



Twisted

DECEIT

(The Sands of Singoor Series)

P.G.VAN

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The Sands of Singoor Series

by

P.G.Van

Twisted Deceit

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Excerpt

The smirk on his face made a strange sensation ripple through her. “I dare you to. Tonight.” He took a step closer, lowered his voice, and added, “And you’ll need to do it before we consummate our marriage, and then, there is no possibility of annulment, is there, Mrs. Nakul Thakvar.”

She was taken aback that he knew the rules of the land. “Yes, I will do it right after.”

“And?” His tone was so calm that she could think about reaching out and slapping the smirk off his stunning face. “What do you plan to do?”

“Why do you care what I do after?” she snapped.

“Because,” he ran his eyes over her face and added, “I intend to exercise the

contract the moment you leave the Singoor region.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I made a contract with Nakul Thakur, who clearly doesn’t exist. You cannot hold that over my head. That contract is void.”

“Are you sure about that?” The confidence in his voice somewhat stumped her.

Prologue

Singoor Desert, India

The loud and rapid beating of the drums to mark her arrival at the Singoor temple matched the thudding in Aadhya's chest. It was close to the auspicious time for the marriage. Marriages were a big deal in the region. Despite the rifts between the clans, these events were not interrupted by the other clans—one of the reasons why Aadhya felt good about her soon-to-be husband's safety—an international businessman who had no idea about the chaos gripping the entire region.

He didn't need to know. It was a temporary marriage for a year. He needed a wife, and she needed a way to deflect from the Thakvar alliance. Marrying a Thakvar meant becoming part of the region's turmoil

forever, which was not what she wanted for herself. The trauma from her parent's accident wiped out all love for her birthplace.

She stepped out of the palanquin as other musical instruments were played and looked in the direction of the pavilion through her veil. Even with so many people at the temple, she quickly spotted Nakul as he stood tall over everyone else.

She was risking his life by agreeing to get married in Singoor while all the attacks from the savage clans were happening. But she was the Kanwar heir, and she knew she would not budge with the location of the wedding. It had to be in Singoor. She hadn't asked her aunt what the plan was after the ceremony, but in a day or so, she would have Nakul fake a work emergency and leave Singoor. It was for the best.

Pushing away her thoughts, she focused on the chanting as she walked to the pavilion, a garland in her hands. Her aunt and uncle led her, with some clan women walking behind her closely.

Her smile was hidden behind her veil, but she did not miss her stunning groom. He looked like a Singoor man, dressed traditionally with a ceremonial sword and a turban. He wore a dark red turban and rows of pearls that majestically adorned his broad chest. She was impressed with his resourcefulness in getting a hold of the locally made outfit with the unique handiwork.

Isn't that why she chose him to be her contract husband?

She held the garland in her hands and placed it around his neck as directed. With holy words being chanted, her veil

was lifted. A new shyness suddenly overcame her, and she lowered her eyes.

Nakul placed the vermilion powder on her scalp, following every instruction of the priest. A speck of the red powder fell on her nose, and he gently tapped her nose to dust it off.

That sweet gesture made her smile, and she raised her eyes to meet his. She held his gaze for a brief moment before lowering her eyes. Her gaze lingered on the rows of pearls that she had admired from afar. She took in the details of the gold medallion with the attacking tiger.

Her heart thudded as she trailed her gaze up to his turban. And there it was, a metallic symbol that matched the medallion he wore on his chest, and it shook the ground under her feet.

It was the Thakvar insignia on the turban, and the medallion was unique to that clan.

Did she marry the Thakvar heir?

Chapter 1

A few weeks back...

At A Tropical Island Resort

“Sir, the Kanwar group has arrived,” his assistant’s voice came through the earpiece Nakul had on as he typed away on his laptop.

Nakul Thakvar had a plan to execute, and needed to be carried out without a hitch. He was in the conference room at his resort where the Kanwar heir would spend the next few days. It was his resort, and a great travel deal was offered to one of her friends to ensure Aadhya showed up where he wanted her to.

He had arrived a short while ago and decided to wait at the conference room that overlooked the large lobby area where the Kanwar heir and her friends would check in for their stay.

“Ok. Stick to the plan.” It was an order. Every bit of the plan mattered to get Aadhya Kanwar to follow his path for her to be his Singoor wife.

Nakul shut his laptop and walked to the glass wall of the conference room, from which he could see the young women walk into the grand lobby of his resort. It was an exclusive beach getaway that had to be booked a year in advance, but for Aadhya’s group, all it took was setting up an online bait.

A series of emails that Aadhya ignored, but one of her friends clicked on to get roped into the plan. Nakul could not deny that getting her to do what was needed would not be easy, but he had to get her to. Peace had to be restored in Singoor for his family to be together.

A family torn apart twenty years ago when his father left his wife and young children in San Francisco to move to India. It was his father's way of protecting Nakul and his siblings from the clan wars, and the chaos that erupted after *Shakti*, the Goddess who protected the region, was taken away from the region.

As he looked down into the lobby from the upper level, he saw a group of women walk to the front desk. The excitement of the group could be heard through the sealed glass. His eyes fell on one specific woman, and he knew it had to be her, even from behind. He had seen several pictures of her taken by the investigative team as she went about her day.

He zoned in on the tall, slender figure in casual clothes, and her long hair fell loosely to her waist. She stood at the back of the group as her friends checked in, and as if she sensed his eyes on her, she slowly turned, her eyes raising to where he stood behind the darkened glass wall.

Her eyes scoured where he stood before looking away when she heard her friends squeal joyfully. He chuckled, knowing why the group of women were so excited. They were initially given one suite to share; each got a personal one.

Aadhya Kanwar will be placed strategically close to his suite. He saw her smile in response to her friend's joy, but

he knew deep down she was worried about having no choice but to agree to the Thakvar alliance.

With the details he had on her, he knew she would not want to make an alliance with a man from Singoor. She aspired to work abroad and knew she would slip away if he didn't get ahead of her plans. He had no choice but to get her to marry him, and he only had a few days to get her to agree.

Aadhya Kanwar, hold on to your *single* status dearly; it won't last long.

Chapter 2

Aadhya woke up the following morning to the sound of water splashing against the rocks not far from the resort. She chose a room with views and private access to the beach over one close to the large indoor pool on the lower level. Her friends' group was given an exclusive offer to upgrade to individual suites when they arrived, and her friends were psyched by their luck. While they all chose suites by the indoor pool on the lower level, she was happy to pick the only one on the upper level with ocean views.

She loved the ocean since she grew up in a desert with oases and artificial water bodies inside the mansions. The feel of waves hitting her feet calmed and relaxed her. It was the main reason for going on the trip with her friends, despite how dejected she felt when she heard that she had to marry a Thakvar heir. It was not a choice but a matter of when the marriage would happen. She was going to buy as much time as possible at any cost.

She felt guilty for not being able to share the joy of her friends as she was contemplating how to handle the Thakvar alliance. She knew she had no choice as per the rules of the land but needed to devise a plan to reject the alliance. She slowly pushed aside the thin sheets and stretched, feeling every tight muscle.

The stress of her unpredictable future did not sit well with her, and this trip she was on might be the last one she would ever make. She could not go in and out of the Singoor

area with so much unrest. There was no way she could finish her last semester of education even with the online option, as there was no internet in Singoor.

The disturbances that started after her parents passed away in a fire accident continued. Savage clans' attacks were rampant.

For almost two years, she stayed home, too traumatized to leave her aunt's side. The place she fled from as a child with her caretaker, Meenabai, after the clan wars broke out in the region and had hoped never to return except to spend time with her aunt. She let out a sigh and reminded herself that she should make the best out of the three-day trip before she would be yanked back into the Singoor area.

With that thought, she planted her feet on the polished wooden floors and walked toward the heavy shutters that shut out the bright light from the outside. She opened the heavy doors and felt a fast chill from the cool breeze from the ocean. Her lips curved up, enjoying the feel of air in her long, dark hair. It was as if magic was in the air, and all her worries melted away.

She stepped onto the balcony and let out a laugh when she saw the sandy beach through the gaps in the palm trees. "So beautiful." She wanted to explore the beaches but didn't want to go by herself, and it was too early for any of her friends to be up. She had promised her aunt that she would not go anywhere alone, no matter where she was.

Her aunt cared for her deeply, and even though she was thousands of miles away from Singoor, her aunt worried a rival clan might kidnap her or, worse, hurt Aadhya. Very few

people in the Singoor area knew how she looked because her aunt would make her wear a veil covering her head and face. More for safety than to keep up with the traditions. She didn't enjoy wearing the veil as it obstructed her views, especially when they went to the oasis close to her home.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” an angry voice growled with a foreign accent. Aadhya was suddenly pulled out of her thoughts. She looked to one side as the voice seemed close to where she was.

Surprised by how clearly she could hear the man, despite how each building was constructed, she wondered if there was a level above her suite. The views would be incredible from a higher level.

“I can't believe that's what Grandma said.” The conversation continued as Aadhya approached the balcony's edge and looked up. Surprisingly, there was another level above her suite, and it was only in the structure she was in. All others were only two levels, except for the one she was in. She pressed her lips, annoyed that she wasn't given the top-level suite, but quickly brushed it away.

“Dad, you need to convince her to start the treatment? She can't tie her recovery to my marriage. I'm too busy with work to focus on a relationship.” The man's words made Aadhya's ears perk up. “I bet I can convince her. Let me talk to her.”

Moments of silence later, she heard another growl. “Great! She knows I will convince her to start her treatment and get ready for surgery. That's why she doesn't want to talk to me.” The man was upset.

Despite how annoyed he sounded, Aadhya sensed the affection in the man's voice. "I'll be back soon and get her to agree. I know she wants me to get married, but she can't hold her treatment for that?"

There was a gap in the conversation as the person on the phone spoke. "No. I will not have an arranged marriage. Not discussing it, Dad."

"I know." He laughed. "Tell her I get my stubbornness from her." And the conversation was over, and she heard footsteps right over her.

She stood on the balcony, almost in shock. She didn't know if she should feel better about the fact that men had such pressures to have an arranged marriage and not just the women from Singoor.

Later that day, Aadhya smiled, looking out into the ocean, the cool breeze in her hair, the warm sand caressing her bottom as she sat on the beach. It was mid-afternoon, and she felt like she had eaten six times already that day. The resort had world-class service, with staff walking around the beach and bringing food and drinks to them. They had a waiter dedicated to each one of her friends.

The food was so tasty, the drinks so refreshing, she almost forgot about the arranged marriage proposal hanging over her head.

"Ma'am, would you like to try this Pineapple and Passion fruit refresher?"

Aadhya looked away from the water to find her ever-friendly waiter holding a shot glass of the drink. She smiled, taking a small portion of the drink. “Thank you, Rosey, for the drink.”

“You are welcome, ma’am. The chef is preparing finger foods that I think you will like.” The young girl said with pride in her eyes.

Aadhya shook her head, smiling. “I don’t know if I can eat or drink anything more after this.” She held up her small glass of refresher.

The young waitress was not going to take no for an answer. “No, Ma’am. The chef will time it so you can try the finger foods. Enjoy!” With those words, the young woman left Aadhya to herself.

She looked to her side, wondering if one of her friends wanted to try her drink. She smiled when she found half of her friends’ group fast asleep after some back-to-back alcoholic drinks and massages on the beach. The rest of the girls had ventured out to check out the rest of the resort. Aadhya stayed back with the excuse of keeping an eye on the girls in slumber. Her friends didn’t need a nanny while they relaxed on the beach, but it was more for her to have some alone time.

She downed the refresher drink and let out a low moan. The drink was energizing, and she felt invigorated. If only she could halt time and savor the calming and relaxing moments without having to face her reality in Singoor.

Lost in the beautiful sight and environment, she didn’t know how much time passed before she heard the joyful squeals of her friends. She turned to find the girls who had

gone to explore the resort running back toward her. They looked so cheerful she was convinced the girls had found a treasure of some sort.

“Girls, wake up; you need to hear this,” one of her friends, Anu, called out, making the sleeping girls jerk out of sleep.

Aadhya laughed as if unable to be affected by the energy from her friends. “Anu, what’s happening?”

Anu crashed on the sand next to her and shook her head as she caught her breath, her hand on her heaving chest. Aadhya looked at her other friend. “Riti, what did you guys find that you are so excited about?”

Riti let out a squeal. “Did you know that half the resort is booked for a wedding? It’s a beach wedding, and they have events tonight, tomorrow, and the wedding the day after.”

Aadhya let out a laugh in response to her friends’ excitement. What was the excitement about a wedding?

“We have to go to these events,” Anu declared.

Aadhya had no idea whose wedding it was, but it sounded fun. She had gotten her friends to crash a wedding on their trip to South India, and for all the fun they had, she made sure to send the couple a gift after they went back to their college town.

“We are going to crash those events and the wedding, too, just like we did on one of our previous trips.” Usually, Aadhya was the mastermind behind their adventures on trips, and she enjoyed every bit of it, but she did not feel the same

excitement at that moment. It was because the events reminded her of her marriage alliance.

Damn, the Thakvar heir!

“And it’s a beach wedding,” Anu screamed excitedly as the other girls joined them on the sand. “Girls, we are getting decked up and crashing...well, not exactly crashing because we got invited by the bride’s brother.”

All her friends were excited except for her. She was the craziest of the bunch but could not match her friends’ joy then. “It’s an Indian guy born and raised in the US who is marrying a girl from India. We are totally going as the bride’s friends. It will be so much fun.”

Aadhya was only half listening to how the girls bumped into the bride’s brother and his friends and were invited to join them. She wondered if the man she had heard speaking on the phone that morning was at the resort to attend the same wedding. What was the possibility of the man who spoke with an American accent being of Indian origin?

“It will be mad fun.” Diya declared.

Aadhya was convinced it was a great idea but was annoyed that she could not ignore the thought of her impending wedding. “Let’s go get some rest, girls. Let’s party till morning.”

“Bring out your white dresses for the party because it’s glow-themed.” Loud squeals were heard on the beach as the girls talked about how much fun it would be over the next few days.

Thanks to her friend's excitement, Aadhya could shake away her thoughts and look forward to the party that night. She had only heard about the glow-themed party but had yet to attend one. The novelty of attending an event without having to wear specific types of clothes or makeup made these parties famous. People showed up in casuals, wearing a glow necklace or sometimes just a light-colored t-shirt that reflected the special light.

"Everyone, remember the matching white dresses we bought to wear to a club? Let's wear those tonight and mingle with the crowd." Riti winked.

The girls cheered around her, and Aadhya felt guilty for not being able to push away the cloud of worry even though she was excited. She knew the girls were stoked to go, and if she said anything about her concern, it would ruin all her friend's fun. Instead, she decided not to say anything to them and leave sooner if she felt uncomfortable at the party.

Somewhere in her mind, she was curious to see if her upstairs neighbor would be at the party, too. But she had no way of recognizing him. She pushed away the thoughts about a random stranger. She had no idea why she was thinking about a conversation she eavesdropped on.

Maybe because she could relate to the guy's situation?

Chapter 3

Aadhya stepped out of the shower feeling refreshed later that evening. She managed to catch a nap and was looking forward to the party. Her hair was damp from the shower and fell to her waist in soft waves.

She was about to reach for her hair dryer when she heard the man's voice again. It surprised her how clear the man's voice was despite how soundproofed the rooms in such resorts were unless they were built for the guests to enjoy the sound of the waves.

Unable to contain her curiosity, she tiptoed to the balcony and gently pressed her ear to the shutter-style doors.

"I sent you the criteria for the woman." The man paused, and Aadhya wondered what the man was talking about.

"Yes, sir." She heard another male voice through the speaker of the phone. "I have started the search and will have probable candidates sent to you as soon as possible."

"I have reviewed the draft of the contract the lawyer sent and added my comments. I need a clean separation when this is all done." Her neighbor at the resort sounded angry.

"Understood, Sir. It will be an employment contract with the conditions and the clause that no payment will be made if the contract is breached." The man speaking from the other end did not sound too confident.

“I don’t care for the money.” The man barked as if in frustration. “I need someone who will make my grandma believe that I am in a happy marriage for a year until she recovers from her illness completely.”

“Sir, don’t get me wrong, but your lawyer said that an actress would serve our purpose better. They will have the ability to put on a show.” The man still sounded unsure.

Moments of silence passed. “I don’t need an actress. I need a real woman who values family to understand why I need a contract marriage. If you cannot find one, I can find a new executive assistant.”

A long pause. “Got it, Sir. Please enjoy the event tonight, and I will keep you posted. I’ll try not to disturb you when you are with your friends.”

“No, call me.” He growled. “The event is important, but finding the right woman is all the more important. Call me as soon as you have more information.” With that, the conversation ended, and Aadhya found herself shuddering in response to what she had heard.

The man was being creative with his situation. Finding a fake wife to get his grandmother to agree to the treatment and then break off the marriage cleanly. A series of thoughts fired away in her head.

She was in a similar situation and needed a way to break out of the alliance. Her eyes widened, and a low squeal escaped her when she realized she could pull off a similar scene. She needed to find someone willing to be her temporary husband for a year. She needed someone outside the country to break the marriage without anyone in Singoor knowing.

Even as her excitement grew, she was guilt-ridden. What about her aunt? She would have to lie to her aunt, too. Her aunt would follow the rules of the land even if she disagreed with the idea. It was the only reason she considered the Thakvar alliance for her, although she knew very well that Aadhya wanted to move to a different country after her education.

Her mind raced as she quickly moved around her suite to get dressed. She had to find her way to get out of the unwanted alliance proposal. She went to a girls-only college and didn't interact much with anyone outside of college. She had not gone on dates to even consider someone as a candidate for a temporary marriage. She didn't know who could help her find a man willing to be her fake husband unless she found a man looking for a temporary wife.

As promised to her aunt, she stayed focused on her education to get a job and escape for a new beginning. She was not going to throw away all of that for nothing. She had dreams of her own, a life she had wanted and imagined for herself.

She moved quickly, slipping on the dress she had laid out on the bed to wear after drying her hair and putting on some makeup. But she had no time. She had to get to her neighbor to ask him to make her his temporary wife or maybe find her a temporary husband using his resources.

She knew the man had no reason to help her find a fake husband, but she knew she had to take a chance with the man. There was no other option for her. The door slammed behind her as she rushed out of her suite, looking for a

stairway to take her to the suite above hers. She looked around and saw no other way to reach the upper level.

Unable to find a staircase or elevator that would lead to the topmost level of the building, she wondered if there was a private staircase or elevator just for that level. Desperate to find a way, she looked around for the resort staff, but no one was in sight. The entire level was just her suite, so no other guests were there.

A few moments of frenzy later, her eyes fell on an emergency phone next to the elevator. She dialed the front desk. “I need to get to the upper level of my building. Where are the stairs?”

After moments of silence, the woman responded, “Ma’am, the upper level of your building is private. May I ask why you need access to that level?”

She had no good reason, but she desperately needed a way to talk to the man. “I need to talk to the person in that suite and tell them not to disturb me. They play loud music and disturb me all the time.”

She was sure she heard a gasp from the other side. “Sorry...Ma’am, we will ensure that does not happen.” A brief pause later, the woman continued, “We can move you to a different suite if you’d like.”

“No,” her response was involuntary. “I like the suite and just need to tell my neighbor myself. I need to meet him.”

“One moment, Ma’am.” Aadhya waited with bated breath as time ticked with music playing in her ear. She was

getting impatient by the minute. Whatever she was going to do, she had to move fast.

After what seemed like an excruciatingly long time, the music stopped. “Ma’am, Mr. Thakur apologizes for the inconvenience. He assured me that there would be no further disturbance for you.”

Thakur! An Indian last name. So, the American-sounding man was indeed of Indian origin.

“Thank you, but I still need to talk to him as soon as possible,” she insisted, her mind racing with ideas.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am. Sir is busy with a personal event this evening and cannot meet.” The woman quickly thanked her and ended the call before she could object and ask for a meeting.

Frustrated that she could not get a hold of the man who may be her only chance to dodge the bullet with the Thakvar alliance. She didn’t know how long she stood lost in thought before she heard the elevator ding, followed by her friends’ excited voices. “Aadhya, what are you doing here?” Riti asked and added, “Let’s go. We are getting late.”

“Why is your hair still damp?” Diya grumbled, dusting off the moisture from Aadhya’s hair. “And no makeup on.” Her friend reached into her small clutch to pull out an eye pencil and lipstick. “It’s a good thing you don’t need makeup.” Diya lined her eyes with the pencil and colored her lips with gloss. “There, now you are all set.”

Aadhya was tuned out of her friend’s conversation as she wondered how to contact the man. Maybe she could wait

outside on the balcony and ask him to help her.

Find her a fake husband?

She stopped walking when something clicked in her mind. “Aadhya, what happened?” Riti asked when she found Aadhya lost in thought, a broad smile on her face.

She can be his fake wife!

He is of Indian origin from his name and is from America based on his accent. It’s the perfect setting and the right match for her to pull off a stunt that no woman would have ever had in Singoor.

The next thing was to find him. The woman at the front desk said the man she had heard was busy with a private event. She had even heard him mention he was there for the same event she would attend. If only she had a way to recognize him. She would have to hear anyone speak at the party to be able to recognize his voice and talk to him.

Thakur was the last name! She could ask for him at the party.

“Let’s go fast.” Aadhya laughed, rushing her friends down the walkway, although she had no idea where the event was. She hugged Diya and said, “Thank you so much for getting us an invite to this party.”

“Wow! What got into her suddenly?” Sunny was amused at Aadhya’s sudden excitement.

“Sorry for being a damper all day. I was tired from our travel.” She truly felt guilty for not sharing her friend’s excitement all day.

Now she had something to look forward to—a potential fake husband.

Shortly after, when Aadhya and her friends arrived at the venue where the party was being held, they could see that most guests had already arrived. “We are fashionably late, girls!” Sunny was the first to enter the party area and go to the dance floor. She was a dance buff, and just like Aadhya, she would join the party and spend some time on the dance floor before she loosened up. That evening, she had another mission on her mind.

Riti and Diya were the kind to take in the crowd while sipping a drink before mingling, so they went straight to the open bar. Navya and Sana always played it by ear, and that evening, they followed Sunny to the dance floor.

Aadhya found herself scanning the crowd, but it was hard to see anyone’s faces or features, except for the bright paint or the clothes they had on that shone under the special light. She felt like a life-size light bulb in a white figure-hugging dress she had on standing in the middle of the banquet hall. Waving at her friends, gesturing for her to join them on the dance floor, she returned to the check-in area.

She approached the host desk and asked. “Hi, I can’t reach my friend on the phone. His last name is Thakur. Can you tell me if he has already arrived at the party? It’s hard to find people out there.” She let out a casual laugh.

The man behind the desk smiled politely. “I’m sorry, Ma’am. I cannot share the details for privacy reasons. You have to find your friend yourself.”

Her smile widened even though she wanted to snatch the guest list and look at it herself. “I understand. Can you tell my friend, Mr. Thakur, that Aadhya will be looking for him when he arrives?”

“Sure, Ma’am. Enjoy the party.” With a friendly nod, she walked over to where her friends were, enjoying their drinks.

“Get a drink, and we can mingle with the boys,” Navya winked. “Quite a few guys are waiting to take us dancing.”

Aadhya suddenly felt let down, but she brushed away the annoyance of not being able to find the man she was looking for.

“Aadhya, that guy is seriously checking you out?” Diya leaned over and almost yelled into her ear.

“Who?” She turned and looked around, forgetting all protocols of a girl’s night out. Their girl’s night out rules were to have fun with each other. Play hard to get so the guys don’t think the girls are an easy lay, and that meant not looking at the guy who was ogling her.

“Oh no, you looked.” Diya grit her teeth. “Don’t forget the rules.”

Aadhya didn’t care if she sent the wrong signal of interest to a stranger by looking at them. She was trying to find the man who could solve her imminent problem. When she didn’t see the man her friend was referring to, she asked, “Have you talked to the bride’s brother? The one who invited us to the event?”

“Yeah, we said hi to Jai.” Diya pointed to a man on the dance floor, cheering a young woman as she moved to the music.

Aadhya smiled as she approached the happy bride-to-be dancing with her brother. “Jai, I’m Aadhya. Thank you for inviting us to this awesome party.”

The young man smiled, extending his hand, and yelled on top of the music. “You must be with Diya and Riti. Glad you could join.”

“Likewise. By the way, do you know if Mr. Thakur is at the party?” She tried to sound as casual as possible.

Jai scrunched his nose. “This is a young people’s party. No uncles and aunts were invited.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “He is a young, Mr. Thakur. Maybe from the groom’s side?” Aadhya was not ready to let go yet.

Jai thought for a moment, and just as he was about to respond, two men walked up to him, and they appeared stressed. With that, the party’s host excused himself, and Aadhya continued to scan the room. She had no idea what the man she was looking for looked like. She searched every inch of the event venue for someone preoccupied or distracted.

The man she was looking for was expecting profiles of potential candidates to be sent to his phone, so he must be looking at his device. Her eyes swept group after group for such signs, and the glow lights made it harder to read people’s expressions, but she could see what they were doing. In general, most people seemed to be having a good time.

Just as she was about to give up and head back to her suite, her eyes fell on a man sipping his drink, his body facing her as he sat at a table, his gaze on her. He was too far for her to tell if he was looking at her, but she could feel his eyes on her.

Her heart roared to life as she looked toward the man sitting on the other end of the dimly lit banquet hall. The light in the room was from the reflection of people's clothes, and the man was dressed in a dark outfit.

As if in a trance, she stepped toward the man and felt the shudder that ran through her. Awareness increased, making her shudder, but she kept walking and squeezed through the group on the dance floor.

“Aadhya, come dance.” Navya pulled her to the group, and Aadhya smiled, moving to the music even as her eyes darted toward the man seated in the corner. A few minutes later, she slipped off the dance floor and looked at the table where she had seen the man, but someone else was seated. It wasn't the same person, and she looked around for him, but he was nowhere in sight.

She looked in the opposite direction when she felt someone's gaze on her, but he was nowhere in sight.

Why did it feel like he was observing her?

If he was, it was time for her to talk to him. With that thought, she made her way to the DJ's table, scribbled a note, and handed it over to the man playing the music, along with a currency note.

Aadhya walked around the dance floor and headed outdoors, ready to take charge of her situation. She had spent too much time worrying about the alliance and didn't want to spend another moment thinking.

“Mr. Thakur, you have someone looking for you. Please meet them in the garden outside the event center. I repeat...”

She heard the DJ announce the man twice, and she was sure the man would hear the message no matter where he was in the building, even in the restroom.

Time for her to take charge and make a deal with a stranger for a temporary marriage.

Chapter 4

Aadhya waited outside, hoping to talk to the man looking for a temporary wife. If only she could find him, she could convince him she was the one he needed for his brief marriage.

Minutes passed, but there was no sign of the man. She knew his name was Nakul from what the attendant at the front desk had said, and no other person was staying at the suite above her. If he had been at the party, he would have heard the DJ's announcement and should have been out there to meet her, especially if he had been observing her as she suspected.

Feeling embarrassed about the announcement, she stepped away from the well-lit part of the garden and walked toward the water fountain. A heavy feeling like she had made a mistake was settling over her when she heard a male voice at a distance.

Her ears perked up as she picked up on the familiarity in the voice. She walked toward the voice that seemed to be coming from behind a large tree in the garden. She stuck her ear out as she moved closer, like she had every right to participate in the conversation.

She froze when she heard the man's words. "What do you like to do for fun?"

"I'll do anything you like to do," a woman's voice said on the phone speaker.

Was he interviewing a potential fake wife candidate already? How did he find someone so quickly?

“What do you do for work?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m looking for a good role. I just finished acting school.” The woman had an American accent, too. What if the man was looking for someone from America? How could she convince him she was best suited for what he sought?

“Are you close to your family?” His question surprised Aadhya.

“Well, I don’t talk to my dad anymore because he is pissed that I went to acting school instead of pursuing engineering. And my mom—”

He interjected. “It was nice talking to you.”

Aadhya’s jaw dropped when she realized the man had ended the call. He was looking for someone who was genuinely close to their family. Good. Another point in her favor. She had a great relationship with her aunt.

But how was she supposed to approach him? She had to tell him she had overheard his conversation, which might ruin her chances with him since she was being nosey. An idea sparked in her mind just as she assessed her options.

As if that was her only shot at getting the man’s attention, she placed her phone to her ear and said, “Hi, Rajji,” She started the conversation, as she did with her aunt whenever she called her. “Yes, I’m having fun. You should have come with me too; it’s so beautiful here.”

She wasn’t sure if he was still on the other side of the tree listening to her. “I miss you too, Rajji. I can’t wait to be

home.”

Even as she faked a conversation, she was focused on any movements on the other side of the tree. She didn't hear footsteps recede, so he had to be there. “No, Rajji, I don't want to discuss the marriage alliance.” Another long pause. “I need time. I'm not ready.”

She stayed quiet, listening to someone convincing her of an arranged marriage. “I'll think about it, I promise.” She ended the fake conversation with those words and waited with bated breath.

What was she expecting from him? Propose a fake marriage? She knew he was desperate to find a wife. Why wasn't he talking to her already?

Her heart beat rapidly when she heard footsteps, but then it dropped to her stomach when she realized they were receding from her. She walked around the tree and caught a tall man in a dark suit blending into the shadows. She stood frozen, unsure of her next steps.

Moments later, she took a few steps and sat down on one of the benches by the fountain, disappointed that her plan did not work. She didn't know how long she sat lost in thought when her awareness snowballed. Her heart sped up like it did when she saw the stranger in the dark corner of the club.

A fresh masculine cologne filled the air before she heard the footsteps approaching her, and she looked up. A low gasp escaped her, and her lips parted as her eyes locked with dark, intense ones.

“Hello, Ms. Kanwar?” The man addressing her was the most stunning man she had ever seen. Even in the dimly lit space, she took in his intense eyes, the high cheekbones, a chiseled nose, and that sexy cleft on his chin.

“Yes,” she whispered as she looked up at him, anchoring her neck to meet his eyes.

He held out his hand, and one end of his mouth twisted up. “I’m Nakul. I’m told you’re looking for me.”

Mr. Nakul Thakur! Finally.

She knew it was time to stop beating around the bush and get to business. She stood up slowly, her face tilted up to help his gaze. “Yes. I hear you’re looking for a temporary wife. And I’m looking for a fake husband.”

His eyes narrowed, but he remained silent, and she continued, “My suite is right below yours, and I didn’t really need to try to hear your conversation. That’s how I know.”

After a long silence, he asked, “And what makes you think you will fit the profile I’m looking for?”

“I know. I heard your conversations.” She wanted to be open. “You’re doing this for family, and so am I. I’m suggesting we make this work...for a year.”

“What if I’m looking for someone to be my wife for over a year?” His tone was curt.

“Like two years?” She nodded. “I can make that work.”

His eyes swept over her face in a lazy gaze. “I don’t know if you fit the personality I’m looking for. Even if it’s

temporary, I don't want to be stuck with a bore.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you calling me a bore?”

“You said that. All I said was I need to ensure I'm not stuck with someone I can't hang out with.”

She found herself smiling. “Then I suggest we start spending time together.”

He shook his head. “I'm here for a friend's wedding. I won't have much time to get to know you.”

She nodded. “The bride's brother, Jai, invited me and my friends to the events. Take me as your date.”

His eyes flickered with surprise. “One day, Ms. Kanwar.”

“Okay. And this needs to be between you and me. No one else.” She didn't want her friends to know about the deal she might be making with him.

“My legal team will need to be involved to write the contract.” His tone was matter-of-fact, like he was dealing with a business person.

She nodded. “Once we agree to proceed with our deal, I will share some of my requirements. Until then, please get to know your fake girlfriend, who could be your potential temporary wife.”

“What's your reason for wanting a contract marriage?” She wasn't entirely surprised, he asked.

“I'm trying to dodge an arranged marriage bullet.” There was no reason for her to lie to him—the more authentic her reason, the easier to convince.

He pressed his lips together. “Why?” He had every right to know, but his probing annoyed her.

“I’m in the middle of my Masters in Business Administration degree, and that marriage will end my education.”

“How so?” He seemed to find her motive weak. “You could study online and finish your coursework.”

Yet again, it was okay for him to ask, but it annoyed her. “Not an option. The place I’ll need to be after marriage has no cell phone or internet connection.”

When he only looked at her silently, she smiled and said, “Come talk to me at the party so my friends don’t wonder why I’m going out with a stranger tomorrow.”

With those words, she walked away from him, knowing very well the deal was almost set. She could not believe things were falling into place so quickly. She smiled when she felt his gaze and knew he was considering her proposal.

Shortly after, she was at the bar talking to her friends. They had all gathered there after socializing for a bit. She was in mid-conversation when she felt the strange sensations again and before she could turn, Navya leaned over and whispered, “That guy who was checking you out early is walking over here.”

Her back stiffened, and she had to bite back a smile. He was checking her out even before he met her. “Which guy?” She wished her voice didn’t feel so shaky.

“Stay cool, Aadhya. He is super-hot, and he’s coming straight for you.” With those words, Navya leaned away, and Aadhya kept her eyes on the bartender, taking a sip of her drink. She was nervous and hoped the alcohol would calm her.

“Hi,” the familiar baritone was hard to miss, even with the loud music playing in the background. She paused momentarily before turning on the barstool to look at him. Navya was still beside her but turned away like she didn’t even know her. But she knew all her friends were focused on the conversation between her and the stranger who walked up to her.

“Hi,” she managed.

He leaned closer, slightly. “May I buy you a drink?”

She bit back another smile. “Maybe, once you tell me who you are and why you want to buy me a drink.”

One end of his mouth twisted up, and he sat on the barstool beside her. “I’d like to know you better this evening, and I was hoping the drink would help you loosen up.”

“Okay, but who are you?” She didn’t need to look at her friends to know they were cringing at her responses.

He chuckled like he found her act amusing. “I’m Nakul, and you are?”

She smiled at him, glad he was going along so her friends didn’t think she was crazy to make a deal with a stranger. She knew nothing about him but the fact that he was willing to do what it took to convince his grandmother to go through the surgery; she didn’t worry about the man’s character.

“I’m Aadhya. Are you on the Bride’s or Groom’s side?”

“I’m here for my buddy, Nitin.” He pointed to the groom.

“Oh, how do you know him?” she asked, genuinely interested.

“We went to college together. Are you here for Nitin or Maya?”

She shook her head. “Neither. We are just crashing the party.”

His eyes narrowed. “Interesting.” He looked around the club and let out a chuckle. “I’ve never been a party crasher. Is that fun?”

“A ton of fun.” She laughed.

“I’d like to hear more. Would you care to join me at my table?” He pointed to an empty table in the corner. The same one where she had thought she had seen someone looking at her.

Was he checking her out even before they met? That could be an advantage—one more point in her favor for the contract.

Chapter 5

The following morning, she woke again to his voice, which was muffled. She had intentionally left the windows open, yet his voice was distant. She could not figure out what he was saying, but it was him talking. She pulled on the silk robe over her nightshirt and opened the doors to the balcony.

She was surprised when she didn't hear him clearly even after she stepped outdoors. She looked around, and it was then that she saw him. He was on the sand, bare-chested and in beach shorts, walking up and down the sand as he spoke on the phone. She waved at him but he seemed to be in a deep conversation, so she waited, her eyes on him.

While her gaze lingered on him, she couldn't help but admire the steel-cut muscles and the strength his build exhibited. Her heart beat rapidly as she took in his masculinity even from afar. He was stunning and incredibly charming from how he engaged her in the previous night's conversation.

That day was her only chance to wipe out the man's doubts about getting into a contract with her. He mentioned he wanted to discuss the contract details if everything went well that day. If they could make his and her friends feel that they were into each other and found the connection from their first meeting, they would make everyone else believe they were married for real.

She felt a tug in her chest when she realized she could put her unsuspecting potential fake husband in danger in

Singoor. There was no way to avoid a trip to her birthplace, but she had to ensure it was short.

The Thakvars and their supporting clans would be pissed with her marrying someone outside the region and might attack to scare him away. She had to make sure that didn't happen. She could not wait to get the charade started, the first stop being to meet Nakul's grandmother and maybe perform the ritual at their family home.

She looked away from him when she felt guilty about lying to her aunt about the marriage, but she had no choice. Her aunt would follow the rules of the land no matter what. Her chest heaved as she felt anxious about what she was about to embark on, but she reminded herself of the freedom she would have once she separated from her temporary husband.

Aadhya smiled, knowing it would be hard to let such a handsome man go, but she knew she had to move on. The only thing to watch out for is not to believe the marriage is real and fall for her fake husband. Her eyes wandered back to the tall figure on the beach not far from her, and she wondered how he could look so perfect.

What if she had met him at a resort on a holiday and really fell for him?

She smiled, knowing that would make a hell of a love story, but she didn't have time or headspace. Even if she had both after getting out of everything, she didn't know if it would be as exciting as it was at that moment.

Her eyes fell on his handsome face, specifically on the deep cleft of his chin, wondering what it would be like to run her finger over the dip. A sizzle passed through her, making

her breath come fast. She blinked as if to push away her thoughts before they became wild, only to find him looking right at her.

“Good morning!” He smirked as she walked toward her balcony, making her look down at him. “I hope I didn’t wake you up today.” She shook her head, fighting the heat that crept up her cheeks. “Anytime I’m staying at the resort, no one else is assigned the lower suite, and I didn’t realize I was feeding all my information to you.”

She shrugged. “Well, it worked. At least you and I have something to work with.”

He only nodded.

Feeling bold and not wanting to waste any time getting to know the guy and, in a way, to get him to agree sooner to the fake marriage, she asked, “Would you like to join me for coffee?”

A moment of hesitation, but he nodded. “I’ll see you in fifteen.”

“Okay.” She stood on the balcony, casually waving at him as he approached the private elevator. When he was out of sight, she rushed into the bathroom to get dressed for coffee. Everything she did from then on was crucial for the plan.

She had set aside a pale-yellow maxi dress to wear to the *Haldi* ceremony later that morning. She quickly dressed up, ready to go any minute. She wanted to show him that she was quick to dress up, which was a pet peeve with most guys about girls taking a long time to get dressed. She quickly

applied lipstick and eyeliner and squeezed out the water from her wet hair when she heard the gentle knock.

Her heart thudded with anticipation. One was because of the charade. The other was because she had never spent alone time with a guy, especially a handsome man. She paused and took a deep breath before opening the door with a wide smile. “Hi, come on in.”

She took in his gorgeous presence and how his scent filled the air as she led him to the suite’s living room. “What kind of coffee do you like?”

“Black.” He stepped toward the coffee machine, and she gestured for him to be seated.

She turned on the coffee machine. “Aren’t you going to ask me what I like?” She held his gaze as if in a challenge.

His brow furrowed, but he didn’t say anything.

“You know for when we will be pretending to be married.” She picked up his mug of coffee and gave it to him. He nodded thanks but did not respond to her question. “Do you agree that we should share basic information?”

Yet another nod. “You’re nothing like the other women I’ve dated, so I’m unsure how it will work out.”

She was suddenly tensed, worried he might back off. She took a low breath, took her coffee to the couch, and sat across from him. “Well, I still don’t see you continuing to date any of those girls. Doesn’t that mean you need someone different for things to work out longer?”

He tipped his coffee mug just a little. “Fair enough.”

“You don’t need to decide until much later,” she said before sipping her hot drink. “Enjoy your coffee while I enjoy my Cappuccino.” She dropped an educational hint about herself.

He smirked. “Noted,” he said and added, “Have you decided to move forward if I have no objection?”

“Yes,” she said, gulping down her sip of coffee. “I told you; I do not want to get into the arranged marriage situation.”

“Aren’t arranged marriages common in India? Why are you trying to avoid it? You can still have a long-distance relationship while you finish your education.” She was encouraged by his curiosity but didn’t want to reveal anything about the clan rivalry or the unrest in Singoor.

“I-I’ve always wanted to live and work in another country. Women in my region don’t have much choice for travel. I want a career of my own and have an urban lifestyle.” She hoped her voice didn’t shake when she spoke. Singoor also brought back much sadness; she could not imagine spending more than a few weeks each year.

“Okay.” He pressed his lips together. “I have a large family. Will you be comfortable around them?”

“Yes,” her response was instantaneous and genuine. She loved the idea of a large family as she didn’t have one. Her aunt and uncle were all she had, and she lost all ties to her mother’s side of the family after her parents passed away.

Just don’t get attached to his family or him.

A warning rang in her mind. It was much needed as she had caught herself gawking a few times, admiring him, not

just his striking features.

After moments of silence and Aadhya focusing on steadying her heartbeat, she raised her eyes to find him looking at her, his eyes unreadable. Her heart somersaulted and went on a rampage as he kept looking at her, and the heat crept up her cheeks. Her chest heaved, but she could not avert her eyes. He held her captive in his gaze, and the air around them was heating up, and she knew it had to be just from the proximity.

His eyes narrowed even so lightly before a grin appeared on his handsome face. “Not bad.”

She was taken aback. “What?” Was he referring to how she reacted to his gaze? Was that good? It must be; he looked pleased.

He stood up and, without another word, placed his empty mug on the counter. “I’m ready to go whenever you are.”

She nodded, putting her mug away. “Let’s go.” She didn’t want to waste any time. She had to convince him she could do the job.

Aadhya was ecstatic but sat patiently as her friends worked on getting her decked up for the evening reception. The morning event was a super hit, and her friends were convinced Nakul was madly in love with her. She would

accompany him as his date for one more event, and her friends would not let her go with her minimal makeup look.

Shortly after, she walked down the hallway toward her date and potential fake husband, her friends watching from afar. If her date looked hot and unruly in casual clothes, he was stunningly swoon-worthy in a suit. They planned to meet early, chat over a drink, and then join the group for the evening. She had, at best, a couple of hours to address any concerns the man would have to move forward with the contract.

She didn't tell him she had already started drafting contract terms for their upcoming fake marriage. Her smile broadened as she approached the entrance of the highly-rated restaurant. "Good evening, you look stunning." She meant every word but she was being extra chirpy on purpose.

"And you are beautiful." She knew his words were a formality, but it made her heart skip a beat.

What do you expect when such a handsome man compliments you?

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to our date." She had a hard time keeping her voice steady as they stepped into a modern setting restaurant. To her surprise, no one else was there, considering it was happy hour.

He directed them toward a table by the window as if he had read her mind. "I figured it'd be better for us to talk when no one else was around."

She didn't want to know how he managed to reserve the entire restaurant at such short notice. He held the chair for

her, and she sat down. The table was set up indoors with a large window opening, creating a beautiful mix of both experiences.

“Such a lovely location,” she said, looking out into the open gardens that extended from the deck next to the window. Even as she admired the location, she felt super nervous and unknowingly avoided his eyes.

“Good. We could check out the gardens after a drink. Looks like something caught your attention.” He was being somewhat formal, almost businesslike. Was it because of the potential contract? Whatever the case, she wanted to get things rolling and move toward the plan fast.

“Nakul, what are your absolute requirements for the contract from me—or any other woman?” She was getting right into business.

One end of his mouth twisted up in amusement. “Very direct, I like that.” He looked at her for a long moment. “You are a beautiful, educated woman from an Indian family. That gives you a huge advantage. One year is long, and I want to ensure I’m not stuck with someone boring.”

She narrowed her eyes, somewhat offended that he wasn’t convinced she was terrific and fun to be with, but that was not her focus. “What would give you the confidence that I’m not a bore.”

