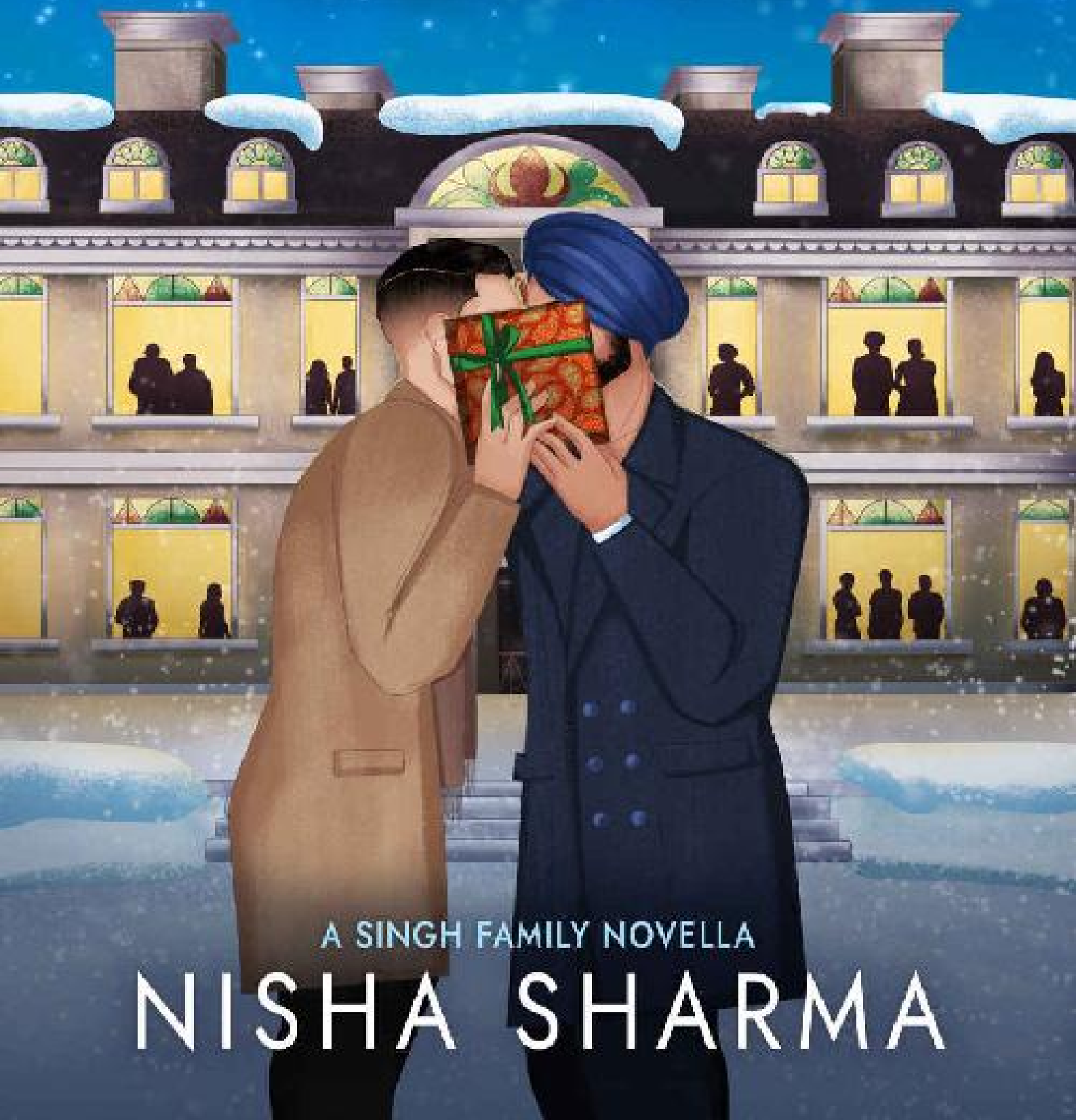


A Singh Family Christmas



A SINGH FAMILY NOVELLA

NISHA SHARMA

A SINGH FAMILY CHRISTMAS

A SINGH FAMILY NOVELLA

NISHA SHARMA

CONTENTS

[Books by Nisha Sharma](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

BOOKS BY NISHA SHARMA

Young Adult Romance

My So-Called Bollywood Life

Radha & Jai's Recipe for Romance

The Karma Map

Adult Romance

The Singh Family Trilogy

The Takeover Effect

The Legal Affair

If Shakespeare Was an Auntie Trilogy

Dating Dr. Dil

Tastes Like Shakkar

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2022 by Nisha Seesan w/a Nisha Sharma

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Chai Culture, LLC

ISBN-13: 978-1-959678-01-4

Cover design by Najla Qamber Designs

Printed in the United States of America

*For my readers who have been asking me for Bhram and
Rafael's story.*

This one's for you.

