shutting down. That was some fast recovery, not that she complained. She clung to him as he rolled her over, coming on top of her to ride her hard. She revelled in the sensation when he caressed her breasts, his hands rough.

Bharat groaned as he climaxed too soon this time, his face buried on her shoulder. It was some time before he recovered and moved off her, still holding her close, whispering in her ear. "I'm sorry I..."

She rubbed her back against his chest, treasuring the moments in his hold. "What for?" she asked, stretching like a satisfied cat, turning her head slightly to look at him from the corner of her eyes.

"I didn't wait for you before climaxing." He kissed her on her ear, his hand stroking her breast. "I'll make it up for you, I promise. Just give me a few

moments to recover."

Dia laughed softly. "I thought we were going to talk," she teased, turning around to face him. He looked so handsome, his brown eyes gone soft, making her want to drown herself in them. She spread her hands on his chest, moving them across in a caress.

"You keep that up and I'm going to forget how to talk, ever," said Bharat, pulling her closer. He went on his back, tucking her on his side, her head on his shoulder. "I need some food in me." He got up suddenly. "Let me order something." He lifted his shorts to get his phone out of the pocket, even as he felt Dia's hand on his arm. He turned to look at her with a raised eyebrow, his finger running through the phone screen, in search of the Zomato app.

"I have dinner ready." She got off the bed, took his t-shirt and pulled it over her head, as Bharat looked on, his eyes studying her movements keenly. His t-shirt fell off one slender, golden shoulder, but she liked wearing it, feeling close to him. She sniffed, imbibing the scent that was a combination of the musky fragrance that he wore and something else that was all him.

"Come here," he beckoned imperiously.

Her legs seemed to have a mind of their own as they took her close to him. She pressed a kiss to his manly lips, rejoicing in taking a bite of his lower lip.

He crushed her to his body, kissing her deeply. It was a while before he let her go with a sigh, getting up from the bed, looking glorious in his nakedness.

She devoured him with her eyes, watching in fascination as his manhood sprang to life. She laughingly placed a hand against him, saying, "Do you think dinner or talk is going to happen tonight?"

Bharat removed her hand away and turned to wrap a bed sheet around his middle. "Yep, they are."

"A man with iron willpower is one that I can admire for sure," she said cheekily, turning towards the kitchenette, even as he followed close behind. "So, what would you like to have? I've three *pizzas* and a helping of *pasta*." She looked back at him over her shoulder, even as she opened the freezer.

Bharat eyed the pizzas. “Red, yellow, green peppers, corn and onions. Woohoo! With loads and loads of cheese. I already love it. Let’s have *pizza*,” he said, rubbing his flat stomach. “Did you make them?”

Dia nodded, removing all three pizzas and placing them in the microwave, setting it to ‘defreeze’. “From scratch.”

Bharat gave her a surprised look. “You mean you baked the bread too?” He smiled when she nodded. “You’re a whiz,” he said, hugging her, moving the t-shirt up to caress her bare bottom. “I thought you’re into management. How come so much of cooking?”

She shrugged. “Management is to earn my living. This is pure joy. I love cooking since it totally relaxes me after a hectic week. I thank my lucky stars that I have both Saturdays and Sundays off. I cook for the whole week in those days.”

“What all do you make?” he asked, wanting to know more, fascinated by all things about her.

“*Parathas* with different fillings, an array of *chutneys*, enough to last me a week. *Pizza* and *pasta* as you can see. I cook Chinese for immediate consumption. So weekends are set aside for *noodles* or *fried rice*. I’m also experimenting with Mexican. Need to practice more.” She changed the setting on the microwave to ‘heat’ when the oven pinged.

“Do you know how amazing you are?” said Bharat, kissing her on her forehead.

“I am?” She looked into his eyes searchingly. Yeah, he looked serious. “But Bharat, I’m very ordinary. I...”

He pressed a finger to her lips, shaking his head. “Why do you keep saying that?” He wondered if someone had said something to lower her self esteem. “You’re anything but ordinary. You have a management career at twenty-four. You can cook different cuisines. You look gorgeous.” He stopped to look at her enquiringly when she made a sound of protest. “What?”

“I know I don’t look gorgeous. You don’t need to say that to boost my

confidence.” Her eyes looked at him accusingly.

Bharat shook his head, his coffee coloured eyes gazing deeply into hers. “You’re crazy if you think that, baby. Listen. Your quicksilver gaze pierces my heart.” He kissed her eyes one by one. “Your pert nose beckons to me.” He kissed her there. “Your pouting lips turn me on.” He gave her a brief, hard kiss. “Your pointed chin challenges me.” His pressed his lips to her chin. “Your shell-like ears call out to me.” He bit on her right earlobe, making her moan with desire. His voice turned softer as he spoke into her ear. “Your gorgeous breasts make me salivate. And your...”

Dia pressed her fingers against his mouth to stop the flow of words, blushing to the roots of her hair. Her eyelids felt heavy as she felt a strange shyness invade her. His verbal lovemaking was more arousing than the actual physical act. She hid her face on his broad chest, feeling too shy to look into his eyes.

Bharat hugged her close with a smile on his face, kissing her on the top of her head. She was simply adorable! And completely unaware of how much she affected him.

14

Dia paid the rickshaw driver before getting out at the gates of a famous film studio in Bandra. No one stopped her when she walked in, searching for the venue where Bharat was shooting since morning. He said he'd be finishing by eight or so and had invited her over after she was done at work. She asked someone for directions before taking a right and finding herself in front of large metal gates that hid the studio from view. A small door cut out on the gate opened into the area and she went in to find what seemed like chaos. She stared in awe at the glaring lights, three cameras that were set in different angles, and at least fifty people running around. She walked carefully in the peripheral, not wanting to get in the way, before finding a batch of plastic chairs in one corner. She sat on one of them and turned to see the action.

She could see an order in the chaos by now. And yes, she had noticed Bharat's tall form right in the middle of it. He was wearing ripped jeans and a casual white shirt that was unbuttoned at his throat, sporting a smart pair of glares. As she watched, Dia guessed that he was probably shooting for some brand of sunglasses as he kept changing them, picking one by one from the tray held by an assistant who wasn't far away, but out of line of the cameras. She was glad to see him alone on the stage.

But after about half an hour, Bharat went away. She sat back to check the messages and emails on her phone before logging into Facebook. Raising her head after a while, she saw that he was back, wearing a pair of navy blue corduroy pants and a collarless shirt of a brick red colour. He held a casual jacket hooked from a finger on the back of one shoulder, posing with his hand holding a pair of sunglasses against his face. Two women models, clothed in barely-there dresses, came to stand on both sides of him, their arms around his waist. Dia sighed. They looked so beautiful. How could Bharat resist them when they were working in such close proximity, especially if they were willing?

She couldn't remove her eyes from the scene as they posed in different areas of the stage, in varied postures. The director kept calling for a shot again and yet again. Bharat had been right. It was a lot of hard work. But he looked happy as he chatted with his colleagues during breaks. She also noticed another thing that day. It was not just the women models that he spoke to. He also seemed to share

a rapport with the rest of the staff hovering around. She saw him place an arm around the shoulders of the guy holding the tray of glares, taking the burden off him. The other man laughed, shaking his head and taking the tray right back into his keeping.

She heard the director call out for yet another costume change and went back to her phone when she saw Bharat walk out once again through a side door.

It was 8.15 when her cell vibrated in her hand. Her face lit up when she saw his face on her phone and picked it up.

“Hey baby,” came the gravelly voice. “Could you make it to the studio?”

“Oh yes,” she whispered into her phone. “I’ve been right here since the past couple of hours.”

“What?” She stood up and waved when she saw Bharat looking for her. But she was sure he wouldn’t be able to see her as the light was brighter where he was.

“Do you see the chairs clustered in one corner?”

“Okay, I see you now.” He continued to whisper nonsense in her ear and Dia turned redder by the second as she watched his tall form eating up the distance between them in but a few strides. He stopped within a few feet of her, disconnecting the phone, when he was interrupted by one of the beauties who had shot the ad with him.

Dia’s smile left her face as the model walked along with Bharat towards her, her tinkling laugh ringing out.

“Hey,” said Bharat again, pulling Dia into his arms, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “How have you been?” He moved her away to check her out from top to toe and realised that her smile was missing. He immediately knew why; also the exact reason why he’d asked Bina to join them. It was time Dia understood the world he moved in.

Dia nodded. “I’m good. And you?” Her voice was subdued.

“Don’t I get a kiss?” he grumbled, tilting her chin with a hand. But she wouldn’t

meet his eyes. “Dia?”

She lifted her eyelids suddenly to gaze into his hot brown gaze. “We’ve company.”

“Of course we do,” said Bharat, before bending down to capture her lips in a hard, but too brief a kiss. He raised his head to watch with satisfaction as colour rushed up her cheeks, her silver eyes promising retaliation. Good! “Dia, meet Bina, my colleague.” He turned to the other woman, his arm still around Dia’s waist, ignoring her effort to pull it off her. “And Bina, meet Dia, the love of my life.”

Bina’s grin was wide as she hugged Dia warmly. “It’s great to meet you Dia. I’ve been working with Bharat on and off for four years. He’s a wonderful guy and handsome too. You’re truly lucky.”

Dia tried her best, but couldn’t fault the other woman’s behaviour. Though one couldn’t call her a conventional beauty, Bina looked amazing, her russet coloured hair tumbling like a river down her back, her sharp features perfectly made up. If she was attracted to Bharat, she wouldn’t show so much warmth towards his girlfriend for sure. Dia smiled at Bina, hugging her back. The other woman was obviously a friend.

“Phew,” said Bharat, winking at Bina. “Would you like to join us for dinner, Bina? We...”

Bina shook her head. “You don’t want me to play *kabab mein haddi*, I’m sure.” She turned and winked at Dia. “You lovebirds go on and enjoy yourselves. I’m going home to soak my tired muscles in a bathtub. No date night for me.” She grimaced, stretching her aching body.

“If you’re sure,” grinned Bharat. “Excuse us then. I need to get all this makeup off before hitting the town. Come along, Dia.” He waved to Bina and with a hand at Dia’s elbow, he walked towards the door he had kept appearing from, each time after a change of costume.

He had a green room to himself it seemed. It was brightly lit with a wall that was covered with a single sheet of mirror. “You’ll need to wait for twenty minutes. Hope you don’t mind. I’ll get the makeup off and have a quick shower before

I’m decent company. I...”

Dia reached him in a couple of strides and put her arms around his neck, pulling his head down to her, and kissing him on his mouth. She traced a tongue over his lips, seeking entry. He opened his mouth with a groan, kissing her back with fervour. “I don’t mind waiting. But are you sure you want to go out? Bina said she’s tired. Aren’t you? We...”

“I wanna go dancing with you,” he growled into her neck, nibbling on her skin. “Do you like dancing? It’s Friday night. Let’s go paint the town red.”

She nodded, thrilled to be his girl.

15

The next day was Saturday. While Dia had a holiday, Bharat was to go for a night shoot. They had spent the morning in bed. When Dia wanted to get up, Bharat wouldn't let her.

"Come on baby, I want you in my arms."

"But Bharat, I haven't done anything the whole week. The apartment needs cleaning and loads of clothes to wash. I also need to buy provisions and cook as the fridge is nearly empty," protested Dia.

"Hmm." He nibbled the curve of her jaw line, his scruffy face tickling her skin. He took her hand and placed it against his manhood. "Feel that? My body craves you." He nipped her lips. "We'll be up soon, I promise, and I'll help you with the housework." He raised his head to look down at her when he heard her laugh. "What? You think I'm no good around the house? Just wait and watch. But first things first." He bent down to close his lips around an engorged peak of her breast, stroking it with a moist tongue, making Dia forget her own name, let alone cleaning her apartment.

That day, Dia saw a different side of Bharat that was most unexpected. He vacuumed the apartment for her and cleaned the kitchenette, leaving it spotless. He insisted on doing the shopping for vegetables and provisions. "Give me your shopping list and go wash your clothes. I'll get all that you want." He slapped her hand away when she tried to give him money. "Don't be silly, Dia. Now that I'm officially your partner, allow me to share some of the expenses," he insisted, before leaving with a wire basket in tow.

She stared at him from her window, blowing him a kiss when he turned to look up at her with a grin on his face. He made her heart thud with excitement, the noon sun lighting up his glowing features, his unshaven face looking handsomer than ever. He needed the scruffy look for today's shoot, he claimed. Well, she didn't mind at all. Actually, she thrilled to the sensation when he rubbed his fuzzy face against her sensitive skin.

And she was glad that he had insisted they spend a lazy morning in bed. Staying

all alone, Dia had realised that the only way to live a comfortable life was to ensure that all housework got done by Saturday afternoon. But today had been a lovely change from routine. Bharat had brought her coffee in bed, that too after making steamy love to her just before that. Bringing her a tray with two mugs, he'd said, "Well, that's the extent of my skill in the kitchen, making instant coffee."

Taking the tray from his hand, Dia placed it on a side table before hugging him. "I don't care about what you can manage in the kitchen. I appreciate you more for your expertise in bed," she whispered naughtily in his ear, nibbling on the earlobe.

Bharat laughed, his body vibrating against hers. "Now you've to admit that a have-been Casanova has his advantages."

She hit him with a fist before succumbing to his love making, the coffee growing cold as they feasted on each other.

Bharat returned in forty-five minutes, loaded with all the items on her list, plus two bottles of wine and—Dia's heart flipped—a huge bunch of red roses.

"They look so lovely. Thank you Bharat," said Dia, giving him an adoring smile, before burying her face in the roses.

"Do the flowers get all your kisses?" grumbled Bharat, hugging her from behind, nuzzling her neck.

Dia laughed, moving out of his arms. "I think I'd better look for a bigger apartment with a separate bedroom, just to stop you from tempting me to bed every few minutes," she teased.

Bharat quirked an eyebrow at her, his eyes roaming over her slim body that was covered by only a t-shirt—his. "Do you really believe the distance will discourage me?"

Dia shook her head at him. "On second thoughts, no." She turned to look for a glass jar that she kept on a shelf under the kitchen platform. Removing it, she filled it with water before placing the roses in them. She stood back to admire the lot before lifting the jar and placing it on the desk near the window where it

caught the light. “I love them, Bharat.”

“I’m still waiting for your ‘thank you’ kiss,” he grumbled, removing the t-shirt he was wearing.

“Hey, what are you doing?” asked Dia breathlessly, her eyes clinging to his naked torso. God, he was a hunk. “I need to cook.” She turned away, determined to finish her work.

“What do you think I’m doing? Just getting cool so I can help you. So, tell me what you want done,” he said, removing his shopping from the basket to place them all on the platform. He looked at her with a roguish grin on his face. “Ms. Mathur, you need to get your head out of the bed that’s dominating your flat. Come on,” he slapped her bottom, “let’s get this show on the road.”

Cooking had never been such fun with Bharat getting in her way whichever way she turned. Yes, he did help as promised, but managed to make the whole process long drawn. He had no clue as to which end of the knife to hold when it came to chopping veggies. But his enthusiasm more than made up for his lack of prowess. And Dia didn’t mind the hot necking they indulged in every few minutes. It was past two when they sat down to a Chinese lunch of *hakka noodles* and *veg Manchurian gravy*. A week’s worth of food was cooling as it was spread over the kitchen platform.

Dia watched Bharat fork some noodles and gravy into his mouth as she sipped on chilled wine. She raised a brow in query as she saw him munch. “What’s the verdict?”

“Will you marry me?”

“What?” Dia jumped, the mouthful of wine spurting out. “Are you mad Bharat? Get serious.”

He looked at her with puppy dog eyes. “What did I do? Why are you calling me ‘mad’?” His coffee brown eyes danced mischievously, looking at the confusion on her face.

Dia placed her wine glass with a thump on the dining nook, standing up to place her hands on her hips, her arms akimbo. She looked at him with molten silver

eyes that spat fire. “All I wanted to know was how you liked the food, and...”

He pretended to look innocent, raising his palms in a gesture of peace. “I know. And I said...”

“And you proposed marriage. Is this a joke?” She was snarling now, furious.

Bharat got up from his chair, his eyes grave. He walked close to her, standing toe to toe. “I’ve never been so serious in my life. The food’s amazing. Shall we eat it before it gets cold?”

Dia stamped her foot in fury. Just like a man to evade giving a straightforward answer. When she asked about the food, he proposed marriage. When she questioned him about it, he was complimenting her about the food. He was just impossible! And just when she was about to say something, he smothered her lips with a mind-blowing kiss. Dia was rattled, her anger having sublimed to desire in the matter of a couple of seconds. She clung to his shoulders, stepping on his feet to reach out better, kissing him back with equal fervour.

Bharat raised his head to look down at her flushed face. “Did I tell you how gorgeous you look when you get angry?” he winked. “No, no, please don’t go off like a rocket again. Let me explain myself. I love the food and I love the woman who made the food even more. Since I want both of you in my life, I’m asking you to marry me. Got it?”

Dia shook her head. “You want to marry me for my cooking...?”

“Well, there is this renowned saying, “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach”. I thought that maybe you...”

She hit him with both her fists, raining blows on his chest, even as she laughed out loud, her whole body shaking with mirth. “You *are* mad. And I love you.” She fell into his arms, hugging him close. “And yes, I’ll marry you.”

“Phew!”

16

Bharat checked his phone during a break during shooting to see missed calls from most members of his family. He speed-dialled Shatru's number, wondering what must have happened. "Shatru..."

"Congrats, bro. We're both uncles now. Ram and Sapna's baby girl was born at 7.05 in the evening," yelled Shatru, obviously excited.

"What are you saying? That's damn cool. How's Ram? Is Sapna fine? And how's the baby? Is she cute? I..."

"Whoa!" laughed his twin. "Everything's good. Ram was kind of rattled after holding Sapna's hand during childbirth. But otherwise, all great. The little one looks gorgeous with a head full of hair and the cutest of little faces. So when are you coming?"

"Will try to make it tonight if there's a flight available. OMG! I can't believe this. This little baby is the first of the new generation of Maheshwaris." There was awe in Bharat's voice. "Is Ram there?"

Ram came on the line. "Hello Pappa," said Bharat. "Congrats. You must be feeling on top of the world."

"Bharat, yes. Missing you. She's the most beautiful baby in the world." There was so much joy and pride in Ram's voice.

"And how's Sapna?" asked Bharat.

"She's fine now, sleeping. So when are you coming?"

"I'm checking flights as we talk. I'll see you tonight. Please bribe the nursing home staff for my sake, Ram. I want to see the baby ASAP."

Ram laughed. "I can try. See you."

Bharat disconnected the call before going to meet the director of his shoot. He

explained the situation and requested to leave immediately. The main segment of his shoot was already over. So the director let him go. Booking the flight for 9.50 pm, Bharat quickly changed into his Bermuda shorts and t-shirt. Wearing his sneakers and picking up his backpack, he booked an OLA and left, waving to the rest of the team.

He called Dia on his way to the airport. “Hey, I’ve some awesome news to share.”

“Tell me,” said Dia, a smile in her voice.

“Ram and Sapna had a baby girl today. I’m on my way to the airport. Can you believe it Dia? I’m an uncle.”

“Wow! That’s splendid. Congrats Bharat. You have a safe flight and send me pictures of the baby.” While Dia was thrilled for his sake, she was disappointed that he wouldn’t be spending Sunday with her.

“Tell you what. Why don’t you come over first thing tomorrow? I’d have taken you along with me if there had been a later flight. You...”

“Are you sure?” Dia’s heart went *dhak dhak*. “Won’t I be intruding?”

“Don’t talk crap, Dia. Of course not. You’re family. It’d make me happy to have you with us.”

“Fine, let me book...”

“Shall I book the 8 am flight for you?” asked Bharat.

Dia grinned from ear-to-ear. “Yes, please. Though I’ll have to return late Sunday or early Monday.”

“Okay. Will ping you the details. This is superb! I can’t wait to reintroduce you as my *fiancée* to my family,” said Bharat. “I’ll miss you baby.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

They chatted till he reached the domestic airport and had to disconnect. Her

meeting with Bharat's family would be very different this time. Dia hugged herself, a dreamy smile on her face.

17

Shatrughan was waiting for Bharat outside ‘arrivals’ at the Jaipur international airport when the latter got out a few minutes before midnight. A wide grin split Shatru’s face when he saw his twin. “So, what’s up, bro?” he asked, hugging the other man.

“Life’s awesome,” said Bharat, grinning too, returning his brother’s hug. “I don’t suppose they’ll let me into the nursing home, not at midnight.” He was disappointed. He couldn’t wait to hold his baby niece in his arms.

“No way. But I’m glad you’re home. Do tell me you don’t need to rush back,” said Shatru, getting behind the wheel of his car—a brilliant blue Audi.

Bharat got in from the passenger side after throwing his backpack on the back seat. Pulling the seat belt around him, he said, “I’m free for the whole week.”

Shatru said, “Am I glad to hear that! And what’s happening with you and Dia?” He reversed the car out of its parking place and got out of the airport speedily.

Bharat grinned wider than ever. “She’s agreed to marry me.”

Shatru righted the car that went out of control for a couple of seconds before slapping his twin on his leg. “Congrats! And he tells me now. When did this happen?”

“Today afternoon.”

“Oh, like that. You must be feeling terrible leaving her back in Mumbai.” Shatru commiserated with him.

Bharat shook his head. “Not for long. She’s coming over tomorrow, to see the baby and also to be reintroduced to everyone as my girl.”

“Perfect.” Shatru turned the car into the gates of *Nakshatra*, riding further to park it in the 5-car garage to the left of the main bungalow.

“So, have they thought of a name for the little one?” asked Bharat, getting out of the car.

“They’ve been oscillating between Rakshita and Samaira. But if Ram has his way, they’ll settle for Samaira.” Shatru winked at his twin. “And I’m sure he will. Do you know that Sapna listens to every damn thing Ram says? Yeah, we know he’s smitten with her. But she simply adores the ground he walks on. Whatever, just whatever Ram says, Sapna follows blindly. Without an argument. Amazing!” He shook his head in wonder, a look of awe in his eyes.

“You’re just jealous,” teased Ram, though he couldn’t but agree with Shatru. It was almost three years since Ram and Sapna had been married—an arranged match at that. While it was love at first sight for Ram, their relationship had taken some time to kick off. Nowadays, it was as if Sapna almost worshipped the path Ram walked on.

“Of course I’m jealous,” grinned Shatru. “Of Laki too. Yeah, Pappa’s given up insisting on everyone calling him Lakshman since he became Ruma’s Laki. He’s a lucky dog for sure. The two are as cute as two peas in a pod—working together, eating together...”

“Sleeping together,” laughed Bharat. “So, why don’t you get a partner for yourself? I thought you were enjoying puttering around the world?”

Shatru grimaced. “I’m, most of the time. I’m also happy with my short-term affairs.” His grimace turned to a grin as he winked at his twin again. “But all this love floating around me is making me feel lonely.”

“You’ve been too long at home, I suppose. What’s it been, three weeks?”

Shatru sighed. “Hmm. Feels like the longest three weeks of my life. I was better off staying back for just one week at a time.”

“Do you want to go back with me to Mumbai for some time?”

“And do what? Play third-wheel to your romance with Dia?” asked Shatru, glaring at his twin.

Bharat burst out laughing. “You need a woman of your own,” he said, slapping

Shatru on his shoulder.

The twins chatted half the night away with Shatru telling him about his trip around Europe and Bharat making the other man laugh with humorous anecdotes of all things that could go wrong during shoots. It was like old times when the twins used to share a room and cook up plans to play mischief on the rest of the family. They fell asleep around 3.30 in the morning, bickering in a friendly manner.

18

It was five in the morning when a knock came on Sapna's hospital room. Ram got up to open the door to see a nurse holding a precious bundle that was his daughter. Yeah, his Samaira. "The baby needs feeding," said the nurse as Ram held out his arms to take the squirming bundle. He nodded, holding the baby close to his chest, kissing her on her tiny forehead. The nurse left, pulling the door shut, confident that the father was capable of taking care of the newborn.

Ram walked with his baby daughter towards the bed, where Sapna had just woken up from a deep, undisturbed sleep. He handed their daughter to the new mother, kissing Sapna on the top of her head, saying, "Good morning."

Sapna took their baby from his hands and began to feed the little one who had just opened her mouth to cry, her little face contorting unpleasantly. She latched on to the teat presented to her, suckling hungrily, her eyes tightly shut, long lashes fanning her baby cheeks. Sapna brushed the soft curls on the baby's head lovingly, before looking up at her husband who sat down next to her on the bed, watching them keenly.

"Greedy little imp," he chuckled, touching the baby's head in fascination. "She's adorable, our baby."

Sapna smiled at her husband, her heart in her eyes. "Yeah, she is, in the spitting image of her dad."

Ram grinned with pride. "Isn't she, our Samaira?"

"Ram!" Sapna gave him a mock glare. "I thought we'd agreed on Rakshita?" She raised an eyebrow at him, carefully clutching her daughter close to her breast.

"Our first baby will have her name beginning with S, same as her mom. We'll name the second one with something in R, okay?" Ram couldn't take his eyes off Samaira, who was still feeding greedily. "Does it hurt?"

Sapna laughed. "What do you think? She's a baby, Ram, without teeth. While

I’ve always revelled having your mouth on my breasts.” She winked at him.

Ram took a painful breath, wincing. “Don’t remind me. The doctor’s warned me to keep my hands off you for at least three months.” He bent down to press his lips to hers in a gentle kiss.

“Actually, my nipples do feel a bit tender. But I suppose it’s normal with childbirth,” said Sapna, turning her head to kiss his rough cheek. He’d been a rock, never letting go of her hand in the labour room. She wondered if the pain had been less because he’d been with her.