“I’m not saying you are, but—”

She didn’t let him finish. “What would you like to ask me?”

He leaned forward and asked, “What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done?” His tone was casual, but she panicked for a moment. She had a long list of things to list, but what would be branded as crazy vs fun-loving was the challenge. “Well, there are many, but the most memorable one was when my friends and I went on stage while the music concert was going on, and I sang with the lead singer.”

He raised a curious eyebrow. “Oh, fun and you sing too? Trained, I suppose?”

A talent she barely shared with anyone. She nodded, surprised he picked up on the detail. “I did train as a kid and stopped once I got into college.”

“My grandma sings too and connects well with people who share her interest and talent.” He smiled like it brought back happy memories for him.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding...

“Great! I’m happy to sing with her if that helps her recover.” She was throwing out anything and anything to seal the deal on the contract. Thank goodness for her Sales class in her first year of business administration.

“Good,” he hesitated like he was debating his next question. “How close are you to your family?”

She felt a tug in her chest. “I don’t have a lot of family left. Just my aunt and uncle.”

His brow furrowed. “And it’s your uncle and aunt forcing you into an arranged marriage?”

She shook her head. “They never would. It’s just that the family is well known, and it’s part of the tradition to build

alliances between the..." she paused, not wanting to give out too much information about the clans and the rift between them. "Arranging marriages within the same region is what is tradition, but I have my aspirations."

"What if your aunt or uncle convinces you or forces you to agree to the arranged marriage?" His question sent a shiver down her spine.

Her aunt would never force her, but if she insisted, Aadhya would agree, even if it meant she was stuck in Singoor forever. "She would never. I'm confident. Especially if I tell her, I like to be with someone else."

"I see." He scanned her face like he was looking for a reaction to her next question. "How many serious relationships have you had prior?"

She was taken aback, but she knew why he was asking. She had never been on a date or been in a relationship. Would he consider her not experienced if she confessed? Just then, she remembered something he had said on the phone the other day. "No serious relationships. I've been focused on studying and having fun with friends. One of the reasons I'm not interested in anything but a contract marriage."

"Fair enough." He grinned, and she could not tell how she was doing on her test.

"What about you?" she asked to get some breathing room from being bombarded with his questions. She didn't care about his past relationships.

"No time for serious relationships." He shrugged, and she virtually patted herself for remembering the details from

his phone conversations on the balcony. “And now I will answer your first question. What I need most importantly out of the contract is a No-Strings-Attached outcome.”

She panicked as to what he was suggesting. Usually, No-Strings-Attached was synonymous with Friends-With-Benefits. She wasn't looking for any physical intimacy. She had to make that very clear. She opened her mouth to oppose the idea but bit back.

As if reading her thoughts, he clarified, “I cannot risk having you develop feelings for me during this year. You are an attractive woman; I could feel something from my side, too. But I want out of the deal when we go past the contract and have an intimate relationship. I can't take clingy, mushy feelings.”

It was a relief, and she let out a laugh. “Thank you for being so upfront about it. I am in 100% agreement with that.” She was so glad the guy was of the same mindset as hers. Granted, he was hot, and she would admire him from time to time, but that was harmless and well within the contract boundaries.

“Good.” He nodded. “What would you describe as your perfect evenings?”

Another tricky one? She wondered what he was trying to get out of it.

“Well, an evening like this, good company, great location, and maybe a walk in the park is perfect.” She pretty much described the setting he had planned for the evening. She paused like she was thinking or finding it hard to choose from the many different things she had done. “Let me see,

there are so many...but I would say one other would be attending a music concert on a beach. It's perfect!"

He chuckled. "Good to know. How about we make this evening a perfect one by taking a walk?"

"Sure, that sounds good."

Later that evening, she waited for him on the patio next to the reception venue. It was a beautiful night and calm compared to the noisy banquet hall. They spent several hours talking, primarily her responding to his queries. She also managed to get some of her asks out of the way, specifically around her ability to continue studying and not traveling alone or without consent from the other person.

She saw his nose scrunch in response to the ask but did not object. She added a clause in the draft contract so he would not leave the Kanwar mansion alone when they were in Singoor. All other times, she would not care. She even offered to travel with him as needed.

It was the moment of truth, and she could not think of any reason he would not want to move forward with the contract. Even if he had a reason, she was determined to address it.

"Hello, Aadhya." Her back stiffened slightly in response to his voice.

She smiled, slowly turning to face him. "Hey, are you enjoying the event?"

He nodded and stepped closer to her. "I have one last concern about the contract."

Now what?

She didn't say anything. She did not want to sound defensive or desperate. Instead, she remained silent but held his gaze.

He stepped close to her and added, "Everything works well, but if you and I cannot convince people we are a couple in love, this contract will be useless."

"Good point. How do we suggest we go about this matter?" There was no going back from this point. There would be no physical intimacy behind closed doors but they needed to be affectionate. She had to make that happen, somehow.

He lowered her voice further and said, "If you can convince your friends who are secretly watching us that we are a couple, you have a deal."

Instinctively, she wanted to look around to see where her friends were, but her final test faced her. She kicked into action as she stepped closer to him, her hand reaching his chest. I had such a beautiful evening, and I will remember this for a long time."

He smiled like he was picking up the cues of the role-playing. "Me too."

Annoyed that he couldn't develop something more elaborate to help the conversation, she moved on to the next topic. "And I must confess, it was my first time walking hand in hand with a handsome man like you." Her hand reached up to slide up his neck. "What would have made it even more perfect was if I had mustered the courage to do this."

With those words, she reached up to brush her lips against his. It was her first kiss, and all the fairy tales about the fireworks and toe curls were debunked. There was nothing groundbreaking. Unsure that was enough to prove her point, she dug her fingertips into the back of his neck. “Kiss me.”

As if that was his cue to kick off the role-playing, he moved, his arm wrapping around her waist, pulling her up, her lips closer to his. Just as she had discarded the overrated first kiss, she moaned into his mouth as his lips coaxed her sweetly. He took charge, and she was very soon lost in exploring the new emotions she felt deep within.

Her eyes rolled shut when he took over, and she had to admit the fireworks and the toe-curling were indeed correct. Her heart drummed a parade, unsure of what was happening and her skin broke into goosebumps. Her breath came hard when he broke the kiss, but he held her close as she steadied her breathing.

“Get a room, you two!” someone shouted in the background, and she felt the heat creep up her cheeks.

He slowly stepped away without breaking their gaze. “Congratulations Ms. Kanwar, we have a deal. It’s time for you to be my bride.”

Knowing people were watching her, she hugged him to avoid his eyes. She was ecstatic he agreed to the contract, but the novel sensations and how she reacted to his touch scared her.

What was she getting herself into?

Too late; anything is better than marrying the Thakvar heir and being stuck in Singoor.

Chapter 6

Singoor Desert, India

Aadhya could not believe every bit of her plan worked out. From the time she identified Nakul as her potential temporary husband and Nakul agreeing to the contract, everything happened uncannily.

It was the day before her wedding ceremony at the Singoor temple. She sat on the comfortable couch as two women applied beautiful henna art on her arms and legs in preparation for her bridal look.

Her aunt was ecstatic when she shared the news about the man she loved and intended to marry a businessman and settle overseas. She had been busy with the wedding preparations since then.

Still, Aadhya wondered if she disappointed her aunt by choosing to leave the country.

She returned to Singoor a few days ago after meeting Nakul's family over a video call. She was glad that the meeting went without a hitch and, most importantly, the contract for the marriage was signed. She was, in fact, legally married to her temporary husband already. A simple event that his grandmother could witness over a video call before her surgery.

Her uncle, her aunt's husband, was unhappy about her rejecting the Thakvar alliance, but her aunt convinced him. Her uncle was protective of her and asked her to share every detail about Nakul as if he wanted to ensure Aadhya was not

being conned for her inheritance. In the end, she was glad her uncle agreed with her decision.

It was the wedding day, and Aadhya was nervous about everything. She was worried about her aunt finding out about the charade, the Thakvars opposing the wedding, or worse, her groom being kidnapped by one of the savage clans.

The loud drum beats from outside the mansion were drowned in the sound of her heart beating in her ears. She was about to get married at the Singoor temple as per the traditions of the land. She sat in the middle of her room in the Kanwar mansion, surrounded by a dozen women busy with the finishing touches of her bridal look.

Her eyes were lined dramatically, the lip color derived from a local flower, and the pigment was so deep it was naturally beautiful. The vermilion powder was mixed in water to draw Kanwar traditional designs on her forehead.

Her body still had a hint of yellow from the *Haldi* ceremony, and her red dress made her skin glow. Especially the mehendi patterns stood out. Her hair was braided with gold medallions used to decorate along the length of it.

Her outfit was heavy, hand-embroidered silk, making her look like a queen. She felt the weight while standing but it felt lighter when she saw how her aunt smiled at her.

Her aunt was the one who raised her after her parents passed away in a fire accident almost twenty years ago. She would do anything for her aunt. Even if it meant she had to marry the Thakvar heir to make her aunt happy. But her aunt

loved her equally, and she agreed to Aadhya marrying a man outside Singoor. It was her way of dodging the bullet of the Thakvar alliance.

Thakvar heirs showed up out of nowhere, sending out alliances to the female heirs, and she had no interest in becoming a Singoor bride and being stuck in the region. She had no good memories from her place of birth and never once thought of moving back.

A week ago, she got legally married to a man who was looking for a temporary wife. He needed a wife for his grandmother's sake. It was the setup she needed to not be tied to a man from Singoor. She didn't want to be in the place where her parents took their last breath. Her goal was to live as far away as possible from Singoor, away from the darkness of the past.

The event at the Singoor temple would seal the deal for her to leave Singoor with her temporary husband, an international businessman. The ceremony was for the clan heads and close family to attend and give blessings. Also, it was a way to notify the clans that the heir was no longer available for future alliances.

“Such a beautiful bride, our Aadi, has turned into. Her to-be husband is very lucky.” Meenabai, the older woman who helped raise her, made her smile, relaxing her a bit.

“Nani, where have you been all day?” Aadhya met the older woman's eyes in the mirror.

“Getting everything ready for you,” the woman laughed and added, “I prepared all your favorite sweets and

snacks. They will be sent to where your wedding night will take place.”

“Great! Thanks, Nani.” Aadhya knew there would be no wedding night with her fake husband.

“This child is not shy at all.” Meenabai tried to chastise her for being so casual, and Aadhya laughed it off.

“Is my Aadi ready to go get married?” Her aunt’s voice made her smile. Rajeshwari Devi Kanwar, the clan leader caring for the people since her father passed away, leaving the region’s responsibilities and their only child to her.

“Rajji,” Aadhya let out a squeal of joy when she caught sight of her aunt in the mirror. “You look stunning in that outfit.”

Her aunt had her traditional clan head outfit with the long Kanwar insignia necklace. A round medallion with the symbol of a camel in front of a sunrise. A sign of hope and new beginnings. Paired with her medallion was the traditional weapon, a spear on her back, held securely by a belt wrapped around her waist.

“You are so beautiful, Aadi,” her aunt blinked away tears and quickly followed, “I cannot believe it is your wedding day.”

Aadhya hugged her aunty as soon as the women around her released her. “I’m not a kid, Rajji.”

Her aunt cupped her hand on her cheek. “You will always be my baby.”

“Rajeshwari, Aadi, we have to go. The auspicious time is upon us.” It was her aunt’s husband, the only fatherly

figure left in her life.

“Ready to go,” Aadi smiled and hugged her uncle.

“God bless you, Aadi.” Her uncle placed his hand over her head. “I was a bit upset you did not accept the Thakvar alliance, but I hope you understand why I pushed you.” Her uncle was convinced the Thakvars would do good for the region. For her, it wasn’t anything against the Thakvars, but she had no plans to spend the rest of her life in Singoor.

She nodded. “I know, Mama.”

He nodded and added, “I just got word that the Thakvars are also at the temple.” Aadhya’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Wow!” her aunt said. “They are indeed known for their magnanimity and kindness. I grew up with their sister, and from what I know of them, I’m not surprised they decided to attend Aadi’s wedding, although we did not accept their alliance.”

Aadhya felt the weight of a boulder on her in response to her aunt’s words. Did her aunt want her to marry the Thakvar? Was she making a mistake by fooling the one person she loved most for selfish reasons?

The questions were burning in Aadhya’s head as they rode to the Singoor temple, but she hesitated to bring them up. She could not disappoint a man who trusted her to solve their problems with a marriage contract. But was she letting down her people by choosing not to marry the Thakvar heir?

She was anxious when they reached the temple, and the vehicle stopped beside a palanquin decorated with the Kanwar clan colors. Gold, Blue, and Red. It was traditional for the Singoor brides to ride the palanquin to the wedding pavilion right in front of the deity, Lord Shiva.

“Rajji,” she said, her voice shaky as she held her aunt’s elbow. “Do-do you think I’m making a mistake by not marrying the Thakvar heir? Are you upset about me marrying a man from outside Singoor?”

Her aunt let out a laugh. “Silly girl, why would you think that? I respect the Thakvars, but not to the point where I force you to marry their heir. Now,” her aunt paused, smiling. “If you didn’t have anyone you loved, then I would have convinced you to consider the match, at least.”

Aadhya felt the guilt lift away with her aunt’s sweet words, but the part about the charade with her fake husband was still eating at her. She could hear the drums from a distance as she climbed into the palanquin. The clan men chanted the holy words as they carried her, and her mind was in turmoil.

Was it too late to end the charade? Stop the wedding in the temple?

It would be easy for her to say no to the marriage even at that point if she wanted to. The rules of the land were the woman, especially an heir, could decide not to get married at any moment but once married, they were bound for life as long as they were in Singoor. She would soon break that marriage rule of bond by leaving the land and ending the contract in a year.

She felt conflicted about everything, and just like every time, she thought of her parents. What would they have wanted for her to do?

Another weight settled over her when she realized her father would have wanted her to take the responsibility of the Kanwar clan as their heir. Relieve her aunt from the burden she carried all these years.

It was too late.

She could not go back on her word to Nakul. He trusted her to help him convince his grandmother to get treatment. She got him involved in this somewhat dangerous situation, and she could not go back at this point.

If her parents were around and didn't have the sadness that hung over her when she visited her home, she would have been more than happy to marry the Thakvar man. But no. She needed to be away from the land and be able to visit her aunt from time to time.

She also wanted to finish her education, and marrying a Thakvar meant no way to graduate with a business administration degree. In her thoughts, she had even reasoned that she did not have it in her to be the heir and commit her time to the people of Singoor.

The Thakvar was better off marrying a woman who had grown up and was willing to be in the Singoor region.

Chapter 7

Thakvar Mansion, Singoor

It was almost time to set the next step of his plan in motion. Later that morning, he would marry Aadhya Kanwar and take over the responsibility of the Kanwar clan. It was one of the alliances needed to restore peace in the region.

The Thakvar heirs needed the marriages to happen sooner rather than later. Rishab married Gauri Bhil, and as soon as he tied the knot with the Kanwar heir, they could start commissioning the status of the Goddess.

The goddess taken away from Singoor thirty years ago must be returned to the people to bring the clans back together. Nakul was on a hunt to find the sculpture that was taken, but they didn't want to take any chances and wait too long to find the statue.

The prominent clans first commissioned the sculpture in the past after three alliances were formed over a hundred years ago. They would follow the same process to commission the Goddess statue.

One such ritual was to take the jewelry, precious metals, black diamonds, and other rare gems to fifty-one temples of Goddess Shakti to seek her blessings to commission the new statue.

Nakul's parents would start the pilgrimage right after the wedding festivities were done that day. Aadhya Kanwar

was the missing piece, and he would be married to her soon to set things in motion to bring the clans together.

He smiled, thinking of his mother. Chitra Thakvar was the happiest woman on the planet, as her wishes came true. All her three sons would be married before sunset on Singoor lands that day.

His smile broadened when he thought of his youngest sibling, Nandini Thakvar. Their sister was mad for not being able to attend any of the brothers' weddings. The youngest of the four, and the brothers were extremely protective of her.

No matter how upset his sister got, it was not safe for her to be in Singoor amidst the chaos and the unknown danger. Nakul, just like his brothers, was on a mission to unite the clans and soon hoped for their sister to visit the home where his father grew up.

Earlier that morning, his parents helped him get dressed for the wedding, and he knew his bride would identify him as a Thakvar as soon as she noticed any of the clan-specific items he had on that morning as a part of his attire.

The design of the Thakvar medallion was unique, and it was surrounded by gold-rimmed tiger nails. The ceremonial sword he carried had a jeweled handle and was secured to his side in an ornately decorated gold case. He had almost forgotten to wear his ring.

Mihir Thakvar had given his three sons a ring with the Thakvar symbol that served as an identification as heirs to the clan. Nakul didn't want to take any chances while at the resort with Aadhya and had put it away.

His wife-to-be may have grown up away from Singoor, but he knew she would recognize the Thakvar emblem when she noticed the symbol with the attacking tiger.

Nakul was ready. He had a plan of action no matter how she would react or respond to the truth!

Later that morning, Nakul waited for his bride at the Singoor temple. The one he had secured as his wife through a legal marriage and a contract a week ago. There was no other way to get her to agree to the alliance between their families. It was moments before she would find out the truth about him, and he was prepared for every possible outcome.

It's what he did even for work. He was the business strategy guy for all the companies he and his brothers owned, and he had to apply the same principles in his personal life. Whatever her reaction would be, he was ready. But knowing her, he knew exactly how she would react to the truth about his identity. Even if she knew the Thakvars were present at the temple to attend the wedding and suspected anything, he had a plan laid out for that, too.

Nakul heard the drumbeats and corn shells clashing, getting louder, and he looked toward the entrance. His dark eyes followed the tip of the palanquin in which Aadhya was being carried over to where he stood, waiting to take her hand. He knew she had not suspected anything if she reached the temple.

The ceremony would be long, and he would not see her until after the rituals. Anything he needed to say to her would be much later when they had some alone time. The

Kanwar clan women who led the palanquin all looked surprised to see the Thakvar clan in total attendance. But they quietly went and stood to the side.

He then looked at the Kanwar clan leader, Aadhya's aunt, as she greeted the clan heads who were in attendance for the event. He had seen pictures of the woman who took care of the Kanwar clan after her older brother passed away in a tragic accident. The woman respected her niece's wish to marry the man she loved and never once pressured her into the alliance.

As Aadhya's aunt approached him, he bowed to her to take her blessing. "Nakul, it is so good to meet you in person." She placed her hand gently on the top of his turban, giving him her blessing.

Nakul straightened his back, looked down at the woman, and noticed her eyes were trained on the Thakvar insignia on his turban. Her eyes were confused as they averted from the metal piece with the Thakvar emblem to the ceremonial sword he carried.

"I'm Nakul Thakvar, son of Chitra and Mihir Thakvar, here to take your niece's hand in marriage." He saw a strain of fear in the older woman's eyes. "I'm also the man who loves your niece with all his heart." Her aunt didn't know how the Thakvar heir looked but had seen pictures of the man her niece loved.

"I don't understand." Her aunt's voice was loud but drowned in the background noise, even for the folks standing a foot away from her.

Nakul nodded. "I wanted Aadhya to like me for who I am and not be forced into an arranged alliance. We love each

other very much, and I promise to cherish and care for her while we strengthen our ties to keep our region safe.”

A moment of blankness later, there were tears in her eyes. “God bless you, Nakul. Aadhya is lucky to be marrying a man like you.”

With those words, she nodded at the priest to start the rituals and walked to the palanquin to bring his bride to the wedding pavilion. He could see the joy in her aunt’s eyes; that emotion was his insurance for the event to go without a hitch. Aadhya would not do anything to upset her aunt, not when the woman was bouncing with joy.

A small smile played on his lips as his bride approached where he stood, holding a garland of flowers. As per the Kanwar traditions, as soon as the woman places the flower garland around her groom’s neck, the union is made. He knew she would be too nervous to notice the Thakvar attire and emblems he had worn for the event. He hoped to reason with her privately and assure her he would abide by the contract as planned and ask her to do the same.

His motive for marrying her was to be able to commission the sculpture of the goddess in case they couldn’t find it in the next few months. The past few investigations about the statue yielded no leads or clues.

Nakul kept his eyes on Aadhya as she moved toward him. An embellished translucent cloth covered her face, and the skirt moved fluidly with her every step. As she got closer, the drumbeats intensified, and the priests read the *mantras*, louder.

She stopped a foot from him and raised her hands to place the flower garland over his shoulders. He still could not see her face as it was covered. The priest handed him a flower garland, and as soon as he reached for it, one of the women standing next to Aadhya lifted her veil.

His breath quickened when his eyes fell on the magnificently beautiful face of his bride. The woman was a classic beauty and looked stunning even in casual clothes, but in the traditional attire with the jewelry, she looked like a piece of art.

He felt a strange warmth spread over his chest when she raised her eyes to look at him, beaming. She lowered her eyes as he placed the garland around her neck. The priests chanted the holy words to bless their marriage and the region. He kept his eyes on her all along, even as he wondered why he wasn't looking away. The moment felt real; although he knew it was only a contract marriage, excitement took root.

He followed the priest's instructions and placed a good amount of the vermilion powder on the forehead, spreading it into the partition of her hair. As he pulled his hand back, a few powder specs fell on her nose, making her look even more beautiful.

Unable to suppress the need to touch her, he gently tapped away the powder and saw her cheeks redden. It wasn't his who felt the reality of the moment.

He didn't have to look in the direction of his parents to know how happy they were with their sons' marriages.

Moments passed before she slowly raised her eyes. From the way her veil was layered over her head, it shielded

her face from anyone else but him. Her eyes met his briefly before she looked up at his turban.

He saw the bliss in her eyes be replaced with horror. Her eyes widened before she let out a loud gasp. A moment later, her eyes rolled shut, and she started to sway and fall backward. Her reaction was not something he had factored in the level of shock she would experience.

The women around them gasped when he briskly slid his arm around her, pulling her to him. He needed to get her some fresh air. They were surrounded by many people from various clans, present to witness two clans coming together, and he needed to move past all of them.

He scooped his bride into his arms and moved toward the temple's back entrance. Aadhya's aunt and a few others followed closely as her aunt called out his wife's name to wake her up. He knew Aadhya had been nervous about the ceremony, and added to that, the shock magnified her reaction to his real identity.

"Aadhya, what happened?" Her aunt looked distraught as Nakul lay her down on a bench and started tapping her on her cheeks. Even as his mind told him it was nothing, he felt a tug in his chest, guilty about putting her through the trauma.

A few seconds later, Aadhya's eyes fluttered open and looked lost. Her eyes were only partially open as he helped her sip on some water. "Aadi, are you okay?" Her aunt was on the brink of tears.

"I-I want to go home," Aadhya's voice was a whisper. Nakul looked at his security head and signaled him to prepare the car. He scooped her back into his arms.

“Not yet, Aadi—”

Nakul interjected before her aunt could finish. “I’ll have a doctor check on her as soon as we reach.”

Her aunt placed her hand on him. “Nakul, the wedding ritual is complete, but you both need to meet the heads of the other clans. Aadhya seems to be doing okay. You must stay for a bit longer.”

“I understand. But I need to get her home. She is going to be miserable here in this state. Please join my family in greeting the guests here to attend the event.” Nakul held the almost limp body of his wife, guilt twisting the insides of his chest.

With those words, he left her aunt in shock, took her to the SUV, placed her in the back seat, and slid into the driver’s seat. He paused momentarily, thinking of his route to his destination and his security team followed him.

Hours later, Aadhya woke up to whispers. She opened her eyes to a familiar space, her room. At the foot of her bed was the woman who raised her. Her heart started to beat rapidly at her last memory from the temple, and she hoped it was a bad dream she was waking up from. She was in her pajamas, ran her hand over the soft material, and was assured it was the morning of the wedding.

“Nani,” her voice was gruff when she spoke.

Meenabai looked up, startled. “Aadi, you are finally awake.” The elderly woman called out to a few other women who were part of the household staff before adding, “Let’s go. We have to get ready.”

Aadhya felt a ton of weight lift off of her. Good. It was all a nightmare that Nakul was a Thakvar.

Why the heck did she even have such a nightmare?

“What time do we need to leave?” Aadhya sat up slowly and planted her feet on the white marble floor, admiring the beautiful henna art on her feet.

“Soon,” Meenabai said, adding, “You should eat something first.”

Aadhya was already halfway to the bathroom. “I need to brush my teeth and take a bath.”

“You’ll need to be quick. Don’t keep playing with the water,” Meenabai teased like Aadhya was still the five-year-old who loved to play with running water.

“Yes, yes, I will.” She smiled.

A few minutes later, she stepped out of the bathroom, a strange anxiety building up inside her. Meenabai was in her room as she walked to her closet where her wedding outfit was hung. To her surprise, the space was empty.

She heard the door click open. “Nani, where is my—” She lost her words when she saw the man who entered her bedroom. It was Nakul, dressed like he was in her horror scene but in a different outfit. He no longer carried the ceremonial sword or the turban.

As Meenabai exited the room, her eyes met his briefly before her eyes fell, yet again, on the medallion on his chest. She noticed he also wore a ring that was indeed the Thakvar heirloom.

A scream escaped her, but it was barely a gasp. “It-It can’t be.” Her body started to shake, and she grabbed the closet door for support. “Who are you?”

“Aadhya, please.” He gestured for her to sit on the bed.

Her body started to shiver again, and her legs threatened to give away. She stepped back as he got closer and held her hand up. “Who are you?” she repeated, her voice weak.

He didn’t respond immediately. “As per last week’s legal marriage, I’m your husband.”

His response only triggered her. “You are a cheat and a fraud.” She was livid.

Something sparked in his eyes, but he stayed rooted to his spot. He did not react or respond to her words.

“You-you deceived me into this marriage.” Her eyes flared.

The intensity in his eyes softened as a smile appeared on his handsome face. “Remind yourself who proposed this marriage, wife.”

“You set me up and...” she lost her words as her anger peaked, remembering how much she had put in to convince him to marry her, unaware of his identity.

“You are a liar and a cheat.” She wanted to scream.
“Why am I surprised? You are a Thakvar.”

His eyes narrowed as his hand made it into her hair.
“Take it back.”

“No. I won’t.” She met his glare even as his fingers tightened in her hair.

“Take. It. Back.” His words made her shiver as a sliver of fear passed through her. Confident she was safe in her home, she tilted her chin up, boldly looking into his eyes, and shook her head.

“No.” She was pissed and felt like a fool to have believed him in such a short time.

Just from how he looked at her and his fingers fisted, she knew he was livid, but she would not let him intimidate her. He glared at her for a long moment. “The next time, if you want to call *me* a cheater, you’ll have to explain the contract to your aunt.”

He was blackmailing her, and that made her body shiver. She could not let her aunt find out about the charade. “My aunt will support me, no matter what.” It was the truth, but she knew she would bring her aunt a lot of sadness when she found out she had lied. She could never put her aunt through that. “I’m an heiress to the Kanwar clan and have rights. My word is all it takes to annul this marriage.”

“Really? And then what do you think would happen?” He sounded too calm and it angered her further.

Not willing to let him break her spirit. “My aunt will get the marriage annulled. I will tell her I was deceived into

this marriage.”

The smirk on his face made a strange sensation ripple through her. “I dare you to. Tonight.” He took a step closer, lowered his voice, and added, “And you’ll need to do it before we consummate our marriage, and then, there is no possibility of annulment, is there, Mrs. Nakul Thakvar.”

She was taken aback that he knew the rules of the land. “Yes, I will do it right after.”

“And?” His tone was so calm, and all she could think about was to reach out and slap the smirk off his stunning face. “What do you plan to do?”

“Why do you care what I do after?” she snapped.

“Because,” he ran his eyes over her face and added, “I intend to exercise the contract the moment you leave the Singoor region.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I made a contract with Nakul Thakur, who clearly doesn’t exist. You cannot hold that over my head. That contract is void.”

“Are you sure about that?” The confidence in his voice somewhat stumped her.

“Yes,” she said, confident about the contract that she meticulously wrote. “The contract is no good, and neither is the legal marriage because it was all set up with a Thakur, not a Thakvar.” He remained silent as she glared at him.

“I never told you my last name was Thakur.” His tone was ice cold, sending a shiver down her spine. She ignored his comment and reached for the contract document from inside

her computer bag. Because she swore she saw the last name as Thakur when she reviewed it.

“Who told you my last name was Thakur?” He insisted, and she could not remember why she thought his last name was Thakur. She could not have made that up unless someone told her.

She blinked when she saw the name on the contract. Her stomach dropped, and she felt dizzy when she realized she had a legally binding agreement with a Thakvar. She slowly looked up at him only to find him looking at her, one end of his twisted. He looked like he was drinking in her misery and enjoying every bit of it.

She could not believe that she was legally married to a Thakvar, with a contract she wrote. She walked right into a trap he set up.

“How could you do this to me?” her voice shook. “I don’t want to be your wife. Not now, not ever.”

He raised a curious eyebrow. “Are you planning to get into a legal battle with me?”

She shook her head and looked at him in silence. She had barely processed the fact that she was tricked into marrying a Thakvar heir. And to find out she had no way out of it, even if she got an annulment in the region. Her only choice was to come clean with her aunt to break the marriage, then be stuck in the region and eventually marry another heir that came along.

The last resort was not a good choice for her. She would hurt her aunt and ruin her chances of ever leaving

Singoor. She could not risk her aunt knowing the charade she pulled to marry the ‘man of her dreams’ but was cornered by a Thakvar. She wondered what he told her aunt about how the businessman she fell in love with happened to be a Thakvar.

“You can’t escape the contract... wife,” he said with a smirk on his handsome face.

With those words, he left her alone, shuddering on the inside. It felt like she had lost all control over her life. She was now a Thakvar despite everything she did to avoid the alliance.

Chapter 8

Aadhya stood in the middle of her bedroom in a dazed state after he left, processing the situation until she heard voices. One of them was her aunt's. She wiped her face away like there might be angry tears before walking to the door with a smile.

“Where is my sweet Aadi?” Her aunt's voice made her want to fall to the floor, beg for forgiveness, and confess but she could not.

“Rajji, so sorry I...” her aunt hushed her.

“It was a lot to handle for my sweet child. Are you feeling better now?” her aunt asked, adding, “Your husband was here to see you. You must be feeling better now.”

She nodded, trying to fake a blush. The heat that rose to her cheek, tinting it, when he was close just a couple of weeks ago, was nowhere to be seen. “Yes.”

Her aunt ran her hand over Aadhya's cheek. “You are so lucky to have Nakul as your husband. He is so caring and considerate.”

“And fearless,” Meenabai added from behind, somewhat satirically. “Who would leave the temple in the middle of the event for his wife? That too to take her home.”

“Fearless, indeed.” Her aunt's words held pride. “Just like your father, Aadi.”

Aadhya found it hard to meet her aunt's eyes and excused herself to the bathroom. "I'll be right back." She shut the door and plastered her back to it, fighting back tears. The situation was overwhelming, and she could not tell her aunt the truth. She was deafened by her racing heart as she stepped into the shower and let the stress flow with the water. The angry sobs drowned in the running stream.

Shortly after, she stepped out of the bathroom to find a few more of the staff in her room. Her aunt looked up from the conversation with Meenabai. "Aadi, come sit here. Let's get you ready for the evening."

"What? Why?" she asked, scrunching her nose.

The women broke into laughter, and Meenabai shook her head. "You should be spending your nights in the tents on the holy lands, but your husband." Meenabai let out a sigh. "He would not allow it since you are not feeling well. The boy is adamant to keep you home."

"No. He loves her Meenabai. Aadi, you are so lucky," her aunt said, a broad smile on her face. "He told me how he wanted you to fall for him for who he is as a person so you didn't feel resentful about an arranged marriage. So thoughtful."

What a web of lies her fake husband was weaving!

"That's enough talking, everyone. Let's prepare the bride for her first night with her husband." Meenabai's words made her stomach drop, but she could not find the energy to say anything.

Aadhya didn't know how long she sat on the chair in her room as multiple women worked to prepare her for her wedding night. Her skin was softened with fragrant oil; her hair was dried with fragrant smoke; her face was prepped with turmeric for the glow. She didn't have the heart to tell them it was all a waste. Even though they were married twice, once legally and the other traditionally, no wedding night was happening for a contract marriage.

"Finish getting her dressed. We cannot keep her husband waiting," one of the women spoke, jolting Aadhya out of her thoughts.

"Did you set up the food for them to last the night?" another woman whispered, followed by giggles. These women had been a part of the household and were part of her growing-up years, but she never connected with them. She could not figure out if the women were trying to get her excited. It was sweet of them to try and ease her into an important night for any bride, but she was nowhere near that head space.

"That's enough, ladies. Let's take her to her husband now." Meenabai's words made everyone around her scramble to finish their tasks.

Aadhya took an extra moment to process the older woman's voice. "Take me where?" She met Meenabai's gaze in the mirror.

The older woman shook her head. "You were supposed to spend your first three nights on holy lands with your husband. But your husband," she sighed and added, "We have prepared the north wing for you and your husband."

A shiver passed through her. The north wing of the mansion had been shut down from the time her parents passed away. It was reserved only for the heir and their spouse. She had not been to that side of the mansion in years. Too many memories about her parents were attached to that part of the mansion, and even when her aunt insisted she check out the new updates, she never went. It only brought her more sadness when she thought of her parents. The main reason why she wanted to get away from Singoor.

“Everything is ready in the new wing.” Someone announced, and all the women got up. Her dress felt soft to her skin with no embellishments like she could sleep in it. She slowly stood up and waited as two women placed a heavy veil over her head, the heavy hem of the fabric keeping it from moving so it covered her face at all times.

Her steps were soft even as her heart beat hard in anticipation of the conversation she was about to have with her husband. She was in a tight spot and had to figure out another way to get out of the marriage.

Maybe make another deal?

She was still lost in thought even as she went up the wide, rounded stairs, missing out on the details of the décor that had been updated recently. She pushed aside the anxiety that surfaced from the familiarity of the space to stay focused on what she was going to say to him to set her free of the ties. Whatever way it was, it had to be aligned with the rules of the land; if not her aunt would disagree.

What did the Thakvars want in the first place? Was he there for the oil, like some of the clans believed?

Ishani Gujjar was the first of the Singoor women to be married to the Thakvar heir, and at that point, no one knew there was another heir. Later, she heard from her aunt that the Thakvars had reached out about an alliance. It was at that point they knew there was more than one.

Were there more heirs? What was their ultimate motive?

Especially after everything Nakul pulled to get her to be the one to initiate the contract marriage proposal. Her head spun at the endless questions that popped up about every one of the situations that led to her meeting him.

Aadhya calmed herself down and followed her instructions for the evening with her husband. She was shown the extravagant lay of food outside with various sweets, savory snacks, and all fruits. She made a note of the drink to offer to her husband as a part of the ritual before she was directed to the bed.

The air in the room held a delicate floral scent despite how many flower garlands hung along with the petals covering the bedspread. She climbed onto the bed as instructed, sitting in the center of it, her veil covering her face and body. She drew her knees into her chest and realized her blouse had a plunging neckline.

The women left after adjusting the flower petals around her, and she could hear their giggles even as they went down the stairs. Minutes later, she was on high alert for his arrival. She told herself to be calm and talk to him like she had at the resort where they met, like she had nothing to lose.

She had her future and freedom on the line and didn't know how to navigate the messy situation. She took a deep breath to calm herself down. She needed to find a way to get him to let her go.

What if he wanted her soul to set her free?

Minutes passed, and there was no sign of him. Was he not coming? Did he change his mind about the contract? Just at that thought, something sizzled in her mind.

He may have tricked her into marrying him, but she had to plan an exit. Was there a loophole in the contract?

Lost in her wild thoughts about escaping the fake marriage, she missed the approaching footsteps until the door clicked open, and her husband stepped inside. A sudden realization hit her that she had been sitting on the bed as if in invitation to consummate their marriage. Why was she sending him mixed signals?

As soon as he stepped in, she caught the surprise in his eyes and heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, good. It's you." She lifted her veil with the idea of putting it away and remembered she might need the fabric to lay over her chest.

She saw the smirk on his face. "Were you expecting someone else, dear wife?" His words slithered in sarcasm.

She let out a nervous chuckle as she slid off the bed. "Oh, I thought it might be my aunt or Meenabai checking on me to ensure I was still in the bridal position." She needed to be on good terms with him to change his mind. "Do you want to drink something?" She maintained a casual tone like she was not bothered by how she was conned into the marriage.

She walked over to the table where the drinks were set up and poured the special drink that she had been instructed to serve.

He remained silent, and she poured the drink and walked over to where he stood, a suspicious look on his face. “What is this?”

“It’s a local, traditional drink.” She shrugged like she was not eager to pick up the conversation where they left off earlier that evening.

He placed his hand on the glass and pushed it away from him. “You first. Then I’ll drink it.”

“Fine, your loss.” She kept her eyes on him as she sipped the drink, debating if she should ask him the questions that played in her mind.

He held her gaze as she took a few sips of the drink, and she didn’t avert her eyes as they looked at each other in silence. Soon, her curiosity got the better of her. “Did you change the name on the contract after I reviewed it and sent the edits?”

“No.”

She nodded, wanting to kick her for not paying attention. The way he responded to her, she knew the Thakvar name was always there on the contract, but in her blind excitement, she did not catch it.

“At the resort, was that even a real wedding?” she wanted to know as if she was finding ways to prove to her that she had not turned a blind eye to everything.

“Yes.” His response was curt.

“What part was fake?” she held his gaze as she spoke.

“Does it matter?”

“Just tell me, please.” She let out a sigh.

He hesitated for a moment. “I don’t have an ill grandmother.”

“So, the groom was your friend, and he got married at the resort. It’s the same one we happened to be at...and my trip was so last minute. I can’t believe it.”

He took one step closer to her, took the glass of juice from her to take a big gulp of the drink. “The wedding was at *my* resort and it was my wedding gift for my friend. And your trip was not last minute; I planned for you to be there with your friends. How did you think your friend got an all-inclusive deal for a fraction of the cost?”

She felt weak to the bone. She took a deep breath, processing the details. “Was it worth it?”

“It will be.” He downed the drink and walked away.

“For what? Is your family really after the oil?” she asked and paused when she caught something flicker in his eyes and added, “I will be your wife as per the contract but I will fight you tooth and nail if you even think about bringing harm to our land or the people.”

“Will you?” It was a challenge.

Her eyes flared. “Have no doubt.”

With those words she walked away from him not wanting to give him any more wins that day. There must be a

grand scheme for him to have pulled off such a stunt—all to keep her stuck in a corner.

But she had other plans!

Nakul stepped away from the master suite and walked around the rest of the wing in the Kanwar mansion. Thanks to the recent upgrades done in the building, he obtained a schematic of the space prior. He had scoped out a location for his office and quickly found the ideally located room.

He didn't trust anyone in the Kanwar mansion, including his bride. Anyone could be working on Tantra's word for greed as Devraj Gujjar had. He walked around the rectangular room, finalizing the placement of everything he needed to start working from there. He would be in the office when he was not meeting other clans.

He had lined up his team to come to the mansion the following day to check the space for bugs and to soundproof it. He could have conversations without worrying about being heard.

His wife was on a mission to get out of the marriage with him, but it would be hard to crack through the trap he lay around her. The meticulously detailed contract she wrote would work in his favor.

She would undoubtedly try to get out of the contract and the Singoor marriage. One thing that worked effectively was playing the aunt card. He knew that would be his most significant leverage even before he met her.

He warned himself to watch out for any signs of seduction. Given how much she hated being in the Singoor region, she could go to any lengths. And with the large almond eyes and the beautiful curves, she didn't need to try too hard to get him or any man to give in to her commands.

The first time he laid eyes on her, he knew she was trouble and added the clause about the intimacy so that he didn't give into the pull however she tried to rope him in.

Chapter 9

Aadhya woke up the following day to a distant tsking sound. Her eyes fluttered open to find the staff opening the curtains to let the morning light in. It took her a moment to remember where she was, and she slowly sat up, smiling at Meenabai. “Good morning, Nani.”

The older woman shook her head. “Your husband left two hours ago.”

She sat up confused by the angry look on Meenabai’s face. She ran her fingers through her long, messy hair. “Okay. Are you upset he left without me?”

Meenabai got angrier. “You were supposed to spend every minute of three days with your husband. You would have done that if you were in the tents on the holy land.”

“Nani, please.” She held her hand up. “Not now. I need coffee.”

“No,” Meenabai growled and Aadhya knew not to mess with the woman who was like the grandmother she never had.

“Why is it my fault if Nakul left to do whatever he wanted?” Aadhya batted innocently, hoping to appease the older woman.

“Do you know where he went and why he left so early?”

Aadhya shook her head, knowing there was no way out of the conversation. But she had to get out from Meenabai's angry gaze. "I was in deep sleep after—"

"Don't you make excuses." Meenabai moved closer. "You not only did not consummate your marriage but also let your husband escape. What if he chooses not to come back?"

Wait! Is that a possibility?

Aadhya shook her head. "You are being dramatic now, Nani. Why won't he come back?" Even as she said the words, her mind was racing as she remembered a clause; she had added to the contract to make Nakul feel like he would not feel tied down by the marriage.

Nakul can choose to step away from the marriage at any time, but Aadhya is the only one to manage the communication with her family for this reason.

She had added that as the best-case scenario where Nakul's grandmother's surgery was a success, and they didn't need to stay married. For her, she would spin off a story about how her husband left her, and she would move on with her life.

If only she knew, there was no grandmother and she was stuck in the marriage. A marriage she wanted but was left with an unwanted husband!

"Aadi, are you even listening to me?" Meenabai was unhappy. "It was your wedding night and you did not let your marriage be consummated and now your husband left in a hurry."

Aadhya's stiffened. She didn't think she would be questioned about not spending the night with her fake husband. Unable to come up with a response to the older lady's statement, she remained silent.

Meenabai glared at her for her silence. "Maybe you were a little tired last night but tonight, you must become his wife." The older woman walked over to her and whispered, "Even if it means that you sleep naked all night, you need to get your husband to claim you."

Aadhya swallowed. "Okay." She had never seen the older woman look so intense and knew not to say anything to oppose her instructions.

"Now, we have a busy morning, and I want you to move fast. We have festivities planned for the evening, and after that, we will prepare you for your wedding night." Meenabai gestured to the other staff, and two women approached her.

"Hang on, let me brush my teeth and shower alone." Aadhya was not used to being readied by the staff and had opposed it since she was a child. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

She made a quick run to the bathroom. She shut the door and looked into the bathroom in the daylight. The night before she made a quick stop to grab a change of clothes placed in the closet and ignored the details.

The bathroom was nothing like she remembered when her parents used that wing as their private quarters. The bathroom was a lot bigger than she could remember when she was a child. She slowly took in the details and scrunched her nose. "Seriously?"

She walked around the massive marble bathroom, realizing it matched a model bathroom she had shared with her aunt a few years ago. She had a special appreciation for modern design bathrooms, and her aunt had gone above and beyond to remodel the space. It was as if her aunt was enticing her with the new bathroom and the complete remodel of what was once her parent's private quarters.

Guilt gripped her when she realized her aunt was trying hard to get Aadhya to stay in the Singoor area. She sat on the platform built around the bathtub, overwhelmed by her emotions, and sat for a few minutes, her head in her hands. She felt her heart tug in response to her aunt's love but still could not get herself to move back to Singoor.

She looked up at the large skylight. "I'm going to make the best of my time here in Singoor. Make Rajji happy," her voice shook as she remembered how her aunt cared for her after her parents passed away, showering her with so much love and affection that she almost didn't miss her parents.