ONE

Bhram knew that he'd messed up plenty in his life. From playing pranks in school to his relationship with his parents. For the most part, he'd recovered from the mishaps. However, there was one that he was still paying for. And that was not loving Rafael the way he deserved. But he planned on making up for it once and for all.

"Happy anniversary," Rafael whispered against Bhram's temple. He stroked a hand over Bhram's thick wavy hair that fell past his shoulders.

"Happy anniversary," Bhram replied. He lay back against Rafael's chest, wrapped in a down comforter, as the morning holiday travel and winter weather forecast played on low volume from the mounted TV in front of the bed. The light was beginning to peak over downtown New York and filter through their windows. Under their very expensive view of steel and glass, cardboard boxes lay in neat rows, with a QR code on the front that led to a database with pictures of each item in the box. Their leather duffels were propped on top of the dresser, ready for the weekend.

That was Rafael's doing. If Bhram was in charge of the unpacking and packing...well, thankfully, he wasn't.

"Should we even celebrate today as an anniversary?" Rafael said with amusement. "We can wipe the holiday party from a few years ago from our memories and use our first date last year as the new starting point."

Bhram smiled, amused at the irony of Rafael's words. Instead of forgetting their holiday party memories, he'd hoped to solidify the date as part of their relationship history just as soon as he retrieved his grandfather's ring. "I will always remember the holiday party as the first time I saw you, and you knocked me on my ass."

"I thought you were the one who knocked *me* on my ass," Rafael said ruefully. "Literally. After you kicked me out of bed and told me that you didn't realize you were fucking the help."

If Bhram could take that moment back, he would in a heartbeat. He had panicked and completely lost his shit when he realized that Rafael was the executive assistant to his uncle, the CEO of Bharat, Inc. He should've asked questions, should've respected the boundary between his position and Rafael's. Instead, he reacted poorly.

In retrospect, it wasn't just an ordinary fuckup, but the one that was at the top of Bhram's list. He was so grateful to have been able to turn his fate around.

The alarm chimed on Rafael's phone that sat on a charging pad next to the bed: 7 a.m. "That's our cue," he said with a sigh. "My grandmother will be here soon for breakfast."

The anxiety that had plagued Bhram when he went to bed the night before resurfaced. Bhram was meeting Rafael's family for the first time.

No, not just his family. His grandmother. The matriarch.

He sat up, the sheet pooling at his waist, and turned back to look at his best friend and the man he planned on spending the rest of his life with. "Will she be as punctual as you are, love?"

Rafael raised one thick brow. "Who do you think I got it from?" he said in Spanish. "I'd like to point out that you're the one who invited her."

"Because she's your grandmother," Bhram said with an easy smile. "I don't know about you, but the oldest relative is the one who should bless new beginnings first." And because Rafael didn't have an elder in the States at the same status as

Rafael's abuela, he wanted to talk to her before he asked Rafael to marry him. It was tradition in his family, and he would honor that tradition.

“Don't worry, Bhram. She isn't expecting much. I'll make us some coffee, then get dressed—”

“I can get the coffee,” Bhram said. “We have a hell of a long weekend ahead of us, and you must still be tired from all the unpacking you did last night. This is the least I can do.”

“I won't argue with that,” Rafael said.

Bhram slid off the side of the bed naked. He used the hair tie he'd left on his wrist and began to gather his waves into a fist before tying it in a bun on the top of his head. “I could've helped unpack, but we both know you'd rearrange everything I'd put away.”

“I prefer knowing where all of our things go,” Rafael said.

Bhram could feel him watching as he grabbed a pair of sleep shorts from the chair that used to be in Rafael's old apartment and tugged them on. He couldn't wait to experience every morning like this.

It had taken him a long time to fight for a transfer from the London office. He'd been there since he graduated from Cambridge. But the Singh family wanted him to be happy, and they knew the only way that would happen was if Bhram could be with Rafael. It didn't hurt that the company had recently been targeted in a hostile takeover, and Bhram helped thwart WTA's efforts at swallowing Bharat, Inc. into their tech company empire.

After a family meeting, Bhram was finally promoted to the C-suite. Gopal uncle, who was living with him at the time, was relocated to an exclusive care facility near Bath before he'd be transferred back to India. Then Bhram had filed for his immigration paperwork, promoted a member of his team to take over his role leading the UK office, and secured an apartment with Rafael. When the ink on his transfer documents were dry, he was finally able to move.

Bhram could still remember the elation he felt when he was cleared to transfer.

A phone buzzed again, and this time Rafael's brows furrowed when he looked at the screen.

"I have to take this," he said.

"Work? On Christmas Eve?"

"It's an emergency, I think."