“Oh!” exclaimed Ram, adoration in his eyes as he gently held the underside of her breasts, his hands supporting their weight.

Sapna sighed. “That’s so blissful, Ram.” She touched a hand to his forearm, caressing the rough surface, her grey eyes glowing mistily up at his. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said, kissing her on her forehead. “How are you otherwise, sweetheart? I’m sorry you’d to handle the labour pain all by yourself.” His charcoal gaze studied her face for signs of pain. She had had a difficult time of it, in labour for almost ten hours.

Sapna lifted a hand to pull his head down to her, kissing him fiercely. “But you were my strength throughout, my Ram. I couldn’t have managed without you by my side.”

Ram held his wife close to his heart, helping her shift Samaira to the other side, while the baby continued to feed contentedly, her eyes tightly shut in slumber. And yes, Sapna didn’t offer another argument about the child’s name. If it made Ram happy, she was absolutely fine with it.

It was a couple of hours later in the morning when the twins knocked on the room. Bharat hugged Ram tightly, feeling emotional. “Hey Pappa! How have you been?” he asked softly, noticing Sapna lying back with her eyes closed. “Are we disturbing?”

Ram hugged him right back. “Awesome. Congrats to you too, *chacha*. Come on in.”

“So is it Rakshita or Samaira?” asked Bharat mischievously, going to the cradle to check his niece out.

“Samaira,” said Sapna, a smile in her voice. “Hello, Bharat *chacha*.”

“Hey, new mamma,” said Bharat, grinning at his sister-in-law, hugging her. “So, Ram had his way, as usual,” he teased.

“As always,” said Sapna, laughing.

“Can I hold the baby?” asked Bharat, looking at the little bundle in awe. “Isn’t she the cutest!”

“Let me help you,” said the proud father, lifting the sleeping Samaira from the cradle and handing her to his brother.

Bharat received the baby carefully, his large hands more than capable of holding her safely, as he kept her close to his chest. He kissed a silky cheek, having made it a point to shave himself within an inch of his skin, not wanting the fuzz to hurt her baby skin. “You must be feeling on top of the world,” he told his brother, refusing to take his eyes off little Samaira’s face.

“I do,” said Ram, sitting beside his wife, holding her hand in his.

Bharat settled down on the couch next to Shatru, the two of them admiring their newborn niece. “Does she ever open her eyes?” asked Shatru, holding a little fist in his huge hand, his face rapturous.

“Only a slit at times. It will take a while. The light is too much for her, after living inside a womb all this long,” said Sapna, smiling at Ram’s brothers. She was so lucky to be married into the Maheshwari family. Each one of them had a large heart and they had accepted her into it totally.

Shatru sighed, taking Samaira from his brother. “I could spend a lifetime simply staring at her.”

Mohan, Meera, Lakshman and Ruma knocked before walking into the room, all smiling widely. “So, how’s my granddaughter today?” asked Mohan, looking at

the sleeping baby in Shatru's hands.

"Samaira's great, Pappa. She even stayed awake for two whole minutes," said Sapna softly. Yeah, she called him Pappa nowadays. No one had insisted. But Sapna liked the typically Indian tradition and she was confident that Ram's parents loved her like her own parents, if not more.

"Excuse me, guys," said Bharat, walking out of the room to call Dia.

Meera took the baby in her arms and kissed her on her forehead. "She looks exactly like you Sapna, right down to your grey eyes. Beautiful baby!"

Sapna blushed at the compliment, smiling at her mother-in-law. Lakshman and Ruma vied with each other to hold Samaira for a couple of minutes each, before they had to rush to work. While Lakshman cooed to his niece, Ruma went to sit next to Sapna. "How are you, Samaira's mom? Hope there's no pain now."

Sapna shook her head, a smile on her face. "None. It stopped the second Samaira slipped out from me, I think. I can't wait to get home."

Ruma nodded. "I'm sure. I'm going to call the baby Sam. Samaira's such a mouthful for a tiny baby. I hope you guys won't mind." She looked up at Ram.

He shrugged. "Why not? Unless Pappa has objections." He winked at his wife and sister-in-law.

"Pappa, what do you say?" asked Ruma, looking at her father-in-law. He was one of the most loving people she had ever met in her life.

Mohan looked up from where he was chatting with his sleeping granddaughter. "What Ruma? I didn't hear you."

Ruma repeated, "I'm going to call the baby Sam. I hope you don't mind."

Mohan sighed. "I suppose you should. In this age of speed, Samaira does seem long." He smiled at Ram's startled laugh as he swiftly changed it to a cough.

Meera laughed, showing a 'thumbs-up' to Ruma. They hung around for another fifteen minutes before the nurse came to shoo them all out. Meera was to stay

back with Sapna and Samaira while the rest were all leaving.

Shatru waited next to his car, arms folded across his chest, calmly eyeing Bharat from afar as the latter fiddled with his phone.

Bharat checked his phone to see if there was a message from Dia. He mentally cursed when he realised that he'd forgotten to turn his mobile data on. She must have just boarded the flight. But her phone was already switched off. Just then, his phone vibrated as her WhatsApp message came in. Dia had wished him "GM" with lots of *emojis* at 5.30. God, he missed her! He planned to pick her at the airport at ten.

What Bharat didn't know was that Dia had switched off her phone sooner than expected because she was on an earlier flight—only it wasn't taking her to Jaipur, but to Delhi. From there, she planned to travel with Pia by road to Meerut.

19

Bharat waited outside the Jaipur airport, feeling restless, when his phone pinged. Eager to find out if Dia had got off her flight, he saw it was an SMS, confirming the cancellation of her ticket from Mumbai to Jaipur. What the fuck! Dia wasn't coming to him.

He called her on speed dial but her phone was still switched off. Bharat turned pale. Had Dia decided to cut him out of his life once again? By now, it was obvious that she wasn't travelling. So, her phone wasn't turned off because she was on a flight. Then what the hell was happening?

Then he remembered her morning message. She had obviously been up early. Then why didn't she take the damned flight? Well, there was no sense hanging around at the airport. He got into his Ertiga and rushed home, crossing the speed limit at least twice, his temper making him reckless. Where the hell was Dia?

He parked the car in the garage, taking deep breaths to calm himself. He didn't want the others to get worried on his behalf. They were all too happy just now with the addition of the new member. And yeah, Chanda was coming that evening while Ranveer planned to join them over the next weekend. Bharat pressed his forehead against the steering wheel, doing his best to calm down.

Just because her phone was switched off, it need not mean that Dia had ditched him. He took a couple of more deep breaths. But then, why had she cancelled her ticket to Jaipur? Shit!

He hadn't got around to taking her sister's contact number or her parents'. Well, even if he had, what could he have asked them? He couldn't tell them that Dia was missing. They would simply panic.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Bharat got out of the car and went to his room—the one that was all his own. He shut himself in the bathroom and ran the shower full blast, not bothering to take his clothes off. He just stood there under the cascade for the whole of twenty minutes, even as his mind ran around in circles. He slowly pulled off his sodden

t-shirt, jeans and briefs, wondering how to deal with the situation. He had been so sure that Dia loved him. She had even agreed to marry him. But then, this was the same woman who'd shut him out of her life for two years. His mind swung back and forth, back and forth.

Suddenly, he switched off the shower and dried himself in a hurry. What in case Dia had called him while he'd been in the shower? He rushed to check his phone to find nothing—not even a measly message. He lifted his cell and threw it on the bed. It bounced and settled against a pillow, refusing to break its silence. Bharat took out an imported bottle of whisky that Shatru had brought for him from Europe. Taking a glass tumbler, he filled half of it, adding some ice-cubes from the mini fridge in his room. Swirling it in his hand, he stared broodingly at nothing before gulping it all in two mouthfuls.

When Shatru knocked on his door, Bharat had finished almost half the bottle. "Come in," he called.

Shatru took one look at his twin's bloodshot eyes and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Dia has dumped me, again," said Bharat in a defeated voice, burying his face in his hands.

20

Dia got into the waiting cab that already had Pia sitting in it. She hugged her sister, asking, “Any further news?”

Pia shook her head, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “Not much. The doctor’s doing an angiogram to find out what must have gone wrong. Mamma’s waiting outside for the results and I’ve been calling her every half an hour. One sec...” Pia pulled out her vibrating cell from her jeans pocket to see it was Daksha. “Hello Mamma.”

“Your father has a block in one of the secondary arteries. The doctor is going to do an angioplasty.” Daksha began to cry in relief. She’d had the shock of her life when her husband refused to get up in the morning. She’d called an ambulance and taken him to the private hospital. Taking an ECG, the doctors told her that Paresh had suffered a mild heart attack. Thank God that he wouldn’t need an open heart surgery. “He says your Pappa should recover soon.”

“Of course he will, Mamma. Dia just got to Delhi and we both are already on our way to Meerut,” said Pia, relieved. She had just read all about heart attacks and the various treatments available, checking out many informative links on the internet. Angioplasty wasn’t so bad. Their father would recover soon. “Here, Mamma, talk to Dia.”

Dia took the phone from her sister and spoke to Daksha for a long time. It hadn’t been easy, sitting on the flight from Mumbai to Delhi, worrying about her parents. She disconnected the phone and gave it to Pia, relaxing for the first time in over four hours. “I didn’t tell you Pia. I was going to Jaipur today to meet Bharat’s family. He rushed there last night as Sapna delivered a baby girl yesterday evening. I...”

Pia smiled, the worry in her eyes diminishing. “Okay, that’s how the wind is blowing.” She hugged her elder sister.

Dia turned red as she hugged Pia back, saying, “Yeah, he wants to marry me and I’ve agreed.”

“Well, this is one news that should cheer up Pappa and get him back on his feet soon.”

“I really hope so. Let me call Bharat. In all the rush in cancelling the ticket and booking into a Delhi flight, I forgot to even message him.” Dia checked her jeans pocket for her phone. Not finding it there, she opened her backpack. After fifteen minutes of fruitless search, Dia realised that she had lost her phone. She stared at Pia, her face pale. “You wouldn’t be having Bharat’s cell number saved on your phone by any chance, will you?” she asked pathetically.

Pia shook her head, thinking hard. “You said Bharat is at his family home in Jaipur. His dad’s number must be stored in Pappa’s phone for sure.”

Dia nodded slowly, feeling sick. What if he presumed that she’d run away from him, yet again? Refusing to think about it, she borrowed Pia’s cell to cancel her SIM card. How the hell had she managed to lose her cell phone of all things? But the morning had been too stressful. Dia shut her eyes, her mind whirling. She had to get in touch with Bharat. But how?

It was three hours before the sisters reached the hospital bone weary, Dia more so since she had been travelling longer. After enquiring at the reception, they went to the fifth floor. Daksha was sitting in the visitors’ area. She hugged both her daughters, tearing up. “Your Pappa’s alright now. The angioplasty went off well. They had to put only one stent. He’ll be in the ICU for twenty-four hours.”

The doctor gave permission for the girls to visit their father—two minutes each, and one person at a time. Dia went in first and was shocked to see how pale her father appeared. She held his limp hand as he slept on, having been administered a sedative. His other hand was connected to an intravenous fluid by a needle and tube that looked ominous.

“I love you Pappa,” whispered Dia, kissing him on his forehead, before the nurse-in-charge shooed her out.

Once Pia finished her visit, the three women sat huddled together on one long sofa.

“Did you eat anything at all, Mamma?” When Daksha shook her head, Pia went in search of the hospital canteen, offering to get them all tea and something to

eat.

Dia sat with her mother, holding her hand. “Do you have Pappa’s cell phone with you, Mamma?” she asked. Now that the worry about their father was gone, Bharat loomed in the forefront of her mind. She was terribly worried for him. The last time she had disappeared, she had hurt him badly.

“Here.” Daksha took the phone and gave it to her daughter. “Something wrong, Dia?”

Dia placed her head on her mother’s shoulder. “I lost my phone, Mamma. I wanted to check some numbers.” She didn’t want to say anything more about her relationship with Bharat. Not at this point. Let Pappa get home first.

Daksha nodded, running a hand on her daughter’s head as Dia ran through her father’s contacts lists. A search for Maheshwari or Mohan didn’t result in anything. Tch! She tucked the phone in her jeans’ pocket when she saw Pia juggling a tray of food and three cups of tea. She went to help her, her nerves taut with tension. Dia bit desultorily into a *veg sandwich*, almost choking on it as her throat refused to let it in, what with the stress she was undergoing. She managed to finish it, though, taking sips of tea in between.

Dia went back to checking her father’s phone while her sister and mother chatted softly in the background.

Running an eagle eye over the numbers stored under the letter M, she saw one that went as MM. Could that be for Mohan Maheshwari? It was a cell number, so she didn’t really know if it was a number from Jaipur. Coming to a decision, she called the number from her father’s cell.

21

Seeing Paresh's call on his screen, Mohan picked up his phone immediately. "Hello Paresh. *Kaise ho*?" he asked cheerfully, happy to talk to his friend. He'd been planning to call him with the news of his granddaughter's birth.

Dia's heart skipped a beat when she heard Mohan uncle's voice. Finally...finally she was closer to getting Bharat's number. "Err...Mohan uncle, this is Dia," she said softly.

"Dia *beta*, *tum kaisi ho*?" asked Mohan affectionately. He had liked both the girls from when they had visited with their parents.

"I'm fine, uncle. Pappa's been a bit unwell..."

"What happened, child?"

"He had a mild heart attack. He's recovering," she reassured in a hurry, not wanting to alarm her father's good friend. "He underwent an angioplasty and is on the road to recovery."

"Oh! Thank the good lord for that. Do you need any help? Shall I ask Bharat or Shatrughan to come over there?"

"No, uncle. That's okay. Pia's also here. So, it's no trouble. Pappa should be home in three days." Tch! Dia bit her tongue. She shouldn't have refused his offer to send one of his sons over. It would have been the perfect opening to ask for Bharat's number. How to ask him now? "How is everyone at home, uncle? Aunty, Ram, Sapna..."

"All are fine, *beta*. Sapna delivered a baby girl last night," said Mohan, bursting to share the news with the whole world. He was a grandfather now.

Sapna felt stupid pretending not to know. "That's wonderful, uncle. Congratulations! Is aunty there? May I talk to her?" Maybe it'd be easier to get his number from her.

“Of course. Here...” Mohan handed the phone to Meera, saying, “Talk to Paresh’s daughter Dia. She...”

Bharat grabbed the phone from his father and walked away, without saying a word to him.

Mohan looked in the direction his son had gone in, his face lighting up. He finally realised why Paresh’s daughter had called on his cell. She’d wanted to talk to his son. He turned to look into Meera’s startled face. “Looks like your wish will be coming true.”

Meera stared at her husband’s mischievous face. “What wish?”

“That you wanted one of your sons to marry either of Paresh and Daksha’s daughters.”

“But how do you know?”

“Didn’t you notice Bharat’s face when he snatched the phone from me?” asked Mohan.

“*Ajeeb sa lagha*,” she nodded. “You said that was Dia, right? And she wanted to talk to me.” Meera was still not clear about what her husband was saying.

“She called me just now from her father’s phone. I thought it was Paresh. But he’s had a heart attack, it seems. No, he’s much better. Nothing to worry,” Mohan added when Meera looked anxious, “and I told her about the baby. She wanted to congratulate you.”

“And Bharat took the phone away. Do you think they must have met in Mumbai?” Light dawned on Meera’s face as excitement took over. “That’s wonderful.”

“It seems so.”

“I told you *nah*?” she grinned at her husband.

Mohan hugged his plump little wife, smiling back. “Exactly why I told you that your wish is probably getting fulfilled.”

22

Bharat rushed out of the house into the garden, out of hearing of the others, before snarling, “Where the hell did you disappear to?”

Despite Shatru’s reassurances, Bharat had been convinced that he was never going to set eyes on Dia again. In fact, he had concluded that he didn’t want her in his life. If she didn’t care, he wouldn’t either. But the anxiety kept gnawing into him as he couldn’t stop worrying if something had happened to her. He had kept calling her cell every fifteen minutes or so. The message had changed to “this number does not exist” after some time. He’d have drunk himself under the table but for Shatru. His brother took the whisky bottle away and wouldn’t let him drink any more.

“I’m so sorry, Bharat. I...”

“I don’t care, do you hear? I don’t give a damn any more. If you aren’t interested in me, why can’t you just tell it to my face? Go on, say it now,” he spat into the phone, his heart breaking. He didn’t want to think of a life without Dia in it. But he would somehow survive. “Say it, woman,” he yelled.

“Bharat...my father isn’t well. I...” Her voice broke.

“I don’t want to know. I...” he paused, getting his wits together, trying hard to calm down his shattered nerves. “What did you say?” His voice toned down by a few decibels.

“My father, he had a heart attack today morning. I...”

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry, baby. I’m terribly sorry I yelled at you.” There was such remorse in his voice that Dia smiled through her tears. “How is he? What does the doctor say? I’m coming to Meerut right now. I...”

Dia laughed softly. “I love you so much, Bharat. Pappa had to undergo angioplasty. He’s recovering in the ICU. I had gone to the airport to catch the flight to Jaipur. Mamma managed to catch me just before I checked in. I immediately cancelled that flight and took another to Delhi. Luckily, they had

seats on one that was leaving in forty-five minutes. Understanding the emergency, they let me take it without a fuss. I'm so sorry I forgot to message you. There was simply no time to think. I had to shut my phone off before I realised that I hadn't informed you." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I got out at Delhi airport to meet Pia. We left in a hired car directly from there. Pia had been in touch with Mamma and she was updating me on Pappa's progress. We spoke to Mamma and realised that things were in control. That's when I was going to call you and I couldn't find my phone."

"Shit!"

"Exactly. And I don't know your number by heart. I feel such an idiot, so dependent on my phone. I should have..."

"Sweetheart, you're anything but an idiot," said Bharat, smiling at the rose bush he had stopped by. "No wonder you didn't contact me. And here I was, panicking and climbing the wall. I was sure you'd left me forever this time."

"That would surely have made me an idiot," said Dia, a smile in her voice. "I love you too much Bharat. I don't want a life without you."

Bharat sighed happily. "I don't want to live without you either," he declared passionately. "Give me your address and Pia's cell number. I'm leaving for Meerut right now."

"Are you sure? And hey, how's the new baby? You didn't tell me anything about her."

"Samaira's the cutest baby on earth," said Bharat, in a whisper. "Tiny and adorable, with a button nose. I spent an hour at the nursing home, holding her. It felt wonderful."

Dia was so happy for him. She'd have loved to see the baby. But that would have to wait. "Why don't you spend some more time with your family Bharat? Things are in control here. Pappa should be home in three days. There's no emergency." And she needed some time to talk to her mother about Bharat, and later to her father, when he was recovered. She didn't want to spring her boyfriend on them suddenly, without any warning.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, my darling Bharat, I’m absolutely sure. I would rather talk to my parents about you first. Please try to understand.”

Bharat sighed. He was going to miss her, terribly. But she had a point there. “Yeah, I know what you mean.” He chatted with her for a while before asking, “Will you be having this cell with you for some time? Can I call you on this number?”

“Yeah, it’s Pappa’s. I’ll keep it till I get a new phone. And Bharat,” her voice turned shy, “don’t send me any naughty messages on this one, please.” Bharat’s mischievous laughter sent shivers down her spine. She blew him a kiss before disconnecting.

Bharat messaged Paresh’s cell number to his phone before walking back to the house. It was time to talk to his parents.

Shatru intercepted him, putting an arm around his shoulders. “So, what does Dia say?”

“How do you know it was Dia?”

“You mean it wasn’t? I heard Mamma and Pappa planning your wedding,” he teased, grinning. “And you’re blushing like a bride.”

Bharat punched his brother, laughing. “Everything’s great. Dia’s dad had a heart attack.”

“What? Can you hear yourself?” asked Shatru, shocked.

“Shit! That came out badly. Dia had disappeared off my radar as she had to hurry home to her father as he had suffered a heart attack. She lost her phone on the way.” He continued to tell his twin the whole story as the two of them walked into their home.

Bharat sat down on the carpet at his parents’ feet, handing the cell phone to his father. “Pappa, Mamma, I have something to say.”

Mohan nodded, a smile on his face.

“I love Dia, Paresh uncle’s daughter. I want to marry her.”

“Does she want to marry you too?” asked Mohan, his tongue firmly in cheek, even as Meera gave her husband an impatient look.

Bharat grinned widely. “Yes, Pappa. She’s agreed to marry me.”

Tears of joy poured down Meera’s cheeks as she hugged her third child. “I knew it.”

Bharat laid his head on his mother’s lap. Yeah, his mother was all-seeing—the very reason he had kept his visits to the family home to the minimum over the past two years. He hadn’t wanted her to sense that he had been unhappy during those days. He wondered whether Dia would agree to move to Jaipur. Well, all that could wait. Just now, he wanted to savour his joy. The woman he loved had not ditched him but was keen to be his life partner. He sighed contentedly, shutting his eyes as his mother ran her fingers lovingly through his curls.

23

Dia called her HOD on Monday to inform him about her leave of absence for one week. “What? Are you crazy, Dia? There’s so much urgent work to get out of our way. You can’t take a leave now. Get your ass back at work, right now.”

“Stephen, did you even hear what I told you just now?” asked Dia softly. She’d always had trouble with her immediate boss, not the least because she refused to date him. But this was the limit. Anyone could understand if one’s father had taken ill. And she did have a couple of months of PL in her account.

“I don’t really care, do you hear? I told you to get your ass to work, NOW. Or find yourself another job.”

Dia turned red with temper. “I’ll do just that. Go to hell!”

Pia looked up at her sister when she heard her banging the phone hard. Wincing, she asked, “What’s up?” and was startled to see Dia grinning from ear to ear.

“Freedom!” yelled Dia, jumping from the sofa and dancing around the living room. She stopped suddenly in front of her sister. “And you know something, at times, these landline telephones are the best.” Banging the receiver down had removed all her stress.

Pia rolled her eyes, even as Dia dragged her from her seat, twirling around the room, singing loudly now.

“Are you going to tell me what happened or should I draw my own conclusions?” asked Pia, miffed when Dia kept grinning madly, refusing to say anything.

“Go on, take a guess,” invited Dia.

“You’re getting married today,” said Pia, tongue-in-cheek.

It was Dia’s turn to roll her eyes. “I wish.”

“Bharat’s coming over.”

Dia shook her head. “He did offer. But I need to talk to Mamma and Pappa first.”

“Why don’t you just tell me? I know you’re dying to,” teased Pia.

Dia shook her head. “I give you one final chance.”

“Hmm...” Pia tapped a painted finger on her mouth. “Are you pregnant?”

“Idiot,” said Dia, turning red, “of course not.”

Pia laughed. “You look guilty as hell.”

Dia shook her head. “Not funny. Before you take any more wild guesses, let me tell you. I’ve just been fired.”

Pia stared at her sister, her mouth wide open in shock. “What?!”

“Yep.”

“But...aren’t you upset?” Pia couldn’t believe it. Dia had so wanted this career. She’d completed her Bachelors in Management Studies before doing her part-time MBA, working hard, probably fourteen hours in a day. How could she feel so happy after being fired?

“Nope.” Dia shook her head. “Listen, I ne’er wanted to say this before now. I hate my job. How much ever I do, it’s too less for my immediate boss. Stephen is a moron and plays dirty. The girls who sleep with him get ahead in the company. Well, I haven’t grown in the company as I’ve refused all his advances. I...what?”

Pia had made a strangled noise. She had a wonderful boss and loved her work. But hearing her sister talk about her head of department, Pia was totally shocked that such things could be happening in even big companies. Now she shook her head. “Sorry, you go on. I still can’t see how you’re happy. But...” she shrugged.

Dia smiled. “I’ve been looking around for another job since a year. Either the work atmosphere is not good, or the profile doesn’t fit or I’m not happy with the

pay. I didn't want to resign without another job in hand. But things have changed now. I'll be moving to Jaipur after marrying Bharat. Well, that's what I think." She suddenly went quiet. She hadn't discussed that with Bharat. What if he thought of moving to Mumbai? Dia frowned. He did have a lot of work in the island city. She had been thinking of something—setting up a business of her own. But she'd need to talk to Bharat before planning things fully. But whatever, Dia was happy losing her job just now.

"Dia?"

She looked up at Pia, having been lost in her thoughts. "Sorry. To continue—whether Bharat wants us to live in Mumbai or Jaipur, I've been thinking of changing my profession." She looked at Pia to see if she had her full attention. "I've been teaching myself to cook different cuisines—Chinese, Italian, Mexican, Thai—especially fast foods. The kind one can take away, you get?" When Pia nodded, she continued, "I absolutely enjoy cooking. It relaxes me totally, taking away the stress of the working week. I thought, why not set up my own business in this line? My MBA degree will help me run the business angle. What do you think?"

Pia looked at Dia thoughtfully. "The idea's good, being your own boss. Especially since you've had a bad experience with the one in the company you work for. But what about investment and all that? You'll need at least one person to help you out. Have you thought of that?"

"Not yet, but I'm planning to. Now that I'm totally free of my job, I'll do some home work. Mamma's insisting on staying at the hospital. We can see Pappa only during visiting hours. I'm glad I carried my laptop with me. I'll first talk to Bharat and find out what he thinks before doing my home work. What say?"

"Go for it. One condition though. I want to taste some of your exotic cooking."

Dia grinned. "Done, beginning with today's lunch."

Pia was totally impressed with the pizza that her sister made for lunch. "This is so yummy. So much better than what most restaurants serve. You're on the right track." She gave Dia her green signal.