"Aadi, are you playing with water in there?" Meenabai's annoyed voice came through.

"No, Nani." A small laugh followed her response. "I'll be out in a few minutes." The older woman was stern about her because she was convinced her aunt's pampering spoiled her.

Hours later, Aadhya stretched her back slowly as she sat on a small wooden platform, performing a post-marriage ritual. Meenabai told her it was a prayer for her husband's safe return. She knew the man was not going anywhere and it was a

waste of time, but she was in no position to push back on the older woman.

After skipping breakfast as part of the ritual, she impatiently looked at the clock when her stomach grumbled. Some of her belongings were moved into the closet in what seemed to be the new private space she had to share with her husband. Even as she processed that information, she wondered if she could stay in the Kanwar mansion and avoid going to the Thakvar mansion.

What was the clause in the contract anyway? Was it to be where he chose to be?

She thought hard about what was in the contract about their living arrangements. She was so sure the marriage charade would be short-lived that she didn't consider the residency. They had clauses about accompanying each other on required travel but nothing about where to live. She could not leave the Kanwar mansion if she needed to put any plans to drive him away into motion. She had no idea what they would be but knew she would benefit from having a home-field advantage. She made a mental note to talk to him about staying in the Kanwar mansion.

“Aadi, take the flower garland,” Meenabai whispered as Aadhya sat close to the priest, who held out the flowers, as she was lost in thought.

She was thankful for the veil covering her face as she no longer focused on the ritual. She nodded before taking the flower garland from the priest and placing it over the deity that was set up using a coconut. She followed the T's instructions

not to upset Meenabai, who was now watching her every move like a hawk.

The moment she bowed to the deity and took blessings from the priest conducting the ceremony, Meenabai held Aadhya by her hand and rushed her toward their private mansion wing. “Nani, slow down.” The older woman was too fast for Aadhya to keep up in her traditional attire. “My skirt is heavy.”

“Don’t complain. If only your aunt had let me force you to wear traditional clothes when you came for the summer holidays.” Meenabai grumbled and issued orders to the staff as they walked toward what seemed like the dining area. She had either forgotten the layout of her parent’s quarters, or it was completely redone.

As they approached the dining table, Meenabai stopped her frenzy walking and turned to look at Aadhya. The older woman paused for a moment, looking at Aadhya’s attire. “What is going on, Nani?” Aadhya was almost out of breath.

Meenabai only hushed her as she adjusted the scarf of Aadhya’s dress. Rearranging it so the fabric covered Aadhya’s face, she tugged the loose fabric into the waistband of her skirt but, to her utter shock, left her entire back bare to be seen. “Let’s go,” she said and took Aadhya by her hand before she could object to how revealing her new adjustment was.

Before she could object, her eyes fell on the tall figure standing by the window in the living room adjacent to the dining area, his back to her. As expected, her unwanted husband was back and was on the phone, talking discretely.

The region had no cell phone coverage, but he seemed equipped with a satellite phone.

Aadhya tried to listen to what he was saying. His tone was surprisingly soft and almost cajoling. He had to be talking to another woman.

Who was it? His mother? Or?

“Wait here.” Meenabai’s tone told Aadhya not to question what was going to happen. She signaled the staff, who stood to one side as if ready to do something. While people around her hustled to get their tasks done, Meenabai walked over to where her husband stood and waited for a long moment.

Aadhya was annoyed that Meenabai would wait until the man was done with his phone call, where he was indeed scheming on how to get the oil in the region.

To her surprise, as if he sensed other people’s presence, he turned, and what Aadhya didn’t expect was for him to turn and look straight at her.

Her heart made a somersault when their eyes met. She was thankful for the fabric that hid her face. He looked at her briefly and took a few steps toward her, before averting his eyes to look at the older woman who stood by the door obediently. “Hello, Meenabai.”

“Nakul *Baba*, Aadhya is ready to have lunch with you. You should not have waited for her to finish the ceremony.” After finishing the ritual, Aadhya knew what the hurry was about. Meenabai walked back to where Aadhya stood and led her to the living area where Nakul stood wearing a white linen

shirt and beige cotton pants. Even in her annoyance, she didn't fail to notice how stunning he looked.

She looked away, not wanting to keep admiring his looks, not after how he fooled her into the marriage. As she approached him, one of the staff came to stand next to her with a small tray of flowers, some sweets, and a silver container of vermilion powder.

“Nakul baba, bless your wife to have a fulfilled life with lots of children.” With those words, Meenabai applied pressure on Aadhya's shoulder, indicating that she kneel and touch her husband's feet.

Aadhya had no idea how she fluidly went down on her knees, and at the same time, Nakul took a step back. She knew he was caught off guard and wasn't used to such rituals. It gave her a slight kick to think he was taken aback.

Small wins, Aadhya. Take them!

Meenabai tsked in objection but spoke softly, “Nakul baba, please take this vermilion powder and bless your wife. We wish you consummate your marriage and give the land an heir very soon.”

Aadhya saw him hesitate for a moment before he stepped closer. She felt her veil lifted and his finger on her forehead as he applied the red powder at the partition on her scalp. “All the way, Nakul baba, apply the powder to the top of her head. When you touch the top of her head with the powder, it will make her fertile and also be aroused.”

What the heck was Nani talking about?

She would have killed to catch the expression on his face in response to the older lady's comments but kept her eyes downcast until he placed his hands on his shoulders, helping her stand up. Her veil was up, and she didn't want to look at him.

"Feed her the sweet," Meenabai said, holding the plate to him. "Don't be shy, Aadi, look at your husband."

Aadhya wasn't feeling shy; she didn't want to look at him. If it weren't for him, she could have slept in, eaten breakfast and skipped the whole ritual for his safe return. Her last semester was starting in a few days and classes would resume at seven in the morning. She was hoping to sleep in for a few days.

She saw him reach for the sweet and bring it to her lips. Annoyance combined with anger set off when she parted her lips as he offered her the piece of sweet. She was about to pull back and reject his offering, but instead, she thought of something else.

She heard his breath hiss as she bit down on his finger, but he didn't pull back as she had expected. "Careful, Aadi." Meenabai gave her a sweet to offer to your husband. "Save all your mischief for the bedroom tonight." Meenabai laughed followed by the giggles from others.

Heat rose to her cheeks as she took the sweet to his lips. She was glad the rest of the mini-ritual was uneventful and that Meenabai was hurrying to get them seated for lunch.

"Aadi, your husband has been waiting for over an hour to eat lunch with you." Meenabai served food for both of them and gave the staff a glance. "We will give you privacy.

Just call out if you need anything.” With that, everyone left her alone with him, her eyes downcast.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” he asked between bites, and she was getting restless by the minute.

She needed to get the conversation in her mind out of the way. “Where did you go?” Why she needed to know, she wasn’t sure.

He remained silent for a long moment. “I don’t remember a clause that required me to always share my whereabouts with you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, you can go do whatever you want to do, I don’t give a damn. But I need to be able to tell people around me so I don’t have to perform a ritual for your safe return every day.”

He stopped mid-bite. “That’s what you were doing? Interesting.”

“So, where were you?” she insisted.

He shrugged. “What difference does it make? You’ve already done the ritual and for tomorrow, make up a story.”

She shook her head. “No. Just stay in the mansion. Or take me with you so I don’t have to make up stuff.”

Nakul leaned back, his eyes holding a challenge but not saying anything. “You want to go with me?”

“Yes.” She batted her eyelashes sarcastically, remembering that she could accompany him on his work trips if she chose to. “Only if the timings don’t clash with my classes.”

He hesitated but nodded and that gave her hope. If she accompanied him, she could find out what he was doing in Singoor and if she got the proof to show her aunt he was up to no good, her aunt would make him leave.

Perfect plan!

Chapter 10

Later that evening, Aadhya dragged her heavy skirt along as she walked with her husband. Her outfit was beautiful but heavy and she had to be by his side as she was tied to him, literally. It was an evening of festivities, and as part of the newlywed rituals, if they could not spend private time on holy lands, they spent time in public events, their hands tied together with a religious thread.

She could not believe her ears when Meenabai said they had to have their hands tied until a specific event was complete. She only wanted to scream. Three days alone in the cabins would have been a lot less tormenting.

Why did her Thakvar husband not want to go to the holy lands? Did he have an agenda?

Whatever he had on his plan, she needed to make sure that she would need to stay in the Kanwar mansion for her to drive him out successfully. Her mind needed to be clearer when thinking about hiring someone to snoop on her husband without being noticed to find proof of what he was doing.

Who would spy on the Thakvars, even if it was for money? And what would be worse was if she was caught in espionage.

The ritual went by fast as she sat beside her husband, her face covered in the veil as the neighboring clan heads were present that evening to bless them. Soon after the ritual, their hands were released, and she let a breath out. Feeling him

against her skin was torturous; her nostrils tickled with the cologne she thought was sexy from the day she met him and just being so close to him.

She was glad she didn't have to walk around the carnival-like setting with her hand tied to her husband's. She was amazed at how quickly the show came to life. Singers, dancers, and other artists from the Kanwar region showcased their talents to the other clansmen who were present. It was only during the big festivals that all talent was put on display. And because of her being away at boarding school, she had missed out on the annual celebrations.

Aadhya spotted her aunt speaking to one of the clan members at a distance, and her heart swelled with affection for the woman. It had to be her aunt's idea to pull off such a celebration, knowing how upset Aadhya would get when she heard about all the fun the household had at the annual carnivals.

She left her husband's side and, ignoring that her aunt was in deep conversation, Aadhya put her arms around her. "I can't believe I missed the fair all these years." She kissed her aunt. "Thank you, Rajji. This is so amazing."

Her aunt placed her palm on Aadhya's cheek. "Anything for you, sweetheart."

"Wonderful celebration, *Maaho*." Nakul smiled, and Aadhya's eyes widened with surprise. The man used the proper term in the Kanwar local dialect to address a female clan head. He even followed the clan norm and bowed to her aunt.

The surprise was visible in her aunt's eyes, and she smiled in return. "You know our local dialect?"

He shook his head. "Just a few words."

Liar!

"Aadi, you are so lucky. Your husband is learning the local dialect for you." Her aunt got emotional, and that made her glare at Nakul. With the way he was building up his profile, it seemed her people would not believe the rumors she planned to spread about him after he abandoned her, as per the contract.

She had to do something else to get him to leave. She muddled through the options, watching a spear fight traditional to the Kanwar clan. One fight ended, and the winner stayed inside the ring. She noticed how the men were placing a personal item on a tray carried around by one of the men to challenge a winner into a fight. Some put their bracelet, some their turban, another man his beads necklace, and as the man holding the tray approached where they stood as if to invite Nakul, she jumped in and placed one of her bangles on the tray.

"Aadi, what are you doing?" Her aunt looked shocked.

She looked at her husband, who was a few feet away, through her veil. "Rajji, Nakul is trained in spear fight. He would not have considered participating if it weren't for me."

"Wow, Nakul *Baba*, is that true? Do you know how to fight with a spear?" Her aunt's joy knew no bounds. Aadhya followed her aunt to where her fake husband looked, and to avoid his eyes, she bent down to touch his feet.

Just like that morning, he stepped back before holding her by her shoulder to straighten her back. His face was a mask, and she didn't know what he would do next.

Aadhya expected him to object and decline the fight, be scared or embarrassed, but the man looked unfazed. He nodded. "I practice from time to time." He looked in her direction and met her eyes through the veil. "I'll do it if Aadhya wants me to."

"How wonderful and auspicious! A Thakvar knowing a Kanwar warrior skill." The aunt quickly signaled to her trusted man. "Make sure Aadhya's bangle is picked for the next fight."

Aadhya watched as her aunt's trusted man walked to the organizers to ensure the next fight included Nakul. She waited to see at what point her husband would back off. There was no way he would have learned the spear fight because it was not the Thakvar fight ritual. They used daggers or swords in that part of the region.

Nakul wore a traditional cotton tunic and loose-fitted pants paired with a turban. She watched in amazement as he walked over to where she stood and handed her his turban. "Don't enjoy the show too much."

She was baffled as he walked to the center court where the fight would happen. Did he realize what he was getting into? Did he think he could wing a spear fight? At best, he probably got trained in handling a sword for protection, but a spear fight was something else.

The opponent looked tiny next to Nakul, despite being tall. She noticed how well-built Nakul was, and all those

feelings of attraction she had for him at the resort came crashing back. She shook them away and sat beside her aunt to enjoy the show.

She knew the outcome of the fight: him leaving the Kanwar mansion. Either embarrassed or angered by the fact that he lost. It didn't matter; she just had to drive him away somehow. She hoped that he would leave that night while people knew from Meenabai that the marriage was not consummated and keep him away.

The sound of metal on metal made her shake out of her dreamy thoughts. The fight had started, and more crowd gathered as the word spread that a Thakvar and the top warrior of the Kanwar clan were engaging in a fight. Aadhya was surprised to see that a different man was sparring with Nakul. His opponent was bigger than Nakul if not taller.

The few maneuvers from Nakul and Aadhya's jaw dropped. He was fighting like he did this daily. How was that possible? He may have been a Thakvar but he was born and raised abroad. How was he able to fight with so much agility? And he had been in the offense from the time the fight started.

Her heart dropped to her stomach when she saw Nakul's opponent's spear fall to the ground and the horn was blown, indicating the match's end. "Aadi, your husband is a true warrior. So proud of him." Her aunt's husband, who joined them mid-fight cheered.

"Thanks, Rajji," she could only mumble as she processed the new detail about him. How long have the Thakvars been planning to take over the land? The way Nakul fought, he had to be learning the skill since he was a child. She

made a mental note to ask him while also realizing she needed to move on to another plan to drive him away. She had none; her mind was blank.

Maybe he is so pissed that she set him up that he would want to leave the Kanwar mansion. She could not let that happen. She wanted to kick herself for not telling him before the carnival that she did not intend to go to the Thakvar mansion no matter what the culture or customs said.

She caught him glaring at her through her veil when she handed him his turban, knowing she had to have a good reason for setting him up to fight. It would not be for at least another couple of hours before she would get an opportunity to talk to him.

Aadhya yet again sat in the middle of one of the bedrooms of the large suite, now her wing to share with her husband, as a handful of women prepped her for her wedding night. She didn't get to go back to her room after the wedding, not even to pick up clothes. The staff did everything.

That evening she was getting impatient as the women massaged the fragrant oils and drew designs on her chest and back. She knew it was a waste because she would change into a long night shirt like she had the previous night. She made a mental note to change back into whatever she wore so Meenabai wouldn't get upset with her. After that night, she would fake the aches and pains to convince Meenabai that her marriage was consummated.

"I think that's enough, and we should go." Her words made the women around her giggle.

“Now you are in a hurry to see your husband. Did you see what a great warrior your husband is? You need to give this region an heir like him.” Meenabai was quick to jump in.

“Nani, you have to let me go to even attempt to make an heir tonight.” Aadhya needed to match up the older woman’s words to escape the long getting-ready task every night. The room broke into a clamor, and soon, she was led back to the entrance of the master suite.

That night, she was in a loose robe tied at the waist for a change. But her jewelry was heavy. Her hair was partially braided as if to keep the jewelry in place and the loose hair fell to her hip. Meenabai gave her the exact instructions about food and drinks as the night before, and even as the women who accompanied her stopped at the double doors, Meenabai stepped into the room with her.

Aadhya stood still as Meenabai adjusted her jewelry and her robe. “You need to please your husband tonight. Do not let him leave your side in the morning.”

“Okay, Nani.”

The older woman stepped back just a little. “God bless you, Aadi.”

Aadhya felt emotional about fooling everyone she cared about with her fake marriage. As she swallowed and was about to say something, she felt the robe on her body be yanked off, and she shrieked, reaching for the flying silk.

She stood in shock, butt naked, staring after the older woman who raced out with her robe and shut the double doors behind her. She heard them being bolted from the outside, and

a cry escaped her. “Nani, what the heck was that?” She never expected the older woman to push her idea of sleeping naked to consummate her marriage to this level.

She heard laughter and muffled voices on the other side of the door as she huffed in anger. She held her arms over her chest, went to the closet, and stopped short when she heard movement in the bathroom.

Oh shit!

“Nakul?” she called out, hoping it was just a random noise. There was no response, and just as she took two steps, she heard him groan, and she froze for a moment. She walked into her closet, and to her horror, no clothes were in sight. Not even the night clothes or the stack of towels she had seen earlier that day.

No piece of fabric around.

“Nani, No!!!!” The angry cry escaped her.

A moment later, she heard footsteps. “You, okay?” It was Nakul and she had nothing but her panties on.

Horrified she stood behind the door, her head sticking out. “Stop, don’t come in. I need clothes.” He stood before her, his hair damp, bare-chested, and a white towel wrapped around his waist. “Give me your towel.” It was a plea but came out as a demand.

His brow raised up slightly. “I’m not giving you my towel.” He let out a chuckle. “Where are your clothes?”

“Nakul, please.” She just had no patience to explain what happened. Her body reacted very differently to the sight

of him and the fact that the only piece of clothing was a flimsy lace panty.

He took a few steps to the door behind which she stood, close enough for her to smell his fresh, clean scent. “Why should I? After the way you set me up for the spear fight.”

How did she forget about that?

“No, No. I did not.” It was good that she had thought about a cover story for her actions. “That was not my intention at all. When I saw the man collecting items on a tray, I thought he was collecting donations for the fighter, and that’s why I put my bangle. Why would I want to set you up.” She hoped he would buy her story. “Please give me something to wear.”

“And why do you not have any clothes in there?” He peeked inside as if not believing her, and she clung to the door further to be out of his sight. “Is this another stunt? What are you trying to do?”

“Nakul, please.” At that moment, she felt so awkward about her bodily response to his proximity, even in such a dire situation. “Just give me your towel.”

He looked at her for a moment and smirked. “Why do you need my wet towel when I can give you dry clothes?”

Heat crept up her cheeks with how he looked at her and what his question might imply. Desperate, she assumed his clothes would have been taken away too. “Okay, I’m not after your towel. I need clothes. Anything will work.” She should have taken a moment to steal the sheets off the bed before entering the closet.

“Stay here.”

She rolled her eyes, wondering what else he expected her to do but stay behind the door. Follow him and seduce him? She could drive him away by doing so, but with the effect he had on her, it might lead her down a dangerous path. One she couldn't return from.

She hugged the cold door further when he returned like she wasn't plastered to it already. She took the white t-shirt he handed her, grateful Meenabai didn't pull the same stunt on him. “Thank you!”

Aadhya pulled the t-shirt over her head; glad she had something on. It didn't matter that it was thin material that didn't stand a chance against her perked nipples or that the hem of his t-shirt barely covered her bottom. She was good as long as her panty didn't show as she ran to the safety of the sheets on the bed.

“What is it with your missing clothes?” He asked from the other side of the closet door.

She let out a sigh. “Let's just say there is a lot of determination by a specific person to get us to consummate the marriage.”

“And you had no idea?” He challenged.

“No. I did not. Believe me when I say that.” He didn't prolong the conversation, so she removed the bangles and other jewelry she could and placed them on the shelf. She could not take off a few alone and decided to leave them on for the night.

Relief swept over her when she realized he was still in the bathroom when she stepped out of the closet. She made a beeline to the bed that was yet again set up with flowers and slid under the sheets. She was starving and looking forward to the specials that Meenabai discussed but didn't want to be spotted in what she had on.

“So, you weren't generous enough to donate all your bangles?” He dropped the single bangle she had placed on the tray to sign him up for the fight on the bed in front of her.

She slowly reached for it and slipped it over her wrist without looking at him. Thankfully, he had changed into a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. “You have to believe me. It was my first time attending a Kanwar carnival, and I didn't know the rules.”

His eyes held suspicion. “I didn't see you stop the fight.” He took a step closer.

“I-I didn't know what was happening. The outfit with the veil, the jewelry, it was a lot for me to process, and before I realized it, you were in the ring to start the fight.” The last thing she had expected him to do. *Fight and Win!*

“Do you think you can drive me away by scaring me with a fight?” He looked pissed, and rightfully so, given the circumstances.

She held her chin up as he held his glare, even as she was intimidated by his proximity and her lack of proper clothing under the sheets. “You must believe me when I say I didn't—”

“I don’t,” he snapped, adding, “Now that you know your silly stunts won’t affect me, don’t sweat it, darling wife.”

She nodded, realizing it was best not to prolong the conversation. She didn’t want to push him to the point where he would consider taking her away from the Kanwar mansion.

“And what’s with touching my feet every time?” She could hear the growl in his voice.

“It’s a tradition.” It annoyed him, and she got cheap thrills. “Nani told me I have to do it, especially after events and in public ceremonies.”

He nodded and ran his eyes over her face as if to get a read on her, and she inadvertently lowered her eyes, pulling the sheets around her a bit closer. “You made everyone proud by winning the fight.” It was the truth that she wasn’t happy about, but shared it in hopes of mellowing him down.

“Really?” She was relieved when he walked over to where the food and drinks were set up. “What did you think?”

Taken aback by his question, she let out a chuckle. “I’m still in shock. I-I didn’t know you knew how to fight with a spear. It is a Kanwar—”

“It’s part of the Singoor traditions; that’s how I know it,” he interjected.

“How-how did you learn how to fight like that in America?” She was genuinely curious.

“It was part of the plan. We trained from birth to take over the region, train in every clan’s fighting skill, drill oil, and ruin the region.” He almost spat the last few words, and

she gasped. It was more a reaction to the anger in his tone than the actual words. “Isn’t that what you think?”

“No. That’s not why I asked. It’s not common for Thakvars to know spear fight so well, and I was...” her voice trailed off when she caught the look on his face. “Not trying to probe, just curious.”

He nodded and walked over to the table where the food was set up. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“No, I’m not hungry. Good night.” She slid flat under the sheets, and just like she had the night before, she placed a pillow in the middle of the bed and closed her eyes. After angering him with the spear fight, she was glad she didn’t need to convince him to stay in the Kanwar mansion and not move to the Thakvar mansion.

Another small win!

Chapter 11

Later that night, she moved in her sleep and let out a yelp when she felt the hard tug in her hair. She sat up, holding her hair, without moving her head. Some of the jewelry that she had on was hard to take off because of the old-fashioned clasps or because they were tied with a rope on the nape of her neck. She had thought she could sleep in them and have the staff take them off the following day.

She found herself alone in bed and wondered if it was morning already and if he had left like he had the previous morning. Her back stiffened when she heard his voice. “Let me call you back.” She stayed put even as she felt him move closer. “Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes-No. I-I need-I’m stuck.” She could not find the words to talk. “My hair is stuck. I need help taking off whatever is stuck.” She had no idea if it was the jewels in her hair that she had forgotten about or the chunky necklaces she could not remove.

She felt him move before he pressed his knee on the mattress. “That’s one hell of a mess. Let me go get someone who can help you.” That would have been good most times, but she remembered then that Meenabai would hear about the fiasco, and her attempts to consummate her marriage would only intensify.

“No.” She moved to look at him, and the sudden movement made her yelp softly. “Come back. I need you to take the jewelry off.” And as if she sensed his suspicion. “There is no grand scheme here. I want to go back to sleep.”

She saw him drop his phone on the bed as he moved closer. “Stay still,” he ordered just before she felt his fingers in her hair. Gone was the pain and the annoyance of waking up how she did, and it was replaced with something novel. Her body was responding to his mere touch and proximity, and for unexplained reasons, her eyes fell on his muscular thighs before they rode up to his crotch area.

She closed her eyes, chastising herself for such kiddish behavior. At the same time, one side of her wanted him to be driven away while the other wanted to enjoy every bit of him. Moments passed, and her heart beat so hard that she didn’t hear him tell her he was done.

He came close to detangling the mess in her hair and caused a riot of sensations. “Do you need help to take off your other jewelry?”

No, say no!

“Yes, that’ll be helpful.” Aadhya had lost all control of her actions and wanted *him* to help. She slowly moved her long hair out of the way, exposing the nape of her neck for him to take off the necklaces. One was a chocker that fit snugly and secured by knotting the tassels at the two ends.

Her heart kick-started again at an amplified rate, and her chest started to heave as his fingers toyed with the clasp of the longer one of the two necklaces she could take out. “That’s one of them.” Relief swept through her when the necklace slid down her chest a little before she caught it and put it away.

Aadhya noticed her hands were shivering when she placed the necklace on the side table. She kept her eyes downcast, not wanting to show any signs of the turmoil raging

inside her. She held her breath and fought her body's response to his touch. Unlike the other necklace, the choker had knots that needed to be pulled open.

Unable to bear the torture of his proximity, she said, "It's okay if it's—"

"I got it. Can I cut it?"

"No. No, please. It's a family heirloom." The choker was the least of her problems; it was her body. She was running so high emotions that she didn't know what to do next. She didn't trust her body and how it reacted to his touch. "I can't take it anymore, just cut it." She needed to get away from him to regain all control of her senses.

The choker around her neck slid up her neck slightly, and before she could ask what he was doing, she felt his warm breath on the nape of her neck. She froze, and time stopped when she felt his lips on her skin, and a moment later, the choker fell loosely down her chest. She shuddered as she processed that he used his teeth to open the knot on the jewelry.

"There you go," he said, pulling back as she still trembled and shuddered in response to the thills that raged through her. Wild thoughts surged, and all she could think about was how it would feel if his teeth sank into the flesh on her shoulder. She gathered the sheets around her as her body reeled from the new sensations.

"What's wrong?" His words reverberated in her ears making her eyes flutter as she lay on the bed.

"I-I'm okay." She lied. She felt weak to the core.

His eyes narrowed. “What’s going on?”

She stayed still, averting her eyes, avoiding his altogether and just in that moment, her tummy made a loud rumbling noise. Embarrassed, she hid her face with her arm. “I’m okay,” she said, adding, “I forgot to eat before I slept.”

“You should eat.” His tone was matter-of-fact.

“I’m okay.” She didn’t want to face him and show any clue that she was affected by his proximity. She heard footsteps recede and a moment later she felt something light land over her as she lay under the sheets.

“You can wear that and if you are still uncomfortable, I can ask someone to bring you—”

“No.” She sat up, pushing away her hair. “This is all I need.” She quickly reached for what looked like a light jacket and slipped it on.

After putting it on, she sat on the bed, calming her raging heart, only to look up to find him looking at her. That very look set off another parade in her chest.

“I thought you were going to eat.” She lowered her eyes, unable to look at him.

How was she so affected by him? Did Meenabai mix something in her drink for her to have such intense sensations? She was desperate for his touch and even thought of ways to get close to him. It had to be some herbal potion that the older woman mixed in her drink.

What if they mixed something in his food, too? She suddenly looked up at him. “Did you eat?” He nodded. “Do you feel okay?”

A curious brow raised high. “Should I not be, okay?” He sounded suspicious of foul play with the food.

“No. No. The food tonight is supposed to be spicy and I wasn’t sure if you were okay with it.” How she was coming up with the lies, she had no idea.

Her stomach growled loudly, and she knew eating and returning to sleep was best. As if the universe was watching out for her, he looked away when his phone started to ring. She slipped off the bed when he excused himself to take the phone call.

She took a plate, loaded up everything she wanted in a small heap and returned to bed. She sat back on the bed, her body securely covered with the sheets as she downed the yummy food. She was starving and knew she might make another trip to fill her plate if Nakul wasn’t around and she wasn’t sporting his t-shirt with a lace panty underneath it.

Shortly after, Aadhya was halfway through her dessert serving of food when she heard him step back into the bedroom from the balcony. She looked at him, somewhat grateful for his phone call so she could move around the bedroom and use the restroom before attacking the sweets. The sugar seemed to help, and she felt a bit relaxed.

“Are you going to keep doing that?” She eyed his phone. “You should run your business from where it’s the easiest. It’s hard to get cellular and internet coverage here.”

Maybe he’ll have an epiphany and leave Singoor, and she can go with him? Getting away from him at that point, she can figure it out.

“I have everything I need here, including a wife,” his tone was taunting as he added, “Why would I want to be anywhere else?”

“Fake wife,” she said in a lowered voice, adding, “But the Kanwar responsibilities are not easy. As the heir’s husband, you have to care for the people of our clan, not just your business.” She hoped something would want him to leave the region.

He looked at her for a long moment. “My father gave up a life with his loving wife and children for this region. What makes you think I won’t be able to care for them?”

A small gasp escaped her in response to the intensity in his voice. He had to be a good actor either to have made his words so truthful, or he truly cared for the people of the region.

Mihir Thakvar had done great work for the region, and her aunt greatly respected the family. No wonder her aunt was so happy when she found out she married a Thakvar. She looked away from him, unable to respond to his question.

“Tomorrow night, we have to go out of the country. We will be away for a few days.” He wasn’t asking her, and that annoyed her.

“Out of the country? I’m too tired to go anywhere. And my classes are starting soon. You go.” Her mind was racing with ideas. Maybe she could get away from Singoor and stay with one of her friend’s cousins or another friend until he stopped looking for her.

She would tell her aunt that she had to attend her first session, go to the city, and stay there. It seemed like the only way to escape the unwanted man and the marriage.

Nakul Thakvar was resourceful and knew he would find her.

“No.” His response, accompanied by the smirk, rubbed her the wrong way.

“What do you mean no?” Her large eyes followed him as he got close to her, too close.

He held her gaze for a long moment, and her breathing became shallow. “Let me remind you that the contract you drafted had the clause that *you*, my wife, will accompany me on any travel.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Required. The statement says only for required travel. I’m not going.” She folded her arms in front of her.

“Sure, but I’d like you to explain to your aunt why a *honeymoon* with your new husband is not required.” He stood tall, hands on his hips, a sly smile on his wickedly handsome face. “I’d be entertained.”

“Fine. I’ll go.” She let out a low yet frustrated growl and sunk under the sheets, having mixed emotions about the travel with him. It was what she had dreamed of doing, which was why she had added the clause, but she didn’t hold the excitement she had before. The treacherous fake husband ruined it all with his stupid charade.

“Good night.” He turned away from her.

Her heated glare followed him as he walked to the other side of the bed to land his body on the mattress and, within minutes, fall asleep like nothing in the world bothered him. She looked at him as he slept, turned away from her, his chest bare as he slept in just the shorts he had on.

Her eyes took in the dips and peaks of his muscles on his back and looked away, unable to control her raging curiosity. She wanted to know what those muscles felt like. She looked up at the ceiling like praying to the heavens for strength.

How could she feel such a pull toward him after what he had done and what he was putting her through?

Chapter 12

“How is the Kanwar heiress doing?” Shivay asked while Nakul was on the phone the following day. “I hope she is feeling better now.”

“She’s doing good.” He let out a low laugh. She was having fun torturing him, for sure. And the worst part, he couldn’t tell if she intended to get him worked up with every interaction. He was going to watch her closely. She would go to any new lengths to get out of the marriage.

Just like she convinced a stranger to get into a marriage contract with her.

“Hope the Kanwar clan is welcoming.” Shivay maintained a calm demeanor.

“Too soon to say.” Nakul had a list of people he needed to check on—their activities, what they did for the clan, financials, everything.

He was also convinced that Aadhya’s parents passing away could not be an accident. It was too much of a coincidence, and it could not be the curse as people in Singoor believed to be the cause of the heirs’ deaths.

Shivay was looking into investigating the accident where their father’s brother and sister passed away in a car accident. Rishab was looking into the death of the Bhil clan heir’s death. When the truth about the Gujjar heir’s death was revealed, it made them question all the other heirs’ deaths.

Nakul shook away the thoughts of his investigation.
“Did Mom and Dad leave yet?”

“Yes.” Shivay paused. “They had a long conversation with Nandini before they left. She was not happy she missed all our weddings.”

“She called me too but could not take the call the first time. She was not happy.” Nakul smiled, thinking of their sister, the youngest of all. He and his sister were closer in age and had a different dynamic than she did with the other brothers. “When I called her back, she insisted on visiting us. I had to come up with many explanations as to why without revealing the truth.”

“Good, and I hope you also explained why we have additional security at her university, too.” Nakul shook his head, smiling in response.

“Of course,” Nakul chuckled. “Did you talk to Rishab? He texted last night.”

Shivay fell silent for a moment. “He called. The situation is under control.”

“Good.” Nakul was glad his brother was able to take care of the situation. “We need to heighten security in all locations. Expand the perimeter.”

“I agree. Adding more security as we speak.” Shivay was aware of the increasing unrest between the clans due to the Thakvar’s presence in the prominent clans.

“I’m headed to the auction tomorrow with Aadhya.” It was in a remote town in Europe. In his months of investigations, he was led to this trail. He was informed that

there was a sculpture of a goddess that we would be on auction.

“We can only hope.” Shivay knew how much time and effort went into even getting this far.

Nakul nodded. “There’s a slim chance it’s *Shakti*, but can’t miss out on the opportunity. And no matter what, I will not lose the auction.”

“Sounds good; all the best. I’ll catch you later.” With that, he ended the call and stepped back indoors. The room was dimly lit as the sun had not risen yet, and he could see her silhouette on the bed as she slept.

What was that about not being able to take off her jewelry and not wanting anyone else to help? Whatever stunt it was, it worked. He had a tough time fighting his urges to pull her into his arms and ravish her beauty.

Two days, and he was already taking long showers to alleviate his growing need and arousal. He could not show any signs of being impacted by her antics.

Aadhya woke up feeling stiff all over. She stretched in bed, groaning deeply as she opened her eyes. Yet again, she was alone in her bed and rolled her eyes, wondering what kind of a ritual she had to perform that morning since her husband had left her and gone off to do whatever he was up to.

Her back stiffened when she heard soft footsteps moving toward her. Was it her husband? A few moments passed, and she knew it was not him. She turned and saw Meenabai with a broad smile on her face. “Good morning, Aadi. Are you ready to wake up?”

Aadhya knew the older woman was trying to be nice to her for putting her in the awkward situation the night before. “I don’t know, Nani. Should I be talking to you after what you did last night?” She was mad at Meenabai for the undress stunt she pulled off effectively.

The older woman tsked. “Aadi, I had to.” She placed her fingers under Aadhya’s chin as she sat up. “Now, all we need to do is wait for the heir to arrive.” Aadhya narrowed her eyes, watching the older woman, but did not say anything. “You must be hungry. Let’s get you ready for—”

“What? Another ceremony?” Aadhya respected the culture and traditions but had no energy to sit for long hours while performing the ceremony.

Meenabai gave her a soft glare. “Aadi, your husband is downstairs talking to the region manager. He has refused to take a morsel of food without you by his side.” There was so much joy on the older woman’s face that Aadhya couldn’t help but smile. “And he had issued strict orders not to wake you up before you are ready to.”

“Oh, so I can go back to sleep, then.” Aadhya fell back onto the mattress from the sitting position and pulled the sheet over her chest. “See you later, Nani.”

“Aadi, please.” The older woman hesitated. “Because yours and her husband have not eaten, *Maaho* hasn’t eaten

yet.”

That got Aadhya’s attention, and she was out of bed in a flash. “Bring me my clothes, and I don’t need anyone to dress me. I will and can do it myself,” she called out as she ran to the bathroom for a quick bath.

Shortly after, she stepped out of the bathroom to find a group of women waiting for her, bright smiles on their faces, and one of them held a tray with a burning lamp on it. Her eyes flew to the older woman who stood to the side, happy tears in her eyes.

What happened in the ten minutes she was gone?

The women started singing as another woman covered her head with a silk cloth, draping it over her chest. Aadhya was confused as Meenabai had not mentioned yet another ceremony. To her relief, the singing didn’t turn into an elaborate event. Standing to one side, she approached Meenabai and asked, “What was that for? I thought you said we were eating breakfast.”

“Yes,” she whispered, adding, “I’m so happy you and your husband consummated your marriage.”

What the heck!

“What? Who told you?”

The older woman was all smiles. “I was sure it would happen if we kept you clothless, but I still had my doubts, but now, we have proof that you and your husband are one.”

“What? Who told you?” she repeated. She didn’t know how the older woman was so sure. And what proof was she referring to?”

“The cleaning staff saw the mark on the sheets.”
Meenabai chuckled.

Aadhya was confused for a second before realizing the older woman was referring to a virgin stain. There was no way it was blood, it had to be a sauce or jam from the food she ate in bed. Whatever it was, it didn’t matter, she felt like the pressure lifted off her. At least Meenabai won’t pull off a de-clothing stunt again. She walked silently down the stairs toward the main dining area.

“I want to meet your mother again when she is born as your child.” Meenabai was emotional.

Aadhya felt a tug in her chest. Guilt and sadness pulled from either side when she realized she was lying to people she cared for. “Nani, stop being so sad.”

Meenabai wiped her eyes. “I’m delighted today.”

“Good, and I’m hungry. What’s special today?”
Aadhya was glad there was no major ceremony for consummating her marriage, that too a fake one. Well, on Singoor land, it was real, and there was no way she could annul it.

“All your favorites.” Meenabai nudged her to look toward the room with its glass doors shut. Aadhya could see Nakul and her uncle in a deep conversation. “Go get your husband, and you can all eat.”

“What are they talking about?” Aadhya found the combination of people having a conversation weird. She was surprised her aunt was not in the room talking to them. “Go, Aadhya, the food will go cold. They have been in there for over an hour.”

“Okay.” Aadhya could not figure out what it was her fake husband was talking to her aunt’s husband and the region manager about for such a long time. She walked to the double doors and paused when she picked up on an assertive voice.

Her eyes fell on Nakul as he looked at the man sitting across from him, a cold expression on his face. She then looked at her uncle and saw the older man seated hunched. He looked defeated, and she did not like the looks of it.

She turned the handle and pushed the door ever so lightly. “I do not care, Sir. I need your men to report every one of the transactions to me. I need to know where the money is spent, and I get to decide where it is spent going forward. Are we in agreement?” She froze when she heard the harsh words.

The older man did not respond immediately. “Yes, Thakvar.” The way Mr. Sirvi spoke, her heart twisted in pain for the man loyal to her family for so long. She closed the door and stepped away, unable to listen to the conversation further. Why was he being mean to her uncle’s man? That too in front of him.

How dare he illtreat a man who deserved nothing but respect for everything he had done for her family?

Later that evening, she walked close to him toward a private terminal at the international airport in the city. From the time she woke up, the entire day was a blur and a mad rush to pack without knowing where she was going. She did not see her husband all day until it was an hour before it was time to leave and he showed up in a helicopter.

She had been angry about how he spoke to Mr. Sirvi in the presence of her uncle but did not get a chance to confront him. She wanted to tell him that he didn't get to talk to anyone that way. It aggravated her annoyance when she didn't get a chance to talk to him even after he returned from being away all day.

What was he doing anyway, being way all day?

She looked up when they stepped out of the terminal, and a soft gasp escaped her. Her eyes fell on a small plane and her eyes fell on the logo that looked like the traditional Thakvar insignia. She felt excitement brew inside her, but she was still salty from what she witnessed that morning.

Aadhya ascended the steps to the plane ahead of him and smiled as the crew welcomed her and her husband. She followed the stewardess to the back of the plane. The woman pushed a door open and said, "We have thirty minutes before we take off. Please relax, and I will bring you a refresher drink."

"Thank you." Aadhya smiled, walked past the door, and stopped short. She forgot she was on a plane for a moment when she saw the modern bedroom with a seating area set up to one side. She heard him step into the room a moment later and shut the door softly.

Unable to bear another second of the anger, she turned to look at him. “Why were you so mean to my uncle and his trusted man, today?”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he walked over to where the two chairs were set and placed his computer bag on the table between the two chairs. She waited a few moments, expecting him to say something, but he did not.

“I heard a part of your conversation, and I’d appreciate it, if you didn’t speak to anyone the way you did this morning. My uncle has been helping Rajji with everything since the time my father passed away.”

He scanned her face with a slow gaze. “I’m aware.” He settled into one of the chairs and held her gaze.

Something about how he said those words or how he looked at her, she wanted to reach out and strike his sexy face, but she held back. She was angry but was furious that he was instigating her to the point where she had somewhat aggressive thoughts about getting back at him.

Was the need to reach out and slap him an excuse to touch him? Physically be close to him?

“I don’t know what you’re aware of, but I want you to be respectful to my family and staff.” She walked close to him, looking down at him as if it was a way for her to assert her statement.

He didn’t say a word for a long moment and slowly stood up, holding her gaze. Her chin tilted up as she held her ground. “I’m the Thakvar who leads the Kanwar clan. Everyone, including the Kanwar heir, is answerable to me.”

He paused as if in reaction to the way her eyes narrowed. “As the Kanwar heir, I take it you know the rules of the clan you represent.”

Her chest heaved as she tried to hold in her anger. The man knew how to get under her skin, and she could not. What worried her more was that he seemed to have a permanent plan to be Kanwar’s head, and her only way out would be to leverage the contract to get out of this marriage of deceit.

One end of his mouth twisted like he was enjoying her reaction, and she dug her nails into the side of her palm to stop her from slapping him.

“Get some sleep. We have a lot to do on our honeymoon.”

*What the heck did he mean by having a lot to do?
What was the fake honeymoon trip for?*

“Where are we going and why?” she demanded.

He smirked like her question was amusing. “It’s a surprise for you, dear wife.” His tone was almost flirtatious.

Her jaw dropped. It was his way of keeping her in the dark. “What? No. I need to know where we’re going.”

“You’ll know when we get there.”

She took a step toward him. “Tell me now, or I’ll get off the plane.”

“Sure.” He nodded, unfazed by her threat. “I’m sure you’ll have a good explanation to your aunt as to why you didn’t go on the honeymoon. Especially the one your husband planned to surprise you.”

“Yes, I do.” She stood her ground and was vexed by his constant threat of disappointing her aunt. “It’s my aunt’s birthday in a week, and I will tell her I do not wish to go on this trip.”

Something sparked in his eyes, but he looked at her silently for a long moment. “Nowhere in the contract does it say that I need to disclose the details of our travel destinations. I’m sure you remember that.”

With those words, he left her standing, frozen in the middle of the room. She didn’t know how long she was processing the situation until the pilot announced their upcoming departure. It wasn’t until she heard the pilot speak that she remembered she was on a plane and not in a hotel room.

Travel was a dream come true for her, but she wasn’t thrilled about the way things were.

Chapter 13

Aadhya was pissed with the man who was her husband even as she got out of the plane the following day. Although she slept like she was on steady ground, she felt groggy. All because of her stunning yet annoying fake husband. She didn't like how he kept using her aunt as a weapon against her.

She looked at him as he stood at the foot of the stairs, holding his hand out for her. She realized he had no trouble putting on a show as the ideal husband. What was worse was that she could not stop admiring how gorgeous he looked in a button-down shirt with jeans. His eyes were shielded behind dark sunglasses, but she knew he always had his eyes on her.

Always keeping an eye on her just like she did on him!

She avoided his eyes even as she placed her slender hand in his and looked around the small airport for signs telling her where they were. The signs looked like they were in English but were in a language she could not read.

“Where are we?” she asked again, unable to contain her curiosity, as he helped her into the back of an awaiting SUV. His silence irked her, and she took a deep breath, trying hard not to get worked up.

Why should she care? She was there to fulfill a clause on the contract that's it. Why let his behavior bother her?

She ignored him for the entire car ride. Not knowing how long it would be, she turned on her phone and was glad

she had coverage. She opened the maps app on her phone. Her eyes widened when she saw they were somewhere in Europe but not in any major cities.

Why they were there, she had no idea.