That was probably common for someone in Rafael's position as Chief of Staff to one of the most powerful tech company CEOs in their industry, Bhram thought. Although he'd been with Bharat, Inc. just as long as Rafael and was related to the Singh family, most of his work had been completed in a silo in the UK. He'd have to get used to being more involved in leadership activities now that he was at the main office full time. "Go ahead and handle it. I can manage the coffee."

He strode out of the bedroom and down the wide, airy hallway into the open concept living, dining, and kitchen space. They had a set of glass windows with sliding doors that led to a small balcony. The furniture was already in place, and the kitchen unpacked. A small Christmas tree, two feet in height, sat on the window ledge centered along the wall. It had pre-lit lights and a soft white felt blanket wrapped around the base.

Next year, they'd do a full-size tree with all the fixings that Americans preferred. Rafael would love that. He was a fan of the holidays even though he preferred a minimalist space.

Bhram stopped in front of the contraption on the countertop and realized that he had never used the high-end machine built for more than just a black cup of coffee.

"Fuck me," he grumbled, then pulled out a pot from one of the drawers, filled it halfway with water, and then whole milk. He ground ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, allspice, and cloves using a small mortar and pestle tucked in a cabinet to the left of the stovetop, then added loose-leaf tea to the pot.

A few minutes later, he poured the silky, fragrant chaa into two mugs and carried them back to the bedroom. Rafael was still sitting at the edge of the bed, phone in hand. He stared at what looked like a blank screen.

“Love? What is it?”

Rafael’s head jerked up. “What?”

Bhram motioned to the phone. “Is it something with Ajay? Is my idiot cousin still trying to prove that he’s as great of a leader as his father?”

“It’s this project that I’ve been working on that has gone to hell,” Rafael said. He rubbed the space between his brows. “We can talk about it later.”

“Of course,” Bhram said. He passed over a cup.

Rafael smelled it, then looked up with puzzlement. “I’m pretty sure our Mielé doesn’t make Punjabi chaa.”

“Apparently, this Punjabi doesn’t know how to make coffee with the Mielé either.”

“We’ll work on it,” Rafael said with a smile, then took a sip. He closed his eyes with a sigh. “Or maybe we won’t.”

This time, it was Bhram’s phone that buzzed on the opposite side of the bed. “That’s my alarm to get dressed. Otherwise, we won’t be ready for breakfast. Then we have to pack our bags for our night at your parents’ place—”

“I’ll be ready,” Rafael said. “Merry Christmas to us.”

“And happy holidays,” Bhram replied, already thinking of the hundred things they had to accomplish before Christmas Eve dinner at the Diaz residence and the Christmas Day holiday party at the Singh family estate.

Without another word, they worked in tandem as if they’d lived together for years instead of just twenty-four hours with periodic visits over the last twelve months. They both dressed in their second bedroom, with rows of designer suits along each side of the wall. Bhram sat in front of the vanity and said his morning prayers as he tied his pagadi. Then he adjusted his kada under the cuff of his sleeve, tucked his kirpan against his

vest, and the small wooden comb he'd inherited at his pagadi ceremony all those years ago. After finishing with beard oil and cologne, he fastened his cuff links.

Bhram had just returned to the kitchen when he received the first call of his day. Uncle Ravi's name appeared on the screen.

"Shit," he mumbled. This couldn't be good if his jeweler was calling him personally. He made sure that Rafael was still dressing before he answered.

"Hi, Uncle."

"Beta, how are you? Merry, merry holiday!"

"Yes, happy holidays, Uncle."

"Beta, I know we were supposed to meet this morning, but I don't think I will be able to deliver your ring to your home on time."

Dread seized him by the throat. "What do you mean? No, Uncle, I need it *today*." He cupped his hand over the receiver and lowered his voice. "It should've only taken a week to resize and clean the piece."

"Yes, I have it right here. I'm sorry, puttara, but traffic in the city is horrendous, and my son won't be back with my car for another hour—"

"I should've just gone to Tiffany's," Bhram mumbled.

At the mention of the famous jewelry store, Uncle exploded. "That place will steal your money! My work is a hundred percent better than them!"

"They don't back out of a deal," Bhram replied.

"I'm not backing out! Who's backing out? It's finished, puttara! Your grandfather's ring is resized, cleaned, and properly restored."

Bhram sighed, then looked at his watch. He wished his assistant was available to help, but Bethany was on holiday through the rest of the year preparing for a move to the New York office. He could always call one of the temps, but if he

did that, there was a chance they'd report his activities to his cousins. No, he had to manage this himself. "Uncle, we'll be in the city to pick up some last-minute things around eleven. I will be stopping by your store then to retrieve the package. If you aren't there, then I expect a very steep, steep discount. Otherwise, I'll just buy all of my future pieces from *you know where*."

Uncle was silent for a moment before he said, "Okay, puttar. This person must be very special to you to give them your grandfather's ring, no?"

"Very," Bhrum said. Then looked over his shoulder at Rafael, who walked into the room, suitcoat slung over one shoulder. His hair was perfectly styled, and the morning scruff was gone.