Dia called Bharat after lunch. "I need to talk to you, something serious."

“Go on and tell me, as long as it’s not about your leaving me,” he joked, half-serious. Yesterday morning had been a nightmare.

“Stop it Bharat. You know I didn’t leave you. Don’t keep saying that again and again.” Dia got bugged with him.

“I’m sorry. Please forgive me.” It was no fault of hers. “That was unfair on my part, Dia. Please tell me.”

Dia took a few moments to get her thoughts together before talking, “My boss fired me.”

“Oh! You don’t sound awfully upset though.”

Dia laughed. “No, I’m not.”

“Phew! I’m glad to hear that. I’ve also been wanting to talk to you. Will you be okay with moving to Jaipur after we’re married? Or do you want to live in Mumbai?”

“Did I tell you how much I love you? Mwah! This is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Huh?”

“You didn’t tell me how much you love me.”

Dia laughed again. “I’d rather show you when we meet.”

“Shall I come over? Even if I leave now, I’ll reach there by night. Just let me...”

“My darling Bharat, I explained to you yesterday. I can’t let you stay at my family home when my parents are out. Nor can I stay with you in a hotel. Please understand...”

“Come on, Dia. Of course I understand. It’s not only about having sex with you.

I love you baby. I just want to be close to you in your time of need, and help you in any way I can. I'll stay in a hotel, of course, and will meet your parents only when you give me the green flag."

There was silence from Dia's end as she digested what he'd said just now. She felt goose pimples stand out all over her body. Bharat loved her, truly. Not just her body, but her whole self. "Please come, Bharat. I could do with a hug from you," she said softly. "And I'd love to move to Jaipur, if you're fine with it."

Bharat hooted, glad on both counts. "Catch you soon, babe," he said, disconnecting the phone, in a rush to leave for Meerut. It took him barely half an hour to pack a suitcase, inform Shatru and his parents before driving towards Dia's home. She had already pinged him the address. Bharat switched on the stereo in his car and sat back to enjoy the drive at a steady pace, as the car ate up the miles. He decided to take the shortest route via NH48 as he would reach fastest that way, hopefully in a little less than eight hours.

24

When he stopped for a cup of tea, Bharat located Bravura Gold Resort that wasn't very far from Dia's home at Vardhman Emerald Greens. He booked a deluxe room for himself for two nights before continuing on his journey.

It was five minutes past eight when he rang the Mathurs' doorbell. "Hello Bharat," greeted Pia, letting him into the living room with a wide smile. "Or should I call you *jijaji*?" she smiled.

Bharat grinned at her, giving her a hug. "Not unless you want me to call you s*aaliji*."

"Ugh! No way," she laughed.

"Exactly." His breath caught in his throat when he saw Dia coming down the staircase, taking the steps two at a time. "Hey." He rushed to her and lifted her in his arms, giving her a chaste kiss on her forehead. "How's my favourite girl?"

"Ecstatic." Dia kissed him full on his lips, taking her time about it, rejoicing in his hold.

He put her down carefully, ending the kiss. He looked at her with curious brown eyes. "I thought you told me to keep my hands off?"

Mischievous silver eyes looked back at him. "When did I say that?" she asked innocently.

He placed both his hands on her rear, pulling her close to his aroused body. "See what you do to me? I thought this wasn't allowed in your parents' home? Or were you pulling my leg?" Noticing that Pia had disappeared, he rubbed himself against her, burying his face against her throat. Kissing the pulse beating there, he said, "I missed you baby."

Dia pulled him closer, her arms around his neck. "I missed you too." She pulled out of his arms and stood away. "Sorry about the mixed signals. I couldn't resist."

He grinned, tracing a finger against her reddened lips. “Can you see me objecting?” he winked.

“I hope you’re hungry. I made *pasta in pesto sauce*...”

“Lead the way, please. I’ve not had anything since lunch. But show me the way to a washroom first.” He threw an arm around her waist. Dia changed direction, taking him to the back of the house. “How’s your dad? I don’t think I can see him tonight, could I?”

“He’s improving in leaps and bounds and is out of the ICU. You can see him tomorrow. It’s too late now. Here you go.” She left him at the washroom and went back to the kitchen where Pia was heating the pasta.

“Your Bharat’s hot!” declared Pia, making Dia blush. “And he’s in love with you.”

“Can you see that?”

“Oh yes. He was talking to me, but his eyes were looking for you. You should have seen the way they lit up, like warm honey, when he caught sight of you.”

“Pia.” Dia turned redder than ever. She didn’t say anything more as Bharat entered the cavernous kitchen that also had a dining area, rubbing his flat stomach.

“Can you hear my stomach growl?” he asked, before carrying the huge pot of pasta to the table. “Anything else?”

“Just some iced tea. I’m getting it. You guys start,” called out Pia, opening the fridge.

Bharat didn’t speak for the next few minutes as he ate his way through two helpings of pasta. “This is awesome Dia. I’d pay a huge sum of money if I ate this at some fancy restaurant.”

Dia caught Pia’s eye and giggled.

“What?” Bharat turned his head this way and that, watching the sisters laugh. “Did I say something funny?”

Dia shook her head. “Not at all. You just took the words out of my mouth. Remember, I told you I lost my job. I’ve been thinking a lot, ever since you appreciated the lunch I made. I don’t want to get back to the rat race. I was...um...thinking of starting a takeaway kind of place. Something that I could do from home or a small space that won’t cost me too much. What do you think?”

Bharat gave Dia an amazed look. “You’re smart baby. That’s an awesome idea. In Jaipur?”

She nodded.

“Hmm...have either of you heard of food trucks?” He looked from one girl to the other.

“Yeah, it’s common in the west,” said Dia. “Wait! Recently I read an article about food trucks in Mumbai.”

Pia nodded excitedly. “Yeah, I know what you’re talking about. I had some burgers and tacos along with friends at a food truck in Connaught Place too.”

Bharat nodded at Pia, “Oh, in Delhi you mean. That’s awesome. It’s ideal for takeaways,” he said, before turning to Dia. “The truck usually comes customised with stoves, fridge, sink, chimney, all built within. It can be assembled according to your specific needs. That’s an option to explore.”

Dia got up to hug him and sat on his lap, throwing her arms around his neck. “You’re my man.” She kissed him on his cheek.

Pia got up. “You lovebirds will have to excuse me. I need to complete some office work.” She took her plate and glass and left them in the sink before going up to her room.

Bharat nuzzled Dia’s neck, leaving a trail of kisses as he moved to her jaw, before dropping a kiss on her cheek. “Hmm...you smell good.”

Dia turned her face to trace her tongue over his lips before seeking entry into his mouth. It was a while before they came up for air. Resting back on his arms that were locked around her, she said, “So you like the idea?”

“Love it. Will you let me assist you? I can drive the truck, serve stuff and...”

Dia’s eyes went wide. “Super model Bharat Maheshwari driving a food truck? You’re joking.” She shook her head at him. “Do you want your parents to disown me even before I marry you?”

Bharat smiled at her. “I’m serious. And my parents will be the last ones to object. Come on, Dia. It’s honest work at the end of the day. I’m planning to cut down assignments that will take me away from you. If you agree,” he thought on his feet, “we’ll run this truck twenty days of the month and travel the rest of the ten days to my shooting locations. I’ll give my dates to producers accordingly. What say?” He quirked an eyebrow at her.

Dia hugged him. “I like it too much.” She had been thinking that she might have to stay away from him whenever he travelled.

“Let’s get more comfy,” said Bharat, lifting her in his arms. She clung to him, her legs around his waist as he carried her to the sofa in the living room. “Tell me if there’s a curfew and I’ll get out,” he said, nibbling her earlobe.

“Hmm.” She turned her head to accommodate his roving lips as he kissed her along the length of her throat, moving down to her cleavage. Dia removed the buttons on her *kurti* to help him.

“Sweetie, if you don’t want to let me love you fully, you’d better not do that,” he said, pulling the open flaps of her top together.

She looked up at him to see the desire burning in his molten brown eyes, before tucking her head against his shoulder. “Okay.”

“Have you thought of a name for your business?” he asked, just holding her on his lap and continuing to talk.

“Bhadia. Spelt B-H-A-D-I-A. What do you think?”

Bharat whistled in appreciation. “That’s so perfect.”

“Maybe *Bhadia’s fast food* or *Bhadia Dhaba*...”

“*Bhadia Dhaba* sounds lovely,” he agreed.

They chatted for a long time, talking about licenses, insurance and other formalities. Bharat had been checking out food truck manufacturers on his phone before he snapped his fingers suddenly. “Hey, there’s a customised truck maker right here in Meerut. Do you wanna go check it out when your dad’s home?”

“What?” Dia jumped in excitement. It looked as if everything was falling in place so perfectly and so fast. She grabbed the phone from his hand and checked the website. “This is great. Let’s go tomorrow after visiting Pappa. I’d rather go with you.”

“Done.” Bharat got up. “I’m bushed. Kiss me goodnight.”

“Where do you plan to go?” asked Dia, kissing his jaw line, reluctant to let him go.

“I’ve a room at Bravura Gold Resort, not far from here.”

“Yep,” she nodded. “It’s about twenty minutes from here.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.” He kissed her hard on her lips, before letting her go. “You stay here. I’ll let myself out. Say ‘bye’ to Pia from me.” He blew her a kiss from near the door, before stepping out.

Dia ran up the stairs to talk some more about *Bhadia Dabha* to Pia.

25

They were married six weeks later, under a shamiana in the compound of *Nakshatra*, in Jaipur. The *muhurat* was in the evening of December 17, the weather simply beautiful. Bharat and Dia took the *saat phere* with the blessings of both sets of parents, while having eyes only for each other.

Chanda, Ranveer and his family; Sapna's family; Ruma's family and Dia's extended family had all come down to attend the wedding. Samaira slept in her crib throughout the ceremony, to wake up just when her parents sat down to dinner. She had the whole family twisted around her little finger, dancing to her tunes.

Bharat couldn't wait to get his bride alone as they had abstained from having sex till the wedding. "Tell me when we can get away. I need to get inside you urgently."

His bride blushed a becoming red, looking gorgeous in a turquoise blue Benarasi silk sari, the *mehendi* a dark red on her hands. She turned sultry silver eyes to her husband and gave him a small wink. "Patience, sweetheart. *Inthazaar ka pal meeta hota hai*."

"*Inthazaar* my ass," he growled. "Haven't I waited long enough for over two months?"

"What two months?" she rolled her eyes at him. "Just six weeks."

"Just six weeks, she says. Do you know that it's actually been more than forty-five days?" he complained, removing his *pagari* and placing it on a chair beside him.

Dia's hands twitched, wanting to run them through his tousled hair. He looked so handsome, as if he'd just stepped out of the pages of the glossy magazine she'd been ogling so long ago. She took his hand in hers and placed it against her bare waist. "I know, my sweetheart. It's not just you who's been waiting that long."

Bharat didn't need a second invitation as his hand caressed her waist, making her

eyes go glazed, as she stared in front unseeingly. There was only the immediate family and a last few stragglers left at the wedding venue. The bride and groom had been left alone for a few minutes as they were getting the dinner table arranged for the extended family to sit together.

“I want to feel your lips on every inch of my skin, Bharat. I’ve missed your lovemaking,” she whispered, looking into his molten chocolate eyes that were burning with desire.

He took her sari *pallu* and spread it over his lap, before taking her hand and placing it against his erection. “My body’s screaming out for you.”

Unable to contain herself, Dia caressed him, her silver gaze locked to his brown one. “Soon. Let’s go for dinner and get it done with.”

While everyone chatted around them, the bride and groom pretended to eat, their hearts not really in it. Even then, it was almost an hour before they got done. Looking at the desperation on his twin’s face, Shatru came to his help. “Tell you what. I’ll drive you both to your cottage. Dia looks ready to drop off.” He gave the bridal couple a tiny wink before getting up to bring the car.

Dia’s best friend Avantika got up to go with Shatru to the garage. If she had thought that Dia’s beau was attractive, she had just flipped for the twin. He was so hot, and difficult to pin down. Like even now, when she offered to go with him, he walked ahead of her, leaving her to follow in his wake.

“Shatru,” called Avantika, “wait for me.”

He turned around with a scowl on his face, impatience in every line of his taut body. He stood there, not uttering a word. And that brooding presence was what made him so attractive to Avantika. Men usually swooned over her, putting her off even before she got to know them. But this man didn’t seem to give a damn, a devil-may-care expression in his obsidian eyes. When she reached him, he continued to walk towards the garage, saying nothing.

“I’m a dancer. I head my own troupe. Now that Bharat has given me a couple of contacts, I’ve got a chance to choreograph for a Bollywood film.” She continued to talk about herself, even if he didn’t respond.

What she didn’t know was that Shatrughan was listening to every word. Yeah, he was attracted to her, big time. But then, he was a loner, a globe-trotter. He got restless if he stayed back home for longer than a month, as he had done this time, because of Bharat’s wedding. The faraway shores called out to him, not letting him be. What would he do with a girl who was grounded in Mumbai, that too with a rocking career?

He opened the passenger door for her, before moving to the driver’s end, impressing her more than ever. She continued to talk to him about her life in Mumbai, as he reversed the car out of the garage and to where Dia and Bharat were waiting.

Their cottage—yeah, Bharat had wanted one and had planned it from scratch—was the furthest building in the compound. While it would have taken a good ten-minute walk to reach it, they arrived there in half a minute by car. Leaving the couple at the door, Shatru turned to ask his unwanted companion, “Would you like to go for a drive?”

“Oh, yes,” said Avantika, a wide smile on her face. Wouldn’t she just love to?

26

Dia looked at her new home, loving what she saw. She and Bharat had got together to furnish the low slung cottage, to make it a cosy home. There was only one floor—sprawling across 3000 sq feet. Well, they called it a cottage because it had a roof of Mysore tiles.

Bharat went forward to push open the unlocked door before turning to lift her in his arms, his left arm under her shoulders and the right beneath her knees. “Welcome home, baby,” he said, walking into the living room, before letting her down to stand in front of him.

Shutting the door, he pulled her into his arms, kissing her hard, sucking on her tongue. His hands were at her back, pulling the strings of her *choli*, impatient to touch her all over.

Dia laughed softly, helping him pull her sari off. “Just a minute,” she said, removing all her heavy jewellery in a hurry and placing them on a side table. She was back in his arms, as he removed her blouse completely off her, his breath catching as her breasts were exposed to his brown gaze. “No bra?” he groaned, cupping her breasts in his large hands, squeezing them gently.

“It’s in-built,” she said, her voice choking as he ran his thumbs in a circular motion against the taut peaks.

“You should wear more of such clothes,” he growled, before bending down to take a stiff nipple in his mouth, stroking it with his tongue, making her moan with desire.

“Bharat, this is not fair. Will you just get out of your damn clothes?” she complained, holding his dark head close to her chest. Her hands craved to touch him.

He laughed softly, lifting his head to look at the wet tip of her breast, blowing on it gently, making her shiver in anticipation. He took his hands off her to remove his *sherwani* and *churidhar* swiftly, watching her with avid eyes as she took off her petticoat. “I’m all yours,” he said, spreading his arms wide in invitation.

Dia jumped on him, kissing him all over his chest, her hand following the line of hair all the way down across his stomach as it disappeared into his briefs.

He placed a hand in her silky hair, pulling her face up to his, placing kisses all over her face. She splayed a hand over his engorged manhood, caressing him as he grew even bigger and harder. “Do you wanna bet that we make it to the bedroom?” he challenged, sucking on her lower lip, nipping it, his hands stroking her breasts, making her wet between her legs.

“I don’t want to lose a sure bet,” she giggled, pushing him down on the carpet. She pulled some cushions off the sofa and spread them around, her breasts jiggling as she worked fast. She stared at him when he finally pulled his briefs off. “Ooh!” She went on the floor next to him, holding his manhood in both her hands.

“Dia.” Bharat pulled her down to make her lie down on the floor beside him, kissing her shoulder. “You looked lovely today, in the wedding sari. But I like you even better with nothing on,” he growled in her ear, biting an earlobe, his tongue immediately caressing it soothingly. Dia ran her hands on his shoulders and chest, revelling in the masculine texture, even as he traced his hands gently down her body, his lips following in their wake. He suckled one breast while his hand plucked at the other nipple, making her moan in pleasure.

“Bharat, I need you now.”

“Anything for you, my love,” said Bharat, getting up on all fours. He gently pulled down her panties, running caressing hands down her long legs, before he cupped a hand against her vagina.

Dia jumped of the floor, clinging to him, her sharp teeth biting his shoulder. “Now,” she demanded.

Bharat spread her legs wide, stroking a finger within her, finding her wet and ready, before he thrust into her with a grunt of satisfaction. “You’re so perfect,” he groaned as he kissed her on her mouth, his tongue thrusting rhythmically, matching his strokes below.

Dia dragged her nails down his smooth back, unable to stop herself, not even

aware of the marks she was leaving on her husband, as excitement built within her. She clung to him, her legs around her waist, meeting thrust for thrust as they reached out to the stars together. The world exploded around them as they climaxed simultaneously, their moans reverberating in the hallway.

Bharat flopped down beside her, totally spent, his breath ragged, burying his face on her shoulder. “I love you baby,” he said, a soft smile on his lips, his eyes closed.

Dia held him to her heart, her arm around his neck, her lips pressed to his forehead, splaying a leg over his waist.

It was a long time before they got up to go to the master bedroom where Bharat made love to her in a leisurely fashion, keeping her awake till dawn broke.

Epilogue

It was the end of February in the next year, two months after their marriage. *Bhadia Dabha* was doing roaring business by now, the crowd increasing day by day. Dia ran it from eleven in the morning till seven in the evening, the stocks running out before that on most days. Bharat worked beside her, driving the truck for her and helping her with the orders and cash. They had employed an enthusiastic young man, just out of college, to help with all the odd jobs.

Dia glowed, what with her husband's love, the success of her business, and living with a wonderful family. Some days of the month, she travelled with her husband when he went on his shoots, taking all the envious looks on her chin. Nowadays, she wasn't too bothered about the women who flocked around Bharat. Well, he would have to be Superman if he had any stamina left to even look at another woman after the way they made love every day.

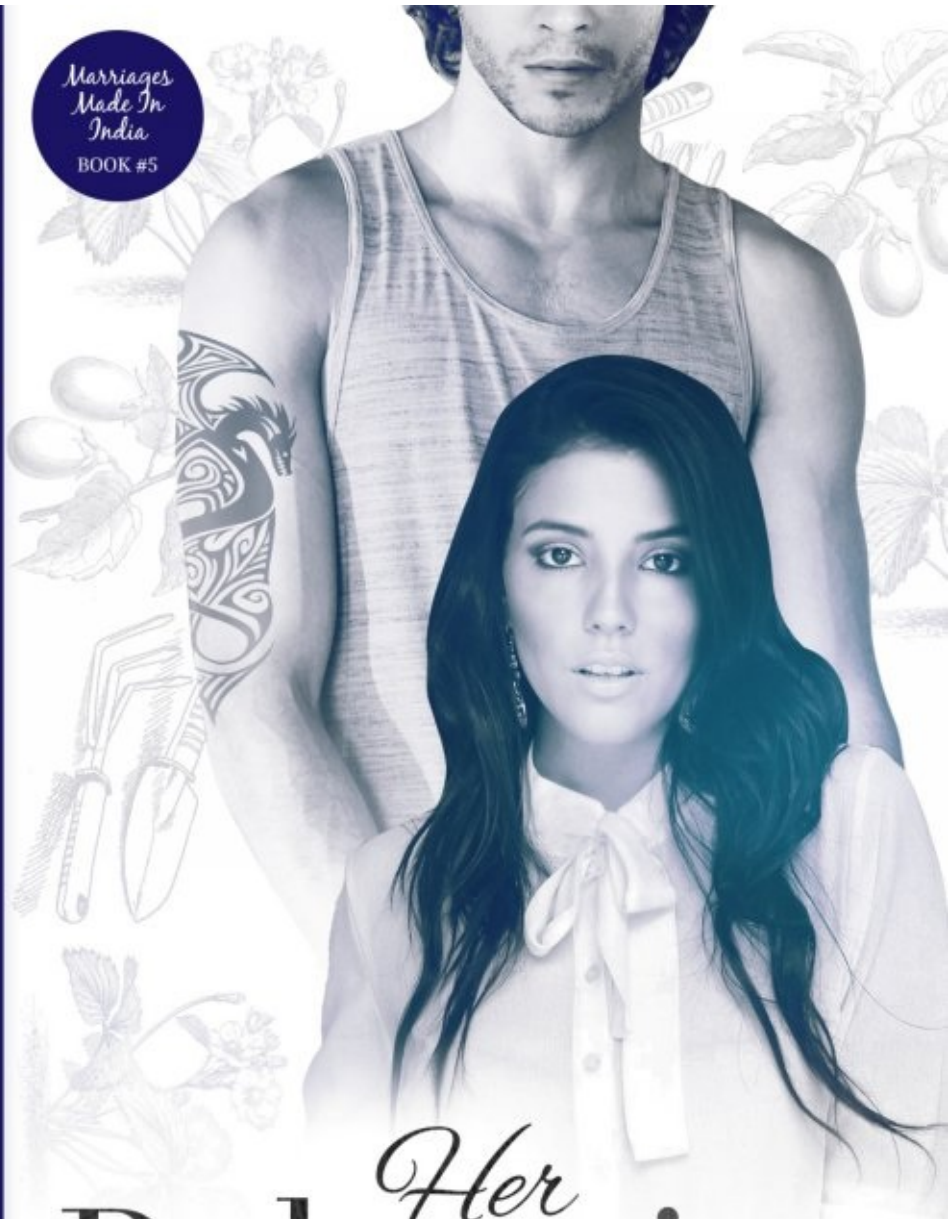
Some days she went to the studio with him, while on others, she toured the city by herself. There were also times when she stayed back in their hotel room, completing the accounts for their new business. Yeah, she'd insisted on managing the business and accounting all by herself. And Bharat was absolutely proud of his wife.

That day, Dia was at the studio, reading a tabloid. Yeah, that was one habit that had stuck with her as she kept looking for titbits that the papers and magazines published on her husband. She burst out laughing when she came across a gossip item, unaware of the stares she was receiving.

You all know about the super model who's a show stopper to top brands, our very own Indian Casanova. But you might be surprised with the latest news we have on him. Psst...our man who used to bed every single woman he met—well, it's not I who's saying this, folks, but someone who's known him intimately—suddenly stopped playing around. Our sources say that this man who hails from the city of gems has turned err...well, he can't do it anymore. Nope! I'm not revealing my sources. There's worse to come. He's married an innocent from a remote part of Uttar Pradesh, obviously without revealing the state of his health. We can't but feel sorry for the Casanova's wife...

Dia took a picture of the write up and sent it to her husband who had gone to the green room for a change. He was drinking from a bottle of water when his phone pinged. Seeing it was a message from his wife, he opened it eagerly. Reading it swiftly, he spat the water, startling his make-up man. “What the fuck!” Bharat started laughing uncontrollably, making the other man wonder if the model had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

THE END



Marriages Made In India

BOOK #5

Her Bohemian HUSBAND

SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN

Her Boehmian HUSBAND

SUNDARI VENKATRAMAN

“I missed you, sweetheart. Melbourne stopped being fun without you in it.”

Avantika stared into his obsidian eyes, her bathrobe sliding off her shoulders as she caressed his strong features with her hands. She held his face, saying, “That’s some admission, coming from you.”

“It’s the simple truth.” He kissed her throat, his tongue licking a trail towards her left shoulder. “You smell awesome. Did you just have a bath?”

“Hmm,” she said, removing the buttons on his shirt in a hurry. “Have you had dinner?”

“Yep, and now I want my dessert,” he said, pushing the robe off her shoulders to expose her breasts to his avid gaze.

Avantika’s answering laugh got stuck in her throat when she felt his lips against her right breast, his tongue stroking the skin above her nipple. “Shatru...” she whispered, hungry with need for him.

She couldn’t recall how they managed to reach the bed in the other room when Shatru placed her on the bed, removing his t-shirt and Bermuda shorts in a hurry, even as he pulled his shoes off with his toes. He lay down on the bed next to her, making an effort to calm down his racing heart, while he traced a finger down the side on her face.

HER BOHEMIAN HUSBAND
(Marriages Made in India: Book #5)

A romance novella by

Sundari Venkatraman

1

“Shatru,” called Avantika, “wait for me.”

He turned around with a scowl on his face, impatience in every line of his taut body. He stood there, not uttering a word. And that brooding presence was what made him so attractive to Avantika. Men usually swooned over her, putting her off even before she got to know them. But this man didn’t seem to give a damn, a devil-may-care expression in his obsidian eyes. When she reached him, he continued to walk towards the garage, saying nothing.

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What she didn’t know was that Shatrughan was listening to every word. Yeah, he was attracted to her, big time. But then, he was a loner, a globetrotter. He got restless if he stayed back home for longer than a month, as he had done this time, because of Bharat’s wedding. The faraway shores called out to him, not letting him be. What would he do with a girl who was grounded in Mumbai, that too with a rocking career?

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Their cottage—yeah, Bharat had wanted one and had planned it from scratch—was the furthest building in the compound. While it would have taken a good ten-minute walk to reach it, they arrived there in half a minute by car. Leaving the couple at the door, Shatru turned to ask his uninvited companion, “Would you like to go for a drive?”

“Oh, yes,” said Avantika, a wide smile on her face. Wouldn’t she just love to?

Shatrughan drove the car out of the compound of *Nakshatra*, picking up speed as they reached the main road. He let Avantika talk, without interrupting her even

once as she filled him up on the details of her life. He drove aimlessly, just enjoying the drive itself, the thrum of the powerful car engine and the melody of his companion's voice, not that he would have admitted it to even himself.