Looking at the map reminded her of her travels with her friends in the past couple of years. It had been a while since she had talked to her friends. Not having cell phone coverage in Singoor was one reason, and the other was him. Just the amount of shock she had to deal with was just intense.

A smile played on her lips when she saw a couple of her friends online, and she quickly got immersed in the group chat that started. Questions poured in about the wedding that her friends could not attend. She had discouraged them from attending taking into account the unrest in the region. When her friends asked for pictures from the wedding, she was stumped.

The day was a blur and she could not remember posing for pictures. No wedding pictures were taken in the temple for sure, but she needed to be in the state of mind to click new ones. When her friends insisted that she send at least one picture, she impulsively held her phone up and captured a photo of her and the annoyingly handsome hunk of a husband in a flash.

She sent the picture and smiled. There were a lot of compliments flowing in, and as she took in the picture, she caught something in the background. Beautiful lush gardens. She looked up and gasped when her eyes fell on a majestic building that was far away.

Was it a palace? It was unlike any other buildings she had seen before.

The road they were on led straight to what looked like a palace surrounded by thick greenery. “What is this place?” She felt a sudden shift in her mood. “It’s so beautiful.” She could not take her eyes off the sight in front of her.

She barely waited for the door to be opened before she flew out to look at intrinsic work outside the structure. Lost in taking in the details, she didn’t immediately notice the arm that circled her until she was gently nudged to walk with him.

Every time he came that close, she felt tiny and weak. To add to the gorgeous looks, he had a beautiful stature. She swallowed the sudden nervousness and walked with him, following one of the staff members. She did not fail to notice how many heads turned to look in their direction, and she felt a sting when she saw how many of the women were openly gawking at her husband.

Fake husband! Why do you care?

What annoyed her was the way she was scanned top down by everyone. What did that look mean? Before she could process any of it, she found her body plastering to his side as they walked to the elevator. She stepped ahead of him and turned to face the lobby, knowing all the women still had their eyes on him.

She didn’t know what got into her when she looked up at him as he stood with his back to the lobby. She smiled and caught the amusement in his eyes as she got up on her toes, and her hand made it up to his shoulder. She held his gaze as the doors closed behind him and tilted her face, pretending to

kiss him. It was all a pretense, a show, but being so close to him always messed with her head. Her bodily reactions were unpredictable when he was around, but, in that moment, his proximity made her mind go haywire. Not only did she feel like the most beautiful woman, but she could kiss him to make their fake marriage look real.

*What would it be like kissing such a beautiful man?
Would he kiss her back if she kissed him?*

Aadhya held the position until the doors closed and quickly stepped away. She avoided his eyes as they rode the elevator and steadied her breathing. She had no idea why she needed to show off to strangers. Was there a need to? Maybe not, but it was as if her mind and body made their own plans.

The soft chime from the elevator doors brought her out of the daze that was settling over her. Why did she get so worked up about strangers looking at the man next to her? She didn't own him; she didn't want to be married to him, so why did she care?

As the thoughts swirled in her mind, she wondered if he could tell how his presence toyed with her mind. Would he guess her reasons for such a behavior? She was glad he didn't demand an explanation for her random move in the elevator.

She avoided his eyes even as he held one of the double doors open for her, but she lost all thoughts when she stepped into the space assigned to them. "Wow," it was the only word she could think of saying when she took in the elegance of the multi-level space, they were in. It seemed bigger than the apartment she shared with her four friends in college.

She lowered her eyes to avoid his eyes and started admiring the patterned high-quality wooden floors. Next her focus shifted from furniture to the accent rugs in the seating area, and finally the delicate fabric that layered the glass wall to one side. The translucent material moved softly, and her eyes swept in the direction and noticed the lake right next to the structure.

“This is unbelievable.” She walked to the glass doors and saw they could be slid open to get a feel of the outdoors while they were inside. It reminded her of the restaurant she had her first date with Nakul. Although she was nervous about him agreeing to the contract, she enjoyed every bit of the space.

She took a deep breath, her lips pressing together as anger built up again at his deceit. But the calming wind from the lake relaxed her. She could tell the suite would have been a private, romantic sanctuary if a couple were indeed on a honeymoon.

She followed where her eyes took her, exploring the kitchenette, the cozy nook with a fireplace, before taking the curved wooden stairs to the upper level. The upper level was even more extravagant, with an open setting.

A loft area that overlooked the entrance and a bedroom with a massive bed and a glass wall for people to enjoy the same view downstairs. Her obsession with modern bathrooms cut short her bedroom tour, and she walked to yet another set of double doors and pushed them open.

She gasped in wonder, taking in the details of the luxurious space. Marble everything, beautiful lighting, and

welcoming jacuzzi. She could spend days just in that bathroom.

Lost in her admiration of the modern yet, classy bathroom, she didn't notice him until she picked up his sexy scent. Her back stiffened, her heart went on a rampage, and she had no explanation for the reaction. How could he instigate such a reaction from her every time?

“Aadhya, we need to attend an event this evening. Get some rest, and we can head out when you are ready.”

She had no idea what they would do and had only packed casual clothes. Nothing fancy, which is what she guessed people would wear to such an event. “I don't have clothes—”

He didn't let her finish. “You'll have a team to help you. They will be here in a couple of hours. You can have them come to your suite when you are ready.”

“Okay,” it was all she could think of saying, and she didn't even turn to look at him as he stood only a few feet from her.

“Good. When you are ready, join me for brunch on the deck. I'll be waiting.” She was starving, and all she could think about was eating and exploring the place they were in.

“I want to explore the city.” She kept her tone abrupt. “I can go by myself if you need to be elsewhere.”

“Sure. Let's discuss this during brunch.”

Aadhya couldn't help but smile at the prospect of some fun in spite of the somewhat messy situation with her fake husband. Maybe this is how she could make the best out

of the marriage of convenience. She had the contract for a year, and if it involved traveling to places she could not read the names, she was up for it.

Shortly after, she stepped out of the large dressing room adjacent to the massive bedroom that was big enough to fit a bed. She walked to the landing space on the upper level of the lavish suite and looked down into the dining space and to her surprise, there was no food or anyone around.

Confused, she walked toward his side of the dressing area that was on the other side of the bedroom. She couldn't hear him and wondered if he changed his mind and left like he had the past couple of days when they were in Singoor.

A worry rooted in the pit of her stomach, the strange feeling of loneliness that hit her occasionally. A feeling that had become a part of her since the time her parents passed away. And the rest of the day would be hard to get by every time it sprouted. She started to hum by habit as it was the only way to calm herself down. s

“Down here.” She was going down a dark spiral, and just hearing her husband call out to her shattered the worry that was wrapping around her. Her chest heaved as she processed her state of mind, and as if he had cast a spell on her with those words, she started to walk down the stairs.

The darkness that threatened to ruin the day vanished like it was never there. She picked up the beautiful scent of coffee mingled with his musky cologne, which relaxed her immediately. She stopped at the foot of the stairs, looking at him as he did something with his back to her.

She had mostly steadied her breathing when he turned to look in her direction two mugs in his hands. “Coffee?” He placed the mugs on the small round table closer to the kitchen and looked up at her. “We can head out right after for brunch at the city center and explore the city like you wanted.”

“Oh,” there was no other way to express her surprise and joy.

She silently sat at the table and sipped her coffee, processing her emotions in the last few minutes. It was the first time that she went from sinking into an abyss of sadness to surfing the waves of joy.

“You good with that plan?” She looked up at him and nodded, unable to find her voice. “Good, we can leave right after coffee.”

Moments of silence later, she felt like she needed to say something about how he had handled the situation with her uncle the previous day. She slowly looked up to find him looking at her. She hesitated momentarily, chewing on her lip nervously before finding her voice. “I-I don’t know what you were discussing with my uncle, but I did not like how you talked to him. Please be mindful of the tone.”

“Noted.” His tone was curt, and she couldn’t tell how he took her message. Nonetheless, she needed to get that message out.” She could not think of anything that warranted that tone with someone decades older.

Moments passed again in silence, and she wondered if their interaction would be awkward every time, they were alone. Based on the time they had spent before writing up the contract, she knew they would have a lot to talk to but at that

moment, it felt like she had to endure an yearlong of the weird silence between them.

As if he had read her mind, he cleared his throat. “We are in the princely state of Ostlandet, a region in Norway.”

Her eyes widened and her excitement hit the max scale. “Oh, wow! That explains why I could not read anything on the map. She looked around and out at the window that had a lake view. “Are we on some island?”

He nodded. “We are here for a special event and it’s an invitation only from the Royal family.”

She thought her eyes would be bugged out at the rate at which she widened them again. “You know the royal family?”

He shrugged. “Through business connections.”

“That’s just-just crazy exciting.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “You couldn’t tell me this before?” She didn’t understand the secrecy. “I could have brought my clothes for the event.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “I don’t trust anyone. Especially not in the Kanwar mansion.” He paused like he picked up on the anger brewing in her eyes. “Until I establish that I can trust everyone, I must be over cautious.”

She wanted to tell him he was stupid and worrying about nothing, but he was not her problem. “Fine. Suit yourself. But I’m particular about how you speak about and to my aunt, uncle, and Meenabai. She’s like a grandmother to me.”

“Noted.” She hated the tone of his response but loved the accent with which he spoke. The authority in his voice was charming and hot at the same time. “We can go as soon as you are ready.”

She stood up from the table, feeling the awareness grow suddenly. “Ready.” He had to say a mundane word to get her worked up. She stood no chance if he decided he wanted to make her his wife. She would have no power to stop him.

Stay strong, Aadhya. The guy is a mercenary. All he wants is the oil from Singoor!

“I take it you liked what you ordered.” He smirked, watching her lick the last bit of the syrup off her plate. They were seated on a private patio overlooking the lake. It was a beautiful morning in spite of the chill in the breeze.

“Hated my breakfast. I can’t eat anything for the rest of the day.” She let out a laugh and looked out into the water. She was already having a great time, and it had barely been a couple of hours since they arrived. Not what she was expecting, considering she stayed on the plane without walking away because of a contract she had signed.

Why couldn't she look him in the eye, especially when he was being nice to her? Scared about falling for him?

A sizzle ran through her. She would be swooning, begging to be his if he exercised a fraction of his charm. She could not risk it. He may be a ten, but he was there to ruin her region, and she needed to ensure that didn’t happen.

Charming her with trips to exotic locations and fantastic food might be his way to win favors. She told herself not to let down her guard. Whatever it was he was up to, she needed to stop him.

He was right to say that he didn't trust anyone. Especially her, because she didn't trust him either. "Why were we invited to the special event?" She wasn't expecting an honest answer because she was convinced, he was up to no good.

"For our honeymoon, why else?" his tone, his sideways glance, told her he had no intention to share any details with her.

"Let's go?" She was pissed again at him. She walked ahead of him as she processed how quickly her emotions swerved in the other direction with him.

She knew he was walking right behind her and she felt spiteful about him keeping her in the dark. She had a sudden need to rebel and do something unplanned, so she didn't feel like he was controlling where she took her next breath. It suffocated her, and she didn't trust him to have good intentions about moving to Singoor and tricking her into marrying him.

The very thought made her grit her teeth, and on impulse, she stepped toward what looked like a boutique with bright-colored clothing on the mannequins in the front window. "I want to check out the dresses here," she said before he could say anything.

She smiled back at the woman who was adjusting the racks. "How can I help you miss?"

Aadhya was glad she was finally talking to someone who spoke English. “I’m looking for a good dress for an evening with my husband.” She found herself grinning uncontrollably and for strange reasons, she added, “We are on our honeymoon.”

“Wonderful, you came to the right place then. We have a lot of fun choices.” The woman seemed to be in her forties and was happy to help.

Aadhya was glad for the distraction. Something about what he shared made her believe him, but she reminded herself not to let down her guard. She was delighted she would burn some time away from him as she tried on one dress after another.

The dresses were simple and pretty, but something seemed off with each one of them. Most of them were too revealing, and she didn’t want to wear anything suggestive. She finally settled on a dress with cutouts on both sides revealing the curve at her waist, and she was happy with the neckline and the length.

“That looks lovely on you. You could totally wear that for dinner too.” The woman beamed at her. “Would you like for me to get your husband so he can take a peek?”

She wanted to say, that wasn’t required but she felt like playing along. “Yes, that’ll be good.”

Aadhya looked at herself from all angles in the mirror when she saw him approach her from behind. “I think I found the dress I want to wear for the auction today.”

“No. A team is coming to the suite to prepare you for the auction.” His tone was stern and that irked her.

“I don’t need all that fancy treatment. I can do my makeup and wear this—” Her voice was lost in a loud shriek when he reached out and tugged on the dress, and the fabric slipped off her body like it was never there.

On impulse, she pulled the dressing room curtain, around her, to cover herself. “What the heck did you just do? This is off limits.”

“Just wanted to make sure if you were aware of the feature on the dress.” His voice was gruff but the mockery hit her hard. “It’s a designer fetish store and you may want the dress for other purposes but tonight, you will stick to the plan.”

With those words he left her shaking and she quickly reached for her dress and slipped it on. It wasn’t until she walked outside that she saw the fetish side in every outfit and her cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

What the heck was she thinking walking into a sex clothing store?

Aadhya was on pins and needles as they got into the SUV. She needed a recovery from the embarrassment and fast. “After this trip, I want to visit my friends.” She had no idea where that came from.

Was it because being with her friends was a safe haven?

“No,” his curt response made her wonder if she imagined him speaking. She wasn’t asking for his permission;

she shouldn't have to.

“Sorry, I missed that.” She was sure she misheard him.

He turned to look at her, eyes filled with mockery like he was enjoying her situation. “I said, No.”

It took her a moment to recover from the shock but she did. “I wasn't asking for your permission.”

“You don't need my permission, but you still can't, as per the contract.” His tone was matter-of-fact, but she was annoyed by the wicked smile that played on the beautiful bastard's face.

“Nothing in the contract prevents me from seeing my friends.”

The chuckle that escaped him wanted her to reach out and strike off the gorgeous smile on his ruggedly handsome face. “Not about meeting your friends but about traveling alone.”

The moment he mentioned those words she wanted to scream.

*Neither of us will travel or go anywhere alone.
All travel needs to be with security.*

A clause she had added so Nakul when she thought he was a businessman from America, didn't travel in the Singoor area and she was worried about his safety. *Never did she think he would use it against her.*

Chapter 14

Aadhya could not believe she had embarrassed herself the way she did earlier that day at the adult store. Even as she sat in the middle of the dressing room, wrapped in a soft robe as a couple of stylists worked on her. One applied makeup, and the other person worked on turning her straight hair into waves.

She dreaded facing him after the strip-down incident in the dressing room. Why couldn't he tell her it was a sex play dress?

Like you'd have listened to what he had to say, a voice contradicted in her head.

Like the strip-down event was not enough insult, she tried to be nonchalant on their way back and expressed her wish to go meet her friends when they returned to Singoor. She had been missing her friends since she chatted with them that morning and asked for arrangements to be made, and he declined.

Not only did he say she could not go, but to make it worse, he used a clause she had written in the document. How was she supposed to break out of the cycle of him holding her captive under a contract she wrote herself? She needed to find a weakness for him, but the man seemed invincible and unshatterable.

She sighed softly, brushed away all thoughts, and focused on what was happening around her. She looked at

herself in the mirror and was pleasantly surprised by the natural makeup on her face. She didn't feel nervous about messing it up since she habitually touched her face for no reason. Her hair seemed to be taking time, and from what she could see, the stylist had opened the high pony they had started with earlier.

As if the woman styling her hair picked up on Aadhya's confused expression. She smiled at her through the mirror. "You have beautiful hair, madame."

"Thank you!" She was happy with how her hair fell to her waist in waves.

A few minutes later, one of the women bent in front of her to slide off the foam slippers she had on to replace them with high-heeled shoes. They were a metallic shade and looked great on her feet.

As she stood up with the woman's assistance, she realized how much of a confidence the five-inch heel added to her look. She felt elegant just wearing the robe, and when the stylist pulled that off her shoulders to reveal the full look she was blown away.

Aadhya blinked, wondering if she was looking at her own reflection. "You look stunning, madame." The woman adjusted the belt and the pleats on the dress, but Aadhya could only look at herself in disbelief.

The deep emerald green dress made her body look like a goddess. The way the dress hugged her torso, it accentuated her tiny waist and the pleats at the front and the ruched sides added extra curvature to her bottom. Her lower half of the

body which she was always conscious about as it was fuller, was what made her look sexy.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the clutch that she was handed by one of the stylists.

“Enjoy your evening, Ma’am.”

Aadhya took a few steps away from the dressing room and walked toward the landing area on the upper floor of the suite. The air held the beautiful cologne scent from her husband, and as she approached the stairs, she heard him speak. As usual, she knew he had to be on a phone call.

As she went down the stairs, one hand on the smooth railing and eyes on the steps just so she didn’t trip, she could hear him talk. Moments passed, and she became aware of a sudden silence, and her awareness grew, making her look up impulsively.

She felt her step falter as her eyes came in contact with deep ones trained on her. An intensity in them held her gaze captive as she descended the last few steps. Her heart was on a rampage as she took in the beautiful stature of the man she was married to, and as if it was what she was supposed to, she walked over to where he stood, somewhat frozen.

Her chest was heaving as the drumming in her chest deafened her, but as if she had a script to follow, she walked right up to him as he moved close to her. And everything froze at that moment. She noticed his breathing was shallow and swore she saw him clench his teeth like he was fighting something.

The way he looked at her made her feel powerful and gave her the confidence boost to step closer to him, and even with her heels, she had to tilt her chin up to maintain the gaze.

“Beautiful,” he said under his breath, and it was so soft she thought she had imagined it, but the look in his eyes gave her the validation.

Heat crept up her cheeks as she leaned closer and went up on her toes, gently mashing her lips to his. New sensations exploded from within when his hand came up to curve her neck as he slowly pulled her into the kiss. It was a slow, soft moment, but explosions were happening inside her.

Her fingers found the lapel of his suit jacket, and she pulled on it like she feared the kiss would end. His lips were enticing, and his touch was gentle at first, but the longer their lips melded together, the deeper his touch got, and the kiss intensified.

Just when she thought she could not handle the emotions anymore, he pulled back, his breathing ragged, as he held their foreheads together. He slowly pulled back, the depth in his eyes morphing into something else. “What are you trying to do? First the adult store and now this—”

His words hit her like a ton of metal.

What did he think she was doing? Seducing him? How dare he?

It took her a moment to recover from the lack of air in her lungs, and with the confidence that her look gave her, she leaned into him and said, “Wasn’t it part of the contract?”

Didn't you tell me people needed to see the normal things between a wife and husband on their honeymoon?"

She saw the conflict play in his eyes, which soothed her outrage from his words. "Let's go."

Aadhya wanted to scream and celebrate her first win, but she couldn't. Suppressing the need to jump joyfully, she slid her hand around his elbow and walked close to him.

Did she finally find a way for her to have a leg up, at least on occasion? She was vexed by being suffocated and cornered by the contract she had written up. It gave her a new high to know she had a way to get under his skin, and she would milk it however long it lasted.

Nakul Thakvar, you have no idea what's in store for you!

She planned to make every moment so torturous for him that he would leave. She smiled at the possibility of the outcome. She got a double-kick out of it as the clause where the contract would be null and void if either party breached physical boundaries was what he added.

She would push him to the edge and drop him. He wanted to abide by the contract; she would use that to get him out of her life and the Kanwar region.

Aadhya was reeling from her newfound powers and the possibilities when their car stopped. Lost in her thoughts, she had moved around in a daze, going from their suite to the vehicle, and the entire ride she was thinking of how she could push him to the limit without breaking the contract.

She exited the car to realize they were at a small port and a boat was waiting for them. Aadhya and her love for water bodies only excited her further, and she hugged his arm. “What a surprise. Why didn’t you tell me we were going to be on a boat?” her words were smooth, and she stayed in character although no one was around.

He didn’t even glance her way like he was still pissed she got a reaction out of him when she kissed him. She didn’t want to address why she needed to mash her lips with his. She kept that thought out of her mind and stayed close to him, hugging his arm all the way on the boat.

A short ride later, she gasped when she spotted a large cruise ship docked on calmer waters. Her smile broadened. She had just started having fun, and it was getting better by the minute. She stayed silent as they stepped onto the bigger boat that seemed a lot steadier than the small one they were on a short while ago. That didn’t stop her from clinging to her fake husband, enjoying his annoyed look and the ticking at his jaw.

Their security escorted them until a point; beyond that, it was only a staff member from the cruise. She looked around, wondering where the other attendees were as they were led down the curved hallway decked like the hotel they were staying in. She had to remind herself she was on water as they were led through double doors to a room that was yet another luxurious suite with a seating area and even a circular bed to the side.

Aadhya was confused and wondered if she had misheard that they would be attending an auction. The setup looked different from the auction setup she had seen in the

movies. “What are we doing here?” she asked as soon as the staff left the room, closing the double door behind them.

“The auction.” His tone was stern.

She looked around. “Here?” She was about to call out his bluff when he pointed to one side of the suite and a computer screen next to it.

“This is an exclusive and highly confidential auction. That wall will become see-through when it’s time, but no one can see us.”

She blinked, looking around, somewhat shocked, as she had not seen such a setting even in the movies. “Why can’t people bid openly in a conference room?”

He chuckled. “No one wants to be out in the open when attending an auction for items whose sourcing is questionable.”

She nodded. “What are you looking to buy?”

He shrugged. “Maybe a wedding present for my wife since we are on our honeymoon.”

“I’m not—” her words were lost when the dark wall lit up, and a large stage appeared before them. She walked to the glass wall and realized they were on a floor higher than the stage, and she saw several boxes wrapped in velvet in various sizes.

A man’s voice came through the speakers in the suite, welcoming their members to the auction. She listened intently to the rules, ran her eyes on either side of her glass wall, and saw many other suites with darkened glasses. No one could see anyone. Neither the person hosting the auction nor the

buyers interested in the items on auction were anywhere in sight.

As she listened to the rules, her eyes widened when the voice said the item would not be revealed until a single winner. She looked at Nakul to find his eyes on her. “What’s inside those boxes?”

He shrugged. “We don’t know.”

Aadhya didn’t understand the fun of going to the auction, not knowing what was available. The rules continued, and a strict warning was issued that the auction suite folks were not to leave their designated space.

“What?” She looked at him in disbelief. “Is that why this suite is equipped with everything to spend the weekend here?”

He nodded. “This is a single-winner auction and it will go on until all items have an owner.”

His words annoyed her. “Why dress up if we are stuck in a room like this? I should have worn my pajamas.”

“Dress code.” He almost snapped but she was intrigued by the auction to let that bother her.

“Which one is my gift?” She was enjoying his annoyance too much.

“Patience.” His voice was assertive and she decided to be nice for a bit. He seemed a bit shaken, and she could not tell if it was from the kiss they had shared.

She grit her teeth in response to the curtness in his voice and walked to the computer screen, and touched it. The

screen changed, and she was surprised to see two names listed on the screen. One was hers and the screen prompted her for a fingerprint.

“Go ahead and authenticate.” She followed his instructions and placed her finger on the button and a robotic voice welcomed her as Aadhya Thakvar.

“How did you get my fingerprint?”

“It was on your case file.” His tone was so nonchalant the anger that she still had pent up about being deceived into marrying him, shot up.

“That was a cheap game you played.” The words left her mouth before she could think.

He smirked. “I’d say, the stunt you pulled before we got here, trumps everything.”

Shit! Why was he going back to her weak moment?

“Looks like you’re unable to keep up with the agreed-upon contract. Feel free to walk away.” She had no idea how she managed to say those words while she shuddered on the inside.

Loud music started, for which she was thankful because if he retaliated, she wouldn’t hear him. There was no doubt the heat she felt on her back was from his glare.

The auction kicked off, and she watched like it was some wrestling match played by people behind the dark glass walls. Her vision of an auction was a room full of loud people but in that situation, there was no yelling and screaming, the computer screen had everything. No names, just numbers for all the other bidders.

After a few rounds, the interest died down and she settled onto the couch eating popcorn. It wasn't until she saw Nakul typing messages on his phone that she guessed what he was interested in was coming up soon.

Who was he messaging, though? His brothers? Security?

Aadhya almost dropped the clutch in her hand when she heard the announcement about the next item on auction.

“A beautiful sculpture of a Goddess.”

She started to piece something. The only sculpture anyone from Singoor would be interested in was that of their Goddess, *Shakti*. She was taken from the Singoor region, which set off the chaos in the region thirty years ago.

Bringing her back to the region would restore peace and order. Was he really working for the people or for himself? She felt conflicted.

She felt a sudden admiration for him when she saw how Nakul took charge of the computer screen. He outbid almost all the other auctioneers, and she started wondering what it would be like to be in Singoor with peace restored.

He could be telling the truth about the Goddess. What if he was trying to make the region better?

“Is this for real,” she said, standing next to him as she looked down at the box under the spotlight. The box size seemed to match based on what she had heard of the sculpture. *Shakti* was smaller than many other deities in other temples, and she started to shudder at the thought of finding the goddess.

She gently placed her hand on his shoulder. “Thank you!” Yet again, she had no control over her words as she was overcome by the emotions and a sudden admiration for him grew. She watched him as he stayed calm, although she knew he had a lot running in his mind.

The next moment his expression changed. “Fuck! No.” He ran his fingers through his hair and held his phone to his ear. “I want to buy out that bidder. Talk to them. Ask them to name their price for the sculpture.”

She watched in horror and anticipation as the male voice announced the reveal of the sculpture. She never once thought she could see what the Goddess would look like. It was almost a myth for her generation as no one had even seen a picture of the power that protected the entire region.

Unknowingly, she had moved closer to him, and as the anticipation built up, she felt him shudder and pull her close.

“I can’t believe we lost the bid.” He growled. A reaction she never expected to see in him, considering how calm and contained in the time they spent together.

“It’s okay, we should talk to the person who won the bid even if we have to beg them to give it to us.” Her voice shook as if reacting to her words; he pulled away and went to the door.

“Nakul?” She called out as he opened the suite door that was not supposed to be opened until the end of the auction as per the rules.

“Stay here!” he ordered.

He was gone with a soft click of the door, leaving her confused, angry, and anxious.

Why couldn't he tell her? Was it what she said?

She focused on the sculpture being revealed while the announcer congratulated the winner of the priced, rare sculpture. She held her phone in position to take pictures and then held back.

Was it okay to take pictures of the Goddess?

She waited for the full reveal with bated breath. The box opened, but there was a silk cloth covering the sculpture, and when the cloth slid off fluidly, she gasped. What she saw with her eyes and what showed up on the TV screen in the suite was a beautiful artwork of a Goddess.

It took her a moment to know it was not Shakti but a beautiful sculpture that exuded peace and calm. She had never seen the sculpture, but she remembered her father describing the sculpture of Shakti as covered in black diamonds that were missing from the statue in front of her.

Relief swept over her that they did not lose the bid for the actual sculpture from the region, but disappointment also set in soon that it wasn't *Shakti*. The announcer shared details of the sculpture, the fact that the origin was unknown but was roughly traced back to Asia.

Her legs were wobbly as she sat down, processing the last few moments. Was her fake husband so desperately behind the sculpture for the right reasons?

For the wealth and success Nakul and his brothers had, based on the internet snooping she did while avoiding

him in the car, there was no need for the oil from Singoor for them to make more money.

Was there any other reason?

She was still unable to digest how persistent he was and how outraged he was when he was outbid. Was there a more significant motivation than what he shared about bringing his family together?

Why couldn't he tell her?

If it was not something he could not tell her, it had to be questionable. Annoyed that he left her by herself, she decided to have some fun of her own.

Wasn't he going to buy her a gift anyway?

The next item seemed like a perfect gift for a wife from her husband on their honeymoon. "Let's get this started!"

Chapter 15

Shortly after, Aadhya was ecstatic that she won the auction and enjoyed doing it. She loved playing with the bidding system and outbidding the other auctioneer by a fraction of a point. She had watched Nakul bid and learned how to use the system. Annoyed that she was left all by herself by her secretive husband, she had no other option to manage her annoyance. She let out a victorious laugh as she looked at the screen that lit up as if in congratulations for her win.

“Show me my surprise,” she said, tapping her fingers on the glass wall as the large velvet box opened. The box opened, and her eyes widened when she saw the jewelry sparkle under the light. She had no idea what she was bidding on other than the fact that it was gold jewelry.

Her jaw dropped when she saw a beautiful pair of earrings, a multi-layered necklace, and a matching bracelet. The stones on the jewelry shone like they were a source of light, and she held onto the screen for support as she took in the beauty of the items.

A robotic man’s voice congratulated her using her code name for the win and moved on to the next item. She watched as the box on the stage closed and was sealed again to be delivered to her, and a beeping noise started on the screen. She looked at that screen and saw a camera tracking the item as it moved on what looked like a conveyor to be delivered somewhere.

As she watched the screen, her eyes fell on a universally well-recognized symbol. The symbol of the US dollar and what followed after was what made her gasp. She saw the number two and the long line of zeros that followed it.

She started to shake outwardly when she processed the value of the number flashed on the screen before her. “What the heck!”

Just as she processed what had happened, the door opened, and her husband stepped in. She looked at him, fearing the unknown. She had spent millions on a jewelry set and didn’t even need it. Out of spite, she started bidding but was carried away when the bidding got aggressive, and she wanted a distraction from being angry about her husband leaving her alone after accusing her of seducing him.

“What is that?” His voice made a sting of fear and guilt rumble through her.

She had no way out of the situation but to be a bullhead. “Something I liked. I knew my husband would want me to have.” She managed to hold a smile as she turned to look at him. “I like my surprise very much.”

She watched as he held her gaze for a long moment. “Good. Time to go.”

He turned away from her to hold the door open for her and she sighed in relief. She was glad she didn’t have to exercise her taunt about him being unable to afford a gift for his wife. It was the backup plan if he had objected to her spending all that moment on a piece of medieval jewelry.

She was a bit taken aback he didn't say anything. Even her aunt would yell at her for spending so much money on a jewelry set.

Aadhya told herself not to act so foolishly the next time she was agitated.

Later that night, Nakul stood on the balcony off their suite's living room, looking into the water. The moonlight reflected off the serene lake, which did not calm Nakul. He felt agitated, and it was for more than one reason. The biggest was the woman who was fast asleep in the bedroom upstairs, oblivious of her effect on him.

“Fuck!” he ran his fingers through his thick hair, unable to break out of the replay of the image of her as he ripped off the sexy dress, earlier that day. The way her cheeks turned red from embarrassment and her smooth, velvety skin glowed in the light, was the most beautiful sight he had seen. There was no need for him to pull the dress off of her to tell her it was not appropriate and yet he did.

To top that off, his contract wife had purchased an exotic necklace that he wanted her to see wear—only the chain and nothing else. “Stop,” he warned, his fingers fisting tightly.

Any amount of warning was no good. Not after she plastered her pillow lips against his, and all he could think of was lifting up her body-hugging dress and taking her right there.

She was playing him, and it was working. His contract wife was stunning and didn't need to seduce him; she merely had to look his way, and she had him hard as a rock. And just at the memory of how stunning and elegant she looked earlier that evening, he was craving what he shouldn't be again.

His phone buzzing pulled him out of his desire-driven thoughts, and he saw his brothers were calling him. Shaking away all thoughts of his wife, he answered the call. He had called them a few hours ago but could not talk to either. They were both working with a clan in the western region of Singoor.

“Hey, Rishab and Shivay, how did the clan meeting go?” Nakul smiled as he spoke to his older brother, barely a year older than him.

“Not too bad. We still have clans refusing to talk to us because of the curse.” Rishab sighed.

Nakul looked up at the sky, realizing how challenging it had been for him and his brothers to connect with the clans. After the untimely deaths of the heirs over the past two decades, the clans were scared to talk to other clans. All the deaths followed the efforts to bring the clans back together and they didn't want to risk it.

“I wish we could tell them about what we found about the Kanwar heir's death and tell them it was no fire accident.” Nakul's investigative team had assessed the location where the ritual was being performed over the past week. It didn't take them long to rule out any possibility of a small ceremonial fire from becoming widespread. They confirmed that a highly

combustible material had to be involved and implied that others had to be present to stage the accident.

A *Peace* ritual that needed to be performed by a couple with only a priest present, went sideways when the Kanwar heir was burnt to death with his wife by his side. There had to be foul play but unfortunately, there was no evidence. The only witness was the priest who had disappeared after that day and was found dead later, ending the trail for his investigative team.

“It won’t help.” Shivay’s voice was calm. “Especially with no proof, we run the risk of backlash.”

“True,” Rishab said and added, “Dad knew his brother’s death was no accident. One of the reasons why he moved to Singoor without us.”

Their father even went to the lengths of faking his death so he and his brothers would never go to Singoor looking for him. They had a few allies for everything their father had done for the region but needed more to connect all the clans. It had to be through the alliances.

“How did the auction go? I saw your message; the sculpture was not what we were looking for?” Shivay asked as if to divert the topic from the investigations.

The auction was a disappointment and a relief for Nakul. “I must say, I’m glad it wasn’t the sculpture we were looking for, but there’s something else.”

“About the sculpture?” Rishab was intrigued.

“The sculpture had a lot of interest, and as the bids increased, there was only one other bidder.” Nakul paused like

he was hashing out his suspicions. “Why was the bidder so desperate?”

“Desperate?” Shivay repeated.

“Yes.” There was silence as Nakul replayed some of the events. “Auctioneers bid with much thought and are calculating the item’s resale or its worth for their status.

“Sure,” Rishab knew his brother was onto something.

“But this bidder was as desperate as I was to get a hold of the sculpture. Who else would want the sculpture so bad?” Nakul let out a growl.

“Did you know who the bidder was?” Rishab asked.

“No.” Nakul let out a huff. “I had the team track the bidder, but they tracked a group to a hotel on the other side of the city.”

“Who were they?” Rishab enquired.

Nakul signed. “Not sure, but when the team searched the hotel room for clues, they found a *Rudraksh*—this one unique to Singoor.

“Must be him,” Rishab growled.

Nakul let out a growl. “That was my thought, too. It has to be Tantra. That desperation was a giveaway.”

“It’s his signature,” Rishab said, adding before ending the call. “We’ll get him soon.”

“Guys, we need a trail that will lead to him. He is taunting us by leaving these crumbs. Don’t get distracted. Be safe.”

Nakul let out a groan and stretched his neck. “I agree. I’ll see you guys in a few days.”

“Get some rest, Nakul.” It was as if Shivay knew how tired Nakul felt.

He was beyond exhausted and wanted to go to bed but needed to be sure his fake wife was really asleep first so he didn’t do something stupid by losing control if she had planned something for that night.

Chapter 16

It had almost been a week since they returned from the auction, their honeymoon. Aadhya saw very little of her husband as she had started her classes online for the final semester. She spent time with her aunt and preparing for her aunt's birthday.

She wanted to have a grand celebration, but her aunt was a simpleton and would not enjoy the limelight. She planned on making her aunt's favorite dishes and had been preparing for what her aunt loved the most.

Aadhya had been secretly practicing her aunt's favorite song of all time so that she could sing for her for her birthday. It was a classic, and Aadhya had not sung in front of anyone for years until she had to show off her skill to impress her fake husband as part of making the deal. The thought agitated her, but she had no choice but to suppress the anger and swallow it for eleven more months.

She noticed that her husband was in meetings all day and spent most of his time on the other side of their wing, where he had set up an office. He met with her uncle and other staff every day, and she only hoped he treated her aunt's husband respectfully and with dignity, especially since she issued a warning.

It was the day of her aunt's birthday, and she had the entire day planned out. She woke up at the crack of dawn to surprise her aunt by doing yoga with her. It was her aunt's

routine that she had encouraged Aadhya to follow, but she never did, and she thought it would be fun to start that with her aunt, considering she would be in the mansion until the contract ended.

She turned off the alarm and rolled in bed like every morning, not realizing she wasn't alone. She froze when her body hit a warm, hard body. A zap of energy passed through her, making her eyes shoot open.

Her heart thudded as she took in the feel of his body against hers. It didn't take her long to realize he was bare-chested. She felt the hard muscles on his back against her arm, and new thrills took root within her. The natural thing to do was to get away from her fake husband, but she could not move a finger, and as if her body had a mind of its own, it slowly curved up against him.

What are you doing? Get up and go!

No number of warnings that fired off in her mind stopped her from going to her side to plaster her chest to his back as her cheek pressed against the warm skin on his back. Her chest heaved, and she was breathing through her mouth, processing everything she was feeling when she felt a sudden movement.

A gasp escaped her and before she realized it, he had turned to face her and his arm held her to him in a vice-like grip. His breath was warm in her skin, and his words cut through the drumming in her ear. "Are you suggesting that we consummate our marriage or is this a play to get out of contract?"

“No.” She started to push him away from her, but she had no power left. Her body was under his spell as it became aware of the dips and peaks of his chiseled body, and the steely hardness she felt against her soft belly made a shudder pass through her.

“And, consider this the last warning for such antics. One more time you come close, I will take it as a sign that you wish to be my Singoor bride forever.”

His words made her shake in fear. Was he planning to be in Singoor forever?

“Also, I have told you once that I do not like it when you touch my feet, and despite that, I find you bending in front of me as if on purpose.” His grip on her hair tightened. “I’m used to women pleasuring me when they go down on their knees. Unless you intend to do that, you better watch it.”

Shocked and confused in response to his words, she wiggled in his arms. “Let—me go,” it was barely a whisper as she tried to push away from him. She was finding it hard to talk as her body tremored in his hold.

He let her go as if in response to her words and she bolted from there not wanting to look in his eyes. Embarrassed and feeling defeated, she ran to the bathroom’s safety and stood with her back to the door. What shocked her most was how much he held her body under his command. Her mind told her to kick away from him, but she had no control over her actions. And what she chastised herself about was why she felt the need to snuggle up against him.

Why Aadhya?

Later that day, she was in the studio where she had learned to sing. Her father was a classical music enthusiast and had started her early on with the training. Her father would join her for almost every one of her music sessions, and it was one of the sweetest memories she had of her and her father. After her parents passed away in the horrific fire accident, she refused to sing as it reminded her of the void in her life.

She would have abandoned the art if it weren't for her aunt. Her aunt sat with her during the music sessions like her dad did until she left Singoor to go to boarding school months after her parents passed away. She kept up with the performing art as a remembrance of her parents but only kept it to herself. Never once did she sing in public. And that evening, she was prepared to sing her aunt's favorites. She could not contain her excitement when one of the staff nodded at her from the studio entrance, indicating that her aunt was approaching.

Aadhya cleared her throat and extended her spine as she sat with her legs folded on the wooden platform. She wanted her aunt to be welcomed back from her day in the temple with her voice, and just as she saw the reflection of her aunt in one of the open glass doors of the studio, she started singing. She taped the background music instead of inviting musicians so it could be time she and her aunt spent together.

After spending the morning practicing Yoga with her aunt and sharing a cup of tea, her aunt left home to spend her day at the Singoor temple. A tradition her aunt followed every one of her birthdays. She spent the day meditating and working at the temple before returning home for dinner.

Aadhya smiled at the surprise in her aunt's face as she continued to sing. She could see her aunt's step falter as she made it to the seating in the large studio. Aadhya fought back tears of joy and sadness as she watched her aunt blink away moisture in her eyes. She could not remember the last time she saw her aunt's eyes light up the way they did, and that only encouraged her to keep singing.

She had chosen to wear traditional clothes and jewelry that evening, and although she never found them to be too comfortable, she wanted to wear them that day because she knew her aunt liked it when she wore local clothes. She would do anything for the woman who took the place of her mother and father and did her best to fill the void.

She sang four songs, paused before singing the last one, and smiled at her aunt. "Rajji, happy birthday. I hope you enjoy the next song." The composition she chose as her last song was from a movie, and the song was about a young woman who was discovering love and expressing what it felt like falling in love.

Aadhya's voice trembled slightly when her aunt cried even as she smiled at her. She stood up from the platform and walked over to where her aunt sat as she kept the song going. Towards the end, her aunt joined voices with Aadhya and they both finished the song and ended up laughing, wiping away happy tears.

"God bless you, sweetheart." Her aunt kissed Aadhya on her forehead and added, "You made me so happy today. This is my best birthday ever."

“Rajji, I love you so much.” She hugged her aunt, batting away happy tears. While rejoicing the moment, she was also stung by guilt at the thought that she had missed so much time with her aunt. She was thankful for how things turned out with the fake marriage with the Thakvar. She would have missed such moments if Nakul were an international businessman.

Stop, giving that deceitful bastard credit for all this.
An angry voice fired away in her mind but she shoved it away.

When the two women settled down from their emotional high, her aunt took Aadhya’s hand in hers and said, “Today you made me so happy and I was reminded of the first time I fell in love.”

Aadhya let out a laugh. “That’s sweet, Rajji. You never told me how you fell in love with my awesome uncle.”

Her aunt smirked and said, “Your uncle was not my first love.” She paused momentarily, “I don’t know if I even fell in love with your uncle after what I felt for the man of my dreams.”

“Rajji...I had no idea. I’m sorry.” Aadhya did not miss the joy in her aunt’s eyes despite her opening up about her relationship with her husband.

Her aunt shook her head. “Don’t be. Your uncle is a good man and took excellent care of me. My only guilt is I couldn’t reciprocate as much as I would have if I were married to the man who was my first love.”

“Where—where is this man now?”

Her aunt shook her head. “I don’t know. He left Singoor a long time back, and I was sad for many years because I had not heard from him in decades.” Her smile broadened, and she looked at Aadhya. “And it was only recently that I was informed that he was alive and well.”

“Oh good,” Aadhya felt conflicted. “Are you still in love with this man?”

Her aunt cupped her hand over Aadhya’s cheek. “A woman never ever forgets her first love. And I don’t feel sad at all about it.”

“Why didn’t you marry him then?”

Her aunt’s eyes showed a bit of gloom before she let out a small laugh. “I never said he loved me back.”

“What?” Aadhya was angry on behalf of her aunt. “How could anyone not love *you*?”

Her aunt laughed, hugging her. “Thank you, dear, for such a lovely gift of music.”

“We are not done yet, Rajji. Let’s go.” She led her aunt out of the music studio toward the family area of the main wing of the mansion. She had asked her uncle to gather some clansmen to celebrate her aunt’s birthday. She had spent the day baking a cake for her aunt and making some of her favorite dishes with help from Nani.

“Where are you taking me, Aadi?” The joy in her aunt’s voice made her laugh.

“You’ll see.” Aadhya held her skirt up with one hand while leading her aunt to the dining area with the other like she was leading a child. She had instructed everyone to be

quiet until she showed up with her aunt. Just before they turned the corner where the main dining area would come into view, she let out a sound, a cue for the folks gathered, and that's when the drum beats started.

Just like she had planned, the celebration was kicked off, and everything went exactly as planned until her fake husband appeared. He was not part of the plan as he was absent the past few days. Especially after the fiasco that morning, the last thing she wanted was not to have to face him. But there he was, cheering for her aunt with everyone else. She didn't have to look at him to know his eyes were on her. The smug look on his face was hard to miss, even if she didn't look in his direction.

She stayed with her aunt throughout the celebration, but it wasn't long before she had to stand beside her husband as they took photos with the families of the clan heads. It was like being on pins and needles standing next to him. What was worse was when he wrapped his arm around her as per the photographer's instruction, her body came alive. Her dress had a full back opening, just like every traditional outfit, and how his warm skin felt on hers was torturous. It made her jittery, and she had to fight her body's need for more of him.