"Then I will be there," Uncle said.

"Promise?"

"Pukka," he said.

Bhrum hung up the phone and returned to his station at the kitchen island.

"What was that?" Rafael asked as he hung up his suitcoat next to Bhrum's.

"This gift for my uncle," Bhrum replied vaguely. "Apparently, I have to pick it up now because the delivery service isn't able to drop it off on time. It's in midtown, so maybe we can split up this afternoon for errands, and I can retrieve it, then join you afterward."

Rafael glanced at his watch. "That should work. All we have to do is get the cake for my mother. Then a quick detour to Newark Airport to pick up your parents before we go to my parents' place. Did the delivery service for your gift even tell you why they're running late?"

"Indian Standard Time knows no borders," Bhrum replied.

"I thought Indian Standard Time only applied to people who showed up late to parties."

“In this case, it applies to deliveries, too. I wonder if my parents will also be practicing Indian Standard Time.” He could feel the queasiness in the pit of his stomach. It was different from the anxiety when he thought of meeting Abuela or Rafael’s parents. It was definitely unlike the butterflies at the thought of proposing to the love of his life. No, this anxiety was something very familiar to him and one that always came up when his parents were in the picture.

Rafael motioned to the pristine kitchen. “Hey, since you’re the one that invited my abuela over, what’s your plan for feeding her?”

“The medialunas should be here any minute. The paranthas were made last night. I’m just going to panfry them. And some of her favorite tea—”

The intercom next to the door rang, and Rafael’s and Bhram’s eyes widened.

“You told her nine, right?” Bhram said.

“Yes, but I wouldn’t put it past her to come early just to surprise us.” He walked over to the intercom and answered. “Hello, Greg. Oh? Yes, that’s Abuela. Can you send her up, please?”

Bhram let out a deep breath and pressed a palm against his racing heart. He’d never met Rafael’s grandmother before, and this was his one chance to make a good impression.

It was go time.

TWO

Rafael's abuela was shorter than five feet tall. She shuffled more than walked and used a cane in bright cherry red wrapped with a white ribbon so it looked like a giant peppermint stick. Upon entering the apartment, she said, "Wow," elongating her vowel as Rafael helped her out of her big coat.

She then presented her cheek to her grandson for a kiss against her wrinkled, papery skin, then did the same for Bhram.

She smelled like spice and roses, Bhram thought and was comforted by it as they led her slowly through their entire living space, bathrooms, and bedrooms.

When they returned to the kitchen, Abuela turned to Rafael and spoke in Spanish. "What a nice boy. And very handsome, too. You've done well, my grandson."

"Thank you, Abuela," Bhram answered. Then in Spanish said, "We have medialunas for you, but I also made some paranthas which is a flatbread stuffed with potatoes. That is what my family eats for breakfast if you'd like to have some. And some of your favorite tea, of course."

"You speak Spanish so well," she said, her eyes widening. She turned to Rafael again. "Are you sure he is not Latino?"

"Sí, Abuela," Rafael said, then winked at Bhram.

Things could not be going any better, Bhram thought.

He led her to the chair at the head of the table and helped her into it. After she was settled, Bhram tied an apron over his shirt and pants. He quickly got to work on the paranthas from the night before while Rafael made tea and caught his grandmother up on everything happening in his life.

“You like your new job?” she asked. Her small, weathered hands wrapped around the teacup.

“It’s not a new job, just a promotion. And yes, I like it,” Rafael said.

The doorbell rang again, and Bhram retrieved the medialunas. They were still warm as he set each of the crescent-shaped pastries on a plate. Their golden currents glistened with a light sugar-sweet glaze. Together with the paranthas, he brought them to the table and set them in front of Abuela.

“And you cook!” Abuela said. She raised her hands as if to cheer. “Your mother taught you well, then.”

“My grandfather taught me well,” Bhram said. “He lived on the same lane as my parents and I, but when I was ten, I went to live with him until I went away to college. He is the reason I am the man I am today.”

Abuela nodded, and for a heartbeat, Bhram thought she would ask him why he was raised by an older man when his parents were a few houses over.

“Will we meet him today at the holiday dinner?”

“Sadly, no,” Bhram said quietly. “He died while I was completing my graduate studies. He would’ve loved to be here though. My parents are coming to America to visit. They will be at the dinner.”

Abuela nodded, pursing her lips. “Can you tell me how to eat the bread?” she asked.

Bhram had cut the round paranthas into smaller triangles so that it was easier for her arthritic hands. After he demonstrated by dipping a slice into the cool yogurt, he held his breath as she took her first small bite.

Her eyebrows arched. “Good,” she said in English. “I like it.”

“I’m so glad,” Bhram said.

When Rafael’s phone rang, he shot to his feet. “I’m so sorry, Abuela. It’s work. I have to take this call. Is that okay?”