Avantika stopped talking after a while, not because she was worried that the man with her didn't care. She was just enamoured with the peace that stole over her as they rode through the silent roads, what with Shatru driving through the parts of Jaipur where the traffic was at its minimum. She leaned back against her seat to simply soak in his company.

It was 2 am when Shatru parked the car in the garage. Only the portico light was on as everyone had obviously gone to sleep. He got out to see that Avantika had already let herself out from the passenger's side.

"Thank you," he said, his voice hoarse as he stared at the lovely vision in front of him. She was still in the wedding finery that she had worn to attend her best friend Dia's wedding to his twin, Bharat. The rose pink *palazzo pants* and matching *kurta* made her dusky skin glow. Her amber coloured eyes were smudged with lack of sleep, the dark kohl lining adding more beauty to their almond shape. He would have easily given an arm and a leg to a hot affair with her just now! But then, Avantika was his brother's wife's best friend. He couldn't very well hit on her, especially as she was a guest in his parents' home.

Avantika stared right back at him, not missing the smouldering look in his obsidian eyes. He so obviously desired her, if not as much as she wanted him. She walked up to him as Shatru leaned against the side of the car, his hot eyes running from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

"Shatru..." She leaned on his broad chest, laying her head against his shoulder, her arms sliding around his waist. Avantika was exactly where she had wanted to be since the past two days, from the moment she had set eyes on Bharat's twin. Her throbbing breasts rejoiced as they fit snugly against his iron-hard chest.

Shatrughan's body shuddered in response to her tempting proximity, but no, he needed to place a restraint on his clamouring body. He couldn't just 'love her and leave her' as he generally did with some of the women passing through his life. That most of them lived on foreign shores had always been an advantage. Moreover, they knew the score that he wasn't looking for a permanent relationship, while they were also keen only on a temporary partner in bed.

But Avantika was different!

He controlled the tremor in his arms as he held them by his sides, refusing to give in to the urge to place them around her. He clenched his hands into tight fists, taking deep breaths to control himself, before placing his hands on her shoulders to move her away from him.

Feeling the tug of his fingers on her shoulders, Avantika raised her head to look up at him. “Shatru...”

He shook his head at her. “No, Avantika.”

“My friends call me Avi,” she said, going on tiptoe to press her lips against his rough cheek, in an open-mouthed kiss.

Shatrughan shook her hard. “I’m no friend of yours,” he said, his voice hoarse with the control he was placing on himself. She was too hard to resist, her soft body pressed against his, making him crave for more.

“I’d rather have you for my lover than a friend,” she laughed softly, nibbling his jaw, as she traced a path with her lips down to the corner of his lips. She threw her arms around his shoulders, her hands locking at the back of his neck, pulling his head down to hers.

“Listen, Avantika...” Shatru’s voice was a groan.

“You talk too much,” said the lady who had been doing all the talking through the evening, before pressing her lips against his. Her wet tongue ran over his dry lips, making him gasp, before pushing its way into his mouth, tangling with his own.

Shatrughan groaned again, gathering her close in his arms, his marauding mouth plundering her rosy red lips.

Avantika sighed, sagging into his arms, grateful for the support as her legs turned nerveless. She refused to let him go when he tried to get out of their embrace one more time.

Shatru gave up fighting a lost cause, burying his face in her scented neck, his arms crushing her against his aroused body. After a few minutes and some very deep breaths, he lifted his head to look down at the woman in his arms. Her eyes were inviting, making her irresistible. He moved away with difficulty, removing her arms from around his neck and placing them at her sides. He turned away from her before saying, “It’s almost three. I think we should go to bed.”

“I’m game,” came the soft and mischievous whisper, as Avantika grinned at him.

Shatru frowned at her, his heated black gaze raking her from head to foot. Yeah, he was tempted, too much. “No,” he said.

Avantika pouted at him. “Okay, have it your way. But don’t think you’re going to escape me forever,” she challenged. She didn’t know what was stopping him. It was obvious that he was attracted to her. She had felt his erection against her stomach when they kissed.

Shatru shook his head at her. “Come now, I’ll let you into the main house. I...”

“Aren’t you coming in?” she asked, her eyes running over his features avidly. He was an absolute hunk, with the beginning of a fuzz on his lean cheeks, the curls on his head mussed up, his charcoal eyes looking a bit desperate.

“Nope. My home’s further down,” he said, pointing in the direction they had taken to reach Bharat’s cottage.

“Oh, you brothers have your own homes.”

“Yeah.”

“So, is anyone else staying with you?” she asked, an innocent expression on her face.

“Just me,” said Shatru, before biting his tongue. “No, Avantika, you can’t come with me there.”

“A woman has to try, right?” she said, shrugging.

He let her into the main house and walked away, refusing to turn and look at her,

even as she stood at the entrance, watching his tall figure till he disappeared.

Neither of them slept a wink that night.

2

Avantika twisted and turned on her comfortable bed. Luckily, despite the number of guests who had come from out of town, she had got a room to herself in the Maheshwari parents' palatial home. She was well aware of the cause of her disturbance. She was terribly attracted, if not in love, with the youngest Maheshwari scion.

Two days ago, she had stepped out of Arrivals at the Jaipur international airport to see one of the Maheshwari brothers waiting to pick up some of the wedding guests. She could see the family resemblance to Bharat and had walked up to introduce herself to Lakshman.

"Hi, you must be Bharat's brother," she smiled, putting her hand out to shake his. "I'm Avantika, Dia's friend."

"Hello, Avantika, welcome to Jaipur," said Lakshman, with a smile. "Hope you had a comfortable journey." When she nodded, he continued, "Would you mind waiting for a short while as some more guests are expected to arrive in about fifteen minutes or so?"

"Not at all," said Avantika. She caught a movement in her peripheral as someone walked towards them. It was a wonder that her jaw was holding up as she stared, not really caring if she seemed rude. The man walking towards them *had* to be Bharat's twin. Her heartbeat soared. Well, Dia's *fiancé* was handsome. And that was all. She'd never, but never, reacted to him the way she was responding to this hunk.

When he was close enough, Lakshman introduced the two. "Avantika, meet Shatrughan. He's the youngest brother and Bharat's twin." He turned to the other man and said, "Shatru, this is Avantika, Dia's friend from Mumbai."

Avantika found her hand enfolded in a huge palm, her pulse beating like a drum by now. She seemed to have lost her voice as she looked into his bottomless black eyes, her own sherry coloured ones unblinking. She didn't hear Lakshman excusing himself to go meet another batch of guests. She forgot to even greet the man who held her hand. She just stared, her lips slightly parted as her breath

came out in gasps from her heaving chest.

“Hello, Avantika,” said Shatrughan, in the sexiest voice she’d ever heard.

Avantika shook herself out of her reverie as colour rushed up her cheeks. “Hello,” she croaked, her throat parched, her gaze lowering as her eyelids grew heavy. What the hell was happening to her? She was normally so confident around people of both sexes.

She took a couple of deep breaths and with a determined lift to her chin, looked up at Shatrughan again to say, “Hello. Sorry about that. I’m thirsty.” With a small smile, she took a water bottle from her handbag and drank from it, doing her best not to choke.

He smiled before nodding, making her heart go banging in her chest again. Well, it looked like she was attracted to a man for the very first time in her life. No, she wasn’t counting her teenage crushes. They were too juvenile. This was a powerful feeling of desire a woman felt for a hot-blooded, fully grown male and it truly shook her up with its intensity and unexpectedness.

Providence insisted on playing its role too. Lakshman took the other guests in his car and it was left to Shatrughan to escort his lone guest home and that’s how Avantika found herself in the passenger seat of his car. They didn’t talk, the music blaring loudly even as Shatrughan drove the car as if his tail was on fire.

Well, she couldn’t even call him the man of her dreams since she had stopped sleeping after setting eyes on him.

Avantika turned around once again on her bed, thumping her pillow, as the comforter bunched under her yet again. She couldn’t mistake the heat in his charcoal gaze every time he looked in her direction. But it was also obvious that he wasn’t going to do anything about it. At least, not under his parents’ roof. She would have to come up with another way to meet him. No, she wasn’t the type to wait for things to happen. She preferred to grab life with both hands.

Avantika had no choice but to leave for the airport early the next morning. She didn’t get to meet Shatrughan before leaving, much to her frustration. It was just barely that she refrained from going over to knock on his door.

She might have changed her mind *if* she had only known that Shatru was also losing sleep over her.

But then, life wasn’t always a smooth ride.

3

Avantika slid on to a bar stool, her gaze unwavering as she stared at the busy bartender as he mixed drinks. It was obvious that he was too busy to be aware of her presence. But it didn't matter. She had the whole evening and was in no hurry.

It was a few weeks since her friend Dia's wedding. Shatrughan had left for Melbourne immediately after she had rushed back to Mumbai. He had ignored most of her WhatsApp messages, only saying a 'hi' at times. Avantika had juggled a lot of shows and wangled an opportunity to perform in Melbourne, for the New Year. Her troupe had left that morning, while she'd stayed back to catch up with Shatru.

Shatrughan Maheshwari made a performance of mixing the drinks, much to the admiration of the customers. The bar was crowded while orders flew from his capable hands. A couple of waiters took care of the regular drinks while he was left with the job of mixing exclusive cocktails that were his specialty. There was an array of whisky, brandy, vodka, gin, wine—both red and white—and more to his left. To the right were bottles of soda, buckets of ice, bowls of mint, dark red cherries, sliced strawberries, lemons and oranges. In the middle were fruit syrups and colas to add colour and flavour to the cocktails. Shatru's hands kept flashing as he played around with the many ingredients, making drinks to suit every palate.

Avantika stared in fascination. Shatru was wearing a black sleeveless muscle shirt that showed off his biceps to advantage. As she was seated on the furthest barstool at the left end of the bar, to his extreme right, she could see a black dragon tattoo on his arm, rippling every time he moved his hand, which was like all the time. He wore gold band earrings that gleamed amidst his black curly hair that he wore longer than before. He was obviously enjoying what he was doing as he chatted with the many clients who were watching him as he mixed their exotic cocktails. It bugged her that more than half the people in his audience belonged to the fairer sex. He didn't seem to have trouble chatting them up. She couldn't help remembering how he had been so clammed up in her company. Well, it was time to change all that.

The bottle he was holding almost slipped from his fingers when Shatru recognised Avantika in the audience. His throat choked for all of ten seconds as his heart leapt up in joy. She looked gorgeous in a strapless, red tube dress that followed the shape of her torso faithfully. The dusky colour of her exposed shoulders glowed in the strobe lights of the bar and discotheque.

Shatru had thought a lot about Avantika since his twin's wedding. But he had refrained himself from getting in touch with her only for one reason—that it might be tough to be in a relationship with the Bohemian life he lived. And giving that up wasn't an option.

But was he excited to see her right here in Melbourne! Shatru couldn't help the smile lighting up his face when he saw her wink at him.

"And what would you like to have, ma'am?" he called out, a dark eyebrow up in query.

"What do you recommend?" she asked, her eyes eating him up.

"Lemme get you the house special," said Shatru, turning to put together a *long island iced tea*, mixing the many liquors, fresh lime juice and cola. He added the mixture to a tall glass that was half filled with ice cubes. Garnishing it with a few mint leaves and a slice of lemon, he placed it on a tray that the waiter took over to serve Avantika.

She took the glass and raised it to him in a silent toast before taking a sip. It was so cool and blissful in the sweltering summer heat and Avantika drank deeply from her glass before nodding at Shatru in appreciation, a sultry smile on her face.

He smiled at her even as he continued with his bartending, the place busy in spite of being a week night. It was past two when the bar was finally empty. Avantika still sat on her stool, waiting for Shatru to finish his stint.

"Can I get you something else?" asked the helpful waiter, his bright eyes running over her long, bare legs.

Even as she shook her head, a voice called out from near her, "That's okay, Kevin, the lady's with me."

Kevin took one look at Shatrughan's face and left in a hurry, calling out a 'goodnight'.

Avantika laughed softly, seeing the other man's speedy retreat, before turning to Shatru. "Are you done?"

He nodded, giving her a hand to help her off the barstool. She tottered a bit on her stiletto heeled, open-toed shoes that were the same red as her dress. Shatru slid an arm around her waist to hold her steady, saying, "Why do you girls need to wear stilts?"

She fluttered her lashes at him. "Do you deny that they make my legs look longer and sexier?"

Shatru ran his charcoal gaze over her legs. Her barely there dress flared from waist down, stopping somewhere mid thigh. And she was right! Her legs did appear longer with so much skin showing between the hem of her dress and her crazy shoes. For a second, he couldn't help but imagine those legs wrapped around his middle as he made love to her. He shook his head, wanting to clear it of the sexy image, before saying anything.

"What? You don't like?" she asked, pouting at him. Her moist lips, free of all traces of the red lipstick she'd been wearing earlier, beckoned to him invitingly.

"Of course not. I..." Seeing her frown, Shatru stopped mid-sentence, raising both his hands in front of him in defence. "That came out all wrong." He took a deep breath before admitting, "I like—a lot. And yes, your legs look damn sexy in those stilettos." He moved closer to her, his breath fanning her cheek.

"And you look hot," said Avantika, turning her face to press her lips to his, melting in his arms as he placed them around her waist, gathering her close to his hard chest. She was thrilled when she felt him take over, his tongue seeking entry into her mouth. She was only too willing to oblige as she rubbed her tongue against his, making him groan.

It was a while before Shatru raised his head to say, "I think it's best we leave. They will want to close the place." He took her via the back door, directly to the car park. "How did you get here?"

“I took a cab.”

He escorted her to a motorbike that was leaning against a wall. “Can you manage to ride pillion on this in that little dress and crazy shoes?” he asked.

“Shatru, why do I get the impression that you don’t approve?” She stood away from him with a scowl, her legs apart, her hands fisted on her hips, her stance angry.

Shatru’s breath came out in a whoosh as he walked closer to her, his black eyes studying her keenly. “Whatever made you think that?” He was having a tough time keeping his hands off her. Why he bothered to stop himself was anybody’s guess.

“That’s twice you have commented on what I’m wearing,” she complained, “and neither time was a compliment.” Why had she even bothered to come chasing after him? She was startled to find his large hands cupping her hips as he pulled her close to his aroused body. Her eyes went wide when she felt the bulge against her belly. She locked eyes with his, even as she kept her upper body away from him, her arms swinging at her sides. He obviously wanted her. But she was in no mood to oblige now.

“Avantika...” Shatru’s voice was hoarse, his throat clogged with desire. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. My only excuse is that I find you irresistible. I...” He shrugged, still not clear how to deal with the deep attraction he felt for this woman. “You are my sister-in-law’s best friend. I can’t just...well, all I can offer you is an affair. I can’t...”

Avantika shut him up in the only way she knew. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, her small white teeth biting his sensuously thick lower lip. “Are you even aware that I’m dying to have you inside me?” she whispered sexily in his ear. “You refused to play ball the last time we met. But please don’t push me away, Shatru. I...”

He crushed her in his arms, kissing her fervently. It was a while before he raised his head to say, “Come, let’s go to my place.”

Avantika sat astride the bike, behind him, her arms wrapped tightly around his

middle, her body pressed to his back, grinning from ear to ear as he tore through the empty streets of Melbourne on his mean machine, reaching his apartment block in record time.

As they removed their helmets, Shatru asked, “Are you sure?”

Avantika nodded, her curly hair tumbling all over her face, “Oh yes, absolutely!”

4

Shatru opened the door and waved her in, before walking behind her into his one-bedroom apartment. It was cosy and reflected his personality. Okay, maybe she didn't know him that well. But she felt at home in the apartment as she could see his personal touches everywhere. Though it was a temporary abode, Shatru had managed to bring a sense of home with some photographs of his family, a large glass bowl with fresh flowers, a couple of books on a side table and a newspaper lying half folded on the sofa. Oh yeah, the house had his stamp all over it.

"Would you like to drink something? Or maybe eat? I have some eggs and bread that I could put together in a sandwich," offered Shatru.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, her wide eyes studying his movements as he sat down on a sofa to remove his shoes and socks, before getting up to walk towards her, his large feet bare. She couldn't wait for him to get the rest of his clothes off.

"For food? No. For you, yes," he said in a whisper, pulling her in his arms.

"Shatru..." she moaned, raising her face for his kiss.

"You've been haunting my dreams since the time I met you at the wedding," he said, tracing a forefinger over the side of her face, making her shudder with passion.

Avantika grinned. "Am I glad!" She bit his finger as he traced the shape of her lips, making him groan. Laughing, she took the finger into her mouth to suck on it.

He lifted her up in his arms and walked towards the bedroom, carrying her effortlessly as if she weighed nothing.

Avantika clung to him, thrilled to be swept off her feet. Her hands caressed the rippling muscles of his shoulders, revelling in the freedom that she'd been denied before.

Shatru placed her gently on the bed before pulling off his muscle shirt in a single movement. He saw her sitting there on his bed, her mouth wide open as she stared at his bared chest. “What?”

Avantika went on her knees on the bed to throw her arms around his waist, rubbing her face against his wide chest, loving the feel of his crisp chest hair against the soft skin of her face. She purred like a kitten, turning this way and that, her tongue peeping out to lick him.

“Avi...” he groaned, his hands in her curly hair, holding her head against his body. He pulled the zipper on the back of her dress, pushing it down to her waist, his large hands stroking her back. Encountering the strap of her bra, he paused.

Avantika lifted her head off his chest to look up at him through her tumbling hair. “Don’t you dare have second thoughts,” she threatened, removing the hook on her lacy red bra. Her breasts tumbled out of their confinement, filling Shatru’s waiting hands, making her moan, “Oh yes, please.”

Shatru stared at her plump breasts, adoring the feel of them, the tips hard with arousal. He bent down to press a kiss on the top of her left breast, making her jump off the bed. His mouth roved over her breasts, tracing a damp tongue in circles, keeping away from the puckered tips.

Avantika felt aroused to fever pitch, desperate to feel his mouth against her sensitised nipples, even as he drove her crazy with his tongue and hands. “Shatru...” she screamed, as he laughed softly against her, his body vibrating deliciously. She bucked in his arms, when finally she felt the heat of his mouth closing over a tip, driving her insane with need. She thrashed on the bed as he suckled her breast, his hand caressing the twin, tweaking the bud between his thumb and forefinger. Avantika sobbed, holding his head between her hands, pressing him closer to her trembling body.

He pulled her dress completely off her to press his hand against her feminine mound, caressing her softly through her lace panties. He moved up to capture the whimper that escaped her throat, kissing her deeply, even as he pulled the last garment off her. Her lips were swollen from his kisses as she responded with enthusiasm, her tongue tangling with his as he sucked on it.

She tried to open the button on his jeans, frustrated in her attempt when she felt

his mouth close over the tip of her other breast. She felt weak with need, pressing her body closer to his face, relishing his caresses.

Shatru's mouth moved down her body, nuzzling her stomach, his tongue swirling a circle in her belly button before moving further down, even as she raked her nails over his shoulders.

When she felt his lips against her inner thigh, Avantika jumped. "What are you doing?"

He raised his head to look at her with slumberous black eyes. "Loving you."

"But Shatru, this is not fair. Why don't you take your jeans off?" she complained, pouting at him, her lips a dark red from all the attention he'd been paying them.

"Okay," said Shatru, getting off the bed to remove his jeans, his eyes continuing to rake over her supine form.

Avantika watched him avidly, her sherry brown eyes going wide as he stepped out of his jeans. She could see the shape of his erection straining against his briefs.

Shatru watched her watching him, colour running up his manly cheeks, even as Avantika got out of the bed to kneel in front of him.

"Here, let me help you." She pushed his hands out of the way, peeling his briefs down his muscular thighs, her gaze fixed on his shaft, her mouth opening wide in an 'O'. "Oh my God! You are big."

He grinned, pulling her up from her kneeling position, into his arms. "Are you scared?" he asked.

She shook her head vigorously, her curls bouncing. "Nope, not scared. But..." She wasn't going to tell him that she had never seen a man in all his naked glory, ever before.

"Hmm..." He kissed the pulse at her throat, his tongue stroking against it. Her soft breasts were crushed against his hard chest, the sensation arousing him all

the more. He tumbled her on the bed, joining her, his hands running down her body from shoulder to thigh.

Avantika purred in his arms, her hands caressing the satiny finish of his broad back.

Shatru suckled on her breast again, his fingers tracing the shape of her vagina, finding her wet with desire. He could feel her buck beneath him when he dipped his fingers into her. “In a second,” he assured her, opening the bedside drawer to remove a condom. Sheathing himself, he rose above her, studying her passion-ridden face on his pillow, her hair spread like a dark halo. Her breasts were glistening from all the attention he had been paying them while her body trembled.

She opened slumberous brown eyes to see what was stopping him. “Shatru?”

He smiled, bending down to kiss her, parting her legs with his hands to enter her swiftly. Shock widened his obsidian eyes when he encountered the unexpected barrier, even as he noticed the same shock mirrored in her sherry coloured eyes. “Avi...” he groaned. “I’m sorry. Do you want me to stop?”

Avantika forgot her pain when she noticed the torture on his face as he worked at controlling his need. She shook her head, “No,” before throwing her arms around him, dragging him close. “Please don’t stop.”

Shatru groaned, pressing down further, hearing her gasp. He paused to kiss her on her forehead, waiting for her body to adjust to his invasion. When he felt her relaxing again, he pushed further. Hearing Avantika’s gentle sigh, he smiled in response, lifting her legs to place them around his waist. “Feeling better?” he asked her softly.

She nodded, her eyes looking deeply into his. They went wide when she felt him stir within her. Oh my God! It was incredible the way he went in and out, making her long for more. She held his muscular arms with her hands, unaware of her nails digging into his flesh, surprised by the moans coming out of her mouth. It was the most amazing experience of her life. But there was something eluding her, something just out of her reach. Avantika squeezed her legs around his waist, seeking the unreachable, as he pleasured her feminine core with his hard strokes. His lips found her breast as he suckled on her rhythmically, making

her jump off the bed.

And then it happened. The explosion that blew her up, making her come apart in his arms. “Shatruuuuuu...” she screamed, biting into his shoulder, marking him for life.

Shatrughan groaned in response, his body shuddering as he followed her with his own climax. Spent, he flopped down beside her, his face buried in her neck. It had been the most phenomenal experience of his life as well.

5

Dawn was just breaking when Avantika opened her eyes in a slit. She smiled at the weight of Shatrughan's arm around her waist. She was spooned close to his hard body, his right leg splayed over both of hers. What a wonderful way to wake up! She turned her head to kiss the arm that was around her, her smile turning wider when she noticed the dragon tattoo. She wrinkled her nose at the dragon before reaching up to kiss its nose.

Shatru stirred on feeling her kiss against his arm, tightening it around her, his hand automatically seeking her breast and cupping it gently, much to her delight. "Is it morning already?" His sleepy voice rumbled at the back of her neck.

Avantika stretched lazily, rubbing her back against him, pressing her breast into his caressing hand. "Not really," she said, turning her head sideways to look up at him. Looking at his half-open eyes, she smiled. "Hello handsome." She kissed him on his rough cheek, her tongue peeping out to stroke the corner of his lips.

"Hmm..." Shatru captured her lips in a soft kiss, sliding his tongue into her mouth, tracing the cavern, before rubbing it gently against hers.

She felt her heartbeat going up at the combined assault of his mouth on hers and his hands on her breasts, as he stroked them, his thumbs massaging the nipples, a delicious arousal birthing in her womb. She turned to caress his chest with her hands, walking her fingers down his washboard abs towards his manhood. She was delighted to find that he was hard and ready.

He raised his head to look at the gorgeous woman in his arms. Her body was flushed with arousal, her lips parted invitingly. The tips of her breasts perked up under his roving gaze, making him harder than ever. "Are you hurting from last night?" he asked her.

She shook her head, her hands caressing his hard shaft. "Not at all. And I want you inside me, please."

Shatru grinned before gathering her in his arms, grunting with satisfaction as he entered her clamouring body. She felt so good, her velvet sheath fitting him like

a glove. Sex had never been better than with Avantika. He rode her, first gently and then roughly as he felt her nails raking his back, her long legs holding him tightly around his waist. He smiled at the moans ensuing from her mouth even as he bent down to kiss her breasts. She was definitely a wild cat.

The world came tumbling down as they reached their climax together, their groans reverberating in the room.

Avantika cuddled close to her lover, satisfied in the aftermath of their lovemaking, a finger lazily tracing the shape of his tattoo. “He looks wild, doesn’t he?”

“Why do you presume it’s a ‘he’? What if it’s a she-dragon?” he asked her, tongue-in-cheek, his chest rumbling with mirth.

“What?”Avantika looked up to give Shatru a mock glare. “I’ll tear her glowing red eyes out if it’s a ‘she’. So, tell me, is that dragon a male or a female?”

“I’m a guy, right? Why would I want a male dragon on my arm?” he asked cheekily.

“She’ll have to go, in that case,” declared Avantika. “I’m not sharing my man with anyone.”

“Am I your man?” he asked in a hoarse voice, the laughter disappearing.

“Of course you are,” she scowled at him. “What sort of question is that?”

Shatrughan stared at her glowing face. Her amber eyes were shining with joy and peace. She looked beautiful, her dark eyebrows like wings, her nose sharp, her generous lips pouting invitingly. She made his heart thunder with need. But...but, he wasn’t ready for commitment. Not yet, anyway.

“Avi, I...”

She placed a hand over his mouth, shaking her head. “I said you are my man. I am not expecting that I should be your woman.” She pressed her lips to his in a brief kiss.