Aadhya stayed away from him, unsure of how her body would react around him, and took the time to be in conversations with her uncle. She had to have a serious conversation with Meenabai about how much her husband hated it when she touched his feet. She had to explain how he grew up outside India and was only taught to touch his parents' or other elders' feet.

She was in the middle of a chat about an upcoming fair when she heard excitement come from her aunt's room.

"Aadi, come here, quick." It was her aunt's excited voice.

Aadhya excused herself and went to the smaller study that was adjacent to the main dining room. Her husband was with her aunt. "What is it, Rajji?"

"Look what Nakul got me," she said, holding up a book. "This is one of my and Nandini's favorite books." Aadhya watched as her aunt hugged the book and looked at Nakul. "Thank you so much. You two gave me the best gifts."

"You're welcome." Nakul nodded.

Aadhya was pleasantly surprised that her fake husband knew her aunt's birthday. She knew it had to be a trick to win over her aunt to further his leverage on her, and she was outraged at that thought. She kept her feelings contained and managed to smile and look at the book her aunt handed to her.

Her aunt reached out, took her hand in hers, touched Nakul's hand with her other, and brought them together. "Now, any gift that will top what you two gave me today would be a grandchild."

"Rajji, why are you—"

"Sure, soon." His words cut her off, and that pissed her further.

"That's all I needed to hear. What a wonderful day you two have given me." Her aunt hugged her and as if in a

rush, she left the study, calling out to both of them, “Let’s go eat.”

Aadhya could see how ecstatic her aunt was just at that affirmation from Nakul. But why did he have to build false hopes? She waited for her aunt to be further away before she leaned closer to him. “Why did you lie to my aunt?”

“Lies? What are you talking about?” He took a step closer to her.

She raised her chin and held his gaze. “Do not make promises to my aunt without consulting with me.”

“Well, based on how eager you were this morning and then now,” he lazily ran his eyes over her body before looking into her eyes, “this stunning outfit to get me to break. This seems to be a ploy to give your aunt her gift.”

If she was pissed a moment ago, she was livid. “How dare you accuse me?” She had no defense for what she did that morning and had to come up with something. “This is the traditional Kanwar outfit. I did not put it on for you.” She paused like she needed to organize her thoughts about addressing the morning situation. “And this morning, I was barely awake. When I wake up every morning, I have an empty bed, and I didn’t know it was you I was next to.”

“I see.” He nodded as if he understood every bit of what she rambled. “Who did you think it was then?”

“I—I thought it was my pillow. I was too sleepy to tell.” She hoped she could save face with that story of hers.

“Would you care to elaborate?” There was mockery in his voice, but she had to ignore it.

“Listen, I told you—I was sleepy, and the pillow felt nice and warm.” She only hoped he had bought the lie.

“How do I know this is not your conniving way of getting out of the contract?” He challenged.

“Believe me, I’m not doing this to get out of the contract.” There was some truth to it.

He stepped closer. “What was that before the auction?”

Her naivety and an unexplained need to kiss him. “I really didn’t know it was an adult store and,” she paused to ensure her words came out right. “I kissed you because you said we needed to show we were on our honeymoon.”

“Fine, but if I catch you pulling a stunt of any kind, it won’t be good.” It was a threat, and she knew she had to watch out for her actions, her body, specifically because she seemed to have lost control lately.

“And the jewelry, I—I didn’t know how expensive—”

“That’s fine.” He brushed it off like he didn’t want to talk about it.

“And, thank you for the gift for my aunt.” She smiled even though she was upset that he was being nice to her aunt to gain more leverage over her. What an asshole. He needed to go and soon. “Shall we go eat dinner?” She widened her pasted smile.

“Absolutely, after you.”

She walked ahead of him, knowing his eyes were roaming her back. And that’s all it took for her to be jittery all

over.

How was she supposed to think and plan his exit when her body craved for him?

Chapter 17

Days after her aunt's birthday, she kept to herself, even when not attending classes, primarily worried she could not keep her hands off him. How much of a conflict her mind and body were in was unbelievable. Despite being perpetually pissed about her situation, it was hard not to feel the pull toward him. It almost felt like she constantly felt his eyes on her, but the more she thought about it, the more she imagined it all.

Aadhya pulled herself out of her thoughts as she sat beside him in the car. All she was told was she had to accompany him for a meeting. Like every other time, he didn't tell her where they were headed like he didn't trust her. She was on a mission to get him out of her life and the region, but she had no idea how. Other than getting him to break the contract rules.

If he thought she had a way other than what she was accused of earlier in the week, and that's why he wouldn't trust her, she needed to figure a way. "Where are we headed?" she asked, and he looked up from his phone. She wondered how much coverage he had with what looked like a satellite phone.

"To a clan meeting."

She was a bit taken aback that he quickly offered the information. "Why am I going to this one and not to the other meetings?"

He looked at her for a long moment. “How do you know I have had other clan meetings?”

She didn't, and it was a wild assumption that he had been meeting with people in the region. She wondered if something changed and if he was trusting her more. “You are a businessman and I think you are meeting people of the Singoor region.”

“You think I'm meeting the other clans for business purposes?” His tone was surprisingly casual.

“Yes.” She saw no need to beat around the bush about what she thought of his intentions. “You are leveraging your ties to this land for your benefit.”

He nodded. “And why do you think I'm taking you to this clan meeting?”

“Beats me!” She held his gaze as he looked at her, trying to read her thoughts.

He pressed his lips together. “You'll see why.”

His nonchalance set her off. “Why can't you just tell me? Why this façade of surprise like you care how I feel about what you do?” The filter lifted on her annoyance. “Or just let me be. Don't pull me into whatever you plan to do here in Singoor.”

He didn't say anything for the rest of the drive, and she felt sick to the stomach. She had not only fallen prey to an excellent master plan but also pulled her clan and other clans into whatever mess the Thakvar brothers were creating in Singoor.

The rest of the trip passed by in utter silence, and she kept her eyes away from him. She looked out of the window but did not process any of the details until her eyes caught something familiar. A symbol on one of the signs that she could not place, but she felt a strange connection to it.

She turned to look at him and found him looking at her. “What is this place?” She looked around as the convoy of vehicles drove through somewhat familiar lanes. He remained silent, and she looked around and lifted her eyes as if by habit to look up at the ancient structure on top of the hillside. Her stomach twisted painfully, and she held her breath.

They were at her mother’s birthplace. The Jangid Fort!

“Why—why are we here?” The location brought sadness and in a strange way a sense of calm to her.

“We are here to meet the head of the Jangid clan. I promised him I would bring his niece with me the next time I visit.”

She felt deep sadness, remembering the side of the family she had forgotten. Her aunt cut off all ties with her mother’s family after her parents passed away in a fire accident while performing a ritual at the Jangid fort. Memories of the smiling faces of her mother’s siblings and grandparents flashed before her eyes.

She remembered the last time she was there, and the last thing she remembered was her being taken away from the fort by her furious aunt. “I—I can’t be here; Rajji will be very upset,” her voice was weak.

He shrugged. “She can be upset with me all she wants. You didn’t know where we were going.”

Her eyes widened in response to his words. “Why are you taking me to the Jangid fort?”

He held her eyes for a long moment. “I need your uncle’s support to achieve my goal.” She appreciated the small bit of transparency.

Aadhya fell silent, unsure of how to react to his words. It was indeed a predicament. Did she care more about stopping him or meeting the family she had not seen in decades? *Nani* had been her only tie to her mother’s side of the family, and the older woman wasn’t even a relative. But she was more like the grandmother she hadn’t seen in years.

Her question about whether to aid in her fake husband’s mission or choose her happiness was answered when the vehicles stopped. Her eyes fell on the people gathered; the first person she saw was her grandmother, and an uncontrollable sob escaped her. The door of the vehicle flew open before she could reach for it, and she saw her husband was the one who held the door open for her.

Wiping away the tears that rolled down her cheeks, she walked to where the older woman stood, towards the back of the group, as if unsure of herself. She walked past people who placed their hands on her shoulder, tears in their eyes, and wrapped her arms around the older woman.

“I missed you, so much, Aadi,” the wobbling voice of her grandmother made Aadhya cry out in joy.

“I missed you too, *Dadi*.” The older woman hugged Aadhya so closely, and she didn’t let go.

“Aadi, it is so good to see you finally.” Aadhya pulled back when she heard a man’s voice from behind. It was her mother’s older brother.

“So good to see you, *Mama*.” She smiled as he touched her head as if blessing her.

The man batted away moisture that gathered in his eyes. “You remind us so much of Jayanti.” Aadhya had not heard her mother’s name in ages, and it brought back happy memories of her when she always thought everything about the region only brought her bad memories.

“Where is *Dada*?” Aadhya asked about her maternal grandfather, almost dreading to hear the following words.

Her grandmother nodded. “He’s inside the house. He doesn’t recognize people these days. He refuses to come out of his room and has been that way the last twenty years.”

Aadhya felt a pinch of guilt for never asking to meet her mother’s family, but again, she wouldn’t do anything that would come anywhere near hurting her aunt. “Let’s go; I want to see him.”

Her grandma let out a laugh. “Not yet, Aadhya. You cannot go into the house without the welcome ritual. Especially since you are a new bride.”

Aadhya only laughed and surprisingly didn’t mind the ritual at all, even if it was something she had to do, holding her husband’s hand while he held her close to him with his arm.

For a change, she wasn't annoyed with her fake husband. He did something right even if it was for his own selfish reasons.

Later that day, after spending time with her maternal family, she entered the garden to stroll through the orchard. No matter how warm the day was, she always remembered it was cool in the shade. She smiled, remembering her mother's stories while they walked down the stone pathway.

“It feels good to be back, Mamma.” The words escaped her, and that made her laugh. Never in many years did she think she could smile and enjoy her parent's memories. She had shut them away and when they resurfaced, they made her find a dark corner and shut herself out from everyone.

She could not believe it was almost sunset time and she had spent all day with her grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. A bit younger than her, but she didn't realize she had so many cousins. It surprised her how much she connected with her mother's siblings like a day did not pass from the last time she had seen them.

Aadhya stopped on the pathway to observe a familiar sign on one of the pillars that held the covering over the pathway. Her fingers trembled as she reached for a smear of color on the painted pillar. It was a marking of her hand from when she was little. How could she not have thought of coming to see her grandparents sooner?

“Don't be ridiculous, they just got married.” A female's voice from somewhere nearby fell on her ears, and Aadhya looked around to see if anyone was in sight. Just from

the reference to a recent marriage, Aadhya wondered if the conversation was about her.

“Why does it matter? It is part of our culture. I’m going to ask my father to speak about the alliance.” Another insisted female voice followed.

“Listen, my cousin just came back home after a long time. Don’t ruin it for my family.” Aadhya recognized the voice as her uncle’s daughter’s voice. She knew not to be eavesdropping but could not move from the spot. The girls seemed to be on the other side of the tall hedge and were discussing deeply about something, not realizing Aadhya was standing not far from them.

Aadhya confirmed the conversation was about her, but she could not understand the context. As if the other girl read her mind, she said, “He is a Thakvar and so good-looking. I don’t care if I must be wife number ten to Nakul Thakvar; I would do it in a heartbeat.”

Aadhya reached for the pillar for support as her legs shook in response to the conviction in the girl’s voice. She felt anger build up and did not know why she was having such a reaction. She should not be eavesdropping and walking past the point, but she stood there like she had every right to listen to the conversation.

Her cousin, Vibhuti, sighed and whispered, “You are mad, Devi. Stop being so obsessed with my cousin’s husband. He is married, and have you seen how he looks at his wife? He would not spare a glance in any other woman’s direction.”

Aadhya did not know who Devi was and didn’t remember meeting her that day.

“I don’t care,” Devi said adamantly. “You either help me, or I will have my father reach out to the Thakvar family for an alliance.”

“Don’t do this to me. You are my best friend, and I would really like to help you, but not at the cost of ruining my cousin’s relationship with me. Not after meeting her for the first time.”

Aadhya wanted to hug her cousin and thank her, but as she processed that image, her mind reminded her of the contract and the fake marriage. Her mind challenged the jealousy she felt about the girl who was interested in her husband and the heartburn that arose from the fact that another woman was eyeing her man.

Your man? When did that happen?

“I don’t need your help. He has been in the study for the past two hours all by himself. I can talk to him myself. If he is interested in me—”

Aadhya did not wait to listen to the rest of the conversation. She was already moving fast back to the house. She needed to make it back to the study to her husband. Why? There was no reason, but she had to.

She hurried back up the stairs, her skirt bunched up in one hand as she made her way to the study. It didn’t matter if she was in a contract marriage or if he was her fake husband; she could not even think of any other woman looking at him, let alone approaching him with a marriage offer.

Never!

Her chest was heaving when she reached the glass double doors of the study and she saw him intently look at his computer. She opened the door only to realize he was on a phone call.

“Let me call you back.” She heard him say as she started to close the door. “Aadhya?”

She froze for a bit but opened the door and stepped into the study. He walked to her as she softly shut the door behind her. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were on a call.”

“That’s alright.” She had no business interrupting him or being in the study to see him. “Everything okay?” he asked as she muddled through her head as to what to say, her eyes downcast.

“Yes, everything is okay,” she said, looking up at him with a smile. “I—I wanted to check if everything was okay with you.”

His brows furrowed suspiciously. “Really? You came here to check on me?”

“Yes—yes, and to also,” she paused to catch her breath and added, “to thank you for bringing me here.”

His eyes held suspicion, but one end of his mouth twisted up beautifully. “You’re welcome.”

“I—I never...” her voice trailed off and she looked away, not knowing what to say and to make sure she stayed there so her husband would not be offered another wife.”

“Aadhya?” he demanded her attention.

She looked up at him, a bit shaky all over. She had to be quick before the other girl showed up and enticed him into marriage. “I—I want to kiss you.”

His eyebrow flew up. “You want to kiss me?” he repeated, like she needed to hear what she just said.

“Yes, only if you consent. I—I want to thank you for bringing me here.” She could not believe the words that rolled off her lips.

His eyes sparkled at her. “Sure, you can kiss me.”

She nodded. “Okay.” She gestured toward the couch that was placed facing the glass double doors. “Can you please sit there?”

“I need to sit down for you to kiss me?” He seemed amused, but she only thought about mashing her lips to his, as her heartbeat deafened her.

“Yes, it’ll be hard to reach for me; I don’t have my heels on today.” Like the night of the auction, she thought and bit back before she uttered anything more.

“Okay,” he said, and she did not fail to catch the amusement in his voice as he sat on the two-seater sofa. The furniture was set up with the smaller sofa facing away from the double doors of the study.

She had no idea what her plan was or the outcome she wanted to achieve, but the goal was not to leave him alone. Mainly to stop the woman offering to be his wife number two.

Is that even possible? Why was she freaking out about it? For the life of her, she could not remember why she didn’t add it to the contract she wrote.

“Now what?” he asked as she stood staring at him, unsure of how to proceed.

“Are you still okay for me to kiss you?” She was unsure of what the kiss would lead to. What if he didn’t stop kissing her? Would she be able to stop him?

“Are *you* sure about what you want to do?” He let out a chuckle.

She deserved the taunt, and she nodded in response and sat on the sofa’s armrest facing him and saw the excitement play out in his eyes. He sat back on the couch, his head resting on the headrest, his eyes half-closed as he looked at her. He looked relaxed, and the way his shirt lay loosely over his chest, showing enough, got her all worked up. She held his gaze, hoping for her breathing to settle down, but the more she looked at him, the faster her heart beat.

Moments passed in silence, and Aadhya moved her hand to cup his cheek. She shivered when he momentarily closed his eyes before looking at her again. His eyes were darkening, and she froze as she held his gaze. She saw movement outside the door but did not look away.

She knew it had to be the woman she had heard talking in the gardens, and like a flash, the woman was gone. Aadhya smiled, rejoicing the moment she drove away the girl who gawked at her husband while she was standing right next to him. That feeling gave her a new high.

She slowly leaned forward and pressed her lips to his cheek. That was all she needed to do, and that would have been a perfect time to pull back, smile at him, and leave the room. But her body had other plans. She pulled back only to

plant another kiss on his cheek and another as she trailed her lips toward his mouth.

She kissed the edge of his mouth, and just as she was pulling back, his fingers slid behind her neck, pulling her back to him, her lips mashed against his. She moaned against his lips as she moved hers gently against his. Her stomach fluttered as his hand slid up her bare back, pulling her body onto his, and before she knew it, she was sitting in his lap.

Her eyes fluttered, and she saw that his chest was heaving. His eyes were dark and dangerous, and they demanded something that she didn't know how to give.

"Kiss me more," she said, running her arm around his neck.

Like that was his cue, his hold on her tightened, and he pulled her into a deep kiss. His tongue was deliberate, seeking to explore every corner of her mouth. He groaned when she met his fierce tongue with her, and they tangled as he kissed with a hunger that set off a new need in her.

She wanted him to keep kissing her. This is what she feared all along.

Her need to stop the woman from approaching her fake husband flabbergasted her. If she really wanted to get him out of her life, she should have used her cousin's friend to lure him away. Instead, she started something she may never have control over.

What the heck, Aadhya?

The dress clung to her body as she stood on the balcony in the evening breeze. Every one of her curves was on display for him to drink in, and he moved closer, taking in her beauty. There was no other woman in the world like her.

Everything about her enticed him, and he knew it was a risk from the time he saw her at the resort. His strategic mind had told him it could be mitigated by keeping the marriage bound by a contract, but it wasn't working. He couldn't stop himself from wanting her.

He walked straight to her, and when her eyes met his, all he could think about was to rip her dress down to remove any barriers between them.

Nakul's eyes shot open in the dark, and he was hot and hard all over. It was not the first time he had his wife in his dreams, but something was shifting, and he had to stop obsessing about his temporary wife.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, he became aware of the soft warmth pressed against him. Like the last few nights, his wife had moved close to him in her sleep. It had been a week since they returned from the Jangid fort, and since then, he had been consistently woken up with her body thrown against his.

He slowly moved his hand that had been resting on her bare belly and moved away in bed. A moment later, she moaned and threw her arm over his chest, her breasts pressing against the side of his chest.

“This is a friggin bad idea.” The woman went from convincing him that she got confused between him and her pillow to now having him want her warmth in bed. This had to stop, and he needed to create a distraction.

He could not let her break the contract!

Chapter 18

“Aadi, have you not been sleeping well? I see you in your study even when I sleep. Don’t study so much,” her aunt’s words made her look up from her plate.

She shook her head and looked down at her plate. “No, I’ve been sleeping okay.” Aadhya would not admit it, but not having her husband beside her ruined her nights. She would wake up in the middle of the night seeking warmth only to be disappointed that he was away.

“Why are you toying with your food? What’s wrong?” her aunt probed. “Are you missing Meenabai’s food? She will come back immediately if I send a message for her.”

Meenabai was able to visit her relatives in Jangid Fort post Aadhya’s visit to her mother’s birthplace. The older woman had come to the Kanwar mansion to take care of Aadhya and chose to be with the Kanwars even after the accident just so she could be with Aadhya.

“Nothing, Rajji. I’m fine. The food is good.” She smiled at her aunt reassuringly. She didn’t want to admit that she was missing her annoyingly hot, fake husband and was looking forward to his return that evening.

It had been two weeks since they got back from the Jangid fort, and it had become an unspoken agreement that it was okay for her to scoot up to him and sleep close to him. When he decided to take a trip, she looked forward to having their private space to herself. She enjoyed not having to hurry

through the baths and getting dressed with him around, but she felt a gap in her day.

She had not realized that he had become the catalyst for her to feel a sense of home. He made it a point to sit down with her aunt and uncle if he was home for a meal. He kept the conversations going and engaged her aunt and uncle in the chats. In the weeks after their marriage, he had tightened security for the mansion. He added his staff as security for her aunt and uncle, who attended events and meetings outside the mansion. Most of all he gave her back the family she had forgotten about for years.

He seemed to mean well even though he held her captive by the contract. Could she trust him to do the right thing for the region?

“Rajji, do you think the region can be united again through these marriages?” she asked, and was taken aback by the surprise in her aunt’s eyes.

“Why not? Look what Nakul has done in a matter of months.” Her aunt smiled. “He not only gave you back the love you deserved but also brought Kanwars and Jangids back together, along with many other clans.”

Aadhya nodded and her aunt continued, “I had invited your mother’s family to your wedding but they chose not to attend, but look what Nakul did. Whatever he said to your mother’s family worked. And if he continues with his actions, your father’s dream of a strong partnership with our allies will be restored.”

She smiled and took her aunt’s hand in hers. “I know you were upset with Mamma’s family after the accident, and I

hope you didn't feel hurt about me meeting them.”

Her aunt tsked. “What are you saying, Aadi? I'm pleased Nakul took you to Jangid Fort. He did something I could not do for years.” She paused like she had difficulty speaking. “I said some harsh words in my agony after your parents passed away, breaking all ties for years. I regret saying those words to them but never got a chance to apologize.”

“You don't need to, Rajji.” She leaned close to her aunt. “They understand your reaction.”

Her aunt wiped off the edge of her ear and laughed. “And we will host everyone when you and Nakul give us the good news about your baby. Hopefully sooner than later.”

Stung by guilt, Aadhya could only smile and nod. “That'll be nice.” She lowered her eyes to the plate in front of her.

There was no way she could confess to her aunt about the contract. But what worried her most was how her aunt would take the separation when the contract ended.

As per the contract, when she had drafted it, Nakul was an outsider to Singoor, and she knew it would be easy to get him out of her life. But now, with him being a Thakvar and the binding Singoor marriage, how was she supposed to get out of the wedding and move on with her life?

One of the staff came into the dining room as Aadhya continued to toy with her food, lost in thought. “*Maaho*, the guests have arrived.”

That caught Aadhya's attention. “Who are we expecting, Rajji?”

Her aunt smiled knowingly. “Why don’t you go see for yourself?”

Aadhya was confused but stood up from the table and followed the staff member to the front of the main house.

“Surprise! We made it to your place, finally.” A unified set of female voices rang in her ears. “We are here to spend the mid-semester break with you!”

Aadhya let out a squeal when she saw her friends in the living room. She had never thought her friends could visit, given the unrest in the Singoor region. “Is this for real?” She was stoked.

Every one of her friends was there in her home. A mansion that never gave her comfort now meant something else. She was still in a daze as she showed her friends to their suite for their stay. She excused herself from her friends as they freshened up and looked for her aunt.

She found her aunt in the middle of a meeting with her staff but she did not hesitate to interrupt. “Sorry, everyone,” she said, hugging and kissing her aunt. “Thank you for having my friends visit.”

Her aunt laughed, patting her cheek. “Thank your husband, Aadi. He told me to keep it a surprise for you. It was his plan and he made sure there was security all along for your friends. Go enjoy!”

She blushed when she realized the staff was also grinning at such a sweet gesture from her husband. “Sorry again to interrupt.”

Aadhya stepped out of the meeting room, grinning like a fool. She remembered his annoying response when she had said she wanted to meet her friends. That was weeks back, and for him to plan this for her was rather sweet.

Maybe he wasn't as bad as she thought. Maybe she should thank him with another kiss when he returned that night.

Nakul was reviewing a contract for a new acquisition for Thakvar Corporation when he looked up from the computer toward the double doors of the space he had been using as an office. On the other side of the double doors was his wife, looking at him with anticipation in her eyes.

She was the last person he expected to see, considering her friends from college were visiting. A trip he planned to keep her busy and away from his thoughts. He gestured for her to come in, and she opened the door and stepped in wearing a beautiful traditional outfit. She held a tray of food as she walked to him.

She looked torturously stunning as she made her way to his large desk, and he had a tough time not following the sway in her hips and the beautiful movement of the curve that was exposed at her midriff.

“This is for you. Your afternoon snacks.” She placed the tray of fresh and dry fruits and looked at him.

“Thanks, you didn't have to bring them to me.” He leaned back, enjoying the display of her beautiful curves in the traditional outfit.

She gently shook her head, and her earrings wiggled beautifully. “That’s okay. I was anyway coming up here, so I asked Nani to give it to me to bring to you.”

“You were going to come see me? I thought you’d be out with your friends.” She was supposed to not show up like this and mess up his mind.

She shrugged and let out a chuckle. “We all decided to wear traditional clothes to go to the Singoor temple, and they are still getting ready.”

“Are your friends enjoying the Singoor region?” He wanted to keep the conversation brief and end it so he didn’t have to fight his need to reach across his desk and take her right there in his office.

Why was he thinking like a savage?

“Very much, and I’m having a great time.” She lowered her eyes and bit her lip, and he could not take his eyes away from her lips. He wanted to feel the softness of her lips again. “Thank you for planning this trip.”

“Glad to hear.” He was having a tough time breathing. “You’re welcome.” He looked at her as she lowered her eyes again like she had more to tell him. His eyes wandered over his temporary wife hungrily and averted them as she lifted her eyes to meet his.

She cleared her throat several times, as if she needed time to formulate her sentence. “I—my friends are telling me how lucky I am to have a husband like you, and my aunt is singing praises for everything you’re doing for the region.”

She paused and meddled with her bangles, yet again, the slight sound driving him crazy. “Maybe I need to get over the fact that you kept me in the dark about your identity and why you really married me.”

He stood up from his chair, walked over to where she was, and stood with his hands deep in his jeans pockets. “I didn’t expect you to accept the marriage as-is, and that’s why we have a contract.”

She nodded. “But it feels like I misunderstood your intentions based on what I had heard about your family. My aunt told me you are working hard to bring the region’s people together. I appreciate it very much.”

His chest warmed up in response to her words and he ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair. “Let’s hope it all works.”

She nodded, smiling, her eyes twinkling. “I know it will, and I—I want to help too.”

“You are helping already by attending the auctions that are only for couples.” He wondered if he was loosening up too quickly with her and revealing the information.

He noticed how her cheeks reddened as she looked away. “I’m sorry I bid on such an expensive jewelry set. I should have paid attention to the cost.”

Nakul was glad she kept on with the bidding process. It was his alibi for not getting into trouble with the exclusive auction commission that was known to find the most unique items. “Glad you liked the items.”

He watched as her eyes fell on something on his desk. He followed her gaze and saw it was the printed image of Shakti. She looked up at him, a mix of emotion and confusion in her eyes. “Is-Is that the picture of our Goddess?”

When he nodded, she reached for it and picked it up with trembling fingers. “I’ve never seen her,” she said, batting away tears, and added, “How did you get this?”

Nakul took the small piece of paper from his wife’s hand and said, “My sister-in-law Ishani was able to have one of the temple priests describe the sculpture to his son to paint it.”

“Nakul,” she said and paused, looking into his eyes as if connecting the dots. “I guessed this is why we were at the auction a few weeks back.”

He nodded, and she sighed and turned away from him, shaking her head and looking upset. He reached out and held her by her elbow. “Aadhya, what’s wrong?”

She turned to face him, and the next thing he knew, her lips were on his as she clung to him with her arm around his neck. His hands were quick to reach the bare curves of her waist as his lips welcomed her into a kiss.

She moaned against his mouth, and that made him shudder and push him to the brink of an explosion. She kissed him, and he took in every bit of her eagerness as he leaned against his desk, holding her to him.

Their engagement was getting intense by the second, and his hand slid up to her chest as if in search of the softness that was pressed against him at night.

She arched her back and pushed her soft belly against his steel hardness, and just as he was about to lose all control, she pulled back. She looked as disappointed as he felt and ran away without another glance his way.

Moments later, he heard her friends tease her as she descended the stairs. He was frustrated with where things were headed. He wanted to keep her under the contract until he met his goals, but the bad boy between his legs had other plans. He let out a growl as he walked toward the private quarters for a cold shower.

After those heated moments, nothing would satiate him, but he had to take care of his throbbing hardness that refused to go away.

How would he get any work done if his wife was so brutally hot and hungry?

Chapter 19

Aadhya could not believe it had been three months since their wedding day. It was part of the tradition for her to visit the Thakvar mansion and perform a ritual. Her aunt went overboard and loaded up vehicles and camels to send the traditional gifts to the Thakvar mansion as a part of her first visit.

She sat beside Nakul, looking forward to meeting his family. She didn't know who would be at the Thakvar mansion besides his oldest brother and wife. Ishani Gujjar was the first Singoor bride to have married a Thakvar heir, and the more she processed their actions, the more she believed they were there to bring peace to the region.

She had seen an older couple standing behind him during the wedding and assumed they had to be his parents. She was told the couple was on a holy journey to get the precious stones and jewels blessed at the fifty-one temples to start commissioning the Goddess statue.

Their car ride was silent, and she meant to start a conversation a few times, but he looked intensely at his phone every time she glanced his way.

Was he avoiding her?

He had to be. He had been cold from the time she kissed him in his office. It was probably best because Aadhya had no explanation for her actions lately.

If anyone were to ask her what her end game was, she would not know since anything she did, she wasn't thinking, let alone planning it. From the time she kissed him in his office for no reason, she had been staying away from her husband. She stayed with her friends in the guest rooms their entire stay, and she had no other option but to return to her husband that night. She wondered if they were staying at the Thakvar mansion that night.

How was she supposed to face him after kissing him for no reason a few days ago?

She was pulled out of her thoughts when his phone started to ring. "Shivay, we are almost there." A long pause later. "Okay. I'll talk to you when we get there."

Aadhya thought it would be an opportune moment to ask the questions that reeled in her mind. "Will your other brother and his wife also be there for their three-month ceremony?"

"No. It would just be Shivay and Ishani." It wasn't until days after her marriage to Nakul that she learned about Rishab and Gauri Bhil's wedding from her aunt. They were married a day before their ceremony.

"Not today; they performed the ritual yesterday." His tone was not curt, but his message was limited like he didn't want to prolong the conversation.

Aadhya decided to hold off on asking further questions. She still could not comprehend the mindset of her husband and his brothers to leave their luxurious lives abroad to fight for the region's peace. Lost in thought, she kept to herself.

Soon, they were at the gates of the mansion. As soon as the car entered the compound, she was in a safe haven. A feeling very few places had in her mind, and she found it surprising that she had the connection even though she had never visited the place before.

The vehicle pulled up in front of the main doors. A set of stairs led to the door, and she noticed the entrance was beautifully decorated with yellow and orange marigolds. She was meeting his family for the first time but was not anxious about it.

A group of women was waiting to welcome them, and in front of them stood a tall man with the same eyes as Nakul. Next to him was a beautiful woman decked up in traditional clothes with a sweet smile.

Aadhya looked forward to getting to know Ishani. In her excitement, she took a step too fast as she ascended the stairs, and her foot slipped.

She lost her balance and knew there was nothing to grab onto. The only thing to do was brace herself, but her fall soon broke. She felt a strong arm steady her, and she heard the collective gasps of the women as her husband held her to him. "Watch it," he said before letting her go to lead her up the stairs by holding her hand.

Shivay and Ishani smiled as one of the women held up a tray of burning camphor. She ran the tray in circles in front of her and Nakul. "Aadhya, welcome home."

Aadhya smiled at the woman. "Thank you." As they approached, she averted her eyes to look at Shivay and Ishani. "Shivay and Ishani, it is so good to meet you finally."

“Likewise,” Ishani said and added, “Please come. We have everything ready for the ritual.”

The woman who had performed the welcome ritual cleared her voice and said, “We heard that Aadhya has a beautiful voice. We would love to hear her sing before we start the ritual.”

How did the Thakvar people know about her singing?

Aadhya was not in the habit of singing in public, and she panicked a bit. And a moment later, a cool breeze swept over her, and she felt at ease. It was as if she was in the middle of the gardens at the Kanwar mansion, where she had sweet memories with her aunt, like the patio at the Jangid fort, where she had precious memories with her mother.

Looking at the women gathered, she smiled and said, “I’d love to.” She caught the puzzled look in her husband’s eyes but ignored him and took a deep breath.

Aadhya chose a simple song, one of her aunt’s favorites, and by the end of the song, the people gathered were smiling with joy, warming her chest.

“That was so beautiful,” Ishani smiled before leading her to the house’s main entrance.

Later that afternoon, Aadhya stood to one side of the living room, looking at the large Thakvar family portrait. It was similar to one mounted on the wall at the Kanwar mansion. She wondered if the extended family had moved out of Singoor due to the unrest, just like her relatives had to the nearby city.

It felt nice for the four of them to sit together and chat. Nakul's older brother was not much of a talker, but his wife made up for it with her enthusiasm. She enjoyed talking to her and, a couple of times, caught her husband observing her, an unreadable expression in his eyes.

Why was he looking at her like that?

Ishani excused herself to arrange for some refreshments, and soon after, the brothers excused themselves when they got a phone call, leaving her alone in the large open space. She started exploring the space, admiring the beautiful artwork and memories on the walls.

"Where did the brothers go?" Ishani asked, pulling Aadhya out of her observations.

"Oh, they got a phone call." She smiled, taking in the detail of the woman's outfit.

Ishani's eyes trailed to where her husband and Nakul stood speaking on the phone, matching smiles on their faces.

"Must be an important call," Ishani said, adding as if to distract her. "I have something that you'll like to see. Come with me."

Aadhya smiled and followed Ishani. It was rare for her to connect with someone so quickly the first time, and she was glad she felt comfortable with Ishani.

Was it because she knew Ishani had a similar type of marriage to hers except for the contract?

Later that evening, she stayed in the main dining area an hour after dinner, avoiding her husband. It would be her first night back after kissing him in his office. She avoided his eyes and clung to her aunt's side after returning from the Thakvar mansion.

She stayed on the patio off the dining area, hoping to avoid any conversations and go to their shared space after he fell asleep. She looked out into the gardens, remembering her time at the Thakvar mansion.

Ishani was excited to show off her favorite spot in the mansion, her library. The portrait of Nandini Thakvar, Nakul's aunt, who was also her aunt's best friend, was the highlight in the library.

What was a real surprise was to see a picture of her aunt and Nandini Thakvar in an old photo album as young girls. Even though it was her first visit, she felt comfortable with the people at the Thakvar mansion, which was rare for her.

"How long are you going to do this?" she grumbled under her breath and sat on the marble bench looking out into the open gardens with the fountain.

She didn't know how long she sat on the outdoor bench before she heard footsteps approaching the dining area. She was in a dark spot on the patio and wondered who was up that late at night. She was the only one with a reason to because she could not be found sleeping in the guest rooms nor could she go to her bedroom before her husband fell asleep.

“Aadhya, let’s go.” She knew who it was before even he appeared in the dimly lit doorway. “We need to talk.”

She swallowed. “Oh, you’re still up?” It terrified her to have a conversation with him.

“Yes, let’s go.” He didn’t wait for her to come up with something clever to stall the talk he wanted to have. “Aadhya, now.” His voice was suddenly stern, and she got off the bench.

“I’m coming.” She could not avoid him; it was probably best to rip the band-aid off.

Aadhya muddled through a million different responses she could come up with, including the pillow theory for snuggling up against him the past few days after he fell asleep and for kissing him in his office. She told herself she would feign losing consciousness if the conversation got unmanageable or worse, maybe kiss him into silence again and run away until next time.

Whatever you do, don’t kiss him!

She approached the double doors of the master suite she had avoided the past few days and walked past him as he held the door open for her. She considered running into the bathroom and hiding there all night to avoid facing him, but she knew it wouldn’t work.

“What do you want to talk about?” she asked, still avoiding his eyes.

“I need to attend another event and this one, I need you to go with me again.” His voice was calm, and she was suddenly relieved that he wasn’t confronting her about her behavior.

She turned to face him. “I’d love to go. When do we need to go?”

He stepped closer to her. “I’ll tell you.”

She scrunched her nose. “Why can’t you tell me now?”

“You’ll know once I have all the details.” He was being adamant again.

“Fine, don’t tell me.” She started to walk toward her dressing room when he held her by her elbow.

“I didn’t say we were done talking.” His voice was gruff.

She slowly turned to look at him. “And if you intend to work with me, you need to trust me.”

Did she trust him?

“I trust you to do the right thing for the people of the region,” the words escaped her before she could process her thoughts.

“Good.” He held her gaze for a long moment. “Can I trust you to do the right thing as well?”

She was caught off guard. “What is the right thing in this case?”

He stepped closer and whispered in her ear, “Abide by the contract.” His breath was warm on her ear and sent sizzles down her spine.

“I—I will abide by the contract,” she blurted without thinking about potentially cutting a deal for her best behavior. Maybe a shortened term for the contract?

“And whatever I’m observing has nothing to do with sabotaging or ending the contract?” She noticed his voice lowered when mentioning the contract like someone could hear them.

She chewed on her lip, knowing where the conversation was going. He was referring to the clause in the contract stating that if either of them developed feelings for each other, the contract would be void. “No, it’s not.”

“Good, because if the contract becomes void, you have no other way to get out of this marriage.” He stepped closer. “You will be bound to this relationship by the law of the land, forever.”

The threat in his voice shocked her. “Why-why would I break the contract?”

“The contract is void if you develop feelings for me or vice-versa.” His tone was matter-of-fact, and that was his primary condition for the contract.

“What makes you think I’m developing feelings for you?” she challenged and hoped she sounded confident. She was not developing anything new for him; the attraction was there even before they signed the contract.

He raised a curious eyebrow. “I don’t think I need to give you examples.”

She let out a breath and nodded. “I know what you’re referring to. And you must believe me when I say I cannot tell the difference between my pillow and you when I’m fast asleep. And when we were in the Jangid fort, I was happy and just thankful for what you did. It was a *thank-you* kiss. That’s

it!” She shrugged and added before he could bring it up, “And a few days ago, in your office, the same thing, I wanted to show you how thankful I am to have my friends over.”

“Really?” He let out a laugh.

“Yes.” She held his gaze to ascertain her point. “And I must confess that I have been attracted to you, but that doesn’t mean I have feelings for you.” She could not believe the words that were tumbling out of her mouth. “And in this kind of a close setting, it’s very common to feel attracted to each other, and if you feel like there is something that you sense, it’s nothing but attraction, which is completely healthy.”

“Healthy.” He was mocking her, but she ignored his tone.

“And I will admit that I should have asked you if I could kiss you the time, we were in your office, but that was my mistake. It won’t happen again.”

He stepped closer to her. “What won’t happen again?”

Her heart thudded in her chest as she looked up into his dark eyes. “I—I won’t kiss you without asking you first.”

He moved closer but he did not touch her. “And what if you do without asking?”

Aadhya held his gaze even as the moment intensified. His eyes moved from her eyes to her trembling lips before holding her eyes with his dark ones.

“Will you stop me?” She had lost all control of her actions and fisted her fingers in the soft material of his t-shirt.

“Just attraction?” he challenged.

“Yes,” she hissed and felt his shudder.

He looked at her for a long moment. “What if I want to kiss you?”

Thrills erupted from within, and she went up on her toes and stopped an inch from his face. “Just kiss me, and we’ll be even.”

The words set off a seismic reaction as he pulled her to him, his arm going around her waist, her feet lifting off the ground as he held her captive in an intoxicating kiss. His lips were eager as they tasted hers, sucking on them like he could not get enough of her. She snaked her fingers into his hair, deepening the kiss.

Lost in the kiss, she didn’t realize how her body ended up on the bed until her back hit the mattress. Their lips still melded like this was their only chance to kiss and write it off. She hugged his head, taking in a deep breath as he lay kisses along her neck, making her moan.

At that moment when emotions were running high, she didn’t think of the contract or the fact that he was her fake husband. She kissed him back with equal fervor and stopped when he pulled back abruptly. She blinked, unsure of what had happened, and saw him hover over her, catching his breath.

She heard his phone ring a moment later as he moved away, leaving her in bed. She was conflicted about the phone call.

What if he didn’t get a call? How far would the attraction take them?

There was a certain awkwardness even after discussing the existence of attraction between them. Scooting up against him at night was the new norm, but she was glad he was fast asleep when she got into his space, and he was gone by the time she woke up. There were nights when she would wake up in the middle of the night to find him holding her to him, and other nights turned away from her, but whatever the position, she didn't mind it.

It was the morning of their travel to the event where there may be a clue to finding the sculpture. A big one, he had mentioned, but no other details were shared. She had packed some essentials the night before as she was told she would have a team help with her outfit and makeup before the event.

She lay in bed enjoying the warmth from the sheets. Unlike the other mornings, she didn't wake up to running water in the bathroom as her husband dressed. It was something else as the room was tranquil. She closed her eyes and stretched, feeling lazy, and that's when she became aware of him, still in bed.

*Should she move away from him or stay put,
pretending to sleep?*

Fighting her need to stay put and enjoying the warmth, she slowly inched away and had barely moved away when he moved, his arm circling her waist to pull her back into position. She was too shocked to react and froze in his arms.

Her breathing was ragged as she sucked in her stomach, unable to handle the feel of the hair on his arm grazing over her delicate skin. He groaned in his sleep, sliding his body against her, his face burying into her hair as he spooned her.

The primal sound he let out played close to her ear, setting off something new and exciting. She slid her back further into the curve of his hard body, and that's when she felt his steely hardness dig into her back. He was hard, and she had an undying need to soothe him and inadvertently, she slid against him making him let out another groan in his sleep.

He was in deep sleep and wondered when he had returned the night before as he wasn't around when she went to bed, after waiting past midnight for him to return. She rationalized her behavior and stayed in his arms so she didn't disturb him when he was in such deep sleep, not acknowledging the sensations she felt just being close to him. She shut her eyes and fell back asleep, enjoying being cocooned in his arms.

Later that evening, she sat across from him as the private jet took off from the city closest to Singoor region. He had yet to tell her where they were headed or what they would be doing, and she knew she didn't need to know yet. She knew he must have figured out a plan, and she would follow it to the T. Unlike last time, she knew he was looking for the Goddess, which mattered to her most.

He seemed to be working on something on his computer even as they took off, and she kept to herself. Not

only because she didn't want to disturb him but to avoid any further conversations with him. The more she was around him, she would think about what would have happened if his phone hadn't gone off in the middle of an intense engagement that had made it to the bedroom.

Would they have gone all the way? What if they did?

A shudder ran through her, and she quickly took a big gulp of her drink. She cast a glance his way and even with a frown on his face as he looked at his computer screen, he looked stunning. The cotton button-down shirt was open wider showing off his broad chest that she enjoyed touching that morning. Her eyes raised up to look at how sexy his hair looked, like she had run her fingers through it while they kissed. His eyes were lowered and focused on his screen and his lips were pressed together, deep in thought.

Her eyes fixated on the lips that had set her on fire and she wondered what it would feel to have him kiss her all over. Lost in her imagination of sensations, she had not noticed that he was looking at her, while she feasted on her thoughts.

“Aadhya?” His voice cut through her dirty thoughts that had gone out of control and she looked up at him, shaken up. “You okay?”

Oh shit! Did he catch her gawking at him while she imagined him naked?

“Yeah, just a bit tired. I'll take a nap.” With those words she exited the seating area. She was throbbing all over from her very raunchy thoughts, and she wondered where her dark need was going to take her.

She shuddered as she got under the sheets, processing the novel sensations and emotions that threatened to consume her.

Aadhya was worried about where her so-called attraction to her fake husband would lead her. Just because he was hot and had the body of a Greek God, she could not risk giving up her freedom and aspirations. She was traveling the world with him, heck she saw more of the world in the few months she was married to him than she had in her twenty-four years of life.

She avoided him like the plague the rest of the day, and she was thankful she had a team of stylists and designers waiting for her when they arrived at the hotel. She set her mind on one mission: help him find the Goddess and return her to the people. Then he might actually let her get out of contract sooner and she would feel less guilty about leaving Singoor.