Abuela nodded. “Tell them it is your family time, and hurry back, Rafey.”

Rafael answered the phone and disappeared down the hallway towards the bedroom.

When the sound of a door closing echoed through the apartment, Abuela turned to Bhram, her smile knowing and slightly terrifying. “Bhram. I’m so glad you make my grandson happy. But there is something you want to ask, no?”

“How did you know?” Bhram said. He had to breathe. Just take big, easy breaths, and he could get through this before Rafael came back.

“Because I have not been on this earth for as long as I have without knowing a thing or two, Bhram Singh. Come now. Tell Abuela what is on your mind and why you called an old woman out in the cold for Argentinian pastries and your potato bread.”

Bhram reached out and touched her wrist. It was so small in comparison to his. Delicate. He prayed his Spanish wouldn’t fail him now as he began his rehearsed speech. “Abuela, when I was young, I told my family who I am. I was the most worried about my grandfather because I admired him so much. I didn’t want to disappoint him. He sat me down and said that he would always be proud of me, he’d always love me. He gave me his wedding ring, the same ring that his father had once worn. I kept the ring in a safe space until I found Rafael. I’d like to propose to your grandson. Do I have your blessing?”

Abuela’s delight turned to confusion. “Sweet boy, shouldn’t you be asking my son and daughter-in-law for their blessing? Why would you ask me?”

“Because in my family, our elders are the ones who give the blessing. You are the matriarch of the Diaz family, and I want to honor you by asking you first. I hope to talk to Rafael’s parents tonight. This way, if you have any concerns, I can address them first out of respect for you.”

Abuela was quiet for a moment, and then she covered his hand with hers. Their eyes met, and in a watery, shaky, soft voice, she said, “You will make an excellent husband for my grandson.”

Bhram smiled, feeling the tears in his own eyes that he ruthlessly blinked back. He leaned down and kissed their joined hands. “Thank you, Abuela, for your blessing. I promise you; I’ll make him happy.”

“I know you will,” she said. “This is the best Christmas gift ever.”

“I’m going to ask him tomorrow at the Singh Christmas party. Surrounded by our family and friends, just as he’d prefer. I would like to invite you to be a part of the proposal celebration. I’d also like to personally extend the invitation to Rafael’s parents once I have their blessing, so if you could just keep it to yourself—”

Abuela made a zipping motion across her mouth and then acted as if she had thrown away the key. Bhram was delighted with this calm woman with her serious demeanor. She reminded him so much of Rafael. How could he not admire her?

“Sorry about that,” Rafael said in English as he strode back into the room. He paused when he saw Abuela and Bhram still holding hands, then reverted to Spanish again. “What did I miss?”

Bhram pulled back, then took a sweet pastry for himself. “I was just trying to convince Abuela to let us drive her to the Diaz house. I know we have errands, and we have to pick up my parents from Newark Airport, but it would be nice to spend more time together.”

“I would love to,” Abuela said. “But I have errands of my own. That is why I came so early! I must visit my friend. She had a kidney stone, so I am to bring her some Christmas cheer at the hospital. I will see you tonight at my son’s home. We have *much* to celebrate.”

“What are we celebrating?” Rafael asked as he returned to his seat.

Bhram held his breath, waiting for any sort of slipup to occur. If Abuela was like an Indian aunty, she’d be itching to tell someone what was going on. But instead, she kept her smugness to a minimum. “It is Christmas, Rafael. I have made it another year on this earth.

My whole family *should* celebrate with me.”

THREE

Bhram was still thinking about the few moments that he'd had with Abuela as he loaded the duffle and garment bags in the back of the car before sliding over the leather bench seats behind Rafael.

The old woman had been so generous and welcoming. Now he had to shift his focus to his parents. Would Abuela feel the same way about him when she met his father and mother? They were going to stay in a hotel near the Diaz residence and most likely leave the Diaz Christmas Eve dinner right after the main course. That's how they always were. They had their set routines and refused to be inconvenienced by anyone, regardless of who it was. Bhram should've spent more time preparing everyone.

"Are you okay?" Rafael asked once they began pulling away from the curb.

Bhram looked over at Rafael as he fastened his seat belt. "What?"

"You look like you have something on your mind," Rafael repeated. He adjusted the collar of his coat. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Bhram said and reached out to link hands. He hoped to God Rafael was too preoccupied with the schedule to focus on Bhram's tells. Even though most of their relationship had been long distance, the man still learned how to read him like a book. "I was just thinking about how long it took for you to say yes to an official date. And now, we're living together and having our first holidays together."

“You wore me down.”

Bhram remembered that he'd been coming to New York more frequently back then to help his cousins fight the hostile takeover attempt by WTA. No one on the leadership team was working normal business hours, especially Rafael. They'd been in the office late again, and Bhram ordered Chinese take away for them both since they were the only ones on the executive floor. They sat at separate desks, working through dinner before Bhram called out to Rafael. “Wouldn't you want to go out with a man who understands you like this?”