Shatru stared at her. Was she for real? “I like you, a lot. I lust you, totally,” he said in a guttural voice. “But I...”

She grinned at him. “That works for me, perfectly. I’d rather you be honest with me, my dragon. I’m in Melbourne this week. Will you let me stay with you?”

Shatru’s charcoal gaze lit up. “One whole week? I’d love to have you stay here with me, sweetheart.” He kissed her nose.

“Then let’s just have fun this week, shall we?”

Shatrughan buried his face against her throat, taking deep breaths to calm his thumping heart. He couldn’t believe that Avantika could be so giving, not expecting much in return. “We will, I swear. Would you like me to show you the sights?” he asked in a whisper against her ear.

Avantika nodded vigorously, her curls tickling his lips. “And we’ll make love every night.”

He bit her earlobe, making her moan, his hand entwined with hers. “And the mornings, oh yes.”

Avantika noticed the red mark on his shoulder when the light from the window fell on it. She traced a delicate finger over it, asking, “That looks bad. What happened? Did you hurt yourself?” She looked up into his eyes before continuing, “Or did something bite you?” She rose to get her handbag, removing a tube of cream from it. “Here, let me apply this. I hope it’s not hurting you too badly.” She didn’t remember noticing it last night. But then, her focus hadn’t been his shoulder exactly.

Shatru grinned at her, not saying anything, letting her apply the cream, even as she blew on the mark.

“What?” she frowned at him as he laughed outright. “Shatru, have you gone mad? You probably need to see a doctor. I...”

He laughed harder than ever, pulling her into his arms. “Can you hear yourself? You’re simply hilarious.”

She hit a fist on his solid chest, hurting herself more than she did him. “What’s so funny?”

He stopped laughing to look at her serious face. She obviously hadn’t realised yet. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“How do you know? You don’t even know how you got hurt. You...”

“I know.”

“You do?” She glared at him. “So, why won’t you tell me? Was it your she-dragon?” Her voice was sarcastic now.

“Hmm...you’re right, it was my she-dragon.” His eyes danced mischievously, even as he bit his lips to stop the grin that was waiting to split his face in two.

“Now you’re pulling my leg.” She pouted at him, her hands gripping his shoulders. “Are you going to tell me or what?”

He laughed again, unable to stop himself. “Did you see the mark last night, when we reached home?”

“I can’t recall.”

“Okay, then. Let me tell you that it wasn’t there.”

“Then how did it happen? Wait...” Light dawned in her eyes even as hot colour rushed into her face. “I didn’t do that. No way!” She shook her head vigorously. “Or did I?” Her voice was a whisper now. Avantika turned away to bury her flaming face on a pillow, beating her fists against it. Oh my God! She couldn’t have bitten him so badly to leave such a mark. It was a dark red on his bronzed skin. No way!

Shatrughan ran a caressing hand down her naked back, doing his best to calm her with his soothing strokes. Though his body continued to vibrate with laughter. “Come on, sweetheart. It’s only a hickey. And it doesn’t hurt, I swear.” He bent down to trace a damp tongue down her spine, pressing little kisses on his way down.

Avantika squirmed at first, but her body turned traitor, responding enthusiastically to his caresses. She let him lift her up in his arms as he pulled her on his lap, his lips tracing a wet path down her shoulder.

He bit her softly, his tongue stroking the area immediately. “See, biting is so much a part of lovemaking. I...”

She turned to bury her face on his shoulder. “But Shatru, you were so gentle while I left such a horrible mark on you. I’m so sorry.”

He lifted her face off his shoulder to look into her eyes. “Don’t be. I enjoyed it. No, listen,” when she shook her head, “I found it totally arousing. Okay, let me prove it to you.”

She stared at him, wondering how he was going to do it when he bent down to run his tongue on her breast. The next second, she felt his teeth nipping the skin above her nipple, making her moan. She was startled to feel the sudden wetness between her legs in response to his bite. Her hands automatically went around his head, holding him close, her body clamouring for more. She could feel his smile against her body even as his mouth closed around the tip of her breast.

He suckled gently and then hard, arousing her to fever pitch. He laughed when she pushed him down on the bed and climbed over him, sitting on his stomach.

“Now tell me what I should do,” she commanded, not knowing how to take it further.

Shatru put his hands on her hips to lift her above him before thrusting his shaft into her and wasn’t really surprised when he heard her moan loudly. He lifted her again and brought her down on himself.

She caught on and continued to ride him, her head thrust back, her curly hair flowing down her back, her breasts bouncing rhythmically, her eyes closed in concentration. She was a sight to behold as she revelled in his caresses while he ran his hands from her shoulders to her chest and down over her stomach. She pressed harder, reaching out to the stars till they suddenly came down in a brilliant shower, making her explode in an orgasm. She flopped against him, even as he helped her continue to ride him for a bit longer until he climaxed inside her.

Shatru hugged her close, not wanting to let go of her, ever.

6

They went by Shatru's bike to Avantika's hotel to check her out. They got back home with her rucksack, into which she had stuffed all her clothes in a hurry. Leaving her bag at his apartment, they went out to have lunch in the Colonial Tramcar Restaurant, boarding the tram at the south bank of the Yarra River. Avantika was excited seeing the old world decor of the tram.

"Can you believe that this tramcar was built in 1948?" said Shatru. "They continue to maintain the vintage look."

Avantika looked around in awe as they stepped into the tram that was fitted with brass and velvet furnishing while feeling cosy with the air-conditioner running full blast and soft music playing in the background. They were to have wine and lunch on the tram as they travelled through Melbourne. What fun!

They got into the tram to sit at a table for two and were served chilled wine, even as the maître d handed them a menu each. Avantika sipped her wine, checking out what was on for lunch.

Shatru searched his menu with a look of concentration. The appetiser and entrée were fine, both vegetarian. He decided to order the *roasted red capsicum dip* and *pumpkin soup* along with *goat's cheese* and *buttered croutons*. So far, so good! But both items on the main course had meat in them. "Have you decided what you want to have?" he asked Avantika.

"Yes," she nodded, looking forward to what seemed to be a delicious experience. While the plush interior was simply gorgeous, Avantika kept turning her head to the window to catch a view of the city passing by. Giving the menu another cursory glance, she said, "I'll go with the *hummus dip*, *duck terrine* and the *roast fillet of beef* for the main course."

When Shatru gave his order to the maître d, the man asked, "What about the main course, sir? What would you like to have?"

"I'd like to consult your chef. You see, I'm vegetarian and don't eat any kind of meat."

Avantika gave him a surprised look even as the maître d replied, “Sure, sir. *Bon appétit*!”

“You are a vegetarian?” she asked the obvious.

Shatru nodded. “Yeah, though I do have eggs at times. You have meat, obviously.”

“Of course I do. I grew up on all types of them and love to explore new cuisines.”

“I’m just glad that a lot of people are turning into vegetarians or even vegans around the world. Otherwise, I’d have a tough time visiting other countries,” said Shatru.

“Have you ever tasted chicken or fish?” When he shook his head, she gave him a small frown. “If you haven’t, how will you know that you like them or not?”

“That’s not the point. I don’t eat meat only because I’m against the killing of animals and using them as food. Let’s forget it, nah, Avi? I don’t want to get into an argument. It’s just my opinion and I’d rather stick to it.”

The chef came to their table before Avantika could retaliate. After a few minutes of discussion, he offered to make a *cheesy vegetable risotto* for Shatru. The latter thanked him with a smile and a handshake before sipping on his wine.

“What awesome service!” Avantika was impressed with both the restaurant’s chef as well with Shatru who got his own way.

Shatru smiled at her. “Absolutely! It’s a joy being here in Melbourne.”

Looking at him curiously, Avantika asked, “So, from when did the travel bug bite you?”

“I always followed the National Geographic Channel even when I was in school. Seeing my interest, my father sent me on every single trip the students went on, whether within India or outside. Later, while at college, I went on a few more trips with friends of mine. What I realised was that I didn’t want to do the tourist

thing. It’s not possible to know a place or the people by tagging along with a group of sightseeing travellers. So, after I finished college, I left home with a backpack, going from one country to another, working my way, taking odd jobs. I suppose one would call it wanderlust. I keep touching base at home only to pack my bags again within a couple of weeks.”

Avantika listened at him, fascinated. “Your parents are okay with it? They haven’t insisted on your getting a career or whatever? You know what I mean. I...” She stopped, biting a tongue, wondering if she sounded insulting.

Shatru smiled. “Go on, ask away. I don’t have a problem. You aren’t asking something that a lot of people haven’t already questioned me about. First of all, my parents are absolutely fine with it. My dad especially believes in letting people be. I’d be proud if I was half as good as him when I bring up my kids. Yeah, I do plan to have a family sometime in the future.” He grinned charmingly, before continuing. “We all harp about education. Well, am I not gaining knowledge travelling the world? And I’m clear that I don’t want to spend my dad’s money. I make my own way.” He shrugged. “There are times when I have to live frugally, but that works for me. In the beginning I stayed with a few families. The accommodation and food were both cheaper that way. I also got to learn about how the kids in those homes lived. This was the first independent trip I made to Denmark to a small town called Dragør. Later on, I learned to work my way around the world, paying for my travel, stay and food.”

“Amazing!” She was absolutely impressed. “Where all have you been?”

“Most of Asia, parts of USA, Europe and now Australia. You tell me, when did you decide to take up dance as a profession? And oh, by the way, I don’t even know your full name.”

Avantika grinned at him, tucking into the steaming food placed in front of her. “Kamath. I grew up in Bengaluru where my parents still live. I learned *Bharatnatyam* when I was in school. Later on, it was fusion dance classes for me while at college since it was considered “cool”.” She drew quotation marks in the air. “After that I never looked back. Dancing grounds me and keeps me fit. I joined a troupe in the beginning and later, moved on to create my own. I’ve had a lot of fun dancing on stage. But now I’m not that keen about it. Choreographing for a film is what I’m doing nowadays. Oh yeah, as I mentioned to you before, it was your brother Bharat who gave me the contact.” She

shrugged before continuing, “But somehow, I don’t think I want to continue doing that. I’d rather teach kids who are a lot more enthusiastic, if you know what I mean. My dream is to start a dance school.”

“That’s definitely a plan. Will you teach me to dance?” he asked, a dark brow up in query.

“Why?” She wasn’t going to teach him just because he thought it was a way to impress her.

Colour ran up Shatru’s manly cheeks as he looked down at his soup bowl. “I’ve always been fascinated by people’s grace when they swing to music. Believe me, I’ve tried, but somehow I haven’t been able to get the hang of it. Somewhere deep down, the wish continues to burn within me. And I don’t believe it’s ever late to learn something new. So, what say?” He looked up suddenly to pin her with his intense black gaze.

“I’d love to,” she smiled. “Your job as bartender, do you work all seven days?”

“I’ve already requested them for leave this week. I’ll have to go today since it’s too short a notice. But I’m free from tomorrow till you’re here in Melbourne.”

“Thanks,” she smiled, placing her hand on his.

He lifted her hand to place a kiss on her palm, even as he looked deeply into her eyes.

Avantika took deep breaths to slow down her heart that was beating at too fast a pace, her eyes mesmerised by the desire in his gaze.

They continued to chat over the delicious lunch, managing to get a few glimpses of the city outside the window, though they were too absorbed in each other most of the time.

They got off the tramcar restaurant after a couple of hours, hand-in-hand. Avantika laid her head on Shatru’s shoulder, saying, “Thank you so much, my dragon. I had a terrific time.”

He turned to kiss her right there on the road, making her eyes go wide. It was

Melbourne and it was probably perfectly alright for some public display of affection, though it was too new for her. But what the hell! Avantika threw her arms around his neck to kiss him back with equal fervour.

They went back home first. “Do you want to go to the bar with me or do you want to catch up with some well-earned rest? Tomorrow’s going to be hectic. We’ll be leaving early on a full-day tour to Maru Park and Phillip Island.” He gave her a choice.

“I’d like to go with you, unless you think I’ll be in your way.”

He pulled her close to him, pressing his lips to her cheek. “Never that. I’d love to have you go with me.”

She grinned. “Then I’ll go and get my stilts on.” Saying that, she walked towards the bedroom where she’d left her luggage.

“Let me help you,” he offered mischievously, following her.

They ended up making love before rushing to get ready for the evening, taking a shower together to save time. Or that’s what they insisted on believing.

Giggling, Avantika sat behind him on the motorbike, wearing a hot pink dress with noodle straps and matching heels. “I wonder how you managed to pack so many pairs of shoes in one rucksack,” he teased, adjusting the strap on his helmet.

“Now you know how smart I am,” she replied cheekily, throwing her arms around his waist and pressing close to his broad back with a sigh of pleasure. “Did I tell you what a gorgeous body you have?” she whispered in his ear. “And I so love those gold bands you’re wearing in your ears, my sexy dragon!”

Shatru, who had just fired the bike, switched off the engine, turning to look at his passenger. “Behave, if you want us to have a safe ride,” he growled.

She pouted at him, fluttering her lashes innocently. “It’s only words, and words are all I have...smft...”

He shut her up, effectively, after tugging off both their helmets.

7

The next day, they left home pretty early to stop for breakfast at Time Out Fed Square that was barely a minute's walk from Flinders Street Railway Station. Shatru pointed out the landmark building to Avantika as she clicked photos of the picturesque landscape. She insisted on him posing for most of the pictures. And of course, there were selfies, his long arm managing to get the perfect angles of the two of them. They stepped into the busy restaurant at 8.30 and sat at a corner table to order a huge breakfast of *toasted muesli*, *buttermilk pancakes* and *Eggs Benedict* and two large cups of *cappuccino*.

Avantika had insisted on ordering the *Eggs Benedict* with spinach instead of ham so that they could both share everything. The *muesli* was loaded with nuts, seeds and berries topped with honey yoghurt and poached pear. It was simply delicious as they fought over the large bowl to almost lick it clean before attacking the fluffy *pancakes* that came with muddled strawberries, maple syrup and raspberry ice cream. The poached eggs and hollandaise on toasted muffin were to die for. They relished every bite, sipping their coffees, while soaking up the morning sun. They had to board their bus from nearby at 9.45 for the day tour to Maru Koala & Animal Park and Phillip Island.

Avantika took a seat at the window with Shatru pointing out the landmarks along the way. They reached the animal park just in time for lunch. She couldn't wait to get the meal out of the way, eager to set eyes on the koalas and kangaroos that lived in the park. They bought some feed sold in plastic containers before going to meet the kangaroos. The smaller ones were eager to be petted and ate from people's hands. Avantika was fascinated with a joey that peeped out of the pouch in its mother's tummy. Shatru watched indulgently as she giggled when the little joey stepped out to take some food from her hand before jumping back into the pouch.

They moved on to watch the koalas that were high up in the eucalyptus trees, munching away on the leaves. Avantika was thrilled to bits when she got a chance to hold a baby koala in her arms. It clung to her, its arms tightly wrapped around her middle as Shatru clicked away with his iPhone camera. "It's so like holding a human baby," said Avantika, parting from the little one with obvious reluctance.

They walked through shelters for emus and cockatoos before reaching the gift shop. Avantika bought a few trinkets to take to her family and friends back home, only those that fit into her tote bag.

From there, they rode on the bus to Phillip Island. The sea looked an amazing shade of blue and what struck Avantika the most was the pristine condition of the beach. Boards along the way warned them of the care for marine life, instructing them to stick to the walking tracks and not intrude on the lives of sea creatures.

They walked down to Nobbies Ocean Centre, looking for seals that gave a rare audience. Avantika gave a small shriek of delight when they caught sight of a couple of them basking in the late afternoon sun.

They walked a lot, checking out Cape Woolamai first and then the Pyramid Rock that was further out in the sea. The foamy waves crashing against the rocks were a sight to behold, the cool spray touching them at times. Shatru and Avantika stood there, watching the waves for a long time, their arms around each other.

“Isn’t that simply awesome?!” Shatru’s voice was hoarse with emotion. This is exactly the reason why he wanted to see every inch of the world. So many beautiful sights to behold!

Avantika nodded, her head against his shoulder, feeling reverent as she drank in the sight.

As the sun began to slide down into the sea, it was time to go watch the penguin parade. “They are called fairy penguins”, said Shatru. The little ones waddled on two feet, walking from the sea towards the land, their backs glistening wet. They walked over the rocky beach in large numbers, looking like miniature human beings.

It was a blissful end to a wonderful day.

The next day, they set out on an organised 4-hour coach tour of the city of Melbourne. On the way, the guide pointed out places of interest such as the Melbourne Cricket Ground and National Tennis Center. They got out of the coach to see the Shrine of Remembrance, a memorial for the Australian soldiers

who had died in the world wars.

From there, they walked across to the Royal Botanic Garden on the banks of the Yarra River. Colourful flowers in myriad shades of the rainbow vied with the green grass verges and trees of many shapes and sizes. Shatru and Avantika walked hand-in-hand through the garden, breathing in deeply of the clean air. There were ducks swimming in the lake that was beyond the Rose Pavilion, getting its name from the variety of rose bushes planted there.

They crossed Bolte Bridge, stopping to take a lot of pictures of the Melbourne skyline before going to visit St. Kilda where they stopped at a popular local patisserie for some cake and cold coffee. After checking out the brightly coloured bathing boxes in Brighton, the guide pointed out the buildings teeming with history as they passed via Prahan to be dropped back at Flinders Street Railway Station.

Avantika dragged Shatru to a local market to buy some fresh veggies and provisions, insisting on making dinner for them.

He helped her make *vegetable biryani* along with *dahi kachumber*, chatting as they worked together harmoniously. He set two places on the breakfast nook, placing a fat candle in a glass holder, next to a tiny vase holding a single red rose.

“Some wine?” asked Shatru, removing a bottle from the fridge.

“Not for me,” said Avantika, squeezing some lemons into a tall glass jar holding lots of ice. “I’m making fresh lemonade.”

He kept the wine bottle back in the fridge. “I’ll have lemonade too.” He went up to her and hugged her from behind, nuzzling her neck.

Avantika wiped her hands on her apron before turning around to kiss him. “Now you know why I didn’t bother to make dessert,” she whispered.

Shatru looked at her uncomprehendingly.

“I’m planning to have you,” she said, rising on tiptoes to kiss him deeply. It was a while before they remembered that the dinner was getting cold. Avantika and

Shatru learned some more about each other as they worked their way through the rice and side dish of chopped raw veggies in yoghurt, topped with fresh coriander.

“That was superb,” said Shatru, rubbing his flat stomach. “Would you like to go for a walk before we get back home for the dessert?” He winked at her.

She grinned at him. “Okay.”

They walked in the balmy night, through silent streets where they didn’t meet a single soul during their twenty-minute stroll.

“So, do you want to learn dancing tomorrow?” asked Avantika.

Shatru nodded, stopping in the middle of the road to kiss her hungrily. “I want you, now.”

They rushed back to his apartment, pulling off their clothes even before they crossed the threshold of the bedroom, falling eagerly into each other’s arms, as they rolled on the king size bed. They made love late into the night, not getting enough of each other.

8

Avantika couldn’t stop smiling as she checked out the photos and videos during her flight back to Mumbai. There was a twenty-minute video that she had taken of Shatru without his knowledge when he was learning the dance steps from her. He looked adorable in a pair of brief shorts and form-fitting t-shirt, his feet bare. His movements were awkward in the beginning, but he transformed gracefully under her tutoring, mainly because he stopped feeling conscious of himself.

“You have to let yourself go, stop wondering about what others will think of you. Close your eyes if need be and dance for yourself. Just let go of your body and swing your arms and legs. Don’t bother with any specific pattern but go with the flow of the music. Once you loosen up, you can open your eyes and learn the steps I’ll teach you.” Avantika stopped lecturing, watching him as he followed her words to the T. He had shut his eyes tightly, his long lashes resting against his lean cheeks. She missed the hot black gaze on her, but it didn’t really matter as she watched him swing his arms. He was suddenly better poised as he lost his awkwardness. After that it was easy to teach him a few basic steps.

She was glad she had shot the video in secret or he might have continued to be uncomfortable. She decided to send him the unedited video. He had to see it. Oh, how she loved him!

Her life got into a routine as she continued to practise with her troupe for at least three hours every day even as she juggled with her choreographing job. The nights were lonely as she missed Shatru’s lovemaking. But she refused to feel sad. Her memories were too beautiful for that. They continued to stay in touch, talking to each other almost every day and messaging pretty often. Then there were the Google hangouts when they got to see each other.

Five weeks after her return from Melbourne, she met Dia for lunch. Her best friend was in town with her husband Bharat for the latter’s shooting of some advertisements.

They met at the Five Spice restaurant in Bandra, having booked a table in advance. Avantika hugged Dia, meeting her for the first time after her wedding. “You are glowing,” she complimented. “Marriage has made you happy,” she

said, grinning.

“Oh yes!” said Dia, turning red, a broad smile on her face. “So, how have you been? Did you get to meet Shatru while in Melbourne?” Avantika had asked for his address before going for her show, though Dia wasn’t aware how her friend had actually manoeuvred to get a show there after she got to know that that’s where he had gone.

Avantika grinned again and it was her turn to go red as she nodded.

“Ohkay! That’s how it is. Come on, tell all,” said Dia, as they settled at their table for two.

“You first. So, how is it living in Jaipur, with Bharat and his family? And how’s your food truck business faring? I want to know everything.”

They placed their orders when a waiter approached their table. They both decided to have a soup each to start with. Dia asked for *veg wontons soup* while Avantika settled for the *spicy crabmeat soup*.

“Tell me something. How do you manage at the Maheshwari home? They are all vegetarians, right?”

Dia smiled, nodding her head. “I’ve no issues since I’m vegetarian too.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that. Shatru manages to get vegetarian food in beef-eating Australia.” Avantika shook her head. “Truly amazing! I don’t think he gives a damn what anyone thinks about that.”

“That’s the beauty with the brothers,” agreed Dia. “Super confident guys.”

“The parents and the rest of the family? How do you get along with everyone?”

“They are all chilled out and too busy to interfere in others’ lives. I did wonder what Bharat’s parents might have to say to his running a food truck business along with me. But I realise that it doesn’t really matter. Uncle and aunty only want us all to be happy. They have no expectations from anyone. Where there’s no expectation, there’s no disappointment. What a simple way to live, nah?” said Dia, blowing on her spoon before drinking the hot soup that tasted so yummy.

“Truly. I was astounded when Shatru told me how his father has always encouraged him to travel the world and live his life.”

“Talking of Shatru, spill the beans. Did you get to spend time with him?” Dia pinned her grey gaze on her friend, her eyebrows almost touching her hairline in query.

“Yeah, I did. I actually stayed back a week after my troupe returned. And I...”

Dia shrieked before shutting up, eyeing the other diners around them. “And what?”

“I love him. Wait...” Avantika raised a hand to stop her friend from jumping off her chair. “That doesn’t mean he’s in love with me.”

“Oh!” Dia’s eyes were wide as she stared at her friend. “I’m sorry...”

Avantika shook her head, a smile on her face. “Don’t be. I adore him and just now he’s mine. He doesn’t want to commit himself long term and I’m okay with it. I am living for today and simply loving it.”

Dia touched Avantika’s hand that was lying on the table. “I’m so glad for you Avi. As long as you’re happy...”

“I am,” said Avantika in a whisper, joy shining out of her brown gaze.

“So did you make love?” Dia’s eyes were mischievous as she served a few spoons of the *burnt chilly rice* on her plate after waving the waiter away. She had asked for the *exotic vegetables in hot garlic sauce* to accompany the rice. The pot of rice was more than enough for both the girls.

Avantika served the *fish Thai green curry* on her plate before replying, “Hmm.”

“What? Aren’t you happy?” Dia had a mischievous look in her eyes as she sipped her *iced tea*.

“Of course not. I mean, of course I’m happy,” said Avantika, chewing on her food. “You still haven’t told me about your food business.”

“It’s going too well. Bharat helps me with it. It’s such fun and self-satisfying. We have one student who helps us. Soon, I think we’ll have to take one more hand as the number of customers is increasing day by day.” Dia smiled at her friend.

“That’s simply lovely, Dia. So, how does Bharat juggle with his shoots? Do you miss him when he has to travel?”

Dia shook her head. “We work together on the food truck for about twenty days in a month. I travel with him during the days he needs to shoot.” She shrugged. “That way, we stay together always. It’s working out so far.”

“Wow! Now, I’m envious. But anyway, my relationship with Shatru is still in the budding stage. We’re in touch every day. Let’s see how it goes from here. I have no clue when he’s visiting India next.”

Dia bit her tongue before blurting out that her brother-in-law was planning to come home the next week. He probably wanted to surprise his new girlfriend. She didn’t want to let the cat out of the bag before that. She smiled at Avantika. “I’m sure things will work out perfectly for you.”

They finished their lunch with the restaurant’s famous *blueberry cheesecake*, sharing a portion as they were already too full.

The long and leisurely lunch and chat had done them a lot of good. Avantika was delighted that she could connect to someone who, while being her best friend, was also part of Shatru’s family. They parted ways outside the restaurant, getting into separate OLAs—Dia to return to her hotel room while Avantika planned to go for her practise with her troupe of dancers.

9

Shatrughan was on pins when he arrived at his home in Jaipur. He was raring to rush to Mumbai to meet Avantika. He spent barely twenty-four hours in his hometown before saying ‘bye’ to his family.

His twin, Bharat, gave him a wink when Dia gave him a knowing smile as he rushed down the portico steps to get into the OLA that was waiting to take him to the airport. Shatru paused to glare at Bharat, “Is something funny?”

Bharat shrugged, raising both his hands in a gesture of peace. “Of course not.”