With that conviction, she stayed the course and played the perfect fake wife. Laughing at his jokes, mingling with people at the fundraising event in a European palace converted into a museum. It was not an auction as she had expected but a large party with dignitaries worldwide.

She stayed at her husband's side and noticed he knew many people at the event. Many of them were shocked to hear he was married, some upset they didn't get an invite, and the others had sheer jealousy in their eyes.

“Why are we here? I see nothing of interest here,” she whispered when he pulled her to the dance floor as the lights dimmed.

“Keep moving with me,” he said, pulling her close and plastering her body to his. He nuzzled her cheek, adding, “We will exit through that side door in a minute.”

Her mind was in a daze as if processing the feeling on her cheeks from how his nose grazed her skin. She could tell he was moving them toward what looked like a small side door. She was still reeling from the sensations that erupted from his proximity as he pushed the door open with his body and stepped out into a hallway holding her close to him.

“Aadhya, the item of interest is on the third level of this palace, and we need to make it there. We will only need a few minutes there. I need you to be with me and be the curious wife who wants to see every room in the building.”

She nodded, unable to speak. She had to try hard to pretend like his curious wife when all she felt was an eagerness to be close to him. She took the opportunity to cling to him and said, “Let’s go upstairs.” Her words came out rather husky as if she suggested they get cozy upstairs. And just at that thought, her mind was messed up all over.

As if he picked up on her tone as a part of the act they were putting on, he groaned and ran his lips along her jawline. “Good idea, let me show you something fun.” His tone was playful and his manner flirtatious as he led her down a narrow hallway.

Security guards were posted by the doors, and they only smiled at them knowingly. Aadhya followed him into the elevator, and he pulled her close to him as the doors closed, setting her body aflame. She gasped, looking at him in anticipation as the elevator rode up a couple of floors. He held

her to him, his breath coming fast as she struggled to breathe.
“Stay close.”

She nodded, and as the elevator doors opened, his lips descended over hers, and a split moment of surprise later, she kissed him back. She held him with her arm around his neck as he walked them out of the elevator and pushed her back to the wall. She had no idea what was happening but didn't want him to stop.

To her utter disappointment, he pulled back slightly and said against her lips, “We need to keep up with this until we get into the room with the painting.”

She melded their lips together, and this time she didn't hold back on the eagerness. She grazed her teeth on his lip and heard him groan and that set of something between her legs. All along it had been her body yearning for his touch, and in that moment, her body wanted more and that made her shiver.

Her lungs were fighting for air, but she didn't want to stop kissing him. It was her desperate attempt to make the best out of the situation, hoping to satiate what her body had been craving for weeks. She felt her body sizzle with need as he pressed his hard body to hers, and she didn't fail to notice how hard he was. He seemed to be around anytime she was close to him, and something about that fact made her bold.

She gasped when he pushed her back against a door before opening it. The moment they were inside the room, he pulled away from her like what they were engaged in did not affect him at all. “We don't have much time to find the painting.” He looked around the room with a wall filled with paintings from eye level to the ceiling.

The smaller ones were on the lowest level and got bigger as they went higher. She saw Nakul holding a camera and recording the entire walls like he wanted to capture every painting in that room. She noticed he moved slowly, pausing on each painting like he needed to capture the details.

If the painting was of the goddess, wouldn't it be obvious? Not wanting to disturb him, she looked around at the paintings and none of them seem to look like one of a Goddess, let alone like Shakti. Disappointed she looked at Nakul but he was still recording the details of every painting.

“What, you were supposed to stall them?” He barked out of the blue, and she looked at him as he pressed on his earpiece.

“Who is coming?” Aadhya asked as he rushed through capturing the paintings.

“Palace security,” he growled and added, “I don't know if this footage is enough to find the painting we are looking for.”

She thought for a moment. “I have an idea.”

Aadhya had no way to tell if her plan would work, but she would try. At that point, she was willing to do what it takes to get the job done!

Chapter 20

Nakul was pissed at his team for not being able to stall the palace guards from finding them. He had to make the best of the time, and as he moved from one painting to the other, somewhere in the background, he heard furniture moving, yet he didn't stop recording the video.

Moments later, he heard voices coming from the other side of the door. He momentarily glanced in her direction to understand what she was doing. She managed to move one of the small tables to block the door of the large room, and she sat on the table to use her weight to hold the table down.

“Excuse me, you cannot be in there,” the voice of an angry guard came through.

Nakul stopped filming and was about to put the camera away when he heard her rock the table she sat on, letting out some fast breaths. “Oh, wait...just a few minutes. Hurry up honey,” she called out, and it stunned him as to what she was planning to do.

Without any further delay, he started to record again, and even as he moved slowly, focusing on the paintings, the image of her rocking on the table pretending to be making mad love was making him hard. He tightened further when she cried out like she was about to peak, rocking the table harder to hit it against the door.

He was hot all over just from hearing the sounds that came out of her mouth, and he dared not look in her direction.

All he needed was that extra minute, and she was buying him that in a wildly brilliant way.

“Sir, Ma’am, please step out of the room now.” The announcement came through an inbuilt speaker in the room and she intensified her cries in response.

Satisfied with the footage, he ran to where she stood and helped her rock the table. Like she knew what he was thinking, she reached for his shirt and pulled it out of his pants and then pulled open the buckle.

His body went rigid, and just as he was about to stop her, she reached for his hair and messed it up. He noticed she had already worked on misplacing her dress, pulling a strap off her shoulder and she was such a hot mess, he wanted to take her there on the table, even if it broke the contract.

Her cries intensified, and they both jerked the table harder, and the sound of her fake climax got imprinted in his head. And he knew he would never forget the time when he blasted off just from a sexy woman faking a peak.

As part of the act, he groaned loudly as he pulled her to him to kiss her, swallowing her sexy moans, not wanting anyone else to hear them. She kissed him back like that’s what she had wanted and that made him hard all over again. He didn’t care. She was his fake wife and the moans were equally fake, but he wanted them all.

“You are a riot,” he said against her lips when the act was all done. He took off his suit jacket and placed it over her shoulders. “Let’s get out of here.”

He held her to him like she was his possession and only he could enjoy her even as they exited the room. They walked past three guards who had turned red in their faces just from hearing all the commotion against the door.

Aadhya Kanwar, you are something!

Aadhya was still reeling from the events that evening even as they left the palace museum an hour later. After pulling off the stunt of fake make-out, her mind was in a drugged state to the point where she wanted to believe it was real. It felt right, and when he came to her for the finale, her body craved for him so much that she didn't know how much of the cries were an act of anguish for him, his touch.

They only spent a short time at the main event, holding each other as they pretended to dance. She needed the time to settle down every overly activated part of her. She was in a daze, processing her own thought process for when she decided to do what she did, and she did not fail to catch the hunger in his eyes.

Was he feeling the need as well?

She knew there was a physical pull, and it was evident from the hardness that dented her belly anytime they were close to each other, but what she saw in his eyes, the way he held her as they exited the room, and how hard he kissed her in the elevator, told her a different story.

The ride was silent, and she was glad she didn't have to talk after such an eventful evening. But she could not deny what she was feeling for him. She had hoped to suppress the strong pull by giving into a few moments of passion and the kiss in the elevator was toe-curling good and yet, she wanted more. It was as if the desires multiplied the physical engagement, and all she could think about was what it would feel like to be joined with his as he filled her depths with his hardness.

Her heart thudded faster and she was finding it hard to breathe. What had she gotten herself into?

Is this what it means to have strong feelings?

It was beyond sheer attraction; it was a demand from her mind and body.

Her mind did not send any warning shots anymore. Her treacherously powerful body had taken over her rational mind when she was around him.

She slowly raised her eyes to look at him as he focused on the computer screen and uploaded the video footage he had captured at the museum. She felt disgusted that all her thoughts were about her physical needs when the purpose of their visit was something else. He seemed to be staying the course, doing what was needed while all she could think about was recreating the scene in the painting room and making it real.

“Aadhya, we need to make a quick stop at the hotel and head over to another location for a casual event.” He was so focused on returning Shakti to Singoor, that she felt like a loser who could not gain control of her senses.

She shook away her dark and unfathomed desires and thoughts. “Sure. I’ll be quick.”

Not long after, they were driving to another location again after changing into casual clothes. She was glad they were not spending the evening alone in the hotel room. Especially given the chaos in her mind.

Even in a foreign country, they had security, and she wondered why they needed that when the clan wars and attacks were local to Singoor.

Unable to bear the constant silence, she cleared her throat as if to get his attention away from what he was doing on his phone. “Did you see the painting of Shakti?”

He put away his phone, pressing his lips together briefly. “The video is being processed. I uploaded the footage to the team for processing,” he paused like he caught the horrified look on her face and added, “without the audio.”

Her cheeks heated up with the way his eyes danced at her. “Thank goodness.”

“Pretty sure I got all the paintings in the video, and the team will comb through the images to find the reference that was made in the blog online.”

She scrunched her nose, curious about what he said. “Someone wrote a blog about Shakti?”

He shook his head. “There was a reference to a partial painting of a Hindu goddess, and the description matched the painting we have. If it’s a match, we must find out who the artist was.”

“How is that going to help?” She couldn’t plug the link between an artist and why the painting was necessary when they already had a good image of their goddess.

“This painting is less than twenty years old.” His voice was calm.

His words made her gasp. “So—” her breath was coming fast. “Someone saw her after she was taken from Singoor?”

He nodded. “That’s what I think. No one in Singoor had seen the Goddess except for the priests and this has to be a painting by someone who saw her after she was taken. It is cleverly hidden within another artwork. Supposedly, part of her face and one hand were visible.”

She felt a surge of joy at the thought of finding the Goddess. Restore the peace that her father and now her aunt had worked so hard for years. “That’s awesome!” She reached out to throw her arm around him. “We should celebrate!”

He chuckled as she pulled back, suddenly feeling jittery from the hug. “That’s what I was hoping we could do.”

“Good, I—”

“Is that a music concert? On a beach?” She squealed as the car turned into the entrance of what looked like a music festival. “This is surreal.”

She heard him laugh as he exited the car, holding the door for her. “I guess this is the spot for the evening.”

“This is unbelievable,” she called out as she rushed to the beach. It was not too late at night, and the air was still

warm. She was glad she changed into casual clothes that were perfect for the beach and for the concert.

She looked around, and most of the folks seemed buzzed and thoroughly enjoyed the music. She sang along to some of the songs and joined a group of people who seemed to be her age and were gathered for the event.

A few minutes later, she spotted Nakul, two drinks in his hand. She blushed when their eyes met, partially because she was embarrassed, she left him behind and didn't bother asking if he was joining her. She heard the girls in the group she was in get all excited when one of them said, "Who is this hottie?"

Aadhya's eyes widened when she realized they were talking about her fake husband, who was walking toward them.

"I call dibs; I saw him first. He is mine for the night." One of the girls declared, and the other girls whined.

Aadhya was frozen to her spot and fuming at their audacity. She felt so spiteful that she started walking toward him before he could get to the group, ensuring she was seen as she approached him. She smiled at him. "I have to do this." She placed her hand on his cheek and brushed her lips over his, and added, "Thank you for bringing me here."

He pulled back, let out a low chuckle, and handed her a drink. "Cheers!"

She could feel the heat from the rage from the girls. She had spent some time hanging out, but she didn't care.

How dare they try to capture her husband's attention? He might be a fake one, but still, he was hers.

Shortly after, she found herself lying beside her husband on the warm beach, staring at the night sky. They walked around the music festival, grabbed some food and drinks, and wandered down the beach to a quieter section, where she decided to lie down and enjoy the time.

She had a few drinks and it helped her relax her nerves. She kept her eyes on the sky and nudged him. "Did you fall asleep?"

He groaned. "I will in a minute."

"Don't. Enjoy the evening. It's so nice here." She took in a deep breath and added, "Thank you for bringing me here."

"Aren't you going to kiss me and say, thank you?" he chuckled.

Like the alcohol was doing the talking, she laughed and asked, "Is this how you get me to kiss you? If you want to kiss me, do it. I won't stop you."

He sat up slightly, supporting his torso on his elbow and smiled. "You are drunk."

She shrugged. "So what? I know what I'm saying."

"I'm sure." He sat up and dusted off the linen pants he had on and said, "Let's head back."

She shook her head and moved her arms and legs in the sand. "I'm not going anywhere. You'll need to carry me out from here."

He laughed and held out his arm. “Take my hand; I’ll help you get to the car.”

She swatted away his hand. “No. Let’s stay. It’s so nice here.” She noticed her words were slurring.

“Yup, it’s nice, but we need to go.” With those words, he bent a little to scoop her off the sand and right into his arms.

“Nakul,” she whined. “How can you take me away from my favorite thing?” She ran her arm around his neck and pulled her body up, and her face was only inches from his. “I can walk.”

“I can carry you to the car,” he retorted.

“Fine, carry me.” She placed her head on his shoulder, and as if it was the most natural thing to do, she tucked her face in the crook of his neck, her lips grazing over his pulse.

She heard him groan as a shudder passed through him. “What are you doing, Aadhya?”

“I’m holding you.” The alcohol seemed to have made her bolder. “And I’m kissing you.” She ran her lips on the side of his neck, and his response was to hold on to her tighter as he walked.

Encouraged by his reaction, she ran her hand into his hair, gripping his head in place as she ran circles on his neck with the tip of her tongue. She went from licking him to sucking on the skin on her neck and enjoyed the way his body responded to her touch.s

Moments passed, and she realized he had stopped walking and stood in the dark, holding her to him. “Do you not

like what I'm doing?"

He let out a growl. "I need you to stop."

"Put me down then," she demanded, wiggling herself out of his arms until her bare feet hit the warm sand. "I can walk." She did not like the way he spoke to her. Making it seem like what she did was dirty and that she needed to stop. She was merely holding onto him, and there was no other place her face could be when he carried her like that.

She moved away from him and took one step in the sand, only to lose her balance. She desperately reached out to grab onto something and the only option was to hold on to him. She reached for the rounded collar of his t-shirt and felt her nails scrape his skin but she could not get a grip.

Just as she thought she would land on the sand, she stopped and plastered her body against his.

"I need you to stop." His voice was gruff in her ear.

"What am I doing? I was holding you like this." She placed her face against his neck and pecked his neck. "And I like doing that." The words that rolled off her lips, she had no idea where that came from.

"That's it, we are out of here." He scooped her up into his arms yet again, and for a strange reason, she wanted to be closer to him. She held on to him as he walked to the car, and the last thing she remembered was him ordering the driver to open the door, and she slipped into a deep sleep, wrapped in his warmth.

Hours later, she woke up with a non-stop drumming in her head. Her mouth felt dry, and her hair was damp. She moved in her sleep only to realize her husband held her close to him. As if that was their new norm, he was spooning her.

Events that followed after they returned from the beach came back to her, and she turned red with embarrassment. She remembered begging him to kiss her, him declining, and then as soon as she got to their hotel, she threw up and made a mess.

It was a blur, but she remembered being held down under the water, fully clothed by her husband and she didn't remember what happened after. She ran her hand on her body and realized she was wearing his T-shirt and her legs were bare.

Did he change her clothes? Her panties, too? He had to have since what she had on was not wet.

Holy shit! What did she do? Did she make the situation worse?

Is her contract void? Is she to be his wife forever?

Chapter 21

Back in the Kanwar mansion, Aadhya was going nuts. There was no other way to describe her situation. The past few days, she had tried many different things to get her mind away from overanalyzing everything that happened at the music festival. She kissed him to get back at the girls, who merely looked at him—in plain admiration. And then she got drunk that night and talked rubbish.

After returning from their trip to Europe, she did not talk about the night of the music festival. She pretended like she remembered nothing from that night. It was the only way to save face after getting drunk and throwing up. She didn't want to hear any details of how he changed her, including her wet undergarments.

She was back to avoiding him. Eating at different times, waking up later than him but surely waking up in the middle of the night to make sure he was holding her, and if he weren't, she'd scoot up to him and fall back asleep.

As if the universe aligned with her wishes, he left to go on a trip right after they arrived, giving her some reprieve from constantly wondering when he would drop the bombshell about her violating the contract rules. She kept telling herself that what she felt was pure attraction to her hot husband and nothing more.

Was it hard for him to see that it was a bodily pull? Especially someone who has probably been with many women.

Her back stiffened at the thought of her fake husband with other women. Did he have all these trips to see other women? What if he was seeing other women, and she would never know?

Why do you care if he sees other women? A voice deep inside mocked her.

“I do,” she said out loud, angry at the thought of him being with another woman. She had to find out what he was up to.

Putting away the task of working on a music composition, she reached for her laptop. She had planned on writing a new song to serve as a distraction when she could not fall asleep that night. Not anymore. She wanted to see if she could find anything about him online.

Using her computer in the past visits was not an option as there was no internet in Singoor. But since her husband had set up the satellite connection, she could continue pursuing her education even from Singoor.

The entire household was down for the night when she went up to the large room converted into his office and paused when the air held his scent. She could have done her computer research at her desk as well, but she rationalized by saying that he must have faster internet in his office.

She took in a deep breath enjoying the warm air, and immediately cursed for being so mushy about his mere scent. He had a large table set up on one side of the room. She placed her laptop where his computer was and plugged in the cables. She was no computer expert, but she knew the internet cable from the power cord.

Moments later, her computer came to life. Her first stop, not her email or her message apps. She went straight to the search bar and put in his name.

Different from the search she had done on a non-existent *Nakul Thakur* a while back, she barely had any results for Nakul Thakvar. A few business articles and economists' analysis on the Thakvar Corporation, owned and run by the three brothers, and there was nothing else. It was what she had seen when she had last looked up on her phone on one of their trips.

No social media presence for him was what she discovered. She spent another thirty minutes digging around for more details but nothing major. She stumbled upon a college project he had worked on and followed the link to the University's alumni page.

A little bit later, she found a picture of him, making her heart somersault. It was a younger picture of him, maybe six years ago. He was wearing a jersey and basketball shorts. Around him stood about fifteen cheerleaders, their hands on him like he was a hot commodity they were all fighting for.

The image bothered her; however much she convinced her that she shouldn't care, she could not stop fuming. She frantically pulled up the contract she had written up from her email. She desperately hoped she had explicitly written a clause stating that he would not see another woman when they were married.

She knew it was the last thing on her mind. She didn't care who he met after she met her goal of dodging the Thakvar alliance. Even in the current scenario, the contract holds, and

she could get out of the marriage when it elapses, so it's no big deal if he was with other women.

“No!” She opened her email and started typing an angry email to her husband. Only to realize she did not have his email address. She had never sent an email to him after they got married. Just as that thought passed through her mind, she hovered the mouse over his name from an old email used for creating the contract and there it was. In clear, plain sight, it said *Nakul.Thakvar*.

Was she so hung up on getting out of marrying a Thakvar she had paid no heed to other details? How could she not see his last name? She could not believe his audacity not to bother using a fake email with the Thakur last name as he had made her believe.

An intelligent, arrogant, and gorgeous bastard!

Using the email address she had, she composed an email.

Mr. ~~Thakur~~ Thakvar,

Where are you?

Ms. Kanwar

Aadhya got a kick out of calling him a Thakur as he had made her believe and struck through it to make a point. She had no idea what part of the world he was in and what time it was for him. The thought had barely been completed when her computer beeped.

She let out an ecstatic laugh when she saw she had a reply from him.

Dear ~~Ms. Kanwar~~ Mrs. Aadhya Thakvar,

Why do you ask?

Your Husband.

His response made her smile when she should be annoyed. She noticed how he replicated the same style she had addressed him. She started typing a response and paused. What was the point of the conversation? There was no way she would ask if he was cheating on her.

She stared at the screen for a prolonged moment and decided not to send a response. She closed her email, and the picture of him with cheerleaders popped back to the top. The very sight of the picture annoyed her, but she could not stop looking at the screen.

How dare they tough him like that?

Why does it matter and why do you care?

Lost in her conflicting thoughts, she didn't hear the door to the office open. She was yanked out of her thoughts when her heart started to thud like it became aware of his presence. Her eyes shot up to meet mischievously dark eyes.

“Two days I'm away and you take over my office?” he taunted as he walked to where she sat.

She could not find the words to retaliate. All she could think about was to demand an explanation of why so many

women were touching him. Followed by the burning question of whether or not he was seeing other women. She found the thought of anyone looking at him unbearable, let alone touching him.

Aadhya stood up as he walked to the table and lowered her eyes, processing the sheer joy she felt for his return. Joy aside, there was an eagerness to ask him if he was seeing someone outside Singoor. She hesitated, knowing it was stupid to ask such a question. He'd think she was immature to think of such things.

Again, why does it matter what he thinks of you? He is your fake husband.

Moments passed in silence and she could feel his eyes on her. Her mind was in turmoil, and her body a whirlpool of emotions but she mustered up the courage to look at him. His eyes were dark but she could not read them.

“I—I wanted to check my email,” she managed to say and could not believe how her insides tremored.

“I guess you like my office better.” He stepped close to her. “Why didn’t you respond to my email then?”

He filled her space with his beautiful scent and the warmth she had missed the past few nights. “You said you weren’t far.”

“I wasn’t. But why did you ask about my whereabouts?” His eyes bore into hers.

She took in a hissy breath. “As per the contract, you need to take me with you.”

A wicked smile played on his face. “Is that right?” His words were slithered in mockery.

“Yes, and the choice has to be given to the other party to choose if they want to travel or not unless it is deemed important.” She had no idea why she was mentioning a contract clause. Was it a segue way into asking if he could see another woman while in contract?

“Did Mrs. Aadhya Thakvar miss being with her husband?” Another mockery, but it fell on deaf ears.

Her heart thudded as she channeled her anger, frustration, and the sheer annoyance she felt. “Yes.” She almost yelled. “You don’t get me used to being held all night and then disappear on me. And you leave when you please? And I don’t know how many—” her voice was lost in an angry sob as she bit back her words.

She had said enough and could not embarrass herself by standing before him. She took a step to walk past him and go to the bedroom, but he blocked her path. Confused, she looked up at him, questioning the intention in those deep, dark eyes.

When he looked at her in silence, she tried to push him aside but he would not budge. “Let me go.” It was an order.

“Not until you finish your sentence.” His arms wrapped around her before he swept her feet off the floor to make her sit on the massive office table. He pushed her knees apart and locked her in place with his body.

She swallowed in response to the intensity in his voice. “I think we need to do something.” She didn’t know what she was referring to, yet the words followed like her tongue had a mind of its own. “This thing between us—we must do something about it.”

His breathing was strained. “What do you suggest we do?” Although he was the one who asked the question, his tone and the look in his eyes gave her the answer she had not thought about.

She responded by moving closer and gently running her lips over his jawline. She had no words to tell him she needed to go all the way to get over the frustration. Every kiss, every touch over the past few weeks has been a tease and only fueled her need to want more. Maybe all it would take was taking away that dull pain that grew inside. It was first a tiny throbbing until it started to converge at the apex of her thighs.

Just once!

“Just once,” her thoughts came out as words as she melded their lips together. His arms circled her as he pulled her body to him. She wore cotton pajamas and could feel his hard body against her soft breasts.

She moaned when he sucked on her lower lip with his teeth before breaking the kiss. Her entirety sizzled as the air around them thickened. Without breaking his gaze, she reached for his shirt buttons. He looked at her silently as she opened his shirt, and when she hit the last button, she leaned forward just enough, and that seemed to set off something in him.

His hand held her neck as he pulled her into a deep kiss, one that ignited new desires. If she thought kissing him to satiation would put an end to her needs, she was mistaken. His hand cupped one of her breasts as he kept worshipping her lips with his.

The feel of his hand on such an intimate part made her moan against his mouth. Her arms tightened against his neck, and she pressed her body further into his. Her eyes flew open when he broke the kiss, and as if the disappointed look in her eyes for pulling away from the kiss was his cue, he pulled on her t-shirt.

She was left only in her bralette in a flash and their lips came together again. Her legs locked around him as his hand roamed her bare skin. Her body felt hot and yet his touch seemed to sear her delicate curves.

Yet again, he broke the kiss only to bury his face into the crook of her neck, sucking on her skin. Novel sensations ignited from within when she felt the burn from his stubble on her chest. She arched her body further, inviting the roughness of his touch on the delicate curve of her chest.

She hugged his head to her chest, her fingers pulling on his hair as if in anticipation. She cried out in sheer pleasure when he pushed aside the thin fabric of her bralette to close his lips on her yearning tip. She threw her head back in decadence as he sucked a bit more of the soft flesh on her chest.

His tongue swirled around her hardened peak while his free hand squeezed her other breast. "Nakul," she called out as she started to shudder in response to the avalanche of emotions rammed through her.

She started to roll her hips against him, in search of the darkest desire unknown to her until that moment. The moment of passion she had imagined was far from where they were and she was not disappointed. The problem was that she wanted more.

Her hands reached for the collar of his now open shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. His lips roamed her chest as she sat up, her hands eager for him. He let go of her for just a moment to let her take off his shirt.

They paused as she took in the beauty of the man who was setting her body ablaze, and she craved the incineration. “Take me,” her voice wobbled as their lips melded together and she straddled him, her heels digging into his back. His fingers dug into her bottom to raise her core to meet his steely hardness.

Despite the barriers of fabric, she felt the heat from his arousal; that was the only way for her to simmer down the flow of molten from within. Yet again, she started to roll her hips against him and felt a surge of thrills consume her. She felt his fingertips dig into the flesh on her bottom, enjoying the sweet pain.

She called out his name repeatedly as she felt the surge of emotions from within. It was an intimate and passionate moment that she had never experienced before. She gasped when he let go of her lips to lay a trail of kisses along her neck. She threw her head back, reaching for the unknown yet deeply desired pleasure.

Every sensation she felt was converging at her core and just as she braced herself for the unfamiliar feeling, she

felt his teeth sink into the curve of her breast. That made her come undone, collapsed in his arms as her body trembled with the new experiences.

She was in a daze as he carried her to their private suite from his office. She remembered how her nerves strummed after what seemed like a catastrophic emulsion of emotions and sensations. She was spent and the last thing she remembered was him pulling the sheets over her as he slipped into bed next to her, just like how she wanted him to, every night.

Chapter 22

Aadhya's body felt like a feather as she rolled in bed, taking in the morning warmth. She had not slept like that in days. She slowly opened her eyes, a smile forming on her lips when she remembered the way her husband put her to sleep the night before.

She slowly reached for him, and to her surprise, he wasn't around. After last night, she expected him to take her wherever he went. She sat up wearing only her bralette and pajama bottoms. She rushed to the bathroom before anyone else spotted her almost bare-chested.

Even as she showered, she remembered how his touch felt painfully arousing. She washed off quickly and stepped out of their private suite. The thought of him not being in the mansion angered her. She went to his office, hoping to see him behind his desk but he wasn't there.

She turned away from the room and was going to check if he was in the main dining area. She stopped when something bright caught her eye. She looked toward the item she had not noticed before. She slowly walked toward it, her body jittery from remembering the events from the night prior.

The colorful box on the table had a small sticky note with her name on it. A frown formed on her face as she opened the box. Her eyes widened when she spotted her husband's phone or one like his. As if he knew she was looking at the phone, it started to ring. Her fake husband's

name flashed on the phone screen, and she answered it on impulse.

“Mrs. Aadhya Thakvar,” his voice was playful. “Good morning.”

She pressed her lips together but did not respond. She was pissed about him not taking her with him as per the contract. At least that was her excuse to be with him.

“Are you going to keep staring at the phone or talk to me?” His words made her look around the room. “I have cameras all over the room.”

She gasped in response, remembering everything that happened in that very spot the night before. Like he was reading every one of her responses, he chuckled. “No one but me has access to my office.”

Relieved, she let out a sigh but glared around the room, knowing he could see her. “You were supposed to take me with you. Are you looking to cancel the contract?”

There was silence on the other end for a long moment. “You were fast asleep, and I had to leave quite early.”

“Where are you?” she demanded. She was feeling a strange anxiety about him being away from her.

“I’m working on getting the images processed.” She knew it had to be the ones they obtained from the European palace.

She simmered down a bit. “What did you find? Any luck?”

A moment of silence later, he said, “Yes, we found the painting of Shakti. Not a full one, but the artist had to have seen her after she was taken from Singoor.”

Tears formed in her eyes as she felt incomprehensible joy. Just the thought that the Goddess was out there waiting to be found, gave her immense strength. “Thank you,” she sobbed. “Can—can I see her painting?”

“Yes. We could not have gotten the footage if it weren’t for you.”

“I—I forgive you for tricking me into marrying you.” The words that rolled off her lips shocked her. “And I’m sorry I doubted your intentions.”

“Aadhya, don’t—”

She didn’t let him finish. “I want to help in any way possible. My aunt told me that was my father’s dream. To bring peace to this land and do what’s best for the people.”

“You have no idea how much you’ve helped already. But if you are up for it, you can go with me to meet the Jodha clan and their allies. Only if,” he paused like he wanted her to process his words.

“I want to go,” she said and added, “only if, what?”

She heard him let out a laugh. “Only if you tell me why you spied on me last night.”

Her heart flipped in her chest and her breath was ragged suddenly. She thought momentarily, debating if she should tell him the real reason. “What do you mean spied on you? Just because I used your office?”

He wasn't buying it, and she knew from how he chuckled. "Remember, Mrs. Aadhya Kanwar, I have access to video and audio footage from my office."

Shit! How could she forget about that?

"I—I was curious."

"About?" He was quick to respond.

Her palms had turned sweaty. "You. I had looked up Nakul *Thakur* but never you. So I wanted to see what I could find."

"What *did* you find?" He was taunting her, and she knew it.

She had to cut to the chase. "I wanted to know what you did when you weren't with me."

He laughed. "Why didn't you ask me?"

"If you were around for me to ask, I would." She was annoyed at that point and hoped her tone would stray from what he was probing into.

"Fair enough." A moment of silence later, he asked, "What did you find about me?"

At that point, it was confirmed he knew everything, including the picture she found of him with the cheerleaders. "That you were famous with the women in college." Her words were lathered in jealousy.

"Indeed, I was named Most Valuable Player for four years straight in college."

"Great." She rolled her eyes, still salty about the picture. She was annoyed by her reaction to the picture.

“What did you think of my picture on my university’s alumni page?”

She looked up at the ceiling. There was no hiding anything from this man. “I have nothing to say.”

He laughed but did not say anything more. “I’ll see you in the evening.”

“Ok, bye.” She ended the call and wondered if he was still looking at her. She toyed a bit with the phone and saw only one contact was listed on the device. She dialed the same number and he answered at the first ring.

“I presume this phone is for me?” She acted cool about it, although she was ecstatic about having a way to communicate with the rest of the world.

“Yes, to call me anytime you need to talk to me.” His tone was casual, but it made her wonder if she sounded too desperate last night.

“Usually, there isn’t much to discuss, but I’ve been curious about your work.”

A long pause, like he wasn’t buying her story. “Ok. Later.”

Aadhya looked forward to having dinner with him that evening. She spent the day using the new phone and catching up with her friends. They were teasing her, saying they were expecting her to share the good news with them, especially when she called them out of the blue.

The evening came and went, and so did nightfall. She debated calling him to ask where he was but didn't want to sound desperate. She wasn't his real wife to check on him or wait up for him.

The harsh reality she was already aware of, hit her hard for an unknown reason.

At half past midnight, she was sure he wasn't coming before she went to bed. Was he avoiding her because of what happened the night before in his office?

It had to be! How could he avoid her after what they shared the night before? Did he think she had feelings for him, and accepting that would mean ending the contract? Why did he need the contract when she was a part of what he was doing?

Suddenly, the contract she had drafted was not something she wanted to be restricted by. She knew he was not the kind to hold her captive as his wife if she wasn't willing, so why was he hiding behind the contract?

Aadhya knew what she wanted and decided to get what she wanted from her husband.

Fake or real, it didn't matter to her. She wanted him.

Chapter 23

The following day, she woke up to a novel feeling and it was not only because her husband was still in bed, but his hand cupped her breast over her bralette possessively. She was angry with him but could not help but smile at how he held her. She had her mind about what she wanted, and she was going to take it all the way that day.

Because he was still asleep, she figured he had probably crawled into bed late at night or even early hours. She wasn't going to let him get away from her that day. With that, she slipped out from under him, careful not to wake him and went into the bathroom.

Shortly after, she stepped out of her dressing room, a traditional outfit and jewelry to go with it. The outfit was pushing the limits on how much skin she was comfortable showing, but she was on a mission that day. She wanted the contract to end.

Does that mean you want him as your real husband?
A voice challenged.

It doesn't directly imply that.

She ignored the debate and walked over to where he slept and sat on the bed dusting her damp hair. She knew droplets of water would splash all over and wake him up. But that's what she wanted. She sat on the bed, her entire back visible as she had a backless top on that morning. The only thing that was keeping her blouse in place were two knots, one

at the nape of her neck and another, all the way at the waistband of the matching skirt she had on.

The front of her blouse had a plunging neckline that showed a good part of her breast curvature. Just enough to drive a man nuts. If that outfit were to be worn in public, the sash paired with it would cover most of her skin. That morning, she chose not to use the sash.

A few moments into gently rubbing her hair with a towel, her heart started to go on a rampage. Her back stiffened, knowing his eyes were on her. She stayed still, wondering if he would make the move but nothing followed and she got even more frustrated.

Maybe he was still asleep?

Not wanting to dial back on her plan, she tossed her hair in the air, ensuring there was enough of a splash of water on him. She slowly stood up and faced him. Pretending to be air-drying her hair she stood under the fan in the middle of the room, with her head thrown back. She knew he could see what she intended for him to see, yet he did not move.

Impossible that he was still sleeping.

Unable to bear his adamant stance, she slowly walked over to the side where he slept. She saw him lie on his stomach, his face turned away from her, and wondered if he was really sleeping. Her stomach twisted with guilt.

Why was she so desperate for his attention? Couldn't she wait until he was fully awake to get him to make out with her?

Ashamed with her behavior, she was just about to turn away when she noticed how ragged his breathing was. It was impossible for him to have such elevated breathing while sleeping.

Bring it on, my dear husband.

She slowly reached for the blanket that layered over his legs, she slowly pulled it up to his chest. She also noticed he was sleeping with a t-shirt on when most days he slept bare-chested. Did he think wearing a t-shirt would stop her?

Determined to achieve her goal, she returned to her side of the bed and slowly crawled up the bed, her eyes trained on his face. He was still fast asleep or at least that's what he wanted her to believe. She wasn't taking no for an answer that day. She wanted it all and all of him.

Supporting her weight on her hands, she lowered her lips to his cheek, gently grazing them over it. She made sure to put her cleavage on full display and she knew he caught sight of it as she was pulling back.

Her adamant husband was still asleep like he had turned into stone when she knew that was not the case.

Recognizing that she needed to switch gears, she left the bedroom and went into his office. He had to be receiving a notification every time someone entered his office. Fully intending to drive him over the edge, she sat on the edge of the large mahogany table and called one of her friends. She kept up the casual conversation while alternating the view for him from her front to the fully open back. She didn't know where the cameras were and how they were positioned but knew she had given him enough footage to get him worked up.

Satisfied with her time in the office, she returned to the bedroom. As expected, her husband was no longer in bed. The next moment she heard the shower run, she decided to move to the next stage.

She blow-dried her hair and left the loose curls to fall to her waist. She applied another layer of the scented oil Nani gave her on her wedding night. She was glad she was finally using it. It was supposed to get both men and women excited in bed. She took the time to put on some makeup, especially paying attention to her eyes. She gave herself a full assessment in the full-length mirror and liked what she looked. She turned away from the mirror to check her back and realized there was nothing but bare skin.

She thought for a moment, and an idea sparked in her mind. She walked to the section of her closet where the jewelry was kept and reached for one of the boxes she had brought back from the auction. It was the most expensive piece of jewelry she knew and she did not dare think about wearing it. But that day, there were no limits. She was just about to put it on when she heard the shower stop running.

One of the necklaces in hand, she went to the bathroom and pushed the door open. As expected, he had just stepped out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist. Their eyes met, and he quickly grabbed another towel over his shoulders.

“Good morning,” she chirped and hoped she sounded composed. Nothing was calm about her thoughts or emotions as she approached him and held the necklace. “I need help putting this on.”

He looked at her suspiciously, but she didn't entertain his look. She turned away from him, pushing her hair to the front, exposing her back.

“What do you think you're doing?” his voice wobbled, bringing a wicked smile to her lips.

“Wearing the necklace you bought me.” She bit back a smile and added, “My back is too bare, and I will get yelled at for not wearing any jewelry.

It was the most unusual thing to do: wear a necklace on an exposed back, but that seemed to be the only way to get his hands on her. She moved closer, her rounded bottom touching him gently. She heard him groan before she felt his fingertips on her shoulders.

Moments later, she felt the necklace fall over her back, and she knew it looked beautiful. “Done.” His tone was curt.

Her breath hitched as a natural response to his touch but she made it a point to exaggerate her responses. She made sure he noticed her breathing and slowly leaned into him. He didn't move when she surely expected him to wrap his arms around her. She gave it a few moments before turning around to face him.

She slowly looked up at his eyes and found his gaze on her cleavage. She slowly raised her arms to circle his neck, pushing her breasts further up for him to savor. She slowly went up on her toes and planted a soft kiss on the cleft of his chin. His hands surprisingly stayed to his side.

Aadhya's mind told her something was wrong. How was he not responding to the ammunition she aimed at him?

She looked up at him and finally met his eyes. His eyes were hard to read, and she took a few extra moments to process the expression.

She slowly released the hold around his neck when she could not read anything. She moved her hand down to soothe away the lingering moisture on his chest. With that move, she pushed the towel off one shoulder. He didn't oppose her touch and she kept going. She trailed her lips slowly along his neck, enjoying his reaction.

Encouraged, she continued to kiss him on his neck, enjoying the warmth from him. She was deliberate with her kisses and just the way he stood in front of her, offering her what she wanted, melted her heart. She didn't need to put him through the torture, he didn't deserve it especially when he had been good to her all along.

If the contract were what he wanted, she would respect that and not force him out of anything. She paused for a moment and looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be putting you through this."

Something flickered in his eyes, and he was kissing her hungrily the next thing she knew. A man who could stand up to her seduction melted at her apology. Their engagement may have started in a rush but suddenly slowed down. There was a sudden shift, and she molded to his body, enjoying the moment's sweetness. Her hands cupped his face as he took in every bit of her, his lips coaxing hers.

His hand roamed her bare back and she smiled against his lips. He finally touched her the way she had hoped he would all morning. When he pulled back to run his lips along

her neck, her hand moved from his shoulders to his chest and then to his back.

She was lost in the intimate moment until her hand on his back felt a rough patch on his skin. The exact moment she felt him groan against her neck like he was in pain. She froze for a moment before pulling back to look up at him.

He was avoiding her eyes. “Nakul, what happened?”

He looked up at her, his hand moving her hand away from his back. “I’m sorry, I got delayed last night.”

The tone in his words was different. Something was off. Everything about that morning made sense. He was fighting too hard to not react to her tease. And she knew something was off. She tried to touch the spot she had felt something earlier but he kept pushing her hands away. He held her hands in his and kissed her.

She moaned with the way he sucked on her lips and just as she was getting lost again in the swarm of emotions, she pulled back. He was distracting her with his kisses. Why?

She searched his eyes for an answer before asking, “Why were you delayed last night?” He took pride in not lying. Obfuscating details and creating scenarios that distract people were his strong suits. He would never lie.

“Something unexpected came up.”

She skewed her eyes at him suspiciously. “I want to look at your back.” She wanted to turn him to look, but he was stronger than her. She could not see what she felt unless he was willing to show her.

“Aadhya.” He let out a sigh.

“Nakul, please. Tell me what happened.” It was a plea born out of a strange fear she was feeling.

He ran his fingers through his damp hair. “There was a disturbance on my way home.”

She was done taking his alternate answers. She remembered what she felt on his back and his reaction to it. It was pain that he expressed when her hand grazed over his back. “Are you injured?” She had barely touched him and he seemed to experience pain.

“Aadhya, I need to go.” He tried to walk past her, but she wrapped her arms around him.

She pressed her cheek to his chest. “You’ll need to take me wherever you are going, and before that, you need to answer my question.”

She clung to him and held his gaze as he looked down at her for long moments. “We were attacked last night. Some of my men were injured, and I had to take them to the hospital.”

Her eyes widened, and she let out a gasp. “Are-are they okay?” He nodded. She felt guilty about what she put him through that morning and felt sick to her stomach. “I’m sorry.” She batted away tears as she gently kissed him on his cheek. “Let me look at your back, please.”

He pressed his lips together, stood in place as she let go of him, and took a couple of steps to check on his injury. She let out a gasp when she saw the telling marks. There were three scars on his back, swollen and red. One of them had

stitches, too. It explained why he had his t-shirt on in bed. He didn't want her to see his injuries.

She gently placed her hand right below the three scars. As she took in the details of the injury, something hit her. "Kabalis." It was one of the rogue and savage clans; only their weapon would leave such marks. "Why did they attack you?"

He shook his head. "Aadhya, it is not the first time I've been attacked."

She could not accept what was happening. "I don't get it. Why are there so many people who don't agree with what you and your brothers are trying to do?"

"Time, they need time to process." He looked at her for a long moment. "They are scared of the curse."

He was right, and she nodded. "Even I needed time to understand, and I want to make more people see what you are doing. And the curse will be forgotten when peace is restored."

He smirked. "I've already notified that the Kanwar heir will be in attendance for the clan meeting tomorrow."

She felt the heat creep up her cheeks. "I'll be there." She smiled and started to walk away from him when he called out to her.

"I'll see you for breakfast in a bit."

She nodded and went straight to the dressing room. She changed into casual and conservative clothes. She was done seducing her husband. He was putting his life on the line to do good for her people and all she could think of was satiating her physical need.

She felt disgusted but in spite of how she felt about her behavior, she was still smiling like a fool thinking about the moments they shared. She could be with him all day and not want anything else.

Just him!

Chapter 24

Before sunrise the following day, they left the Kanwar mansion to meet with the clans of the south region of Singoor. She was amazed at how hard her husband worked to resolve the conflicts one meeting after another. He not only spoke the regional languages; he even knew the sensibilities specific to some clans.

Some meetings were favorable, others not so much. But she got a glimpse of what her husband was doing when he left the mansion so early. She was sitting next to him, on their way to the last meeting when she raised her eyes to look at him. He was frantically typing on his computer like every time.

She noticed he did that after every meeting. “What do you type on your computer after every meeting?” She was genuinely curious.

He smirked before looking at her. “Connect dots.”

“And what do you use this for?” She was intrigued with his way. She noticed he had a lot of detail like he wrote every single word that was said in the meeting.

He turned his laptop toward her. “Every detail that I noticed needs to be noted. This is how we build profiles and determine which clans to invite to a meeting and which one to meet individually.”

“Interesting.” She knew Nakul was the strategy leader for their business. It fascinated her that he was applying his

leadership and talent to resolve clan wars. “Is that why we are meeting the Jodha clan by themselves?”

He shook his head. “Not really because the Jangid clan will be joining us for the meeting.”

She let out a laugh when he mentioned her uncle would be there for the meeting. “I didn’t know he was coming.”

Nakul nodded. “Just as an icebreaker.”

Aadhya was impressed. There was no way any one clan could have pulled off such a massive re-engagement. It was what her father did, along with the other clans twenty years ago, including the Kabalis but went nowhere. She looked up at the sun setting over the mountains and thought of her father. He would have been so proud of her for marrying such a man. One who was working every minute to bring the region together and out of the turmoil.