It was exhilarating when Rafael had finally said yes.

Now, he was smiling at Bhram in the quiet of their car, as they drove under the big sparkling snowflake lights in midtown. “Your luck has turned around, Bhram Singh.”

“It certainly has,” he said as he watched the throng of people crowding New York City sidewalks, bundled in winter coats, and pausing periodically to look at the brightly displayed holiday windows. The smell of roasting chestnuts and hot chocolate was so strong he could practically smell the deliciousness through the frosty windows. When he looked back at Rafael, his love was still watching him with that steady intensity.

“Bhram, I know you better than that by now. That's not what you were thinking of. Was it my grandmother? Did she say something while I was out of the room?”

“Your grandmother is a wonderful woman, and you are so lucky to have her,” Bhram said. He scrambled for another excuse, anything other than discussing the very real actuality of seeing his parents again with his love for the first time in his life. “I just thought that Abuela is my ally now, so it'll be a little easier for me when I meet your family. She said that she's going to be at your parents' once she finishes her visit with her friend in the city, and she'll introduce me to your parents herself.”

“Ahh, so that's the reason why you wanted to meet Abuela,” Rafael said. He visibly relaxed. “You just wanted a powerful ally against the Diaz family. It wasn't really about

getting a blessing from the eldest. I see your plot now. I have to admit; that's very smart."

"You're on to me, love."

Rafael held up his phone. His daily calendar was pulled up and packed with color coded blocks. "We can talk about your ploy to make the Diaz family fall in love with you later. First, we divide and conquer. I will get the dessert, and you finish your errand. We can meet afterward. Then hopefully traffic won't be too bad going to the airport. I have my notifications on, and there are no flight delays from what I can see, so we'll be right on time to pick up your parents. Then, we're off to see my family with everyone in tow."

His errand. His grandfather's resized ring. Bhram checked his wristwatch, and thankfully, he was right on time, if not a little early, to meet Ravi Uncle.

Rafael's phone buzzed. The tension that had disappeared moments before returned, and his shoulders stiffened. This time, he put the cell on silent, then dropped his head back against the seat, closing his eyes.

It was so rare to see Rafael look stressed; it took Bhram a moment to figure out what to say. "Maybe I should ask *you* what you're thinking about?"

Rafael shook his head. "I don't want to ruin today by talking about it. It's strictly a business-hours issue, even though I'm getting information at the worst possible time. Besides, I don't know if the intel is accurate. I want to be positive before I share."

"Okay," Bhram said, running his thumb along Rafael's knuckles. He would have to get used to this, he thought. Rafael always knew more than Bhram when it came to company secrets, but now, it would be so much more common for them to hold work information from each other before C-Suite meetings. He hoped that whatever it was wouldn't put Rafael off for the rest of the day. It was supposed to be special for the both of them.

“Here we are, folks!” their driver Denny said as he pulled up in front of a popular bakery with a line stretching outside the doors and halfway down the block.

Bhram whistled. “I can’t believe that this place had pickup available on Christmas Eve. You’re going to wait in that?”

“I have to,” Rafael said with a sigh. “My mother loves this place, and she would be very upset if I didn’t bring her a freshly made dulce de leche cake that I personally picked out for her Christmas Eve dinner.”

Hopefully, this would keep Rafael occupied long enough for him to go to the jewelers. “I’m only a few blocks over. I’ll pick up the, er, package and be right back.”

“Works for me,” Rafael said.

Bhram leaned over and pressed a soft, quick kiss against Rafael’s upturned mouth. “See you soon, love.”

After another quick peck, Rafael slid out of the vehicle and, with poise and grace, strode to the end of the line, where he promptly retrieved his phone from his coat pocket and began scrolling. It was cold out, and Bhram could see the puff of breath from behind the tinted-glass car window. Hopefully, Rafael didn’t have to stand in the frigid wind for that long.

Bhram hadn’t even made it to the jewelers when his phone alerted him to a call with a number from India. He picked up on the second buzz.

“Mom? Are you calling from the airport?” he asked in Punjabi. His mind raced through all the possibilities of something terrible happening. They were flying on Christmas Eve, which meant that so many things could go wrong in the process. “Did you land early?”

“I’m sorry, puttar,” his mother said gently. “We aren’t in the States.” Her voice was filled with so much regret.

Bhram checked his watch, his anxiety dialing up a notch. “Is everything okay? Did you miss your flight or your connecting flight?”

“No,” she said softly. “Your father wasn’t feeling well yesterday when it was time to go to the airport...”

Bhram’s heart sank. He let out a breath. “You missed your flight on purpose.”

“We know you spent a lot of money on it.”