“Then what was that wink for?”

“Why, nothing.” Only Bharat’s smile had turned into a wide grin by now.

Shatru looked at both Bharat and Dia, an impatient frown on his face. “You both obviously know why I’m in a tearing hurry. Please keep that to yourself.”

“Sure,” said Dia, walking up to Shatru and giving him a hug. “Your secret’s safe with us, Shatru. You’re truly lucky to have Avi for your girlfriend.”

Shatru cooled down to give her a small smile. “Yeah, I know.”

“And your friend’s lucky to have my bro for her boyfriend,” said Bharat, bumping his fist against Shatru’s.

“Okay, you guys, now don’t get me all emotional. I don’t want to miss my flight,” said Shatru, getting into his cab.

“See you,” chorused Bharat and Dia, waving to him.

Shatru was in a confused state of mind, his mind only half on the cab ride and later his flight. He had been travelling since more than five years. He usually made a detailed plan of how many weeks he was going to stay in one city or town, his activities, his job options and the places he was keen to visit. Once he had these lined up, he stuck to almost ninety percent of his schedule, open to any

changes that needed adapting. This was the first time he had cut short a trip midway and returned home. All because of Avantika!

Actually, why blame her? It was because he couldn’t stay away from her. He had had affairs before, those that had lasted longer. But he’d barely spent a week with Avantika and only he knew how difficult life had been over the past six weeks with her so far away from him.

Shatru had reached a crossroads in his 27-year-old existence, it seemed. He would now have to plan his trips in such a way that he had more time to spend with Avantika. After thinking long and hard, he had given notice to his job as well as his rental apartment, managed to stay back for the specified period, packed his bags and returned to India.

As of now, he had no plans for the immediate future. A lot would depend on Avantika and yes, he wanted to spend a lot of time with her. No, marriage wasn’t on the cards just now. He was so glad that she was the least demanding person he knew, even more so than his own family members.

A few hours later, Shatru rang the doorbell of the flat that was at the address given to him by Avantika. He hadn’t informed her that he was coming to India, let alone Mumbai. He wanted to surprise her. Actually, he had amazed himself with the need to get back home in the middle of his trip. But his attraction to Avantika was too powerful. Yeah, he wasn’t going to admit to anything beyond the feeling of attraction.

“Coming,” called out a feminine voice from within as he heard the lock of the inner door being opened. Seeing him through the grilled window on the outer door, Avantika shrieked, “Shatru...” before opening the second door in a hurry. She fell into his arms, kissing him on his chin, nose, cheeks, lips, wherever she could reach.

“Whoa! What a welcome,” laughed Shatru, hugging her close, walking into her flat. He dropped his backpack on the floor before kissing her thoroughly, lifting her high enough for her to lock her legs around his hips.

It was a while before they came up for air and he whispered, “I missed you, sweetheart. Melbourne stopped being fun without you in it.”

Avantika stared into his obsidian eyes, her bathrobe sliding off her shoulders as she caressed his strong features with her hands. She held his face, saying, “That’s some admission, coming from you.”

“It’s the simple truth.” He kissed her throat, his tongue licking a trail towards her left shoulder. “You smell awesome. Did you just have a bath?”

“Hmm,” she said, removing the buttons on his shirt in a hurry. “Have you had dinner?”

“Yep, and now I want my dessert,” he said, pushing the robe off her shoulders to expose her breasts to his avid gaze.

Avantika’s answering laugh got stuck in her throat when she felt his lips against her right breast, his tongue stroking the skin above her nipple. “Shatru...” she whispered, hungry with need for him.

She couldn’t recall how they managed to reach the bed in the other room when Shatru placed her on the bed, removing his t-shirt and Bermuda shorts in a hurry, even as he pulled his shoes off with his toes. He lay down on the bed next to her, making an effort to calm down his racing heart, while he traced a finger down the side on her face.

Avantika lay on her side facing him, a blissful smile on her face as she studied him with her sherry coloured eyes. She raised a hand to caress the muscular arm with the dragon tattoo. “I’ve missed you too, Shatru. I’m so glad you’re here.” She didn’t ask for how long. It didn’t matter. Just now, he was with her and that’s what counted.

He caressed her cheek with his hand, his black gaze holding her glowing amber eyes.

“Is something wrong, Shatru?” she asked. She had expected him to be eager to make love to her. But he was just lying there, looking at her, which wasn’t like him. At least, he seemed to desire her a lot more during their last encounter.

“I...” Shatru moved away a little to lie down on his back. “I’m just tired,” he said, laying an arm over his eyes. More like he was confused. He was torn between his passion for travelling and his attraction to Avantika.

Avantika got up to sit on the bed. “Do one thing. Turnover on your front,” she said, bunching her long, curling hair into a loose knot.

“Huh?!” Shatru removed his arm to look at the determined woman who was sitting next to him, unselfconscious in her nakedness. She appeared glorious. He did as she asked, wondering what she was up to. The woman he knew was full of surprises, lovely ones at that. He turned on his front, laying his head on the pillow, facing away from her. His arms were folded at the elbow, his hands lying palms down at the sides of his head. He felt the bed give when she got out of it. He closed his eyes, a smile on his face, even as he wondered what she was up to.

Avantika grabbed the big bottle of body lotion on her dressing table and poured a generous amount on her left palm. Rubbing the lotion between her hands, she pressed them firmly against his shoulders, caressing him with firm strokes, shoulder to hip. She heard him groan before he relaxed, giving in to her ministrations as she massaged him, her hands offering the solace that seemed to have disappeared from his life. She revelled in the satiny finish of his back, her fingers applying the right amount of pressure as they found every tension knot—and there were many—that seemed to be troubling him.

Shatru delighted in the feel of not just her nimble fingers but her breasts too as she bent over him. He sighed in pleasure when she massaged his firm butt, her fingers pinching and kneading the firm flesh, arousing him. What was she doing now?! Shatru felt her weight as she settled on his lower back, obviously facing away as she was running her fingers down the backs of his thighs, her strokes even. Oh my God! Life had never been this good!

Avantika revelled in the freedom of exploring his muscular body. Shatru obviously stayed fit. He had to be, with all the walking, climbing and cycling he did during his travels. She knew he had a wonderful body as she had explored it many times during their lovemaking. But this was the first time she was touching every inch of him, without any distraction from the man himself. She smiled to herself as she stroked the backs of his knees, bending down to kiss him there. She could feel him shuddering in response. She placed a hand under his right shin to lift his leg, bending it at the knee, bringing his foot closer to her. Firmly, Avantika applied pressure on every inch of his underfoot and his toes.

Shatru almost jumped when he felt her lips on his heel. “Avi...”

She ignored his moan as she licked and stroked his foot, bending it at the ankle before biting the pad of his big toe. This time he jumped so hard that he almost toppled her off him. Well, almost...only she refused to budge, laughing softly.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he growled, his eyes still closed.

“Hmm...” Avantika didn’t bother to answer as she gave his left foot the same attention. “Shatru...” She held both his feet against her breasts, pressing his heels against the hardened nipples.

“Will you let me up, NOW?” groaned Shatru, bucking under her. He was painfully aroused by her caresses and wanted to get inside her like, immediately.

Avantika laughed softly, letting go of his feet reluctantly to get off him. She went on her knees as she saw him turn in a hurry, his manhood springing up in attention. She blew him a kiss, before pressing a hand on his stomach, saying, “I’m not done with you yet. You just lie back a while longer.”

“What?! Can’t you see that I’m dying to get inside you?” His expression was pained.

“Come on, Shatru. Be a sport. Aren’t you having fun?” she asked, a shapely eyebrow up in query, her sherry eyes challenging him.

His gaze was red hot as he raked his charcoal eyes over her flushed body, the tips of her breasts tantalising him. He smiled suddenly, relaxing, his hands under his head. “Oh yeah, I am. What about you?”

Avantika grinned, bending down to bite hard on a male nipple, making him growl deeply in his throat. She raised her eyes to meet his before saying, “This is too much fun.” She sat on his stomach, driving him crazy with her slow strokes. She paid extra attention to the fire-breathing dragon on his arm, before taking his hand in hers. She again applied pressure to all the points before kissing him on his palm, her tongue peeping to lick the centre. She paid the same excruciating attention to the other hand. She wiggled her hips, moving down further, her eyes going wide as she felt his shaft pressing against her bottom. “Gosh, you’ve got bigger than ever.”

“Of course I have,” said Shatru, tumbling her on the bed and going above her to enter her in one stroke. Her eyes went wider still as she choked, her breath catching in her throat as he pumped into her, grunting his pleasure at her enthusiastic response.

Avantika clung to him, her arms going over his shoulders, and her legs locked around his waist, matching him stroke for stroke as he rode her, his lips suckling at both her breasts, in turn.

The world came to a standstill as they climaxed as one, falling back on the bed, fighting for their breaths.

“I love you,” said Shatru, accepting it, finally.

10

Avantika smiled, her head on Shatru's shoulder. "I love you too."

He was at peace now, after finally accepting that he loved this wonderful woman who obviously adored him, exactly for what he was. His mind went back to a couple of years ago when he used to have a girlfriend. He began to talk about his ex-girlfriend...

"I met Esha at one of the parties with Bharat. We hung out together a lot over the next few months, in between my trips actually. She had a job and seemed to be okay with it...and one day..."

It was about two years ago when Esha and Shatrughan met for dinner at Zoya, the restaurant renowned for both Rajasthani and Continental cuisines, at Fairmont Jaipur. They had finished with the starters and soup before beginning on the main course. Almost through dinner, while Shatru was bursting to share his experiences about his trip to Angkor Wat and the rest of Cambodia, he had patiently listened to her complaints, first about her parents, then about her job, her colleagues and immediate boss.

"My parents are crazy, you know. While people their age are keen to get their children married off, mine don't care about me at all. Can you believe that they haven't raised the subject of my marriage even once? And I'm all of twenty-five. It looks like I'll have to find myself a groom." She looked at Shatru from the corner of her eyes to see if there was a reaction from him.

He just nodded, only half-listening to her rants. Maybe the poor thing didn't have anyone else to confide in. Yeah, the Maheshwari family preferred to think the best of people, unless they were forced to change their minds.

Esha changed the topic to her office colleagues now. "They're all idiots, Shatru. No brains at all. I don't know how they've been running the company for a whole decade. They say their shareholders are pretty happy with the profits too. A pack of morons, all of them." She stopped to sip on her cocktail, her dark eyes angry and frustrated.

Shatru watched the woman he had been dating since eight months. Well, he had probably met her a dozen times in that period. She was beautiful and had a slim figure. She dressed elegantly too. They had kissed a few times, Esha refusing to let him touch her intimately. He was okay with it, in no rush to take the relationship further. It was nice to have a girl to hang out with when he got back home. And yes, he was loyal to her that way, abstaining from having an affair while he was wandering the globe. Today, he noticed something he had never seen before. Esha's lips constantly drooped, as if she was dissatisfied with her lot in life. He mentally took a step back from her as he continued to eat, letting her talk.

Suddenly, Esha placed her glass on the table with a thud. "Tell me something, when do *you* plan to settle down?" she asked, pinning him with her eyes.

"Huh?!" Shatru stared at her, his spoon stopping midway between the plate and his lips. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Come on, Shatru. You surely understand what I am asking you. We both have been together since eight months. You keep going on your "trips"." She drew quotation marks in the air, her tone sarcastic now. "So, when do you plan to settle down?"

Shatru sat back in his chair, having lost his appetite. "And what, in your dictionary, does settling down mean?" he asked mildly, holding on to his rising temper.

"As if you don't know," she pouted. "Getting a job, staying in one place, setting up a home, getting married. What else?" She glared at him.

"Oh! Does being happy count, or no?" It was his turn to be sarcastic.

"One should learn to be happy with what one has," she philosophised, a triumphant smile on her face.

"Oh yes, of course. Just the way you're happy in your home and your place of work." He wondered if she would look at herself impartially. She had been complaining about both of those for the better part of three hours.

Esha's smile got wider. "I always knew you were smart. That's exactly what I

mean. Look at me, I don't approve of any of them. But I've still managed to lead a successful life. I could teach you a thing or two."

Shatru nodded. "And what does success mean to you?" His sarcasm was definitely lost on Esha who was too self-centred to see beyond her nose. Yeah, he could see that now.

She grinned now, showing her pearly whites. "I get a great salary and am saving most of it. Since I live with my parents, even though I can't stand them, I get to spend the least of my money. My bank balance has been growing steadily. Any guy who marries me is truly lucky."

She was obviously angling for a proposal. Shatru bit his lips to stop the smile that was waiting to break out. She just might misread it. Talk about a lucky escape!!! "I'm sure. So, how do you suggest I should settle down?" He was going to have fun, at her expense. Why not, after the prolonged torture she'd made him undergo, listening to her rants.

"I'm glad you asked. Why don't you do what Bharat does?" There was a glow in Esha's eyes now, as she licked her lips. "He's a supermodel, right? You're his identical twin. It shouldn't be difficult to become one."

"I'm sure," Shatru shrugged, too angry now. Well, wanting to have fun at someone's expense could simply backfire, it seemed. "But what if I don't want to?"

"I think you're an idiot, Shatru. Hope you don't mind my saying this to your face. Bharat is the smart one. He's made a name for himself in the modelling industry. With the same looks, you are wasting your life away, loafing."

That did it, the final nail in the coffin. Shatru got up, throwing five thousand-rupee notes on the table. "I'm leaving. You enjoy what's left of the dinner and get yourself a dessert with the balance. And for your information, this money for the bill is not from my father, but that which I earned myself." He left, refusing to look back.

The Maheshwaris were close, especially the twins, Bharat and Shatrughan. When Shatru told Bharat about his break up, the latter told him something that shocked the wits out of him.

“Okay, I don’t want to bug you more than you already are,” said Bharat, “but Esha chased me for a while. She can be relentless,” he grimaced. “I turned around and told her to *eff* off, before she got off my back.”

“Why the hell didn’t you warn me?” said Shatru, glaring at his twin.

Bharat raised his hands in a gesture of peace. “I forgot all about it, bro. And the next time I was in Jaipur, you both were an item. It was tough to digest, but I didn’t want to come between the two of you.”

Shatru’s black eyes spat fire. “You would have been comfortable if I’d married Esha and brought her home as your sister-in-law?”

Bharat shuddered before he got up to hug his twin. “I’m sorry. My mistake!”

Shatru hugged him back, his anger disappearing. “I suppose we live and learn. I’m glad to be rid of that bitch. I’m sorry, bitch is too strong a word, but definitely an idiot.”

Esha called him, many times. After making a few enquiries, she had found out that Shatru had his own bungalow in the same compound as *Nakshatra*, he had purchased a 25-acre plot of farmland outside the city and his bank balance—while she couldn’t get the exact figure—was huge. She was sure she could dissuade him from running away every couple of weeks, to explore the world. She wasn’t going to lose him for sure. She landed up at his parents’ home one evening, just before dinner.

Lakshman’s wife Ruma went to the open door to see who was knocking at that strange hour. “Hello,” she greeted the stranger politely.

“Hi, my name is Esha. I’m Shatru’s close friend. I...”

“Please come in,” invited Ruma, making the guest comfortable on the living room sofa. She called out to a servant to get some water, before sitting across Esha. “Shatru isn’t at home. Is he expecting you?” Her brother-in-law hadn’t mentioned that a friend was coming for dinner. In fact, both Bharat and Shatrughan were dining out that evening.

Meera walked out of the kitchen along with the servant carrying water. “Mamma, this is Esha, Shatru’s friend,” introduced Ruma. “And this is Shatru’s mother,” she told Esha.

“*Namaste* aunty,” said Esha, getting up to touch Meera’s feet.

“*Nah beta*,” Meera hugged the girl, before sitting down next to her. “You must stay for dinner. We will call Shatrughan and ask him to come home.” She saw Ram and Sapna coming into the house and said, “Ram, call Shatrughan and ask him to come home. Tell him that Esha is waiting for him here for dinner.” She turned to Esha and said, “It’s not like Shatrughan to forget if he’s invited someone. I wonder what happened.”

“Actually, aunty, he doesn’t know that I was coming. I wanted to give him a surprise.”

Ruma, who’d walked towards the kitchen to ensure that dinner could be stretched to accommodate the guest as well as the twins if they returned, turned around on hearing the words. She smiled at Sapna who joined her. Esha was obviously more than a friend.

Ram speed-dialled his brother’s phone. Shatru took the call immediately. “What’s up, Ram?”

“Your friend has come and mamma wants you back home for dinner,” said Ram, baldly, a mischievous look on his face.

“My friend? Who could that be? All my friends are right here with me. We’re going to watch a film, actually.” said Shatru, his forehead pleated in a frown, as he wondered about the guest.

“A *lady* friend,” said Ram, stressing the word lady.

“Is her name Esha?” Shatru snarled. How dare she?!

Ram’s smile vanished. “Is something wrong Shatru?”

“She’s a snake and no friend of mine. Ram, get her out of our home, ASAP. She’s trouble with a capital T.”

“You enjoy your movie, Shatru. Let me handle this,” promised Ram, a determined look in his eyes. He sent a quick WhatsApp message to the family group, warning them about Esha. He knew that Sapna, Lakshman and Ruma would see it, if not his parents.

He went and sat next to his mother, looking up when Lakshman joined them, the latter giving a small nod, indicating he had seen the message.

Ram spoke. “Well, I’m sorry Esha. Shatrughan is watching a film and didn’t take my call. I think...”

“But you must stay for dinner, my dear,” said Meera. She was sure that her youngest son was in love and she wanted to make the young lady welcome in their home.

“Mamma,” said Ram, wondering how to make her understand that Esha was unwanted and was glad to see Mohan coming into the house. “Pappa’s come.” He hoped his mother would get up to greet his father while he got a chance to tell Esha to get lost.

Mohan came and sat on the sofa next to Lakshman, picking up a glass of water and drinking it. “I suppose you are Esha?” he said, much to his wife’s surprise.

Esha nodded eagerly, getting up to touch the older man’s feet.

“God bless you, my child. But it looks like my son doesn’t want you for a friend. I’d rather you leave now, before any of us says something rude,” said Mohan mildly, a hard expression on his face.

Meera jumped up from the sofa, gaping at her husband. She had never, but never, heard him say something rude to anyone in all these years. What had come over him?

Esha took one look into the blazing dark eyes of the head of the house and fled.

“What happened to you?” asked Meera, looking at her husband with shocked eyes. “The child had come over to meet Shatru. Can’t you see that she likes him? She could have stayed for dinner and we would have had the chance to get to

know her more. How could you just tell her to leave?”

Mohan put an arm around his diminutive wife. “You are an innocent, my dear. See Ram’s WhatsApp message and also what Shatrughan has said in reply. That girl is no good.”

It took a while for Meera to calm down with Ram and Lakshman joining their father in explaining the true state of affairs to her.

Shatru pulled himself out of the past, his expression strange as he looked at Avantika who had been listening to him quietly as he spoke about his experience with Esha. “I don’t know if she was right maybe. I seem to have got on a roller coaster and don’t know how to get off. On the one hand, I want to see more and more of the world. On the other, I want a life with you. I’m torn, Avantika. I don’t know how to settle down in life.”

He buried his face against her breasts, wondering how to deal with the situation. Esha’s words had cut into him deeply, he realised. For all his defiance, it looked like she had been correct in pointing a finger at him. Was he being irresponsible in wanting to live his life on his terms? Why hadn’t his parents stopped him when he continued to go on trips? Why hadn’t his father told him to get a job or a career that would keep him in one place? What would happen if—when—he wanted to take a wife and have children? All this long, he had pushed all that into a vague future. But now, with the advent of Avantika in his life, things were coming to a head. What if she ditched him because he refused to “settle” down? Shatru was extremely disturbed.

Avantika raised a hand to run it through his tousled curls, her strokes soothing. “You should do what your heart tells you,” she whispered softly in his ear.

He raised tortured eyes to hers. “It’s my heart that’s being torn into two.”

“But why?”

“Avi, my first love is exploring new places. Now, after being with you, my love for you equals that. I...”

Avantika raised her head to kiss him on his lips. “Thank you.”

Unable to resist, Shatru kissed her back, hard, before looking at her again. “But I want to make you happy, Avi.”

Avantika laughed softly. “I’m happy as I am, Shatru. I don’t need someone else to make me happy.”

Shatru stared at her in awe, his tension and confusion disappearing in that second. He understood exactly what she meant. She was a happy person, wherever she was, whatever she was doing. And she was totally independent. She didn’t need him to change his way of life for the sake of her happiness. She was nothing like Esha.

“I wouldn’t have thought it’s possible. But I’m more in love with you than when you were in Melbourne.” Shatru bent down to kiss her, peace stealing over him. He made leisurely love to her, adoring every inch of her body. His only aim just now was to give her at least a small portion of the joy she gave him.

Avantika felt treasured in her lover’s arms.

11

Shatrughan stayed back a week in Mumbai, accompanying Avantika whenever she went for practise with her troupe of dancers. He danced along as part of the background group, learning the steps on the way, bringing a smile to Avantika's face.

"Looks like you have learnt all my tricks," she teased him when they took a break for lunch, going to a small restaurant in the neighbourhood.

Shatru winked at her. "I sure have. Dancing is truly liberating, Avi. You've got an awesome career going for you."

She nodded enthusiastically, regaling him with tales of her stint at her fusion dance school in Bengaluru. "I sometimes drove my instructors mad, I think," she grinned reminiscently. "Not that I meant to do it. But I kept asking a lot of questions that they never seemed to have answers to."

Shatru laughed. "So do you have the answers to the same questions now? It's best if you're prepared when you start your own school."

"You bet. I have a whole list of FAQs and I'll ensure they are up on my website when I have one ready. And I'll make everyone working on my team learn all the answers. Actually, patience will be the first qualification for anyone who wants to work with me."

He nodded. "I agree. That's so important in a teacher. Will you let me apply for a post in your school?"

Avantika looked him up and down. "You'll need to qualify first. If you do, why not?"

"I need a favour. Do you have videos of your shows or maybe even your practise sessions?"

"Why do you ask?"

“I’ll use those to teach myself to dance, to qualify to the standard of a teacher.”

She looked at him shrewdly. “You think you’ll manage that way?”

He grinned. “You can find out the next time we meet.”

“You are serious.” There was awe in Avantika’s face.

“I am. You don’t know what all I’ve learnt watching videos on YouTube. You saw me bartending. What did you think?”

“You are a pro.”

He grinned, thrilled with her compliment. “I practised in front of the mirror after watching a dozen or so videos.”

“What are you saying?” Avantika was astonished. He must be an excellent learner.

“It’s all about survival. I can’t take corporate jobs as I keep moving. I need to do odd jobs and I’m not trained for many of them. And then it’s very important not to get bored, so a variety is a must too.”

“May I ask you something? I hope you won’t be offended. Please tell me if you think I’m stepping on your toes. But I’d really like to know...”

“Ask away, Avi. I know you love me and it’s not just idle curiosity that drives you,” he said, an adoring smile in his obsidian eyes.

She blew him a kiss, uncaring that they were in a crowded restaurant. “You need a lot of money to travel and to go sightseeing. While you must be earning on your odd jobs, I’m sure they won’t pay you enough to fund your whole trip. I know you’re fiercely independent. So, how do you manage?”

“Thanks Avi. I’m truly glad to know you realise that I’m independent.” He blew her a kiss back. “You’re right. Though it might appear to many that I’m just loafing around the world, it’s taken a lot of planning. I have to thank my father for that actually. When he saw that I was interested in travelling, he first made me do a lot of home work. I was barely eighteen at that time. He made me find

out the cost of travel, accommodation, food, sightseeing and the options of earning while having fun. I gathered the information from the net as well as from talking with travel agents. I put together many packages, and believe me, the costs nine years ago were much lesser than today. Once I had all the information in place, Pappa sat with me for a long talk. He asked me if I would like him to fund my trips. I knew that it would have left only a tiny hole in his bank balance. But I had already been thinking about all that. I didn't want to use his hard-earned money for my travel. I told him of my plan to work part-time while finishing my college. Every rupee I earned went into my savings, since I was still living at home. Two years later, my dad introduced me to the idea of investing in shares and mutual funds. He explained all the pitfalls to me and taught me to never do things in haste. It was a lesson for life. I've never looked back. Even then, I waited for two more years and," Shatru turned a bit red when he said this, "I literally amassed wealth. Everything I touched seemed to turn to gold. All my investments doubled, trebled and quadrupled. I kept separating my profits and reinvesting my principal amount. I began travelling only after I turned twenty-two and after ensuring that I had enough money to do what I want to do over the next decade, actually."

"So, you plan to travel till you're thirty-two." Avantika smiled at him. "That's just awesome, Shatru. Your family must be extremely proud of you. And you are truly fortunate to have such a wonderful dad."

"I am! Well, I've this vague idea of ten years, give or take some years or maybe till I'm so saturated with my globetrotting that I want to stay back at home."

"And do you have a plan for that time?"

He nodded. "Yes, I want to do organic farming. I've been visiting a number of farms in Italy, Spain and Germany. And actually, India is renowned for organic farming. I'm putting together a list of farms to visit next year, before I begin work on mine."

"Okay. So, where do you plan to have your farm?"

"I've a plot of land, in Kotputli, about two hours from Jaipur. It'll be somewhere I can keep a tab on while living in Jaipur." He was quite excited sharing his future plans with Avantika. He had never discussed any of these with anyone other than his family before now.

Avantika couldn’t help smiling in admiration. He was obviously living his life, exactly on his terms. “What an awesome life, Shatru!”