She didn’t disturb him the rest of the way and wondered how she could help with what he and his brothers were doing. She told herself to overcome her selfish needs and find ways to work with him.

Aadhya kept to herself so he could continue working on his notes. She looked out of the window enjoying the scenery. She had not been to that part of Singoor ever but she felt at home. A region that gave her sadness was now a beacon of hope. The anxiety she used to feel about being in Singoor was non-existent. Thanks to her husband.

Temporary husband, a voice reinstated but she chose to ignore that voice.

By the time they reached the Jodha clan meeting place, she looked forward to meeting the clan head. It was led by a woman just like her aunt and she looked forward to gaining their support.

Her husband opened the door for her and she took his hand as she exited the SUV. She walked next to him in a conservative, traditional outfit. She had been in the dress all day and could not wait to get into her pajamas. He led her to a tent that was set up for the meeting. Unlike the last time, the clan meeting was not a family event, it would be a make-or-break situation.

She saw the leader of the Jodha clan to one side with her trusted clan heads; on the other side, her uncle sat with his men. Before taking one of the seats designated for them, she walked over to where her uncle sat. She bent to touch his feet for blessings before sitting next to Nakul.

She looked across the room, looking to make eye contact with someone in the Jodha clan but no one seemed to be interested. They were avoiding looking in the direction of Nakul and she was sitting. Her heart twisted at the thought of how many such meetings her husband had to endure, for the sake of the people.

Despite her being born in the region and having ties, she didn't have the endurance to face so much animosity, and neither did many other clan heads. The reason why the land was in such turmoil. She slowly looked toward her husband and he turned to look at her at the same time. His eyes held concern for her and she smiled assuringly.

How could she not see his dedication to bring peace to the land, sooner?

Finally, the silence was broken by her husband speaking in the local dialect, with praise for the all-powerful Lord Shiva. The clan heads shifted uncomfortably in their seats as if they were taken aback by Nakul's ability to speak the language.

Nakul led the conversations with introductions and set the stage for what they would be discussing. She noticed how much of a conviction his voice held while running the meetings. He first stated in every meeting that the Thakvar family would renounce any control over Singoor's resources, especially the oil.

Aadhya noticed the Jodha clan head's reaction to his words. "What's the guarantee you will not change your mind about the oil later?" a clansman asked.

Nakul shook his head. "I may change my mind, but my promise to follow the rules of the land will not alter."

"You are business savvy and might find a way to fool others." Jodha bai, the clan head was not trusting Nakul to stick to the peace treaty.

Aadhya knew Nakul to be patient, but his persistence was next level. As he answered questions the older woman fired away. After a few rounds of back-and-forth questions, Nakul paused before asking, "Jodha bai, what is your real concern in this matter? All I hear are excuses for not wanting peace in South Singoor."

Jodha bai looked at the Jangid head, her uncle before looking straight at Aadhya. “The Kanwar heir, the *Maaho*, does not belong to this land.” She turned to look at Nakul and added, “You don’t belong to Singoor either. What do you really want?”

Aadhya had enough of the woman’s tantrums. “Respected clan head, Jodha bai, the Maaho of Kanwar is my aunt, Rajeshwari Devi Kanwar. She has been working tirelessly to bring everyone together since the time my parents passed away.”

Jodha bai shook her head. “You are the Kanwar Maaho now and this is the first time in twenty years that Kanwars have reached out to talk to us. How can we trust the Kanwar intention?”

Aadhya was taken aback by the accusation that her aunt had not been working on bringing people together. She maintained a calm manner. “My aunt took on the responsibility of the family and the clan after my parents’ demise. The way my parents passed away, was traumatic for me and everyone in my family. What was left of my parents after the accident haunted me for years and as a child I could not live in the mansion that reminded me of the tragedy. I was sent to boarding school to help heal my situation.”

She paused to get a read on the group and when there were no questions or retaliatory words, she continued, “It was so painful for my aunt, she cut off all ties that reminded her of her biggest loss. Her older brother was the mother and father she did not have.” She turned to look at her uncle, who was fighting back tears at the memory of the accident. “After the

fire accident, I not only lost my parents but also my entire family on my mother's side, until recently. Mistakes were made due to grief, trauma and now," she paused to look at Nakul, "because of my marriage to the Thakvar heir, my husband gave me a gift of family. I may have spent decades away from this region but I am back and I belong to Singoor."

There was a sudden silence in the tent where a hundred people were gathered. "We are on a path to peace, and I hope you will join us. Shakti wants us to be together, so she has made three marriages happen. She wants to come back to Singoor and she will not until we are all united."

Jodhabai's eyes flashed for a moment. "Is-is Shakti coming?" The woman's voice was suddenly weak.

"Yes," Nakul said with so much certainty that Aadhya thought he would reveal what they found about the sculpture, but he did not. "My parents are in the process of performing the rituals at all the temples as per the guidance. Only then can we start commissioning our Goddess."

Aadhya noticed the surprise in her uncle's eyes as well. Jodhabai stood up like she was done discussing but moved to where Aadhya stood.

"Maaho," Jodha bai formally addressed her and added, "Now that you are married, you must perform the peace ritual. It will make our people feel safe and secure."

Aadhya felt a shiver go down her spine. Fear and anxiety took root just at the thought of the ritual being performed. The one that took her parents away from her. She stood in shock, unable to respond, until her husband wrapped

his arm around her gently. “Jodha bai, the ritual left two families broken forever, and we will need to—”

“We should,” she interjected and looked at Nakul. “We should perform the ritual. It was my parents’ wish to perform the ritual, and they never finished it.”

With those words, Aadhya saw the shift in the room. Everyone in the room bowed to her as Jodha bai took her hand in hers. “May the Mahadev bless you with everything you wish for!”

Aadhya batted away happy tears as she bent to touch the clan leader’s feet. She was surprised to see Nakul do the same with the clan leader. “May you both be blessed with an heir soon.” She straightened her back, a broad smile on her face at the thought of a baby, their child but quickly pushed that thought away.

There was a lot to be done for the region to stop the suffering before she could think of her selfish needs and desires. Aadhya watched as Nakul spoke to the Jodha clan representatives while she half followed the conversation between her uncle and Jodha bai. She could not avert her eyes from her husband. The man she thought had deceived her into marrying him for his gains. She was so wrong and was glad that was the case.

“Maaho,” Aadhya looked away from her husband when Jodha bai addressed her. Her cheeks flushed from being caught staring at her husband by her uncle and the older woman. “Please spend the night here. It is past sunset and you have a long distance to go. Allow us to serve the Kanwar Maaho.”

The woman's affection moved Aadhya. "Jodha bai, I'm thrilled to receive your affection. My husband and I need to return tonight. We will be back soon to accept your hospitality." She knew Nakul had his nightly meetings and had to return to the mansion.

"We look forward to your visit. We send our prayers for the *Peace* ritual!"

She smiled as the older woman left with her lead members. Her uncle came to stand next to her. "Aadi, are you sure about performing the ritual?"

"Mama, I see no reason why not. It will be hard but the reality is I should have thought of performing it sooner, especially when I know that was their dying wish."

Her uncle nodded. "Tell me dear, when you'd like to perform the ritual with your husband, and we will be waiting."

Nakul joined them a moment later and her uncle bid goodbye and left the tent with his men, leaving them alone. She smiled as he held his hand out to her to take the back of her hand to his lips. "Thank you!"

She stepped closer to him, her hand on his shoulder. "I need to say that. I'm so glad I came to this meeting. I never once realized that my parents left their last wish unfulfilled. And, I'm so glad you are—"

He hushed her. "Let's get out of here. We can talk on the way."

She followed him to the awaiting vehicles and she noticed there was more security than the other times they had

attended meetings. Maybe it was because of the recent attack on him by the Kabalis.

Aadhya scooted closer to him as he slid next to her in the back seat. “I declined an invitation to stay over at Jodha’s tonight. I hope we can come back soon. I’m told this part of the region is extremely beautiful.

He nodded. “That’s not a bad idea.”

Her eyes widened. “Sorry, should I have accepted the invite? Would that have helped with the relationship?”

Nakul’s eyes were unreadable as he smirked. “You’ve rebuilt the relationship by agreeing to perform the ritual. I commend your resolve in this matter.”

She leaned closer to him. “Compared to what you’re doing, it’s nothing.”

He let out a chuckle. “Do you still want to check out the region in the morning?” His tone was playful so she could not tell if he meant it.

She pulled back to look at him. “Seriously?” She laughed. “Are we going to go back and insist we take her offer tonight?”

“We could,” he winked and that set off something in her. “Or we could stay on the holy lands and come visit the region in the morning.”

Her eyes widened. “Is that possible?”

“I’ll make it happen.” He reached for his phone and sent out a few messages. A moment later, his screen flashed and he smirked. “We are all set.”

She let out a squeal of joy. “But, what about your meeting?”

He shook his head. “Nothing is more important than pleasing my wife at this moment.”

Her heart skipped a beat but she managed to laugh it off. “Not cheesy at all.” Her nerves were high-strung when he was close and she didn’t know what that meant as they worked on other goals.

What Aadhya felt between them was powerful and had the strength to steer them in any direction, but given where they were headed, she wanted to be with him forever.

A solid need to break the contract consumed her but she pushed away the selfish thought.

Chapter 25

A short ride later, Aadhya caught sight of lights at a distance. Before she could ask what town or settlement it was, their convoy took a detour toward the lights. “Where are we?”

“We are on holy lands. We will spend the night here to tour the region in the morning.” He met her eyes in the dim light of the SUV, and she couldn’t help but smile.

“That sounds good.” She was excited about being with him in a new setting. The holy lands near the Kanwar region also had tents, but she had never been to one. They were considered safe havens for travelers to rest at night without fearing attack.

Aadhya blushed as Nakul held out his hand to help her out of the SUV shortly after. She wondered what he told his staff about making an overnight stop. Did he tell his staff it was as per his wife’s request?

She was somewhat embarrassed at what the staff thought but thrilled about him changing plans for her, at such short notice. Nakul stayed outside talking to security and he gestured for her to go inside. She stepped into the large tent and gasped. The exterior looked plain but on the inside the setup was pretty extravagant.

To one side a seating area with two sofas, area rugs, and curtains to separate the seating and the bedroom area. The large bed looked inviting; all she could think about was a bath

and sleep. She walked over to the other side of the suite and saw the various fresh and dry fruits.

Food was the last thing on her mind, she wanted to get out of her outfit. Even if she had to use a bedsheet as her nightgown, that's what she was going to. She looked through the shelf for an extra bed sheet and to her surprise there were plain white, linen cloths. Traditional pieces of clothing she had seen both men and women wear to the temple on certain occasions.

“Perfect,” she said reaching for a couple of the clothes and a towel. Her clothes were not dirty but she wasn't accustomed to wearing a tight-fitting blouse for so long. She pushed open the door to what she thought was a bathroom and was amazed, yet again how much larger the space was inside. The tent from the outside was deceptively small.

Aadhya was excited to see there was running water and buckets to fill for a bath and she could not ask for more in the middle of the desert. She could hear Nakul speak to his team right on the other side of the thin canvas wall of the tent. She went to stand by the window and from where she stood, Nakul was in her line of sight.

She looked away to scan the space just outside the tent through the window opening but her eyes returned to him. He was wearing a linen shirt and a pair of cotton slacks. The sun had set but there were lamps set out and even in that light, she took in his masculinity and his ruggedly attractive features.

She would never have enough of drinking in her husband's stunning looks and kept up with her perusal. Moments passed and he nodded at his staff like he was done

giving them instructions. And as if on impulse, he turned to look directly in her direction.

She shuddered in response to the intensity in his eyes, even in the dim light. She stood rooted to the window as he moved toward her. She kept his eyes on him as he walked past the door and came to stand on the other side of the tent, looking at her through the screen on the window.

No words were exchanged but the air between them was charged and neither looked away. She didn't know how long she stood looking into his eyes, her heart banging away in her chest.

“Nakul sir, I brought the clothes and food you requested.” He looked away when a woman approached him.

“Thank you, would you please take them inside?” He looked at her for a brief moment before turning away to enter the tent.

Aadhya smiled at the woman who brought them a tray of food and a bag of what seemed to be clothes. She stood by the window as the woman placed the food on the table to the side and left. A strange anticipation was building inside her as she heard him enter the tent and shut the door. It was not her first time alone with him in a room, but the air around her seemed supercharged.

“What would you like to eat?” His voice was composed, but it was an odd question for him. He knew she wasn't shy about food, yet he was asking her.

“No, I'm fine. I need to take a bath, though.” She stepped away from the window to check what they had in the

bag the woman had dropped off. She noticed it was extras of the white linen cloths that she had already set aside to wear after a bath.

“Sure, go ahead. I’ll wash off after you do.” He was turned away from her as if he was avoiding her eyes.

Unsure of why she was feeling nervous around him, she rushed into the bathroom. She took some time to calm her raging heart before taking off her clothes. She undid the knots on the back of her blouse one by one and dusted off her clothes. She hung them on the hook before washing her body off with soap and water.

Shortly after, she stepped out of the bathroom, feeling weird about using the white fabric to cover her body. They were all rectangular pieces of cloth that she had to get creative about. She used one piece to create a makeshift halter top. A knot at the nape of her neck and another around her waist with her back left bare. Another piece of cloth wrapped around her waist like a skirt.

“The bathroom is all yours, Nakul.” She tried to sound chirpy, although the sound of her raging heart was deafening her. She only hoped he would not hear it drumming in her chest. She was glad and disappointed when he quickly went into the bathroom. It felt like he was preoccupied.

She sat on one of the chairs in the living room area and started flipping through a book on the table. She was glad he had closed all the windows as she heard the nighttime wind picking up outside.

Aadhya was on the edge and everything around her seemed elevated. Her senses were on high alert for the

slightest sound, awareness growing by the minute. She took a deep breath, suppressing her surmounting need to be held by him. She had earlier reasoned that she would not distract him from what he was doing. If anything, she was going to help him stay focused. That meant she needed to not indulge in what she felt toward him.

Her back stiffened when she heard the bathroom door open. She was seated in a chair with her back to him. She chastised herself for not taking a spot where she didn't have her bare back on display and one from where she could see him without turning her head.

With her heightened senses, she didn't have to look at him to know what he was doing. It was as if she could feel his fingers dusting off the moisture in his hair. She could see the droplets of water splashing all over while other drops rolled down his bare chest. She suddenly remembered the injury on his back and turned to look in his direction.

A soft gasp escaped her when she found him looking straight at her. He didn't avert his eyes even as she looked at him questionably. "How is the cut on your back?"

He chuckled. "I don't know."

As if that was her calling, she set aside the book and walked over to him. He looked irresistible with the white cloth wrapped around his waist. His body on display was beautiful with his tan skin glowing in the light from the lamps.

She walked slowly; her movement restricted by the fabric that was wrapped snugly around her legs. He did not move but stood facing her. When she got close, she tried to walk past him to look at his back, but he wouldn't let her see

it. He moved again when she tried to peek and laughed at the annoyed expression on her face.

“Not funny, Nakul.” She glared, unsure why he was avoiding showing her the injury.

He shook his head, his voice an octave lower. “Not at all. It’s beautiful.”

“You’re nuts.” Her voice blared in the tent. “Let me check your cuts.” She was already on the edge, so close to him and his fresh scent filled her nostrils. When she didn’t budge, she turned away from him. “Suit yourself.”

She had barely stepped away from him when she felt a tug on her arm. The next thing she knew, her bare back was pressed against his warm chest. She gasped, taking in the sudden sensations. It was a beautiful moment, and it was what she had been secretly hoping for. She processed every bit of her emotions, and the anticipation was killing her.

After avoiding every bit of her, why was he holding her like he wasn’t letting her go?

“Nakul,” her voice shook. “What-what are you doing?”

He tightened his hold on her further, his hand pushing the hair that fell partially over her back to the front. Her skin sizzled in response to his fingers grazing over her. “Do you not like what I’m doing?” he asked before his lips lowered to her bare shoulder.

She let out a moan, her eyes rolling shut, and her head fell back over his chest. He lay a trail of fire with his kiss as

she reached for him, her fingers fisting in his hair. “I—I want it.”

He bit down on the muscle on her shoulder, making molten heat pool at her core. She called out his name as she whimpered with sweet pain. She arched her back, her head tossing to the other side as his hand slid from the side opening of her makeshift top to cup her breast. It was everything she had been craving for, and he was giving it to her without her even having to ask.

A cry of pleasure escaped her when he gave the delicate flesh on her chest a tight squeeze while his other hand trailed over her soft belly before cupping the apex of her thighs. She thought she would come undone just at his touch, but he kept her longing for more. She had no idea what it was, but she knew it would be so powerful, it could shred her to pieces.

Anticipation and a dark need to be destroyed by his desire gripped her. She pulled on his hair hard while nails dug into the arm that held her breast possessively. “Please,” the word rolled off her lips but she had no idea what she was asking for and something told her he would know.

As if that was his cue, he pulled his hands away, making her eyes flutter open. He quickly turned her around and mashed their lips together in a hard kiss. He groaned against her lips as his eager hands attacked the knots on her back. The one at the neck fell apart first and he pulled away like he wanted to savor her beauty.

Her eyes opened to find him looking at her chest in amazement and a small smile formed on her lips. She had

taken off all her jewelry except for the one chain that was near and dear to her only because she bought it at an auction that they attended as their honeymoon.

“You are such a tease,” he said, gently running his finger along the length of the necklace. His very touch and the intensity in his eyes made her knees wobble. He pulled her close, his lips finding the spot where the necklace touched the side of her neck.

She let out a cry of sheer pleasure when he started tracing the necklace with his tongue. Just like he had trailed his finger on the other side of her neck and chest. Her lips shuddered, her skin peppered with goosebumps as his lips lowered, drawing a steady path heading south. He undid the other knot on her lower back and let the fabric that covered her chest drop to the floor.

She had nothing covering her upper body and no one had seen her that way, ever. And it only thrilled her that he was enjoying her beauty as he went down on his knees, burying his face into her belly. She looked down at him as he sucked on her skin like he was rejoicing on a sweet thing.

Her body was humming with a newfound pleasure and when he looked up at her, she knew he controlled every one of her senses.

“There’s no going back from here.” His voice was gravelly and she let out a sob, nodding.

With that he stood up, pulling her lips to his as he swept her feet off the floor to carry her to the bed. She moaned delectably when he placed her on the mattress, his weight

coming down on her. She grabbed onto him as if it was the moment, she had been waiting all her life.

She felt his hard shaft against her belly just for a moment, before he lifted himself off of her while still kissing her. She matched his eagerness as she held his head with her hands, as he met every one of her desires.

He pulled away, hovered over her, his weight balanced on his hands, and looked at her with dark eyes. She matched his gaze as he looked at her like he couldn't get enough of her. Moments passed and she slowly touched his cheek and saw his eyes close like her touch was so pleasurable. It amazed her how much of an effect her touch had on him.

His eyes shot open, a primal look in them that made her womb flutter. He lowered himself, eyes on her and broke the gaze as his mouth closed over her hardened buds on her chest, one after another. Her back arched as if offering herself to him.

His lips trailed lower and at the same time she felt his fingers on her legs, pushing up the thin material around her. Her body went on high alert as if bracing for the impending implosions. She shut her eyes, her face buried into the pillow as he pushed away the last piece of fabric away.

His touch was incinerating and when she felt his fingers on the edge of her core, she whimpered unable to handle the novel thrills. She called out his name, not knowing what she wanted. And as if he knew what she desired, his mouth closed in on her drenched nib. Her fingers went to his thick hair as he gently licked on her every fold setting her on fire.

Her heart beat so fast she had a tough time breathing. Her body processed the pleasure that was building up and the small of her back lifted off the mattress, inviting the explosion of emotion. She writhed under his expert seduction but he held her hips in place. She threw her head back, moaning loudly, her hair tossed over the soft pillow and then it happened. She saw fireworks behind her eyelids and she peaked, crying out his name.

She was sweaty and out of breath when he came up to kiss her, as if to soothe her shudders. He held her to him, laying a trail of kisses on her jawline before pulling himself up to look down at her. He kicked off the cloth wrapped around him and kissed her hard. "You're mine."

The possessiveness in his words made her heart somersault, and she placed her hands on his shoulders as he spread her knees apart. She yet again, arched her back, opening up to him, invitingly. She felt his fingertips dig into her flesh before his steely rod that pushed up against her entrance.

She froze for just a bit before every part of her opened up for him. She moaned when she felt the burning trail his arousal lay and it was gone like it never existed. He sucked her lips in, his hand in her hair gripping it as he built up a steady rhythm.

She gasped every time he pulled away and drove back slowly into her, only to get deeper every time. Her hips rolled naturally to match his drives and moments later, she was bracing herself for yet another peak and this one was surmounting rapidly.

She was lost in uncharted territory, it scared her and she clung to him. As if he sensed the delectable turmoil, his pace slowed down and he kissed her, soothing her. The slow drive accentuated her sensations and on the next drive she fell apart. A moment later, she felt him stiffen and let out a groan against her lips before taking his weight off of her.

He pulled her to him, still joint at the center as she caught her breath and fell into an abyss of newfound emotions and thrills. And as she fell asleep in his arms as he kissed her sweaty forehead, she was finally home.

The contract that brought them together had turned into a pile of ash, incinerated in their passion.

A distant buzz woke him up and it took him a moment to remember where he was. He smiled looking at the woman who lay asleep in his arms. He brushed his lips gently over hers before reaching for his phone on the table beside the bed.

It did not surprise him that it was half past eleven, considering they were both up satiating each other's desires all night. It felt like the floodgates opened for him and he could not get enough of her. She was a riot in bed and the way she responded to his touch made him want her over and over again.

He saw the messages from his security head about the plan for the day. He smiled and responded, *TBD. Secure the area.*

He pulled her close to him, smiling at her soft snore, ready to take her again but he needed her to recover from the all-night marathon they ran in bed as if they could not get enough of each other.

The contract he held over her head was now void and the only thing binding them was the law of the land. He didn't know how long she would choose to be in Singoor, but when she was ready to work on her goals and aspirations, he'd have to let her go!

Chapter 26

It was the day after they returned from the meeting with the Jodha clan. Aadhya headed to her aunt's study to meet her that evening. She had requested her aunt's staff to let her know that she had an important matter to discuss. There would never be a good time to break the news about the ritual she had agreed to perform at the Jangid fort.

Aadhya knew the ritual that took her parents from her would be hard for her to go through, but she was confident she could do it with her husband. She had to tell her aunt and alleviate her concerns about the decision to proceed with the ritual.

She walked past the main dining area and stopped when Meenabai called out to her. "Nani, I need to go talk to Rajji, can I come by after?"

"Aadi, wait for two minutes, I'm coming." The older woman was insistent.

Aadhya was nervous about talking to her aunt and the interruption felt like an excellent opportunity to organize her thoughts. Moments passed and just as she was getting impatient, Meenabai appeared with a tray filled with red liquid.

"Really, Nani?" Aadhya teased as the older woman lit a large piece of camphor in the middle of the tray. "Why a mini ritual now?" She followed the flame with her eyes.

The older woman didn't talk immediately. She handed the tray to another staff member and silently chanted in front of Aadhya. "I hope no evil gets close to you. The past few days, you have been glowing like the morning sun. May god bless this region with an heir soon."

She nodded and hugged Meena bai, a thought passing her head about the mention of an heir. She consummated her marriage with her husband on the holy lands, and neither used protection. She did her math based on her cycle, which was not a fertile day for her. If only the older woman knew the glow was from the increased activity in the bedroom and not an heir.

Was she ready to be the mother of her husband's child?

She paused right outside the study and took a deep breath to calm her thoughts. She pushed away all other threads in her mind and focused on the chat she was about to have with her aunt. She knocked and stepped into the study when her aunt permitted her to enter.

"Hi Rajji, I hope I'm not interrupting." Aadhya hugged her and sat on the chair right across from her aunt.

"Not at all, Aadi. You know I'd love to spend all my time with you but I can't get into trouble with your husband." Her aunt teased, and Aadhya could not believe her ears.

"Rajji, stop." Her cheeks turned crimson.

Her aunt laughed. "Look at you blush. That's a sign of happiness."

Indeed, she was happy and had been levitating the past couple of days. She nodded and smiled. “I am Rajji. Especially because of all the progress we’ve made with the clans in the south.”

Her aunt nodded, batting away happy tears. “I agree and I must thank you for choosing him as your husband. Nakul is a blessing to our family and our region.”

Aadhya could only nod and listen.

“I still cannot believe the lengths he went to get you to agree to marry him. The man he was and not as the Thakvar heir.” There was truth to every word her aunt said but the *how* was questionable.

“Yes, and there is one more thing I would like to do with my husband,” she hesitated, unsure how to say it.

Her aunt interjected. “Don’t tell me you are moving to the Thakvar mansion. I cannot handle it.”

Aadhya laughed. “No, Rajji.” She reached out and took her aunt’s hand in hers. “I told my husband I’m never leaving you.”

“I love you, Aadi. I’m so happy you have come to be with me after all these years.” Her aunt was so happy, that Aadhya was conflicted about sharing the news about the ritual.

“Me too, Rajji. I love it here and being a part of what Nakul is doing for the region.” She paused yet again to gain composure. “And as a part of that, Jodha bai recommended that Nakul and I perform the *Peace* ceremony to unite our people.”

Aadhya saw her aunt visibly freeze like she had flashes of the trauma. She squeezed her aunt's hand. "I know it's hard to even think about it, but it's a ritual we need to do anyway. Nakul's parents are performing the rituals in the temples in preparation for commissioning the sculpture of Shakti. And I want to do my part for the region's betterment and perform the ritual with Nakul."

"What?" Her aunt's eyes held shock and disbelief. "I never thought I would hear those words in my lifetime." A small laugh followed her words, and that's when Aadhya knew her aunt was not horrified by the idea of her performing the ritual.

"Rajji, Mamma, and Papa were performing the ritual to pray for peace in the region." She got off her chair to kneel next to her aunt. "This is the only way to bring the people together."

Her aunt fought back tears. "When did my baby grow up so fast?" She looked up at the picture of her parents on the wall and smiled. "Did you hear what Aadi said, Dada? She is a true Kanwar."

Her aunt's words made Aadhya very happy. She hugged her aunt before planting a kiss on her cheek. "I'm so glad you are not angry with me about agreeing to do the ritual."

Her aunt placed her hand on Aadhya's head. "God bless you with everything you ever wish for."

Aadhya was super excited when she left her aunt's study shortly after. She could not wait to tell Nakul the excellent news. She pushed open his office door to find it

empty. She scrunched her nose, wondering where he was, and went looking for him. It was odd that he wasn't in the bathroom either.

In the months they have been married, she had figured out his schedule, and he stuck to it with no exceptions. It had made it easier to avoid him when he was at home. After looking through, the entire private suite she went back to the main section of the house. She didn't know where else to look and wandered toward the kitchen.

“Aadi, come, are you hungry?” Meenabai was in the middle of getting the staff preparing for dinner.

“No, Nani. I'm good. Do you know where Nakul is?” she asked tentatively, somehow convinced they won't know. But it bothered her that her husband left the mansion without her.

The older woman laughed, shaking her head. “Now he needs your permission to go anywhere?”

“Nani.” She narrowed her eyes. “Do you know where he is?” She was a bit irritated that everyone but her seemed to know where he was.

The older woman reached for a glass of green juice and handed it to her. “Yes. He is in the storage room. Take this to him.” The older woman handed her the drink. The storage room was her old playroom where she had spent a lot of time with her mother. After her parents' death, she felt scared to go to that room even to get her toys so it was used as storage. She could not remember the last time she had been to the side of the mansion. It was a room with a lot of sunlight but slightly detached from the rest of the house.

Walking down the short hallway to the room that had not been used in years, she wondered what he was doing there. She heard the sound of his grunt followed by a clang of metal and her curiosity peaked. She pushed open the door and blinked in disbelief. The room that once had boxes and old furniture was converted into a workout space. There was a full-size treadmill, dumbbells to one side and her eyes trailed to where her husband stood picking up a heavy weight. She licked her lips, enjoying the sight in front of her and it explained how he had a Greek-God-like body.

He dropped the weight when he looked at her and she smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.” She walked up to him and handed him his drink. “Nani sent this for you.”

He took the drink from her and with the other hand pulled her to him, his lips sucking the air out of her lungs. “Did you miss me?” he teased, his teeth grazing over her lower lip.

She blushed. “I was looking for you and had no idea you worked out, here.” She looked around the room. “This used to be my play area, a long time back.”

He chuckled, taking a bite of her neck, making her inner layers damp. “I needed to work out to stop thinking about doing things to you all the time.”

His words made her gasp but she enjoyed the vice-like grip around her waist. “How come you never worked out before?”

He let out a laugh. “I did every day in the morning.” He nuzzled her ear. “These days my wife keeps me up all night

and I can't wake up in the morning. He lay a trail of kisses along her neck, his sweat coating her skin. The slick feeling made her hot and crave him.

She hugged his head as he kissed her. "Not here, Nakul. Someone will see us."

He pulled back to look at her, his eyes holding mischief. "Really and it was okay every other time we kissed?"

"Well," she swallowed when he traced her lower lip with his finger. "We were fake kissing back then, and it wasn't like we would," she blushed and added, "do anything in public."

He looked at her with hooded eyes. "Liar," he taunted.

"What?" She laughed throwing her arm around his neck. "It's true. We were faking it." There was some truth to it although she knew it had not led to anything serious.

"Really?" He pulled her closer, taking a bite of her ear. "What about the time you were all eager for me in my office?" It was a tease and he was enjoying it.

She shook her head. "That was because I was jealous that all those cheerleaders were touching you." It felt stupid in hindsight for her to feel that way but she did.

"Noted, and the time you randomly showed up in the office at the Jangid fort? Why did you have to fake kiss me with so much intensity?"

She blinked, unable to believe he was bringing up that particular time she was desperate for him. She was embarrassed to talk about it and tried to dodge the question. "I

don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you finish your workout and we can talk after?"

He wasn't ready to let her go and pulled her back to him, drowning her in sweet kisses. "Nice try; you're not going anywhere now."

She smiled and fought back the need to engage with him while in such a public place of the house. "Nakul, let me go. Let's talk after."

He tightened his arm around her. "Now. Here. I want to know why you almost gave me a lap dance that day." He was adamant, and she knew it was time to tell him the real reason.

She lowered her eyes and chewed on her lip. "I—I was in the garden at the Jangid fort and one of my cousin's friends talked about wanting to be your wife number two and...ummm, I could not let that happen." She saw the suspicious look on his face. "Because we were in a contract. Not because I wanted to be with you or—"

He kissed away her words. "You are so hot when you are jealous." His words made her smile against his lips. "I watched the video from my office of you cursing the cheerleaders, so many times." He groaned, sucking on her lower lip. "But my all-time favorite was the audio of you pretending to come while we were in the Palace Museum."

His words made the throbbing between her legs harder. "Nakul, take me." She no longer cared where they were. Her need to be filled by him was far greater than being caught making out with her husband.

With those words, he pushed her back into the wall, bunching her full-length skirt at her hips. Their lips melded while their tongues tangled as she straddled him. His hands squeezed her yearning breast making her let out a cry of pleasure.

He moved quickly and she didn't want it any other way, pulling her panties away from her, he entered her, hot and hungry. His kisses made her lips sore but that accentuated their engagement and as he pushed deeper, she cried out, her voice muffled against his neck.

On the last drive, she let out a loud cry that she had no way to suppress and when he came right after, she shuddered as she felt his warmth spread inside her. "You are so hot, I'll never have enough of you." He kissed her hard before slowly setting her feet down. He adjusted his shorts and pushed her skirt down before leading her to the other side of the room.

She was still in a daze as they stepped into a bathroom that she didn't know existed. He kissed her gently as she caught her breath. A moment later he reached for a hand towel from the rack and dampened it before going down on his knees before her. She watched as he lifted her skirt to clean her before pulling up her panties that were halfway down her thighs. He planted a kiss on her cover over the fabric barrier before dropping her skirt to the floor.

She smiled at him not knowing what to say. She'd never imagined he would be such a caring lover, especially after how eager and hungry he could be. "I liked what we did."

He smiled pressing his arousal that was hard already and said, "And I'm up to do anything you want, anytime,

anywhere.” His eyes spit fire and they heated her. “And I prefer this to what I have been doing for months.” He pressed his hardness deeper against her. “This bad boy was so hard; I needed to take care of him at least a couple of times a day.”

She blushed, but she also felt bold. She reached up and kissed him. “Then why didn’t you kiss me when I wanted you to? Do all the dirty things I wanted you to do to me.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “I needed to be sure.” He kissed her softly to soften the questioning look and added, “Needed to make sure you weren’t seducing me to get out of the contract.”

She smiled, her cheeks turning red. “What if I did?”

He tightened his hold on her, making her breath hiss. “I can tell when a woman wants me for real.”

She fumed, angry at the reference to his experience with other women, and bit down on his chest. “Does this feel real enough?”

He let out a grunt, his eyes darkening with desire, and that only set off more longing as they shared some more hot moments like they could not get enough of each other.

Chapter 27

Aadhya had fallen into a habit of waking up in her husband's arms every morning, either gasping for air as he would wake her up with a peak or to him being hard and wanting her. Nights and days were spent together as they prepared to perform the ritual at her mother's birthplace as per tradition.

Nakul spent a lot of time in his office during the day, setting her body aflame between his work, and she only wanted more of him. She had fallen into a new routine for herself. Along with the classes, she started working closely with her aunt's staff, who took care of the finances for the region. Her aunt was thrilled when she showed interest in helping and learning what her office does to run the operations for their region.

Aadhya was reviewing a plan the manager had sent for repairs in the hospital when Nakul knocked on her door. She had set up her office in her old bedroom and liked the separation, so anticipation could be built to see him after being away for a few hours.

“What a pleasant surprise. Did my husband miss me?” she asked, standing up to walk over to where he stood. Her smile dropped when she saw the expression on his face. “Nakul, what's wrong?” Her worry shot up, and she hoped everything was okay.

Although she believed in the good that would result from performing the ritual at the Jangid fort, she was aware of the superstitions surrounding the event. Nakul sighed and said, “You have to believe me when I say I was tracking down another lead when I stumbled upon this finding.

She felt her stomach twist in anxiety as she touched his cheek. “Whatever it is, I trust you.”

“For months, we have been trying to find out more about an international businessman named Tantra. There were indications that he had a mole in all the prominent clans, just like he had in the Gujjar clan.”

She was confused and wasn't sure why he was sharing those details. “What does this person want? And are you saying he also has a contact in the Kanwar clan?”

Nakul shook her head. “Tantra is interested in the oil and has been on a mission to gain control over the region. And I've been looking for clues, and nothing led to Tantra, but I came across something else. It's about your uncle.”

Her eyes widened. “What are you talking about?”

Nakul ran his fingers through his hair. “I will leave it up to you if you want to tell your aunt about this. But your uncle has another wife and children in the neighboring region.”

The room around her started to spin. “What?” Her voice was barely a whisper. She was sure she had misheard what he said.

As if he sensed her state of mind, he wrapped an arm around her, holding her to him. He slowly walked her to her

desk and sat her on the chair. He knelt in front of her. “I had to tell you.”

Tears started to roll down her cheeks, and she hid her face in her hands. “How could this happen to her?” Guilt gripped her as she reasoned her uncle’s life choice, and it hit her hard. “This is all because my aunt decided not to have kids of her own because of me.”

“Aadhya, you don’t know that for sure.” He reached for her and scooped her off the chair into his arms. She sobbed softly as he carried her to their private suite. He sat her down on the bed and sat next to her.

He planted kisses on her head as she sobbed into his chest. “This is so not fair to my aunt.” He ran his hand on her back, trying to soothe her tears.

“Are you sure about this?” She hoped it was all a mistake but knew she had to accept it as the truth. “My aunt doesn’t deserve this. How can I even break this news to her?”

“Aadhya, this is not your burden to carry.” His words didn’t change the reality, but they took some weight off of her, and she sobbed into his chest. She was glad her aunt was away at one of the meditation centers. Her aunt confessed she was worried about her performing the ritual but would not stop her. She was dealing with the anxiety about the ritual by spending time at a sanctuary outside the Singoor region.

With the new information that came to light, she couldn’t be thankful for the timing of her aunt’s visit to the meditation center. After what she found out, she didn’t know how to face her aunt. But there was one person whom she wanted to talk to: her aunt’s husband.

“Nakul,” she pulled back to look at him. “Please be beside me when I talk to my aunt’s husband.” She was so upset she couldn’t address him as her uncle.

He looked at her for a long moment. “If that’s what you want to do.”

She nodded. “Are you sure about his family you found out? Is this for real?” She so badly wanted it to be a mistaken identity or wrong information.

Nakul let out a sigh before kissing the top of her head. “I had my team double-check everything, and I even had a DNA test run.”

She nodded. “I need to talk to him. This has to be sorted out before Rajji is back.” She stood and took his hand. “I need to do this now.” Even as she exited her room, she didn’t know when her uncle managed to spend time with his other family. He was such a homebound person; he rarely left the house.

Even at that moment, she knew the man was at home, just as he had promised to her aunt. Her aunt asked her husband not to leave the mansion while she was away as she was worried about his security.

She approached her aunt’s private quarters and let one of the staff members inform her uncle that she wished to see him. She clung to Nakul as she made her way to her aunt’s study. The space smelled of her aunt’s favorite sandalwood oil, bringing tears to her eyes.

Her aunt would be heartbroken to hear what her husband had done to her. “Aadi, Nakul come sit. What a

pleasant surprise?”

She nodded but could not get herself to look at the man who had given her as much love and affection as her aunt had given. He had been the one to secretly give her chocolate even when Nani would tell her not to eat so much candy. He would bring her toys every time he traveled on business trips, once a month.

The older man cleared his throat when silence fell between them. “I hear you are both performing the *Peace* ceremony. I’m happy you are performing it. It’s good for people’s confidence.”

Nakul tightened his hold around her as if he sensed her situation. She had to muster up a lot of strength to even look at her uncle and ask, “How could you do this to Rajji?” She suppressed a sob.

Her aunt’s husband looked momentarily confused, and his eyes went to Nakul’s. “I’m sorry you found out Aadi. I never wanted you to know.”

Aadhya could not control her anger. “Do you have any remorse for what you have done? I cannot believe you are so calm about it.” She was outraged.

The older man looked at her silently. His silence further aggravated her state, but she held back her words. The harsh ones that she wanted to say but knew not to. Moments later, he cleared his throat. “Rajeshwari and I had an arranged marriage, and on our wedding night, your aunt told me she would never be able to love me.” He paused like he needed strength to continue. “She had loved someone and could never

marry him. She only agreed to the alliance with me because her brother, your father, convinced her.”

Aadhya had no defense or to accuse the man of making up things. Because she knew her aunt was in love with someone all those years ago. But she didn't realize that her aunt was always in love and had not accepted the man as her husband. “No,” her voice was a whisper.

The older man continued. “Marriages in Singoor are meant to be for a lifetime and that's the reason I did not leave your aunt. Then, I met someone on a business travel and fell in love. The woman I fell for wanted me, my love and when I told her I had nothing to offer in return, she didn't care. It did not matter to her that she was not going to be recognized as my wife by the society. We got married in a temple and started our life.”

Aadhya dreaded asking the question that was burning in her head. “Does Rajji know?”

If she wanted to find out she could have. She never asked me and I never told her. It's an agreement.”

She suddenly felt sorry for the man. “I'm sorry, Mama.” She felt sad for her aunt and uncle. They were both heartbroken in one way or the other.

“It's okay. I feel lighter about sharing it with you. You are my child, too.” Her uncle's voice was feeble. “How did you find out?”

Nakul cleared his throat. “I was looking for clues for a contact in the Kanwar region to an international mercenary who is after the Singoor oil.”

The older man shook his head. “Impossible. Kanwar men are extremely loyal to their heirs and to the land. You can rest assured they will not give into greed for money.” He smirked. “Your aunt has done a wonderful job of keeping our people safe all these years.”

“Good to know, Sir.” Nakul sounded relieved. “And I apologize for suspecting you to be the contact. I had to check everyone out and that’s when we found out about your family.”

“The truth always will find its way out. I’m not upset and I know Aadi you understand our situation. I merely abided by your aunt’s wishes.” The man’s words brought tears to her eyes. She quickly stood up and touched his feet as an apology before leaving the room, unable to face such a kind-hearted man, stuck in a love triangle.

Nakul caught up with her just as she was going up the stairs. “Aadhya, are you okay?”

She stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to face him. “Let’s keep this matter between us. I don’t want to bring this up with my aunt or anyone again.”

Nakul nodded, and she threw her arm around his neck and hugged him. “Thank you. What would I do without you.”

Nakul lay in bed holding Aadhya in his arms. It was late afternoon, and she lay exhausted, a soft snore playing in his ears. His hand moved softly, rubbing her back as she

thought back to the morning when they had arrived at the location to perform the ritual.

He knew the ritual brought back the trauma of her parents' death. As a young girl, having to process the sudden death of her parents, he knew it would not be easy for her. But his warrior heiress pushed through their hour-long ceremony.

As he thought through the rituals, he knew why his investigative team had ruled out a while back the possibility of Aadhya's parents' death as an accident. The experts reviewed the doctors' report after the fire and concluded the parent's clothes caught fire so rapidly because of foul play. A highly flammable gas or another material intensified the flame and burned rapidly.

Her parents had to perform the ritual privately; the only other person present was the priest. It required the couple to feed the holy fire oil with a long-stemmed spatula as sacred words were chanted. His team looked for the team who had disappeared after the accident, only to find out that the priest died soon after in a road accident as he fled the Singoor region.

It was the truth Aadhya deserved to know, but he didn't want to tell her the information with questions unanswered, especially after she had mustered up the courage to perform the ritual. He had known the information for months and didn't think he needed to share it, but now he knew it would be hard on her and chose not to reveal the findings.

Although traditions prevented others from being present at the ceremony, Nakul ensured the area was secure.

He had security scan the open area a few days prior and had a tight perimeter set throughout the event. No matter his progress in recent months, he wasn't taking any chances.

The one ritual his wife agreed to perform did wonders for the south region of Singoor. The Jodha clan's *Maaho* was there to meet them along with ten other clan heads to show their support.

His chest warmed up at the memory of happy tears in his wife's eyes. As she received the blessing from the clan heads, she did not notice how her grandfather stood beside her uncle to bless them.

She sobbed happy tears, hugging her grandfather as he thanked her for completing the ritual. The older man believed it was one wish of his daughter that was left unfulfilled.

With one ceremony, his wife united so many clans, making him want to give her anything she ever wished for. He planted a small kiss on her head and said, "I'll protect you with my life."

A moment later, she moved in her sleep, letting out a moan. He held her close to him, enjoying the feel of her softness against him.

"Nakul," she said, her voice groggy. "Are you awake?"

He responded by kissing her head, a smile forming on his lips. She moved her head to look up at him. Long moments of silence passed. "I'm glad you didn't leave Singoor."

He chuckled. "Why would I do that?" He placed his fingers on her chin and kissed her lips. "Especially when I

have my beautiful wife here?”

She lowered her eyes. “This is not the life you’re used to. You didn’t need to—”

“I’m a Thakvar and I am bound by my duty to protect Singoor. My father left his family... wife, and three young children to return to Singoor to restore peace after his brother and sister were killed in an accident.”