To hell with the money, he thought. He would spend all of it if it meant that his parents would take two steps toward meeting him where he was.

Why did he think that this time would be different? For years, he’d gone out of his way to try and get his parents to understand him. To see that he was happy and thriving. Both in India and the United States. He thought that Rafael’s presence in his life would change things. They were enthusiastic at first, but then like all the times before, they acted selfishly, and Bhram was disappointed all over again.

How was Rafael going to take the news that his parents weren’t coming? He scrubbed a hand over his face. It was not only embarrassing for Bhram, but this was going to hurt his love’s feelings, knowing that Bhram’s parents weren’t excited enough to take an all-expense paid trip to celebrate the holidays together.

“I had plans for tomorrow, Muma. You knew it was important to me to introduce you to Rafael.”

“I know,” his mother said gently. He could tell that she was going to make excuses before she uttered another word. “I’m so sorry, puttara, but your father...”

His father, who refused to reach out to his son. Bhram shook his head. Thoughts of Abuela sat in the back of his mind, and the stories he’d heard from Rafael about how his parents loved to celebrate him as much as they could.

“You always make excuses for Paji. When are you ever going to take my side? I’m your child. I’m the only one you have. And if you keep saying no because of him, then you won’t have me either.”

“No,” his mother said quietly. “No, please don’t say that, Bhram. You are always my son, always the first person I think

about when I wake in the morning. But there is no one here to take care of your father..."

"And I have my cousins and my aunt and uncle," he said, finishing his mother's sentence for her. He tried to take in a deep breath and felt like his lungs were being squeezed by glass shards. "It's fine. I have to go, Muma."

His mother was still saying something when he hung up, but he refused to let the pain linger. He was working on building boundaries, and hanging up was a way to enforce one of them with his parents. It pissed them off, but Bhram knew it was necessary. He remembered in Cambridge when his friends would tell him that he needed to cut his family off completely. He couldn't do that. He was raised to be a member of a larger community, and his family was a part of his identity.

But that also didn't mean that he would have to subject himself to pain.

They were willingly missing the moment their son proposed for their own convenience.

Maybe this was the final straw. It wasn't just himself they were disappointing. It was Rafael now too. And that was unacceptable to Bhram. He had to stop hoping that one day they would be there to support him because the fallout would no longer touch him alone.

He choked back the burning warning of tears. "Bloody fuck me," he hissed. Bhram wanted them to be just as excited as he was to plan a big wedding. He wanted them to cry over pictures and host a prayer service in their home. He wanted his mother to smile with joy and feed both Rafael and Bhram with her hands in welcome.

But if he wanted a Punjabi wedding ceremony, he would have to accept that his mother and father would not be a part of the picture.

And that shattered his heart into dust.

"Sir?" Denny said, interrupting his spiraling thoughts. "We're here."

Bhram looked out the window at the jewelry store. The sign lights were off, and sad, twisted Christmas lights dangled in the window. They were off too.

With the way his day was going, he shouldn't be surprised.

"I have a feeling I know how this is going to end," Bhram mumbled as he got out of the car. He turned toward their driver. "Denny, do you think you can wait here at the curb for a few minutes?"

"Sure thing," Denny replied. He hit his hazards and put the car in park.

Bhram nodded in thanks, then strode toward the entrance. He tugged on the door handle, only to confirm that it was locked. Then, he peered in through the fogged glass to see felt blankets over all the cases. He knocked twice, but no one answered.

After retrieving his cell, he yanked off one leather glove to call back the last number in his phone log.

"Hello?"

"Ravi Uncle, it's Bhram. I'm standing in front of your shop at the time we're supposed to meet. Are you in the back?"

There was a long pause and then a heavy, tired sigh. "I'm sorry, Bhram, but I haven't left my home yet. If you give me an hour, maybe two, I can be there. My son still has my car, and we have guests—"

"*An hour or two?*" Bhram looked at his watch again. In theory, he could do it. Now that he no longer had to go to the airport to pick up his parents, they had more time. But there was no way he'd be able to wait in New York City for a random jeweler to open without raising suspicion with Rafael. It was a feat keeping secrets from a man who specialized in them. "Uncle, I have places to be too. Can you, or can you not, bring me my grandfather's ring right away?"

There was more silence. Damn it, Bhram should've known better than to try to use the one person who did the rest of the Singh family jewelry. Because only his parents and his one

sister-in-law knew about the proposal, Uncle was probably unbothered by deadlines or commitments. If his aunt and uncle were involved, he'd never disappoint them like this.

"I'll expect my deposit returned," he said, dropping all community niceties.

"You signed—"

"Uncle, I don't know if you remember our chat when I dropped off the ring, but I planned on proposing this weekend. Rafael's family is expecting the proposal now that I've asked his grandmother for his hand. I invited her to the Singh family party to be a part of the celebration, and I was going to invite Rafael's parents, too. Then I'll have to tell the Singhs about this whole situation. How do you think my aunt and uncle will feel about your services then?"