He smiled. “Yes, it is. I thank my lucky stars every day, and my parents, of course. Actually, we are from a farming community. We shifted to Jaipur when I was eleven.” Shatru stopped when he realised that maybe he was talking too much about himself. “That’s enough about me. You tell me more about yourself.”

“You know I’m from Bengaluru. My parents live there by themselves in a sprawling bungalow. My brother, Vidyut, is elder to me by four years. He’s doing his Masters at Princeton University. My parents weren’t too happy when I shifted to Mumbai to pursue my career. But they’re broadminded and didn’t stand in my way, since the opportunities are way more here.”

Shatru nodded. “And you’ve made such a success of yourself too. I’m so proud of you, just as your parents must be.”

Avantika blushed a deep red, nodding her head slowly.

“And how and when are you planning your school?”

“In a couple of years or so. By then, I’ll wind down all my present projects.”

“Won’t you miss the shows? Can’t you do both of them?”

“Missing my shows...well, I’m enjoying them while at it. I suppose I just don’t know how to miss something that’s not there. Maybe because I’m too involved in what I’m doing at any particular time. Am I making sense?” She looked at him, wondering if she sounded crazy.

“Absolutely. I know exactly what you mean. I love my family. But when I am out of the house, I don’t pine for them. Isn’t that what you’re saying?”

Avi grinned. “Exactly.” She was thrilled to know that he could relate to her. Not many could.

“Will you be my long distance girlfriend?” he asked, looking deeply into her

eyes.

Avantika’s face glowed. “Try and stop me.”

They left the restaurant, hand-in-hand, glad to have found each other.

12

Avantika sipped on the sweet water directly from a coconut as she sat back on her bath towel, mesmerised by the waves. She was on a holiday at Villingili Island, Addu Atoll, in the Republic of Maldives, where Shatrughan was a surfing instructor these days.

The past year had been hectic but wonderful, as they had savoured every minute they got to be in one another's company. Avantika had made it a point to spend at least a week with him every couple of months, in whichever part of the world he was in at that point in time. She had been to Brisbane, Istanbul, Egypt, Johannesburg and now Maldives. She had even managed to put up dance shows at Brisbane and Jo'burg along with her troupes. Thanks to Shatru, her performances had gone international.

She lay back on her towel, soaking up the sun that was gently sliding down the horizon, the book she had been reading, lying on the side, forgotten.

Avantika opened her eyes when she felt the cool droplets of water on her skin. It was evening and her lover was on his knees beside her, his hair spiked under the influence of sea water. His gold ear-rings glinted in the setting sun as he grinned at her supine form.

"Hey!" said Shatru, his hand caressing her abdomen, "Do you wanna go for a swim?" He'd been busy with his avid surfing students while she'd been relaxing on the beach.

She took his hand and placed it against her breasts, smiling as she got up to kiss him on his lips. "Hmm...yes."

Shatru held her close to his naked chest, only a pair of figure-hugging swimming trunks covering him. His large hands caressed her bare waist, even as his lips traced her skin from neck to shoulder. He moved down to take a bite of a luscious breast before he slapped her bottom mischievously. "Come on, let's go before it gets too dark."

They raced towards the sea, diving headlong into the warm waters. It was simply

fabulous as they swam along with the myriad fishes, ducking each other time and again.

“I’m hungry,” said Avantika, after a while. “Let’s go.”

Shatru lifted her up in his arms, one arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees, rising up from the seas like a Greek God.

Avantika watched him in the twilight as they towelled themselves. He had tanned to the colour of dark honey and looked delicious. Unable to resist, she hugged him, kissing him on his chest. They walked to the guest house that Shatru had hired for the season, showering together before going out for dinner at Palm Village, a local restaurant.

She smiled when the chef came over to their table to take Shatru’s order. By now, the locals knew Shatrughan’s vegetarian inclination and adapted their cuisine to suit his tastes. Avantika ordered *Thelui mas*—fried octopus that was pretty spicy, *Dhon riha*—tuna curry that was flavoured with mango, coconut, ginger and cinnamon along with a plate of steaming rice. Shatru ordered *Banbukeylu harisa*—a vegetarian curry of breadfruit that was steamed and flavoured with coconut, onion and chilli. Coconuts were abundant to the region and were used in almost all dishes. Being from Karnataka, Avantika was used to the flavour and loved it. They completed their meal with *Dhonkeyo kajuru*—a banana cake that was deep fried, flavoured by fresh vanilla. They drank *Raa*—the local toddy taken from palm trees that tasted a bit sour by late evening.

The distance back to their guest house wasn’t much and the two of them decided to walk back by mutual consent.

Arm-in-arm, Shatru and Avantika walked along the shore, a soft breeze blowing from the sea. She was dressed in a halter neck top in white, teamed with a black sarong with white batik print on it. She had left her hair loose, the silver hoops dangling from her ears the only ornaments. She turned to kiss his dragon tattoo, before leaning on his shoulder.

Shatru stopped suddenly, kissing her on the top of her head. “Avi...”

“Hmm...” She buried her face on his chest, her arms going around his waist.

“Will you marry me?” Shatru had been toying with the idea since the last six months. He knew that she was the woman for him, the one he wanted for his life partner. Would she agree?

Avantika raised her face to look up at him, her eyes shining brightly in the moonlight. “I thought you’d never ask.” She threw her arms around his neck to press her lips to his. “Yes, please.”

Shatru hooted with laughter, lifting her high up in his arms, thrilled with her answer. “Tell me when.”

“Today?” she winked at him.

He laughed again. “How I’d love to. Would you like to have a big wedding, with all the works? *Band, baaja, baaraat*?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “I’d love to. Will you mind?”

He shook his head. “Not at all, my sweetheart. Whatever you want. Only, let’s do it fast please.” He bent down to kiss her hard. “I want to belong to you, exclusively.”

“Like I want to be yours,” said Avantika, resting her head on his chest. “When are you back in India?”

“The surfing season will be over by the end of this month. I should be home in the first week of November.”

“I’ll talk to my parents. They will want to meet you before we can set a date.”

Shatru nodded. “Done. I’ll go with you to Bengaluru as soon as I get back, right? And we both will fly back to Jaipur to meet my family.”

Avantika smiled. “I love you, Shatru.”

“I love you too, sweetheart, with all my heart.”

13

Shatru opened the door into *SaRa Salon* and stopped when he heard a wolf whistle.

Looking up to see her brother-in-law, a laughing Sapna went forward to hug him. It was her assistant Tara who had whistled on sighting the handsome hunk.

“How are you, Sapna?” asked Shatru, hugging her back, waving a hand at Tara in acknowledgement.

“Life couldn’t get better.” She was too happy with her lot, an adoring husband, a mischievous little pixie for a daughter and the wonderful Maheshwari family.

“Little Samaira has become so big now,” he grinned. “She looks a lot like you.”

Sapna smiled. “Yeah, hasn’t she? And naughty too. She’s thoroughly spoilt,” she said affectionately. Being the only grandchild in the Maheshwari household, her 16-month-old daughter Samaira was the apple of everyone’s eye. “And what’s up with you? How have you been?”

“I’m good. I’m planning to meet Avantika’s parents in Bengaluru. I...”

“High time,” said Sapna, her smile widening as colour rushed up Shatru’s manly cheeks. “So, has she agreed to marry you?”

He nodded vigorously. “Oh, yes! I’m planning to go to Ram’s shop to buy her a ring, after I get a haircut.” His eldest brother Ram was a jewellery designer who owned a huge showroom called *Nakshatra Jewellery*.

“That’s awesome! But are you sure you want to cut off your lovely locks?” asked his sister-in-law, showing him to a salon chair that faced a wall of mirrors.

Tara came forward. “Let me have a go at Shatru’s hair, Sapna,” she requested, eyeing him through the mirror, giving him a wink.

Shatru swivelled in his chair to look at Sapna with comical horror. “You aren’t

going to let this trainee touch my hair, are you?" He was well aware that Tara was trained from a London institute, but he never could resist pulling her leg.

"Very funny," grumbled Tara even as Sapna laughed, going back to her station. Tara ran a gentle hand over his hair after turning his chair away to face the mirror. "So, how would you like me to style it? Just a trim or...?"

Shatru was actually reluctant to lose the length of his hair that touched his shoulders. But then, he wanted to cut down the Bohemian look to make an impression on Avantika's parents. From what he'd gleaned from her, he realised they were a bit on the formal side. "A trim I think. Something that I can pass off as a corporate look," he said, smiling at her through the mirror.

Tara nodded, spraying his hair generously with water, before taking her scissors to snip at it. It was twenty minutes before she used a hair-dryer and brush to set his hair to perfection. She whistled again after giving him a final once over, bringing her thumb and forefinger together in a gesture of appreciation. "You look awesome, dude."

"Thanks, Tara," he pressed a few hundred-rupee notes into her hand. He blew Sapna a kiss, saying, "See you later. I'm off to meet your husband." He left to take the ten-minute walk to Ram's jewellery showroom that was in the same area.

Walking in, he returned the greetings of the staff, going directly to Ram's cabin at the back of the shop. Checking through the glass window to see that Ram was alone, Shatru walked in after a cursory knock.

Looking up, Ram got up the moment he saw his youngest brother. "Hey, stranger," he said, giving him a warm hug. "How have you been?"

"Awesome, bro. And you?"

"Splendid," smiled Ram. "Did you go home?"

"Yeah, and met your young madam too. She's become so tall."

"She has nah?" Ram's smile got wider. He was proud of his daughter.

“And I met Sapna too. Just got a haircut from her salon.”

Ram sat his brother down on a chair before picking up the phone to ask for two cups of coffee. “How was your trip this time? You’ve tanned a lot, and looking fit.”

“Yeah, the sun and sea have done me a lot of good. I’m planning to get married, Ram.”

“Finally,” grinned Ram. “To Avantika, right?”

Shatru nodded. “I want to buy her a ring.”

“Perfect.” Ram lifted the intercom again to ask an assistant to bring some rings to his office. Turning to Shatru, he asked, “Any preference?”

“Diamond solitaire.”

Ram nodded, before speaking into the phone again. He disconnected before saying, “So, one more wedding in the family. What about Avantika’s parents? You said they are in Bengaluru, right?”

“Yeah, I’m going the day after tomorrow to meet them.”

Ram nodded. “And when are you bringing Avantika home?”

“Soon after. You’ve all met Avantika and know her, sort of, while I’m still a stranger to her parents.”

“That’s true,” said Ram before calling out, “Come in,” to the knock at the door.

An office boy brought a tray with two mugs of coffee, giving Shatru a wide smile of welcome. Behind him walked in a shop assistant with a large display tray containing rings set with diamond solitaires.

Ram thanked them both, indicating that they leave everything on his table. Picking up a cup of coffee, he walked to Shatru’s side to pull the tray of rings closer.

“They all look amazing, Ram. All your designs, I presume?” When Ram nodded, he continued, “You’ve got better and better at this.”

“Thanks,” said Ram, a smile on his face. The advent of the two women in his life seemed to have made him more creative than ever.

Shatru drank his coffee, looking at the tray, running his eyes over the rings one by one, before he paused on the sixth row. Finishing his coffee and placing the mug aside, he bent over to lift a two-carat solitaire set in a plain gold band. “This looks perfect, Ram. I’d like to have matching ear-studs and a necklace that would go with it. Do you have something suitable?”

“I know exactly what you want. I’ll go and get the stuff myself.” Ram walked out and returned almost immediately, carrying a jeweller’s box. He opened it and showed it to Shatru.

The latter’s eyes went wide, seeing the twin rows of solitaires, strung together in a gold necklace. “This is perfect, bro,” he said, before checking out the ear-studs that had a single stone each. “I’ll take the lot.”

“Good choice,” smiled Ram. “I’m sure your Avantika will love it.”

“I think so too.” The brothers chatted for a long time before Shatru got up. “Will you take the stuff home? I’m planning to meet a few friends and will get back by evening.”

“Sure thing,” nodded Ram, smiling at his brother. “Good to have you back.”

Shatru smiled, waving to his brother before walking out of the cabin.

Dinner was a gala affair with their parents Mohan and Meera, Ram and Sapna with their little Samaira, Lakshman and a visibly pregnant Ruma, Bharat, Dia and Shatrughan. Everyone chattered away, laughing heartily every time Samaira entertained them with her baby talk.

Later, when the others had gone to their respective homes in the same compound, Shatru sat with his parents. “Pappa, Mamma, I’m planning to marry Avantika.”

Meera was visibly thrilled, her eyes damp with tears. “I’m so happy to hear that Shatru.”

Mohan smiled at his son. “Great. I’m glad to hear that too. Does that mean you are ready to settle down here in Jaipur or do you plan to continue with your travels?”

“I may travel a bit more before cutting down my tours after a year or two. I’m hoping that Avantika will go with me on my trips.”

Mohan nodded. “Will you have time to check on your farm this time? The trees are growing really well.”

“Yes, Pappa. I’ll stay for some time. I don’t have my next trip planned yet.”

“Thank God, Shatru. Now that you have decided to get married, let’s get that done first. What about Avantika’s family?” asked Meera.

“I’m going to Bengaluru on Wednesday, Mamma, to meet her parents.”

Mohan nodded again. “Perfect. Once you are done, bring Avantika home. Let’s find out how grand a wedding she’d like to have. We also need to decide if the wedding should be here in Jaipur or they want to have it in Bengaluru.”

Shatru nodded. “Right, Pappa. I’ll bring Avantika back with me to meet you guys.”

They chatted late into the night, before Shatru retired to his room on the first floor.

14

Early on Wednesday morning, Shatru received a WhatsApp message from Avantika. *Change of plan. On my way to the airport to catch a flight to Mumbai. You come over to Mumbai too*.

Her phone was switched off when he called her. Realising that she must already be on the plane, Shatru cancelled his flight to Bengaluru to book himself a ticket on one going to Mumbai in the afternoon. Packing a rucksack, he went down to pour himself a cup of tea.

His parents were already up and planning his wedding as they sipped on their tea. Lakshman walked in, calling out a 'good morning' before getting himself a cup too.

"Did you just get back from the factory?" asked Shatru.

"No, I'm going there now."

The brothers chatted as they had their tea before Lakshman got up to leave.

"Laki, I'm leaving for Mumbai. Will be back in a day or two."

"I thought you were going to Bengaluru to meet Avantika's parents?" asked Lakshman. "Everything's okay, nah?"

Shatru shrugged, even as his parents turned to look at him, unaware of the change in plan. "I hope. I got a message from Avantika that she's returning to Mumbai. Probably had to get back to work."

Restless, Shatru decided to leave early, immediately after breakfast, even though his flight was only at 12.30. His cell rang after he crossed security. It was Avantika.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said, a smile in his voice. "Have you landed?"

"Just. I'm still inside the flight."

“Okay. What happened?”

“It’s a long story. Please get here fast. I’m missing you, terribly.” Avantika’s voice seemed on the verge of breaking.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Shatru was shaken. She was neither the clingy sort nor one to break down in any situation.

“When’s your flight?” asked Avantika.

“12.30.”

“I’ll see you then.”

“Avi...”

“I love you, Shatru. I need you. See you soon,” said Avantika, cutting the call.

He tried calling her after that, many times. But she didn’t pick up her phone. Something was definitely wrong. Highly disturbed, Shatru called Dia.

“Hi Shatru, tell me. What’s up?” Dia was surprised by his call. They had met at breakfast and her brother-in-law had been rushing to the airport, on his way to meet her best friend. She was the happiest that Avantika was also going to be married soon into the Maheshwari family.

“I need a favour. Can you talk to Avantika? Something’s terribly wrong. She refuses to tell me. And I’ll take almost four hours to reach her home. Please...”

“Leave it to me, Shatru. I’ll get back to you soon,” said Dia, cutting his call to speed-dial her friend. It took her many attempts before Avantika answered. The friends talked for a few minutes and Avantika did her best to convince the other woman that everything was fine.

Dia didn’t fall for it. “Have it your way, Avi. Shatru should reach you soon. Don’t lose heart. I’m sure you can sort everything out with his help.”

“I suppose,” said Avantika, in a broken voice, before disconnecting the line.

Dia called Shatru immediately. “You’re right, Shatru. Something’s up. But Avi won’t tell me. One good thing though. She’s convinced that you can sort it all out.”

Shatru shut his eyes, a pained expression on his face as he listened to his sister-in-law, before saying, “Thanks Dia. Bye.”

He was extremely restless and couldn’t wait for his flight to be called. He spent the next four hours on pins, before he reached Avantika’s apartment to ring the bell.

A red-faced Avantika opened the door to fall into his arms. Shatru threw his bag down to crush her close to his chest, pressing his lips to the top of her head, his hand rubbing soothingly against her back.

“I love you, Shatru,” said Avantika, her voice muffled against his chest.

“I love you too, sweetheart.” He lifted her in his arms and sat down on the sofa, holding her on his lap. “Tell me what happened.”

“Will you mind terribly if we don’t get married?” asked Avantika pathetically, looking at him with dull, brown eyes.

Shatru stared at her, startled. Whatever he had expected, it wasn’t this. He spoke carefully. “I’d be happier if we marry. But I’m okay if you don’t want to. I’ll go with your choice, love. Is that what’s bothering you? You got cold feet?” He smiled gently. “I love you and that’s what matters. It’s a bonus that you love me too. I don’t have any expectations beyond that.”

“Shatru...” Tears filmed Avantika’s eyes, to his shock. His Avantika crying!!! He couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Sweetheart...what’s wrong? Please don’t cry.” He wiped the tear that rolled down her soft cheek with his thumb.

Avantika buried her face on his chest, her body shuddering with sobs.

Shatru held her tightly, rocking her, waiting for her to calm down.

Avantika lifted her head to look at him, saying, “It’s my parents. They...”

She had gone to Bengaluru on Monday to prepare her parents for Shatrughan’s arrival. It was dinner time when she opened the subject. “*Amma*, *Appa*, there’s this guy called Shatrughan Maheshwari. He’s based in Jaipur. They are a big family, very rich too.” Yeah, that was especially important to her father. He wouldn’t want to be associated with someone who wasn’t wealthy and successful.

“Where did you meet him?” asked Vandana, curious to know more about her daughter’s love life.

“At a wedding I went to, in Jaipur. You remember my friend Dia? It was at her wedding. Shatrughan is actually...”

“But that wedding was almost two years ago. Have you known this boy for that long?” asked her father Arun Kamath.

Avantika gave a shy smile. “Yes *Appa*.”

Her father grunted, signalling that she continued.

“As I mentioned, they are a big family—four brothers and one sister. Shatrughan is the youngest son. Mohan uncle runs a provision shop in the business district of Jaipur. Ram is the eldest son who’s a jewellery designer. He’s married to Sapna and they have a little daughter. Lakshman is the second one. He runs a baking factory along with his wife Ruma. The third son and Shatru’s twin is Bharat who’s married to Dia. He’s a super model and also runs a food truck business with Dia. Shatru...”

Arun interrupted. “What a strange family. Do none of them have regular jobs? What about Shatrughan?”

Avantika took off from where she had left off. “He travels the world, *Appa* and works his way through. He also has an organic farm outside Jaipur. He...”

“Come again?” Arun frowned heavily at his daughter, keeping his spoon down on the dining table carefully. “What does Shatrughan do?”

“I just told you, *Appa*. Shatru...”

Arun’s voice went up by a few decibels. “You told me what he does when he’s on holiday. I’m asking you what he does for a living.”

Avantika scowled, irritated. “*Appa*, you didn’t understand me. Shatrughan travels the world. That’s his passion. And he works in every city and town he visits. He...”

“What kind of a career is that? How will he take care of his wife and a family later on?” Arun was furious.

“*Appa*, I don’t need my husband to take care of me. I can manage very well on my own. And Shatru...”

“Stop,” yelled Arun. “That’s not the point, is it? What does your job pay you? Will that pittance be enough to run your life? This is bullshit, Avi. I’ll never agree to your marrying this...this man who leads such a Bohemian life. I don’t approve and that’s final.” He got up, pushing his chair noisily and went to sit in front of the TV.

Vandana looked pathetically at her angry daughter. “Give him some time, Avi. Your father will come around. But Shatru will get a job, nah? Before getting married?” she asked anxiously.

“*Amma*, he has a job—two actually. One is his passion for travelling and the other is his farm.”

“How can you expect your father to agree to your idea to marry a farmer? This is just ridiculous, Avantika. Farmers are poor people and they are villagers. Has this Shatrughan even been to school or college?” It was her mother’s turn to frown at Avantika.

She wanted to bang her head against the wall. How to make them understand? They had no clue as to the lap of luxury the Maheshwaris lived in. But just now, she knew that it was an impossible task getting her parents to go visit Shatru and his family in Jaipur. She drew in a deep breath to calm herself down before saying, “*Amma*, of course Shatru is a graduate. He even speaks four foreign

languages besides English.”

Vandana nodded, looking impressed. “Why does he want to be a farmer, then? Couldn’t he get a job in a multinational company or something?”

Avantika took an about turn and went to her room before she blew a blood vessel. It was past nine. It must be around eleven in the morning at Princeton University where her brother was doing his Masters. She sent him a message. *Call me ASAP, however late it is*.

It was 11.30 pm when Vidyut called her. “Hey Avi, what’s up?”

Avantika growled, startling him. “I think *Amma* and *Appa* are crazy.”

“What happened?” he asked patiently. He adored his sister who was younger to him by three years. They used to squabble a lot when they had been teenagers but had become as thick as thieves over the years. It was thanks to Vidyut that Avantika had got to live independently in Mumbai and pursue her dancing career. He had a way with persuading them. It also helped that he was a male in the patriarchal family.

Avantika quickly filled him in on what had happened during dinner. Vidyut already knew that his sister was in love with Shatru and had recently accepted his marriage proposal.

“*Appa* said a flat ‘no’. He says that I can’t marry someone who doesn’t have a job. What do I tell him, Vidu? I had a good mind to scream.”

Vidyut smiled. The younger Avantika would have done just that. But his sister had become extremely calm as her career soared and she had begun to give her heart and soul to her dancing.

“You do one thing. Let it go for a day and talk to them again tomorrow. If it works, it does. If it doesn’t, let me deal with it.”

“Please Vidyut. That’d be for the best, I think. I’m going to stop Shatru from coming to Bengaluru. I won’t let them insult him.”

“Don’t say anything just now. Give it one more chance before pressing the panic

button, okay? What if they are convinced tomorrow?”

Avantika sighed exaggeratedly. “Okay. I’ll do that.”

“Good girl. Now I need to rush for my lecture. Catch you tomorrow, bye.”

Avantika spent a restless night, wondering how to convince her parents. The next day, her father seemed more determined than ever that she should forget the idea of marrying Shatrughan.

“*Appa*, let’s do one thing. Both you and Amma come with me to Jaipur and meet Shatrughan and his family before you decide he’s unsuitable.”

“Are you mad, Avantika? That’s not very practical. I *know* he’s not suitable husband material for you. I refuse to waste my time and money on a worthless trip.” Arun roared. There were two more years to go before his retirement as Financial Director with an MNC.

“How can you know without meeting them, *Appa*? Please, do this one thing for my sake.”

“Listen, Avantika,” said her father with an impatient sigh, “this boy doesn’t have a job and so can’t marry you. That’s final! Maybe, just maybe, he gets a suitable job that will earn him at least 40-50 thousand a month, then you talk to me about marriage, okay?”

“But Shatru already makes way more than that, *Appa*.”

“Doing what? Farming? But that’s so unreliable. And I don’t want my daughter to marry a measly farmer.” He got up before saying, “That’s my last word on this. If you still want to marry him, I cannot stop you. You are an adult and have the legal right to marry the man you choose. You should do what you want.” He walked away, his disapproval obvious.

“*Appa*, of course I won’t marry someone without your blessing,” said Avantika in a broken whisper.

“Forget this boy, nah, Avi. Why don’t you meet Swapnil, my friend Radhika’s son? He’s so good-looking and educated in America. He’s working for a bank in

New York City and is earning in dollars. He...”

Avantika glared at her mother, shutting her up effectively.

She left home the next morning, after sending messages to Shatru and Vidyut about her return to Mumbai. What she didn’t know was that her parents had already spoken to her brother about Avantika’s mad scheme to marry a farmer and he was on his way home to talk to them on her behalf. Seeing her message, Vidyut decided to get off his flight in Mumbai when there was a stopover.

Avantika felt so much better after talking to Shatru about her visit with her parents. While she didn’t tell him everything in so many words, he read between the lines and understood that her parents didn’t approve of him as the right husband for their daughter. Well, he would have to work at persuading them, obviously. Before he could say anything, Avantika’s doorbell rang.

She left his lap reluctantly to open the door and squealed in delight, jumping into the arms of a tall, dark and handsome man. Shatru stared, his jaw dropping. Who the hell was this?

15

Vidyut held Avantika at arm's length and tut-tutted when he saw her red face. "Avi, this is not done," he said, giving her another hug. "Is your Shatru here yet?"

She nodded, a look of relief in her eyes as she pulled her brother into her living room. "Shatru, this is Vidyut, my brother. And Vidu, meet Shatru, the love of my life."

Shatru got up from the sofa to shake Vidyut's hand, relieved to know that the handsome stranger Avantika had hugged enthusiastically was actually her brother. "Hello, Vidyut. Good to meet you."

Vidyut shook Shatru's hand enthusiastically. "Wonderful to meet you, Shatru. I hear that you're living the life we all are just dreaming about. You must be feeling so proud of yourself," he smiled widely.

Shatru smiled back at the other man, seeing his strong resemblance to Avantika and liking him already. "Thanks, bro. Not proud, but definitely happy with my lot."