Aadhya gasped. “I didn’t know that, and Rajji never spoke about what happened to her best friend.”

He ran his hand on her back as if to soothe away the pain he saw in her eyes. “It was unfortunate, and in my aunt’s memory, my sister, Nandini, is named after my aunt.”

She sat up, somewhat surprised. “You have a sister?” He had not mentioned his youngest sibling. They had to protect her with their lives, and the brothers made it a point not to reveal anything about the sister—not even to their respective wives.

He nodded. “She is the youngest and still in America.”

“How—how come you didn’t tell me?” He saw the disappointment in her eyes.

He pulled her to him, their foreheads touching. “You must believe me when I saw it was solely for Nandini’s protection and nothing against you.”

She nodded and hesitated momentarily before asking, “Why didn’t you come to see your father sooner?”

Nakul knew now how much his father thought about preparing them to be protectors of Singoor, even when they

were thousands of miles away. He had his sons trained in martial arts to protect themselves and stand for the people of Singoor. “When he decided to leave, he faked his death so me and my brothers would not even think about looking for him.”

“Even your mother didn’t tell you?” There was shock in her eyes.

Nakul shook his head. “He made my mother promise never to contact him. No matter what happened.” He paused, smiling at the memory of when his sister Nandini met their father for the first time. She had only seen pictures of him. “My father didn’t know he had a daughter too until Shivay came to Singoor earlier in the year.”

She smiled like she was imagining the sweet moments of a father-daughter reunion. “That must have been such a beautiful moment. He noticed how her voice suddenly shook. “Today, when we performed the ceremony, I was reminded of all my sweet memories of my parents.”

Nakul was relieved to hear her words as he was worried about how performing the ceremony affected her. She was willing to do it for the people but knew it would not be easy for her. “I’m so proud of you.” She had no idea how much courage and hope she gave to some of the clans by performing the ceremony.

“I could not have done it without you and that’s why I’m glad you didn’t leave Singoor.” Her eyes flashed like she remembered something. “Wait, if your mother didn’t tell you about your father, how did you find out he was here?”

Nakul pressed his lips together and nodded. “My mother kept the truth from us to protect us but when she found

out Shivay was attacked in Africa and the man was linked to Singoor, she told us everything.”

Aadhya’s eyes widened. “Who attacked Shivay in Africa?”

“A man dressed like a Kabali, with the three-pronged weapon.” He felt the shudder pass through her before she sat up to look at him.

“How-how did—”

He pulled her to him as he could not bear to see the fear in her eyes. “You have nothing to worry about. I’m here to protect the region.”

She smiled at him, the spark in her eyes warming his chest. “I know you will; that’s why I’m not scared anymore to be in Singoor.”

Chapter 28

Aadhya felt a newfound relief after performing the ritual. It felt like she had finally fulfilled her parents' last wish. She smiled, thinking of the joy in her grandfather's eyes. That day was the first time he spoke to anyone in almost twenty years. He had shut himself away from everyone after his oldest daughter passed away in the fire accident.

It was a beautiful family gathering after she and Nakul performed the ritual with the priest. She was happy to see her mother's side of the family. She even caught sight of her cousin's friend, and she wasn't jealous anymore.

Aadhya felt a tug in her chest when she was reminded that her aunt was absent from the celebrations. Strangely, performing the ceremony gave her closure, and she wished her aunt was there too. She shook away the gloom and looked forward to spending the day with her aunt when she returned from her meditation camp. She would be home for lunch, and she had planned to spend time in her studio. She had to make peace with the fact that her aunt was in a marriage of convenience and decided to bring it up with her aunt.

She was glad she mustered up the courage to agree to perform the ceremony, especially after finding out about her uncle. She was glad she accompanied her husband to the meeting with the Jodha clan. Unless it was all part of the plan he executed, knowing him, it could have all been a strategy all along but it did not bother her. She was glad he created the situation for her to consider performing the ritual.

Aadhya bit her lip debating if she should give into her need to see her husband right in that moment. A moment later, she walked purposefully toward her husband's office. She knew he would be in meetings with his team. She appreciated how hard he worked, not just to bring the clans together but also to keep the hunt for Shakti on. And he was very strict about his meetings.

Fully aware he would be busy and that she might get into trouble, she opened one of the double doors to his office. She could hear him speak on the phone; based on what she heard, he was looking for the artist who created the partial painting of Shakti.

Her heart swelled just at the thought of everything he was doing for the people of the region. His eyes held a quizzical look when she started walking to him. She was interrupting him but her need to be with him was far too powerful. In preparation for welcoming her aunt she had worn one of the traditional dresses that she gifted. She had started wearing the necklace she bought at the auction as her everyday jewelry.

Aadhya held his gaze as she walked to him, her fingers toying with that necklace. Her hips swayed, and she saw his eyes drop to her waist before trailing up to her chest and then her face. He didn't stop talking even as he drank in the sight before him.

She went to stand in front of him, her finger going to his jawline to slowly trace to the edge of his mouth. He had stopped talking and someone else was talking on the call but he kept his eyes on her. She held a coy look on her face as she

untucked the sash that covered her chest and threw it on him, part of the thin material covering his face.

As if stunned by her presence, he didn't move and she enjoyed every expression in his eyes. She bent in front of him, her cleavage on display as she pressed her lips to his, over the thin material of the sash that covered his face.

She pulled back to look at him when she heard his team address him on the call. She hesitated for a moment, but he responded like he was unaffected. Her eyes narrowed in a challenge, and she moved closer to him. Her lips grazed his lips before she moved away to twirl her tongue against his chin before going down the column of his neck.

She enjoyed teasing him, feeling the shudder that rippled through him. His stone-cold response to her seduction pushed her to keep going, and she wasn't leaving until she got what she wanted—his surrender to her tease.

He held back and continued to talk on the call as if unaffected. It fueled her need to break his resolve. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons on his shirt to create an opening for her tongue to explore him. She was leaning on him, breasts pressed against him, as she sucked on his skin. She enjoyed the freedom to try different things on him; every time he responded, it gave her a new high and made her bold.

Building upon the small wins, she leaned into him, her hands resting on his thighs for support. The way he groaned in response to her touch made a sizzle pass through her, and she was consumed by her need to pleasure him. She pressed her breasts into him, her hand sliding up his thigh to pull on his belt.

She looked up at him as the conference call continued in the background before going down on her knees in front of him. She smiled, her eyes holding his captive as she reached for the tab on the zipper. It felt painfully slow, but the anticipation built up rapidly. Her need to taste him grew as she pulled the waistband of his boxer to free the beast.

His arousal was hard and needy as it throbbed for her. She circled the hardness that pulsated against her palm. She saw his breath hitch, making a new thrill build up inside her. She didn't realize how much more pleasurable it was to push him over the edge than being at the receiving end. It explained to her how he got so much pleasure out of making her come undone just with his fingers.

There was another question for him on the call, and he started speaking just as she closed her lips over the tip of his rod. The shudder in his voice made her bold, and she pleased him with her tongue as her hand pumped the shaft.

Just as she looked up to catch his expression, his fingers gripped her hair like he was losing control. The act of pleasing him was setting off a peak inside her, and she didn't know how to handle it.

"I'll be right back." She heard his gruff voice before he ended the call.

Like he had no control left, he held her by her shoulder, pulling her away from his arousal. She moaned in protest as he stood up to push her back into the wall. His lips pressed against hers, driving his slick hardness into her core.

She let out an uncontrollable cry and kissed him back as he made her ride him, her back to the wall. The act was

beautifully dark and dirty, swirling new waves of pleasure through her. He tightened the hold on her and drove harder. She braced for what seemed like an atomic event of sensations. She screamed into his mouth, and her body shuddered before going limp.

Their breathing was ragged as he pulled their lips apart and the look in his eyes made her smile. He growled. “How dare you tease me like that? You are in so much trouble.”

With those words, he sucked on the sensitive skin on the side of her neck, and the delectable pain made her come again. Mini orgasm rode on the coattails of her massive peak and she fell into a daze as he moved them onto the table like he didn't get enough of her.

“I like to get into trouble with you,” she whispered as he built up yet another peak in her, promising her the world.

“You're mine, only mine!” The magic words rang in her ears as she clung to him, never wanting to let him go.

She didn't know how long she stayed holding on to him before she was distracted by a phone ringing in the background. She blushed, looking down at their still joined bodies as she sat on the large desk. She felt a void when he pulled away. He reached for the box of tissues to clean her.

She smiled, heart creeping up to her cheeks, adjusting her clothes. “You owe me new undergarments.”

“Let's get you some then, so I don't feel bad about ripping them off every time.” His voice was gravelly and it made her want him again.

She pulled on his shirt, her lips going to his jawline. “Or maybe I can stop wearing undies.”

“You’re a riot.” He swatted her bottom. “I need you out of my office now.”

She narrowed her eyes alluringly at him. “This is my husband’s office and I will come and do what I wish.”

He pulled her to him, kissing her hard and letting her go only when her lungs started to fight for air. “Out,” he ordered, making her laugh.

She could not deny how much pleasure she got from seeing her ever-composed husband rattled. She couldn’t wait until their next tryst.

Aadhya was slightly disappointed that her aunt had decided to extend her trip and stay for lunch at the retreat. Nakul was stuck in his office, and there was nothing else she had planned to do that afternoon. She was on her way to her studio when Meenabai called out to her.

“Aadi, what is that?” The older woman looked perplexed as she walked closer. “What happened to your blouse?”

Aadhya looked at the tear on her blouse at her shoulder and her cheeks turned red. It had to be from their rendezvous in his office a couple of hours ago. “Oh, it got stuck in—in the garden and—”

Nani was not interested in the tear anymore. She pressed her neck gently and felt the area tender. “Why is it so red here?”

Oh Shit!

Aadhya knew what it was and had to escape the situation unless she wanted to explain a hickey to the older woman. “Nani, I’m fine. I need to go. Nakul is waiting for me. I just remembered.”

She bolted before the grandmotherly woman insisted on details. She went up the stairs to the private suite, excited to see what the mark of passion looked like on her neck. She was walking past his office, and she heard loud voices.

“How the fuck could this happen?” Nakul sounded angry. “I need to know who did it and how the information even got out. This is not acceptable, especially with the additional security.”

Aadhya felt a shiver run down her spine. She didn’t need to look at her husband to know how pissed he looked. She went into the office, and his back was turned to him. “I need an bigger perimeter around the hospital. Bring in the SWAT team. I need additional coverage at the mansion, too.”

“Yes, Sir.” The man on the speaker sounded rattled.

“Nakul, what’s wrong?” her voice was weak. The mention of a hospital in his conversation made her fearful.

He turned, his eyes red with anger, but the moment she saw her, she saw something pass through his eyes. He didn’t respond immediately but pulled her to him. “Everything will be okay.”

She pulled back as she did not like the sound of his words. “What’s wrong?” she demanded.

Nakul shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. “Maaho’s convoy was attacked on their way back from the retreat.”

“No.” A scream escaped her and gloom started to settle over her at the thought of losing her aunt. She could not lose another loved one, never again. “Where is she? I need to see her. Now.” She started to walk away from him, and he caught her by her elbow.

“She is fine and is under observation at the hospital.” He held her in a vice-like grip and she wondered why he held her back. “And you are not going anywhere. It’s unsafe for us to go out until we know whatever else is out there.”

“We shouldn’t have performed the ritual.” She started to panic. “I should have never agreed.” She was shivering with fear.

“Aadhya, calm down. She is safe.” He pulled her closer.

“I don’t care. I need to go be with her.” She started to fight him frantically. “Nakul, let me go.”

“I said. No.” He circled his arms around her, and she did not like being restricted. She started slapping his chest, and he pulled both her wrists together and held them together, limiting her movement. He was too fast and strong for her.

“You are a—” Her words were lost when his lips descended on hers, suppressing her words. He swallowed the

gasp that escaped her as his fingertips dug into the flesh on her arms painfully while his lips punished hers.

The outrage exploded within her, and she tried to fight him but had no coherent thoughts. Her body would not respond to her command, and he held her in an immovable position as she fell down an abyss of disappointment and anger. She wanted to push him away, but the hand on his shoulder and the one tugging on his shirt were frozen.

“Stop,” she demanded against his lips, and he pulled back his eyes, threatening to sear her with his glare. His breath was coming fast, and so was hers.

Aadhya caught her breath and fought back some intense, unidentified sensations that triggered within her. She grit her teeth and tried to push him away. “You are an asshole and—”

The pain on her lips was back when he pulled her back into a punishing kiss. Her objection was lost in the aggressive exploration of her mouth. She stood frozen yet again, unable to react to such an offensive act, which scared her further.

His fingers dug deeper, making her feel the pressure on her skin while his teeth grazed over her lips. The sting on her lips and the delectable pain from his fingers made her body shudder before going limp in his arms. She had no fight left in her, not at that moment, and she knew the best way to stop this was to yield or at least pretend to.

Like he sensed the shift in her manner, he pulled back, his breath coming fast and his chest heaving like hers. Feeling

weak, she stayed in his arms, taking in how her lips trembled.
“Please take me to her.”

“Aadhya, she is fine. Not a scratch on her, but my men have been badly injured.”

She felt a tug in her heart when she saw how sad he was for his staff. “Nakul,” she sobbed. “I’m sorry. But I still want to see my aunt. She must be feeling so scared and lonely.”

He kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry, baby.” He ran his thumb over her fingers. “I can’t let you go.”

She hugged him. “I cannot imagine anything happening to my aunt.” She took a moment to process the sadness. “Bring her home soon and be with me, please.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I’m here. Not going anywhere without you.”

Aadhya drew strength from being close to him, and it felt like he would not let any sadness near her heart.

He guarded it and also ruled it like a king!

Chapter 29

Aadhya's anger was surmounting as she paced in the main dining area. Nakul was supposed to be back for dinner. He had promised to take her to the Oasis for a moonlit walk on the holy lands. It was her semester-end exams, and she wanted to celebrate with an outing.

Since the time her aunt's vehicle was attacked a week back, Nakul had stayed in the mansion with her. It was a stressful time for her, end of semester exams and the fear of the unknown. Thankfully, her husband had unique ways of destressing her. At times it was, his helping her study, and most other times, it involved their slick bodies stuck together.

What surprised her was no clan took responsibility for the attack. Her aunt could not pinpoint or associate the attackers with a particular clan. She was relieved her aunt was not injured in the attack. Her aunt seemed in good spirits as well but she could not wait to find out who attacked her aunt.

How dare they!

Dinner time came and went and there was no sign of Nakul. He was away for a clan meeting and he wasn't going far. She finally lost all patience and called him from the satellite phone. Her stomach twisted anxiously when she could not reach him via the phone.

Moments later, her phone beeped, and she saw it was a message from Nakul.

Nakul: Sorry, held up here. See you later.

“What do you mean, later?” She growled at the phone as she called him and he would not answer. She tried numerous times, didn’t work either. She threw the phone on the couch, suppressing the need to scream her annoyance.

She moved around the house impatiently. He not only canceled on her but to add insult to her injury, he was ignoring her calls. If only he had said those words by answering her phone call, it would have been so much better.

She had the staff check with the leading security center of the mansion on Nakul’s whereabouts but no information was available. Unaware of any other way to get hold of him, she sat in the main living room, waiting for him. Whenever, the *later* was going to be, he would be in deep trouble.

Aadhya woke up to a distant sound. She blinked, wondering what she heard that woke her up, considering she was a heavy sleeper. It took her a moment to realize she had fallen asleep on the couch. Her eyes fell on the large clock on the wall and her heart dropped to her stomach. It was early morning hours and if she was still in the living room on the sofa, Nakul had not returned. There have been many occasions where she had fallen asleep on her desk and he had coaxed her back to bed with kisses. She wasn’t sure why Nakul didn’t wake her up that night, as she went up the stairs to their bedroom.

Maybe he didn’t see her on the couch!

The cold and hard emptiness greeted her. Fear and confusion gripped her as she rushed downstairs to get her

phone. She called him again and still no reply.

Fighting back dire thoughts and an impending panic attack she approached the main door and opened it. The security that Nakul had appointed was alert and looked at her. “Good morning, Ma’am.”

“Good...morning, do you know where Nakul is?” her voice shook as she spoke.

The men exchanged looks. “Ma’am, those details are not disclosed to us.”

She wanted to scream in frustration. “Please—find out where he is and get a car ready, I need to go out, now.”

“Ma’am, but, Nakul sir—” The man objected and Aadhya did not let him finish.

“I need to go. Please get a vehicle ready and how many ever need to go with me. I need to go to wherever Nakul is.”

She started walking toward her aunt’s room to tell her and decided not to worry her. What did she not want her aunt to worry about?

Nakul was away and she didn’t know why she was panicking. He texted her that he would be late so he must be okay.

Just busy!

She suppressed the scary voice that warned her. She told herself that her husband was well trained to take care of himself. He may not have been born in Singoor but he was one of the warriors.

She walked into the bathroom on the main floor to splash some water on her face. It helped her calm down a little, but something told her it was not normal for him not to be back even in the morning. And all she got from him was a text. Something was keeping him.

The sun was not up yet when she stepped out of the house, her hair a mess, her face damp from splashing water and her dress crumpled. She did not care how she looked and all she wanted was to be with him.

She was glad the security did not push back and got the cars ready. She slipped into one of the SUVs and said, “Take me to the Thakvar Mansion.” If there was anyone who would know where Nakul was it was his older brother, Shivay.

It was going to be an hour-long car ride and she could not wait to find out more information about Nakul’s whereabouts. Did he travel outside the Singoor region? Was he chasing her aunt’s attackers? She had a million questions but the most important one: why was her husband not answering her calls?

Her anticipation grew when the car pulled up in front of the main gates of the Thakvar mansion. The last time she was there was over a month ago to celebrate their three months of marriage. It was still dark when the car stopped in front of the main entrance. As she got out of the car, she was a bit embarrassed about showing up at such an hour but she knew Nakul’s brother would understand her concern.

Could Nakul have been kidnapped and it wasn't him who sent her the text?

She fought away all negative thoughts and knew the Lord of Singoor always protected his people. Especially the ones who were working on doing good for the people. The security held the main door open for her and a couple stood by the entrance. She recognized them as Bahadur and his wife, Malini who she met during her last visit.

She picked up on the gloom in their eyes. “Nakul— where is he?” her voice shook as if in response to what she saw in their eyes.

“Please come,” Bahadur said, leading her to the right side of the main living room. She followed him, her heart in her mouth, unable to speak. She wanted to ask all the questions but she could not find the voice.

She followed him down a long hallway, stopped in front of a door a few turns later, and pushed it open. “After you,” he said, and Aadhya feared taking the next step.

It was unclear what was causing the tremor all over but she took a couple of steps into the room. Her eyes fell on the man asleep on a chair next to the bed. It was Shivay.

Her eyes swept to the bed, and she gasped when she saw Nakul on it. An IV ran into his arm and he lay still on the bed. Her gasp woke up his brother and he slowly stood up.

“Aadhya, he is okay. Recovering.” She was thankful for his brother’s timely words. That was all she needed to hear.

“What-what happened?” Her heart twisted painfully as she walked closer to where Nakul lay on the bed. She was glad to see he had no injuries.

“A poison dart hit him.” His brother’s voice was soft. “He was hoping to return to the Kanwar mansion before you woke up.” Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she gently touched his forehead. “He said, you’d worry. The poison is out of his system. Just resting now.”

“Thank you!” Her lips trembled as sobs escaped her and it was a novel feeling for her. She could not remember the last time she cried. Even when her parents passed away, she was so traumatized she had fallen silent for a year. Even when her aunt was attacked, she was scared and angry at the same time but she did not have tears rolling down her cheeks like they were endlessly in that moment.

“Excuse me,” Shivay said, leaving her alone with Nakul.

She wiped away her tears and sat on the edge of the bed and gently held his hand in hers. “I—I can’t be without you.” Another sob escaped her and that woke him up.

He blinked as his gaze focused on her. She batted away tears as he slowly reached out to touch her cheek. His finger traced the path of moisture with his finger. “You weren’t supposed to be here.” His voice was gruff as he ran his fingers into her hair. “But I’m glad you’re here, what a beautiful sight to wake up to.”

“Shut up,” she said, slapping his arm. “How could you not tell me?”

He let out a chuckle. “You don’t deserve this,” he said, wiping off the tears. “The Kanwar *Maaho* does not know tears.”

She shook her head. “I’m not the Kanwar *Maaho*, I’m Mrs. Nakul Thakvar.” She leaned forward and brushed her lips on his. “And I’ll kill you if you hide things from me again.”

He smiled, tightening his hold on her, sitting up to pull her to him. He held their foreheads together. “I love you. You’re are my most precious.”

“Nakul, hold still?” Aadhya stood in the middle of the bedroom, applying medication to his wound from the dart a few days ago. It was a poisonous hit, and a part of the skin and flesh on his shoulder was removed to take away the concentration of the toxin. He still had limited motion in his arm, but that didn’t stop him from exploring her while seated in front of her. She was focused on making sure the stitches were healing well and there was no redness around them while her husband was making her cheeks turn red. He had his face buried into her belly as she pulled back to look down at him.

She ran her fingers into his thick hair. “I thought you were going to go take a shower.” He had canceled all meetings and been home from the time they got back from the Thakvar mansion. Her thoughts stumped when she realized the Kanwar mansion had finally become her home again. “Unless you were planning to stay home and not go to the meeting.”

He pulled back to look up at her. “Maybe if my wife wants me to stay.”

She narrowed her eyes at home. “You are not skipping any clan meetings, especially with another *Maaho*.” She had not cared much for the meetings he attended, later when he was attacked, she was scared but lately, she knew the importance. She was confident the attacks were happening because there were people out there who were unhappy about the reunion of clans.

He chuckled. “I have something for you.” His eyes danced at her.

She looked at him suspiciously. “What is that something?” She was suddenly excited as he stood up to go to his closet. She followed him, unable to contain her curiosity.

He reached for an almost flat rectangular box and handed it to her. The box was pink, and a red ribbon was tied around it. “This is for you.”

She shook the box as if to guess what was inside but soon pulled open the ribbon. She felt his eyes on her as she opened the box. She looked up at him, eyes widened. “Did you get me a dress?”

“I hope you like it.” He kept his eyes on her as she peeled off her dress.

“I’m going to wear it now and show you.” She was excited and considered wearing the modern cocktail dress, the next time they went to the city.

“Are you sure you want to try it on now?” He chuckled and added, “You’re going to make me late to my meeting.”

“Don’t be silly. I want you to see what you got me.” The material was soft, and it fell fluidly to the floor. The neckline was plunging, making her cleavage peek a little.

“I like the view from up here.” His voice was gruff as he ran his fingertip along the curve of the neckline.

She stepped away from him to look at herself in the mirror. She smiled, her hands running over the soft silk as the material hugged her body. It showed off her narrow waist and the curve on her bottom. The slit ran up mid-thigh, and she liked the contrast of her skin against the red dress. “Nakul, I love this dress. It makes me look so—”

Her words were lost in a gasp when she felt a slight tug on her shoulders and the entire fabric came off her body leaving her in her panties.

“Sexy,” he said, finishing her sentence, his eyes dark with desire.

The moment of shock passed and was replaced with something novel. Anger mixed with excitement, and they found each other’s lips, delving into hungry kisses. He pulled her nakedness to his bare chest, his fingers tugging on her bra clasp. The kisses continued as she kicked off her panties.

“You are so hot; I’m so hard always.” His voice was gravelly as he sucked on the skin of her neck. She knew his passionate denting of her skin would leave her a beautiful souvenir that she had to hide from everyone else for a week.

“Nakul—why...” her voice was lost when he picked her feet off the ground to place her bottom on the smooth

marble counter in the bathroom. He pushed down his boxers and shoved her as if he had no control, making her gasp.

She called out his name, her fingers interlocked behind his head as he arched her back. She raised her breasts to him to feast on. “Why did you buy me a dress?”

He bit down on her breast, drove into her simultaneously, and she came undone. “So, I can take it off and do this.” She rolled her hips as he dove deeper before he peaked, a groan that vibrated within her, making her come all over again.

“You are crazy,” she said, catching her breath. He pulled into a hard kiss. “Crazy for you!”

Chapter 30

Nakul was in a clan meeting in the southeastern region of Singoor. One of the clans that had held off talks in fear of angering the Goddess. They invited Nakul to meet with them after hearing about the plans to commission Shakti in Singoor.

He was listening to some of the details of the sculpture when his security head announced into his earpiece, “Sir, we have a situation.” His security would not interrupt unless it were an emergency. He excused himself from the conversation and stepped out of the tent to find his security head flustered.

“What’s going on?” Nakul had heightened the security for everyone in the family as the frequency of the attacks increased with no clan claiming responsibility.

“We have an unplanned trip, Sir.”

Nakul scrunched his nose. “Who?” There have never been any exceptions to what he had planned. He wondered if Aadhya’s uncle was planning his visit to see his other family while her aunt was away at a ceremony.

“Mrs. Thakvar, Sir.” Even as he wondered why Aadhya was leaving the mansion unplanned, he was thinking ahead. “She is headed to join her aunt at the ceremony by the Oasis.”

“Get in touch with the Tango team to ensure there is a perimeter at the destination.” He thought for a moment and something bothered him. He could not pinpoint what but he walked back into the tent knowing they had security coverage

at all points. He had to continue the talks with the clan who still had their reservations about working together with him.

Aadhya adjusted her dress and jewelry as she headed to the oasis where her aunt was performing a ceremony. It was a last-minute plan for her to join her aunt but she would do anything for her aunt's happiness, especially when she was performing such a ritual. Her aunt had given up on her faith after her parents' accident as if angry with the almighty. It wasn't until recently that her aunt started going to the prayer room to join her husband in his morning prayers.

She had to accept that although it was a marriage of deceit, she was glad the way things happened. She could tell just by driving through the region, it felt safer. Unlike a few months ago, she no longer needed a convoy of vehicles. She was even able to sneak away just with her husband and she loved that. She smiled placing her hand on her chest as her heart thudded just at the thought of him. Her every sense came alive to the memory of their sweet moments that morning. He had left before sunrise for a clan meeting, but before that, just as he had promised, he woke her up before he left, with kisses.

Her inner layers clenched as they remembered the shudders that rippled through her. Heat crept up her cheeks as her mind replayed the feel of the tip of his tongue on her nib at the apex of her thighs. She wanted him and although she had decided not to interrupt his meeting, she changed her mind.

Just as she reached for her phone from the clutch, she heard the sound of tires screeching. Her mouth went dry when she saw the vehicle she was in, blocked by another SUV. Her heart issued a warning and she pressed on the button to call him. Something about the way the vehicle stopped, it felt like an ambush.

“What’s happening?” she asked trying hard not to sound worried. She heard the call go through to Nakul but no response. She kept her eyes on the vehicle, fear gripping her. It was an ambush, just like the attack on her aunt’s vehicle a few weeks back.

Her mouth went dry and a gasp escaped her when their vehicle door opened suddenly. A scream escaped her, a mix of shock and joy.

“Miss me?” Nakul grinned as he got into the vehicle’s back seat, pulling her to him.

She took in the sweetness of the kiss and the thrill from a fearful moment. She pulled away from him and slapped his chest. “Don’t ever do that again?”

He chuckled. “How can I not kiss you again?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You know what I mean.” She was still reeling from the moments of darkness that had filled her mind. “That was scary. I thought it was an attack.”

He pulled her to me. “They’ll have to take my life before they get to you.”

She covered his mouth. “Stop talking like that.”

His eyes darkened as he kissed the palm that covered his mouth. "It's true." He slowly took her hand in his. "Do you mind if I join you at the ceremony by the Oasis?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Seriously?" Her arms wrapped around his neck, her lips going to his cheek. "I didn't ask because I thought you were in a clan meeting."

"I was. I'm here now." He smiled. "Can I take you to the Oasis?"

She let out a low squeal, hugging his arm. "Yes!" She loved going out with just him. No security cars. He helped her to the front passenger seat and held the door as she gathered the heavy skirt. Her aunt was going to be thrilled to see Nakul.

"I'm so glad you are going with me." She looked around as the other vehicles fell back letting their vehicle go solo. "I feel free."

That made him laugh. "So what are we doing at the oasis today?"

"Rajji is doing the ritual, and we are going to get the blessings." She smiled, no worry bothering her. "She had sent a message asking both of us to join but I knew you were busy so I started on my own."

"What is this ritual? And why is it done outside the holy lands?" His curiosity made her smile.

"Look at you. You know everything about Singoor." She could not take her eyes off his handsome face.

He shook his head. "Not everything."

“More than what I know, for sure.” She grinned. “Rajji has not offered her prayers in almost twenty years, as if she was angry with God for ruining our family.” She slowly ran her hand up his arm. “And with everything you’re doing, you’ve restored her faith.”

“Good.” He kept his eyes on the road as her hand slid down from his arm, her hand landing on his thigh. She ran her eye over him before slowly driving her fingers closer to the writhing beast. She cupped her hand over his arousal. “Are you suggesting we pull over and do something between the dunes?”

She bit back her smile. “I like that idea.” Maybe on our way back from the oasis.” She laughed at the disappointment on his face.

“Such a tease.” He growled. “I’ll deal with you when we get back.”

She laughed, her husband’s impatience fueling her desires and she could not wait to be back in his arms, giving into their passion. “Since it is a ritual, I might have to touch your feet.” She winked and added, “I know the drill. I’ll make it up to you for making you feel uncomfortable.”

He squeezed her hand. “How did I get so lucky?”

Aadhya blushed, her heart fluttering for her husband. Not a fake one anymore, a forever one.

Shortly after, the oasis came into sight and then the tent set up for the ceremony. She looked around the place. “I don’t know if I’ve ever been here.”

“I doubt it. This is pretty far, almost the border of the region.” She noticed that his voice had shifted, but she brushed it away as he focusing on the road. He pulled up as close as possible to the tent and parked the vehicle.

She smiled when he asked her to stay put so he could open the door for her. Her eyes followed him as he came around the vehicle to open the door for her. He ran his arm under her legs and scooped her off the seat, making her squeal. “What are you doing?”

“Carrying my wife so the sand doesn’t bother her.” She never would have guessed, a few months ago, that the man who deceived her into marrying him had such a soft side.

“I fell in love with Singoor,” she said and paused to look at him and added, “just like I fell for you.”

He chuckled as he placed her on steady ground before kissing her on her forehead. “Let’s go get our blessings, and I’ll show you a lot more you can love.”

She held his hands took one step, and froze when she heard a popping sound. It was nothing she had heard before but she knew what it was—a gunshot. “Nakul,” she called out as he held her to him, and out of nowhere, a bunch of dark-clothed men were charging toward them.

She watched in horror as one of the men raised his sword to attack Nakul, only to be kicked down by him. He held her to him as he grabbed the sword from one of the man’s hands and started slaying the men away.

“Now,” he growled, and the next moment she saw the men around them fall to the ground groaning in pain. Aadhya

was caught in the middle of what she had only heard about but was not scared for her safety. A moment later, it struck her that her aunt was in the tent.

“Nakul, Rajji—Rajji, she is still in the tent. We need to get her.” She felt helpless, standing behind him as he fought off the attackers.

“Lay down, Aadhya,” he called out as he fought another attacker and fell over her. She didn’t hear gunshots but heard the men around them groan in pain as they fell to the ground. “Secure the perimeter,” he barked into the open air.

He helped her to her feet and rushed her toward the tent, holding her close. They stepped into the now empty section of the tent. There was no sign of a ceremony or a setup of a deity. “Nakul, where is she?”

The next moment, she heard the most chilling voice she had ever heard. “Aadi!” It was her aunt calling out to her and her voice held pain.

“Behind the tent,” Nakul called out and left the tent before her. “Secure the area,” he called out as she stepped outside and saw their security had circled it.

She turned the corner of the tent and froze at the sight in front of her. Nakul was on his knees holding up her aunt, whose chest was drenched in blood, and her aunt holding her neck as if to stop the bleeding. “Aadi, come to me,” her aunt called out to her, and Aadhya was too shocked to move.

“We need medical help. Get the van.” Nakul tried to lift her aunt off the ground, but she refused to move. Not far

was a man fallen to the ground, a bloodied three-pronged weapon in his hand.

“Nakul, no. I need to talk to Aadi first.” Aadhya was not processing any of the details as she sat by her aunt and took her bloodied hand. “Aadi, I’m sorry, this is not how it was supposed to happen. I was told you and I would be safe forever, and I was betrayed just like I was twenty years ago. I was foolishly in love to realize I was being played. I’m the one responsible for your parent’s death.” Her aunt struggled for air. “I was told that the *Peace* ritual would be stopped. I didn’t expect this accident to happen.”

Aadhya’s mouth went dry, and she struggled to breathe.

Her aunt gagged, but she held her neck tightly. “I regret sharing the information about the location and timing of the ritual. I don’t know to this day how your mother’s saree caught fire, setting everything ablaze. I’m sorry for what happened to you, Aadi, but believe me when I say I love you more than anything. I need you to know I regret everything I did, even putting the man you love in danger today.”

Aadhya could not believe her words. “Rajji, no.”

Her aunt looked at Nakul. “In the name of love, I even betrayed my best friend Nandini and lost her forever.” Aadhya saw the shock pass through his face as her aunt’s eyes trailed back to hers.

“I deserve this for believing I was doing this for my first love, but I was wrong and—” There was a sudden silence, and the sound of the wind deafened her. She looked at the

loving face of her aunt, unable to accept everything she told her.

Why would her aunt go to such lengths?

Epilogue

One month later...

“Where are we?” Aadhya asked as they stepped out of the plane early in the morning. It was the day after her graduation and after a great day of celebration with her friends, her husband whisked her away for a surprise trip.

“You’ll know soon.” He chuckled, helping her off the last step.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What is up with these surprises?” She held up the bracelet he bought her as a graduation present. “And now we are in some place where I cannot read any of the—” Her voice was lost in a sequel when she recognized the location. “This is the same place. I can’t believe it.”

“I owe my wife a real honeymoon.” He pulled her closer, his lips running over her temple. “And I can’t have her all for myself.”

A sizzle passed through her just at the simple gesture. As their intimacy grew, the smallest things that he did made her heart leap with joy. The passionate nights were one level but the small romantic gestures made her heart thud faster. The sweet kisses, the warm hugs and his scorching hot gaze that made her blush, no matter where she was.

“What are we doing today? Can we explore the city more this time?” she asked as he helped her into the back of

the awaiting SUV. Despite their situation months ago, she found everything about the place romantic.

He slid into the seat beside her, pulling her close. “Whatever you want to do and however long you want to be here.” He brushed his lips over hers, his fingers tipping her chin up for a passionate kiss. He pulled back slowly, just an inch. “I want to make it up to you on this trip. And I know it’s been rough lately, but I’m right here for you.”

She hugged him, fighting her tears. “My aunt would have been so proud of me. Why did she have to—” She had not cried when her parents passed away because her aunt had told her it would make them sad. And that’s all it took, and now, thinking about how her aunt was the reason for all the trauma, she was torn.

For days, she could not fall asleep, and if it weren’t for the love and support from her husband and her new family, she would have been in a dark place. She was happy her uncle was united with the woman who loved him back. She slowly pulled back to look at Nakul.

“Who were those people who were with her in the tent?” The question that had been burning in her head finally surfaced. “Why did she lie to me about the ceremony?” Her eyes seethed with anger.

He tightened the hold on her. “I was the target, and your aunt was told you would be safe.”

She shook her head. “And who was targeting you? If you were the target, why was Rajji attacked on her way back from visiting her *Guruji* in the city?”

He hesitated a moment. “Do you really want to know?”

She nodded. It was high time she found out the absolute truth. “I want to know why my aunt was attacked. Later killed brutally by slitting her throat.”

He planted a gentle kiss on her forehead. “We traced one of the attackers who was spotted when your aunt’s convoy was ambushed. He was a hired goon to stage the attack.” She let out a gasp, and like he read the question in her eyes, he added, “We’ll never know the real reason for the staged attack, but if I had to guess, it was bait to get me to go to where your aunt was and attack me.”

“I’m sorry.” She batted away tears. “You don’t deserve all this.”

He smiled. “For you, anything, love.”

“Love—” she paused, lost in thought for a moment. “Apart from the fact that his name is Om, I don’t know who the man my aunt loved, but I hope he rots in hell for breaking her heart and tricking her to get the details of the ritual.”

It was a couple of weeks after her aunt’s death, she went into her aunt’s study to look for anything that would answer the endless question that reeled in her mind. It was then that she found numerous diaries of her aunt, all of them referring to a man by the name Om.

Nakul hesitated for a moment, and she could tell he was contemplating. “She was indeed tricked into going against the people she really cared about. And whoever it was, their plan was not just to stop the peace ritual from happening.”

Aadhya was finding it hard to follow. “What else would they want?”

Nakul held her close to him. “This is going to be hard to process, but your parents’ death was no accident. Just like the other clan heirs had passed away, that includes my uncle and aunt as well.”

“What are you talking about?” Her stomach twisted painfully.

Nakul pushed aside the strand of hair away from her face. “It’s hard for you to hear this, but the investigation team that had checked out the location of your parents’ fire accident. They ruled out the possibility of things happening as the priest narrated them.”

“So—so someone wanted my parents—” she could not finish her sentence, and Nakul nodded.

Nakul nodded. “Whoever it was wanted to control the Kanwar clan, most likely through your aunt, and the only way was to—” His voice trailed off like he didn’t want to say it out loud. “It has to be the man who she loved for her to trust so blindly.”

“Why did Rajji say she betrayed your aunt, Nandini? Was it because of the man she loved?” Aadhya could not accept her aunt for any wrong although she confessed to everything. “I thought they were best friends, and I could tell she had genuine affection towards your aunt when she spoke about her.”

Aadhya could not muster up the courage to read all the diaries but the one she had looked through; one statement

caught her eyes.

“Om, I wish you would look at me the way you look at Nandini.”

She gathered that Om, the man whom her aunt loved liked her aunt’s best friend, Nandini Thakvar. Was her aunt’s betrayal of Nakul’s aunt due to jealousy?

Nakul’s eyes flashed with anger, but he didn’t respond immediately. “My father knew his brother and sister’s car crash was no accident. But the man who your aunt loved seems to be the reason behind the death of our family members.”

Aadhya was livid. “We need to find that evil man who caused so much pain to so many people by taking away their clan leaders.” It was too bad they had to tell their clan that the Kabalis attacked her aunt when it was the monster she loved. “Also, find our *Shakti* soon or commission our Goddess’s new form to bring peace to the Singoor desert.”

Her aunt had fallen in love with a power-hungry animal. And how toxic could the love be to convince a sister to betray her older brother and best friend? How could such a thing even be love?

On the other hand, the love she developed for her husband, in spite of the circumstances under which they married, gave her the courage to face her fears. It was he who taught her how to fall in love with her birthplace by bringing all the clans together to restore peace.

She still remembered the day when all the southern clans were summoned by her husband to agree to the peace

treaty among them. She saw skepticism in some of the clan heads' eyes but they were present. Her husband commanded the attention of each and every clan and they obliged, especially when they found out the Thakvars were relinquishing their rights to the resources of Singoor.

It was her father's dream to bring all the clans back together and it was close to fulfillment. It was all because of her unwanted husband who she could not imagine a life without anymore.

Later that evening, she sat beside her husband, wrapped in a warm blanket, enjoying the view. They were on the almost dark balcony off of their master suite, looking out at the lake. They shared a fun day of being tourists and discovering the city's culture.

"I had so much fun today, and it's so awesome to be like this, I could be here all night." She wiggled her bottom against him, getting closer. "It's so perfect to fall asleep under the stars like this."

He pulled her to him, his lips tracing the side of her neck, making her moan. "You rub your juicy bottom against me one more time, and I'm going to keep you up all night."

She smiled and rolled her hips and felt his hardness convulse. "I didn't really want to fall asleep."

The next moment, he turned her to him, her back hitting the chair as his weight came down on her, his lips hot and hungry. He pressed his hardness between her legs. "You are such a tease and I love it."

“What?” she batted her eyelids. “I was cold and just wanted to feel warm.”

She saw the challenge in his eyes, making her body come alive. “I’ll make you sweat all night.” He groaned.

She bit her lip, her gaze locked with his as she ran her hand from his neck to his jawline. “I dare you to.” The words had barely left her words when she felt the delectable pain on her lips as he kissed her in a frenzy.

He let go of her lips to get her off the chaise and scoop her into his arms. She moaned into his mouth when he pulled her into yet another kiss. “You are mine tonight and you’ll remember this forever.”

She smiled, her body yearning for their heated passion. “I will remember every bit of you, forever.” Just then, his phone started to ring but he ignored it as he carried her to the bed, still not breaking the kiss.

“Nakul, take the call,” she said against his lips.

He groaned. “They know not to disturb me. It can wait.”

She pulled back and glared at him. “I know how sincere your team is. If they are calling it must be important.”

Like he was unhappy with her, he dropped her on the bed making her squeal. He narrowed his eyes at her and called his team back. “I need to know who gave authority to break protocol?”

She watched as his expression softened and something sparked in his eyes. He held her gaze as a slow smile formed

on his darkly handsome face. “Good, start the search. I need people on the ground immediately.”

“Nakul?” Just from looking at him, she knew it must be something good. “What is it?”

He responded by kissing her, his weight pinning her down. “We found the location of the person who knows the artist who drew the Goddess’s hand in the painting.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh my God!” She kissed him back. It was from the painting they videotaped at the European Palace Museum. “I can’t believe this.”

“We are one step closer to finding *Shakti*.” His eyes held pride, and her heart kickstarted again.

“We can bring our Goddess back home.” She laughed, fighting back happy tears. “And when we bring her back, I want to have our baby and name her Shakti.”

He smiled, his lips finding hers. “Anything you want, because it was all because of you.” He looked at her, his eyes boring into hers.

“*You*,” she insisted. “You did all the work; you were the one who took the video.”

“Not possible if you had not bought us time with your timely fake orgasm.” He took a bite of her neck. “The way you cried out, not only stunned the security guards, but you made me come in my pants,” he confessed. His raw words made her eager, her folds drenched in her arousal. “And I’ll be lying if I told you I didn’t hear the audio on repeat to get this bad boy happy while you seduced me to no end.”

His confessions made her heart melt for him. “I’m sorry I did that. I was pissed that I wanted you and needed to get it out of my system.”

“Don’t be love. It was torture, but I’d take that all over again.”

She let out a laugh. “Is my husband saying he wants me to seduce him every night?”

“You don’t even need to do it, love; one glance my way, I’m a dead man.” His eyes were pools of desire, but his voice was coaxing.

“I love you, Nakul Thakvar, and I want to be your Mrs. forever!”

THE END

AUTHORS' NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Twisted Deceit*. I hope you enjoyed reading Nakul and Aadhya's turbulent love story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Nakul Thakvar had one goal in mind and executed on achieving it. What he didn't plan for was falling for the woman who was only a means to an end. I hope you fell in love with his charm, demanding yet caring persona, just like Aadhya did!

Aadhya had a lot of trauma pent up from the loss of her parents, and for her to learn to love the land and the man who taught her how to love was beautiful.

I hope you enjoyed the suspenseful and passionate love story.

Coming up next is:

Rishab Thakvar & Gauri Bhil's story by MV Kasi

To get updates on upcoming releases, teasers, and giveaways, follow us on Instagram: [@authorpgvan](#) & [@mvkasi](#)

Thank You

P.G. Van

If you haven't read it already, check out 'The Singham Bloodlines' series.