Avantika went to make coffee as the two men chatted, Vidyut asking Shatru a lot of questions about his life. "I hope you don't mind. I need to know as much about you as I can before I present my case to my parents." He wrinkled his nose, shaking his head. "Our dad's pretty formal and our mom just follows his lead. I hope you don't take offence. They are basically nice people, but a bit old-fashioned."

Shatru shook his head. "Not at all. Parents are our roots. We won't be here without them. Let's all three of us go and convince them that I'm good enough for their daughter."

"I won't let them insult Shatru," said Avantika in an angry voice, addressing her brother, as she placed the tray of coffee on the centre table.

"Sweetheart, don't you worry your pretty head about that. I won't be insulted,

whatever they say. I promise. They've given birth to you and I respect them for that." He touched a forefinger to her soft cheek in a caress, bringing a smile to her drooping lips. "It's not the end of the world. Cheer up, love!"

Avantika turned red when she saw her brother's grin. "There," said Vidyut. "Looks like I needn't have rushed home." He winked at her, making her smile wider.

The truth was that Vidyut was totally impressed with Avantika's choice of a life partner. Shatrughan Maheshwari was smart for one thing and truly valued family. It was obvious that he was comfortable in his skin and at peace with his world. His sister couldn't ask for a better husband. It was time he went home to convince his parents.

"Tell you what, I'll go home tonight and talk to *Amma* and *Appa*. You lovebirds follow when I give you guys the green signal. That'll be sometime tomorrow. What say?"

Shatru nodded vigorously. "Perfect."

Avantika was less enthusiastic. "If you say so."

Vidyut threw an arm around his sister. "Come on, Avi. Chin up! Your defeated attitude isn't going to help the situation."

Avantika gave a reluctant nod, understanding his logic. But she was completely shaken by her parents' attitude. They had never been so adamant about anything, ever before. "Why are you rushing tonight? You must be jetlagged. Go tomorrow, nah?"

Vidyut had been checking the Indigo app for flights to Bengaluru and looked up on hearing Avi. He shook his head. "I don't want to give them too much time to think negatively. Why do you think I took the first flight out? And," he turned to Shatru with a grin, "I'm sure Shatru is a man with a travel agenda. I don't want that fucked up."

Shatru grinned back. "Right now, nothing. My next travel plan will include my wife, whenever she's free to go with me." He turned to kiss Avantika on her cheek.

“Right.” Vidyut got up. “All the more reason for me to get home to Bengaluru ASAP. There’s a flight in a couple of hours. I’ll leave now.”

Both Avantika and Shatru got up to see him off. “Thanks, bro,” said Shatru, bumping his fist with Vidyut’s before giving him a hug. Avantika hugged her brother a bit desperately. “Please Vidu, convince them somehow.”

“You know I will. Promise me not to mope and don’t get Shatru’s shirt wet with your tears. I ne’er knew you for a cry baby, Avi.” He hugged her back. “Do I have your promise?”

Avantika nodded. “Yeah, okay. I’ll not cry. You do know that they aren’t tears of weakness, but of anger, right?” she said defiantly.

Vidyut grinned. “I know that. But there’s no need for it sis. Will call you tonight. Bye now,” he said, waving to them before shutting the door behind him.

Avantika waited for her brother’s call in vain that night as her phone remained silent. She snuggled close in Shatru’s arms as he held her next to his steadily beating heart as they lay on her bed. He understood only too well that it was a hug that Avantika needed tonight and not sex.

16

Vidyut rang the bell at his home at six in the evening. His father's car wasn't on the portico. He obviously wasn't home. He smiled at his mother when Vandana opened the door. "Hello, *Amma*," he said, hugging her.

"Vidu, what a surprise!" said his mother, a broad smile of welcome on her face. "I'm so glad to see you."

He walked in, leaving his suitcase below the staircase in the centre of the living room, before picking up a bottle of water from the fridge to gulp it down thirstily. "When will *Appa* be home?"

"By eight or so. He's busy with extra meetings nowadays," grimaced Vandana. Her husband had been coming home late over the past couple of weeks. "So, how have you been, Vidu? Good you could make it at such a short notice. Only you can talk sense to your sister. She's so stubborn about marrying that farmer. I don't know what she sees in him. I even told her about Swapnil. You remember Swapnil nah? You used to play cricket together. He's such a good catch. I..."

Vidyut laughed, sitting on the sofa, dragging his mother down next to him. "I know Swapnil is a great catch *Amma* and he'll make someone a wonderful husband. But that's not the point, is it? Avi has given her heart to Shatrughan. She won't be happy marrying someone else." His voice was soft and persuasive.

His mother gave him a reluctant nod, an unhappy expression on her face. "But your *Appa* is also right nah Vidu? He takes his responsibilities so seriously. How will he agree to this match? The boy is a farmer and keeps travelling all the time, it seems. He doesn't have a secure job."

Vidyut laughed outright. "Will you give me something to eat? I'm hungry." He planned to tackle both his parents at one go. And it was best to keep his mother busy till then.

Vandana got up immediately. "Our cook has already got dinner ready. I hope you don't mind vegetarian today. I will tell her to make your favourite *chicken curry* tomorrow." She opened the rice cooker to serve *bisi bele bath*—spicy rice

flavoured with tamarind, spices, veggies and split red lentil—on a plate. She added a cup of *cucumber raita* and a side plate with some fried *papad*.

“This looks so yum, *Amma*,” said Vidyut, placing the plate on the dining table, before pulling out two chairs for the both of them. “Is there enough to go around?” He asked, spooning the food into his mouth.

“Of course. You know there’s always a lot of food at home. Don’t worry about that and eat all you want.”

Vidyut did just that, filling her in about his life at university, distracting her as much as possible from Avantika’s beau.

It was another hour before Arun arrived. Vidyut opened the door the moment he heard his father’s car. “*Appa*,” he said, hugging the older man, taking the briefcase from him.

“What are you doing in Bengaluru Vidu? Did your sister drag you home?”

Vidyut smiled. “Not just her *Appa*. You sounded worried when you called me the day before yesterday.”

“Oh yes. Avi’s mad rush to get married to her farmer. Let me get out of this suit first and we’ll talk as we eat.”

“Sure, *Appa*,” said Vidyut, bringing the dishes containing the food to the dining table, setting two places for his parents. If his parents had had their way, he’d never do any of this work that was meant to be done only by women. But Avantika used to fight tooth and nail that he shared her work. That was the only way Vandana could get her daughter to help in the house. Avantika had refused to understand why Vidyut should be treated like a demigod just because he was a male. It had worked out in his favour at the end of it. And living in the US had taught him to be totally self-sufficient.

Arun walked down and sat at the table. “Why only two plates? You aren’t eating Vidu?” he asked, when his wife sat down next to him.

“I already had my dinner, *Appa*. I was too hungry to wait for you. Sorry about that.”

“Not at all son. So, tell me how to deal with your sister. She’s so adamant about marrying this boy who has no prospects. I don’t have the stamina to argue with her.”

“*Appa*, how do you know Shatrughan has no prospects?” asked Vidyut mildly. It looked like it was going to be a long night.

“Well, he doesn’t have a job. He spends his life gallivanting around the world. Over and above, he’s into farming, the most unreliable profession one could have, especially in a country like ours.”

Vandana ate silently, her eyes flitting from one man to the other as they spoke.

Vidyut smiled. “*Appa*, if Shatru goes gallivanting around the world, it’s obviously because he can afford it. You know how much it must be costing him. You and *Amma* went to Singapore for one week. That was eight years ago. Have you thought of a foreign holiday after that?”

“I’m a working man, Vidu. How can I afford foreign holidays? Be happy that we went on that one trip.”

Vidyut’s smile turned wider. “So, do you get my point? This man’s travelling the world and has been doing it since more than eight years. He...”

“Is he trying to achieve a Guinness record?” asked Arun sarcastically.

Vidyut pressed his fisted hands on his jean-clad thighs, holding back his rising temper. “You have missed the point *Appa*. Let me explain. Shatrughan has been travelling for so long. He wouldn’t be doing it if he couldn’t afford it, right? And we know it takes a lot of money. He...”

“Look here, Vidu. There are two angles to this. One is having money and another is holding a respectable occupation. This boy obviously has money, but no occupation. And hence isn’t good enough to marry Avantika.”

“*Appa*, you know Shatru is a farmer. Isn’t that a respectable occupation? Earlier, you felt that he won’t get enough income from that. But now, we have established that he has a lot of money. Now tell me what your problem is?”

Arun glared at his son, washing his hand on his plate. That was one habit the father had refused to forego how much ever his children had dissuaded him. Vandana put up with this quirk, not having a choice. “I don’t have the time or energy to argue with you, son. It’s been a long day. Let’s watch some TV. You know how the country’s going to the dogs with Narendra Modi’s decision to withdraw 500 and 1000 rupee notes so suddenly. Then the US election and the unexpected win by Trump.” He shook his head, getting up to flop down in front of the TV.

Vidyut sat with his father for half an hour before getting up to call it a day. Tomorrow was another day.

17

Vidyut was up early the next day and went down to tackle his father. They sat down to have coffee while Arun took his time reading the newspaper.

"*Appa*..."

"If you're going to talk to me about Avantika's boyfriend, let me tell you upfront that I'm not going to listen."

Vidyut shook his head. "That's not fair, *Appa*. You've always been open to listening to our views on things. I know you love Avi and want the best for her. You also know that I love my sister and I too want the best for her." He looked at his father intensely, pinning him down with his honey brown gaze.

Arun nodded, unable to deny what his son said.

"I've met Shatrughan. I..."

"Huh? And when was that?"

"Yesterday. Believe me, the man is cultured and confident. You can't get a better guy for your son-in-law. *Appa*, he's doing something we all just dream of doing. Do you know that he's been working his ass off since he was barely eighteen? He dares to dream and he works towards fulfilling his dreams. Believe me, he's not spending his father's money, but making his own. He's a billionaire. His farm isn't a one-acre plot. It's set up in twenty-five acres of land. The Maheshwaris live in a huge compound that has five bungalows—one for the parents and one each for the brothers. Avi will live like a princess when she marries him." Vidyut had gathered the information partly from his sister and the rest from the World Wide Web.

Arun stared at his son, surprise on his face, the sarcasm and condescension having disappeared. "Are you serious? How is that even possible? And...and how come such a guy wants to marry our Avi?"

"*Appa*, Avi is beautiful, intelligent and has a rocking career. Any guy would give

an arm and a leg to make her his wife.”

“Our Avi? What rocking career? She dances every day. Are you saying she makes money from that? I don’t understand this modern generation at all. They want to have fun and they call it a career.” Arun shook his head, an expression of disgust on his face.

Vidyut smiled. He knew how successful his sister was in such a competitive sector. But he wasn’t interested in convincing his father about that. His sister surely wouldn’t thank him for that. “Will you meet Shatrughan Maheshwari? Give him an hour of your time. Let’s take it from there.”

Arun turned to look at his silent wife. “What do you say, Vandana?”

She nodded, looking relieved. She had been listening to her son. Avantika’s boyfriend seemed to have a lot going for him. “I think we should meet him.”

“Vidu, you ask Avantika to bring that boy home.”

Vidyut jumped up from his chair, nodding to his parents before stepping out into the garden to call his sister.

18

Things moved fast after that. Shatrughan's behaviour impressed his future in-laws too much. He bowled them over with the love and respect he showed them. After spending a whole evening with the Kamaths, Shatru invited them over to Jaipur.

"You all must come home, uncle, aunty. Let me invite you on my parents' behalf. Vidyut, I hope you'll also come."

Vidyut smiled, his arm around his blushing sister. "Sure, bro. Actually, if you guys can get married within a week, I can extend my leave too. It'll surely save me another trip," he said, tongue-in-cheek.

Shatru took him at his word. "It's an excellent idea. Why not?"

"What? How is that even possible? I..." Arun was speechless. "Shatrughan, your parents might not be too happy with that. We need to find out what their expectations are, how much dowry we should give, the jewellery. And organising a wedding is not child's play."

Shatrughan burst out laughing. "I'm sorry uncle. I don't mean to offend. But it's too funny. We Maheshwaris don't take dowry. It's your daughter I want and need, not what you can give her."

Vandana was astounded as she turned to stare at her husband. Could something be wrong with the boy or his family? Why would they want to marry Avantika for free? She gave a slight shake of her head to her husband to stop him from agreeing to everything.

When neither of them said anything to that, Shatru said, "Why don't you come home first?"

"Yeah *Appa*. Let's go tomorrow itself. I can't stretch my leave too much," said Vidyut.

Arun hemmed and hawed for a few minutes before capitulating. He rarely

denied his son anything.

Vidyut insisted on Shatru spending the night at their home when the latter offered to go to a hotel. “We’ve got a comfortable guestroom. Why would you want to go to a hotel?” He also booked five tickets to Jaipur for the next day at noon, with a stopover at Mumbai, after consulting his father.

It was past eleven when Avantika entered the guest room stealthily, locking the door behind her.

Shatru was reading with the bedside lamp on. He immediately kept the book away to open his arms to hug her close, kissing her firmly on her lips. “Happy?”

“Hmm...” she said, tracing the lines of his throat with her lips. “You smell awesome. Love me?”

“Absolutely.” He stopped her when her stroking hand moved along his naked chest towards his boxers. “Avi, no,” he shook his head. “Your parents...”

“Have as good as agreed to the wedding. I want you.” She tried to get a hand inside only to be stopped again.

“Avoid nah sweetheart.” He gulped when he felt her hand against his shaft as she determinedly pushed his boxers down his thighs. “Are you going to rape me?” he asked, his black eyes twinkling in the lamp’s soft light.

“If I have to,” said Avantika, giving him a challenging look. “Shatru, don’t you dare stop me. I need you. Last night was torture. We were meeting after so many weeks and I was in no fit state to make love with you.”

“It happens at times. Our relationship is not only about sex, right? I love you sweetheart.” He groaned softly as she went on her knees to pull his boxers right down to his feet and remove it off him.

“Of course there’s more to our love than just sex. But it sure is the icing on the cake, right?” She grinned, laying her body across his after removing her nightshirt. She nibbled on his ear, taking a bite off his lobe, making him groan again. She laughed when he protested that someone might hear them.

“Vidyut is sleeping across and my parents are in the other wing. Stop giving excuses Shatru. Do you want me or not?”

He capitulated with another groan, throwing his arms around her before rolling on the bed, going on top of her. He obliged her every whim as he made excruciatingly slow love to her, worshipping her lips and breasts and her feminine core, before entering her. He rode her long and hard, making her climax twice before he found his release.

Avantika protested when he got up after their breathing turned to normal. “Where are you going?”

“Just a sec,” said Shatru, pulling the jeweller’s box from his rucksack. He went back to the bed and took her left hand. “I got this for you, but couldn’t find the right moment.” He placed the diamond ring on her finger before bending his head to kiss it.

“What?!” squeaked Avantika, her eyes rounded in surprise. “You got a ring for me? This is simply gorgeous, my Shatru.” Taking her eyes off the ring with difficulty, she threw her arms around his neck, kissing him on his masculine lips.

“I’m glad you like it. Now you’re officially my *fiancée*,” he said before kissing her back.

19

Ram was waiting for them at the airport the next day, to welcome Avantika and her family. Arun Kamath couldn't help but be impressed with Shatrughan's elder brother's perfect manners. Vandana forgot to shut her dropping jaw when the car entered the gates of *Nakshatra*. While the Kamaths were from Bengaluru, a city that had many sprawling bungalows, they themselves living in one, she was still impressed by the huge compound full of trees and flowering shrubs.

Mohan and Meera greeted their guests warmly, the latter hugging Avantika. Arun and Vandana couldn't find even one fault with the whole family as they were introduced to each one of them. The next day, they got to see Shatrughan's house, another sprawling structure that was built on the lines of an Italian villa with a central courtyard. It was built on two levels and boasted of four bedrooms.

Mohan, Meera, Shatrughan, little Samaira and the four Kamaths left in two cars at around ten in the morning to go to Kotputli to visit *Surya Farms*—the plot that belonged to Shatru. There was a cottage and a lake on the fenced property, with at least five hundred trees planted. There were coconut palms, mango trees, chikoo trees, jackfruit trees, papaya trees, orange trees and a few flowering trees. They weren't too tall since they were less than five years old. The trees looked lush and healthy, with green papayas of various sizes hanging clustered under the branches of their trees while the rest were still too young to bear fruit.

Arun and Vandana realised that the Maheshwaris were rich way beyond their imagination. That evening, they sat down to discuss the wedding.

Arun said, "Mr. Mohan, we are nowhere as rich as you are. But we have set aside some cash and jewellery for our only daughter's wedding..."

Mohan raised his hand to stop the other man in mid-sentence. "Sorry to interrupt. Why don't you keep all that for your daughter-in-law, when Vidyut gets married? We don't accept any dowry, cash or kind. My daughters-in-law can vouch for that. The children want to have a grand wedding. We can share the expenses, if you want. Where do you want to have the wedding? We are okay with either Bengaluru or Jaipur."

Arun nodded, dazed, realising that the other man was absolutely serious. They decided to hold the wedding in Jaipur, with a reception in Bengaluru. The date was fixed for December 26, to make it convenient for Vidyut to attend the functions during his Christmas break.

Avantika gave her best friend Dia a glowing smile when things were finally settled amicably.

Arun, Vandana and Vidyut left the next day while Avantika stayed back with the Maheshwaris. She went with Shatru to his villa. “It just has the basic furniture. We can do it together if you’d like to,” he told his *fiancée*, lifting her hand to press a kiss to the middle of her palm.

“I’d love to. And Jaipur must be a paradise for ethnic stuff. Works for you?” she asked, quirking a shapely eyebrow at him.

“As long as it’s comfy, I’m okay with your choice.” He pulled her into his arms to kiss her. “I’ve been thinking. You want to open a dance school. Will you be okay starting one here in Jaipur? Or do you want to open it in Mumbai?”

“I’ve been thinking too. It makes sense to have one base for both of us, right? I’ve as good as wound up my work in Mumbai. Should be all done by mid-December.”

He nuzzled her throat, tracing his tongue over a pulse. “I need a favour.”

She turned her head to accommodate his roving lips. “Ask away.”

“You’re twenty-four...”

“Hmm...” Avantika looked at him curiously. What was he getting at?

“Will it be asking too much if I want you to give me two years of your life? Can you postpone setting up your school till when you are twenty-six? Or do you think you’ll lose out a lot on your career front?”

Avantika ran her fingers through his curly hair, holding his head close to her body, a smile on her face. She understood what he was getting at.

“You want us to travel together.”

He lifted his head to look down at her, his gaze intense. “Yes.”

She nodded. “Setting up my school two years later works for me, Shatru. I’d love to go with you.”

“Phew!” He kissed her fervently. “I’ll let you plan our tours.”

She laughed softly. “Are you mad? I’d rather go with your expertise.”

Shatru took her by the hand and led her to the only furnished bedroom in the villa.

“This is where I wanted to be on the night of Bharat’s wedding,” said Avantika, a mischievous look in her eyes.

Shatru gave her a charming grin. “I know. I haven’t stopped visualising you naked on my bed, right from that night. I didn’t sleep a wink, you know.”

“Idiot,” she scolded, hitting a fist on his arm. “I was yours for the taking, but you ran scared.”

Shatru sighed. “You know why.”

She looked at him curiously as he removed his t-shirt, before stepping out of his jeans. “I wonder if we would’ve got together if I hadn’t chased you all the way to Melbourne.”

He lifted her *kurti* off swiftly before pulling her into his arms. “I haven’t thanked you for that, have I?” he whispered in her ear, stroking the whorl with the tip of his tongue, making her tremble with desire.

“No, you haven’t.”

He unhooked her bra and flicked it off her before bending down to run his tongue over a sensitive tip. “Thank you for coming after me, sweetheart. I would’ve been a lonely fool otherwise.”

Avantika moaned, holding his head close to her breast. “Who knows?” she said in a breathless voice. “You’d probably have fallen for somebody else.”

“Never,” he nipped the top of her breast, hard, making her moan all the louder. “You are the only woman for me. I love you, absolutely.” He lifted her in his arms to lay her down gently on his bed, pulling her tights down her body, along with her panties. He bent down to kiss her feminine mound, making Avantika protest.

“Shatru, come to me,” she commanded, lifting her arms, “you’re too far away.”

He took his time, running his tongue over her wet femininity, before making his way up, his tongue drawing circles around her navel. He caressed her with his hands and mouth, aroused by the sounds of pleasure that came from her throat.

Avantika sighed softly when she felt his mouth close over a turgid nipple that had been begging for his caress, her legs thrashing restlessly as he suckled deeply, his hand stroking the other breast. She ran her hands restlessly on his back, her nails raking his satiny skin. He felt so good in her arms, his hard and muscular body such a contrast to her soft and feminine one.

Shatru turned his head to make love to her other breast when he felt her hand at his crotch. She held his hard shaft in her hand, stroking him gently and then hard. Shatru groaned before lifting his head up to look at her slumberous eyes. Her smiling lips were red from his kisses, while her face was full of concentration as she stroked, now with both her hands. He nudged her legs apart with his knee before touching her vagina to find it all wet and ready. With a smile on his face, he took both her hands in his and lifted them above her head, bringing her breasts closer to his face. He bent down to kiss her mouth, his hard chest pressing against her soft breasts as he entered her. His tongue and shaft worked in tandem as they pleasured her from above and below.

Avantika clung to him, lifting her legs around his waist to lock her ankles behind his back, going along with him for the best ride of her life. They reached out to the stars together, groaning as one as they found their release.

“I love you, Avi,” he whispered when he finally got his breath.

“I love you too, Shatru.”

20

It was April and bitingly cold in Ladakh. Shatru and Avantika had been to Pangong Lake and returned to the hotel before it got too dark.

They were staying at The Zen Ladakh for two weeks. Avantika had been surprised by the way Shatru had organised their travel plans. He hadn't taken any jobs during their trips. It had been one long honeymoon and the accommodations had almost always been five-star. She stopped protesting after the first time. It struck her after knowing him for more than two years that her husband probably had money to burn.

They got into their cottage to turn on the heater. It had been bitingly cold outside, despite the thermals, heavy clothes and scarves that they wore. Shatru poured cognac into two snifters and handed one to Avantika who was busy taking off her gloves.

"Cheers!" They sipped on the brandy, letting it warm its way down their throats. Soon, it grew too warm and they began pulling off all their garments one by one, their eyes clinging to each other.

Avantika placed her glass on a table before walking close to her husband. "Do you need help?" she asked him, her brown eyes glinting naughtily. She loved to help him out of his clothes.

Shatru laughed, pulling her into his arms before removing all her garments in a hurry. "Are you happy?" he asked, pressing his lips to her warm cheek before lifting his head again to look into her eyes.

"Too much so. And you? Are you glad to have me for your wife?"

"Hmm..." Shatru looked her up and down, giving the impression of thinking hard.

"Shatru!" She pouted at him. "Is that too difficult to answer?" She moved away from him, giving him a mock glare.

“Hey, come here. I need you in my arms,” he called out.

“Nope, I won’t,” she said, turning the other way. Was he already bored being with her? Of course not. They loved each other too much. But then, he was honest, always. Why hadn’t he answered her question? Had he by any chance fallen out of love with her? Maybe he was just teasing her. Well, she wasn’t the one to give up on him. She straightened her shoulders and turned back in a flash to find her husband within an inch of her. He’d moved so silently, his bare feet making no noise on the carpeted wooden floor. She glared at him, her eyebrows up in query. “What’s up?” she asked threateningly, her clenched fists pressed against his bare chest. “Don’t you dare tell me you aren’t happy with me. I...”

Shatru shook with silent laughter, his hands holding her tight fists. He pulled her arms around his neck, bringing her stiff body close to his. “Avi...”

“Don’t Avi me, Shatru. I won’t be pacified. You...”

“...love you.” Shatru flicked a tongue over her lower lip, making her gasp, before thrusting his tongue into her mouth. He rubbed it against her own before gently sucking her tongue. “Do you even know how gorgeous you look when you’re angry? Watching you in a temper arouses me so painfully. See.” He took her hand and opened her fist to place it against his manhood that was clamouring for her. He laughed again softly, his charcoal gaze gentle as they watched her red face. “When I asked you if you were happy, it wasn’t about your life with me, but our trip to Ladakh. I *know* you love me and you, my sweetheart, know only too well that I adore you and do not want to live without you. Yeah, you are my choice of life partner, forever.” He pressed her head against his shoulder, rubbing a large hand down her back soothingly. “I want you. Will you let me love you?”

He traced a caressing finger down the length of her face, following the shape of her collarbone before going further down to touch her breast. He paused, his questioning eyes going to hers.

“Yes, please. And yes, I’m happy with this trip. It’s been awesome. More than the trip, it’s the joy of being with you Shatru. Thank you.”

“To answer your question, I’m glad to be yours,” whispered her Bohemian husband.

THE END

About the author

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Sundari Venkatraman is the author of 12 books, all romances. This box set consists of a 5-novella series titled *Marriages Made in India.* All five novellas are Hot Romances. Book #1 of the series is *The Smitten Husband*, Book #2 is *His Drunken Wife*, Book #3 is *Her Secret Husband* & Book #4 is *The Casanova's Wife* & Book #5 is *Her Bohemian Husband*. Other published novels by the author are *The Malhotra Bride*, *Meghna*, *The Runaway Bridegroom*, *The Madras Affair* and *An Autograph for Anjali*. She also has a collection of romantic shorts called *Matches Made in Heaven*; and a collection of human interest stories called *Tales of Sunshine*. All of Sundari Venkatraman's books are on Amazon Top 100 Bestsellers in India, USA, UK, Canada & Australia under both #romance & #drama categories.

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