"No, no, no," he said quickly. "How about this? I can bring the ring to the Singh holiday party. Would that work?"

"That depends on when you'll arrive at the party."

"Early! I'll be there early."

Bhram would be a mess until that ring showed up. And if it didn't...well, he'd be back at square one, with everyone expecting a proposal. He looked up at the empty storefront and thought about the back-and-forth emails, the constant nudging, and the failed promise to deliver that morning. He no longer trusted Uncle to come through. But maybe there was hope?

"I'll see you at the party," Bhram finally said.

He hung up and leaned forward, so his forehead hit the glass pane door. Then he hit his head again just for good measure.

Could he propose without a ring? Sure. Of course. But would his grandfather be there with him in spirit? The one man who Bhram wished could be there with him now? No.

And for this next big step in his life, he needed that connection to the old man.

With one last look through the empty jewelry store, Bhram crossed the sidewalk and slid into the back of the car. "Denny,

let's go," he said as he adjusted his knee-length coat and stripped off his leather gloves.

"Yes, sir," Denny replied. If he'd seen the entire display in front of the jewelry store, he didn't mention a word.

Bhram took advantage of the short drive to make a quick call to Mina. His sister-in-law was the only person he'd trusted with the information about the proposal other than his parents because she was helping with the holiday party and had to know that he was planning on including Rafael's family on the guest list.

She answered on the first ring. "Hey, Merry Christmas!"

"I wish it was," he said. "Listen, I don't know if I can propose to Rafael tomorrow as planned."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on, let me take you off speaker —"

"I already invited his grandmother, which means that his parents will also get an invite, but in case you had to go out of your way for something, please don't."

"Bhram—"

"I planned on using my dada's ring, but the family jeweler failed to deliver it today. And when I went to pick it up, he didn't show. Now he's saying he'll have it at the holiday party because he's Buah's jeweler, but I don't trust him, so I'll have to think of something else."

"Bhram, wait—"

"My parents aren't coming either, by the way. So maybe I nix the idea of a holiday proposal and just do something with Rafael and myself. It'll be obvious if only Rafael's Mom and Dad are there." He was still hurting from the thought of his parents. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the seat.

"Bhram, uh, what can we do to help fix this situation for you?"

She sounded almost robotic when asking the question. As if she was reading from a teleprompter or something.

Bhram looked at the phone screen, then pressed it to his ear again. “Uh, nothing? Like I said, just pretend I didn’t even ask you for support here. I gotta get going. We’re about to pick up Rafael.”

“Bye,” she said, and the line went dead.

“Happy holidays to me,” he murmured.

FOUR

“That place was packed,” Rafael said when he opened the car door. A small curl had flopped over his forehead as he passed the large, structured bag to Bham, then got into the back seat. After adjusting his Burberry coat, he shut the door and called out, “Denny, I’m good to go to the airport.”

“To Staten Island,” Bham corrected.

Rafael’s brow furrowed. “I thought we had to pick up your parents soon. Did their flight get delayed?”

Bham ran a hand over his pagadi. It took him a minute before he admitted the truth. “Love, they aren’t coming.”

“What happened—”

He had to just say it out loud. Share the news, and rip it off like a Band-Aid. “My father got sick, and he’s not well enough to travel. My mother didn’t want to leave him all alone in case something happened, so they missed their flight. I’m so sorry. I wanted to introduce you to them, and I wanted our parents to meet for the first time. I know your mom is going out of her way for dinner tonight...”

“Those bastards,” Rafael snapped.

Okay, that was unexpected. “Ah, sorry?”

Rafael took the cake bag and propped it between them on the seat. His lips set in a thin line. “You’ve told me they’ve done this before. You’ve been bracing yourself for weeks. And they waited until you had just enough hope that they’d come, and then they canceled on you. This isn’t about you. It’s about

them and how shitty they treat you. I'm so sorry to say it, and I know they're your parents, Bhram, but this is not your fault, nor is it a reflection of who you are as a person."

Bhram knew what Rafael was saying was true, but that didn't make it any easier to accept. He held a hand out for Rafael. "I'm so glad I have you in my life. That's enough for me."

"You have more than me," Rafael said. "Other than your cousins, your aunt, your uncle, your new sisters-in-law, you're about to have my family too. We're together, and they'll see you as my partner. Bhram, you are so loved, you hear me?"

"I hear you," he said. But whether he believed it was a different question. "Rafael? I want you to know that this is not about you, either."

The corner of Rafael's mouth quirked. "I know. They haven't even met me, so how can it be? Bhram, listen to me. Every Christmas, there has to be some type of family drama. It's the rules in our society. If this is our drama this year, then we're in good shape. Everyone is safe and healthy, and the people who want to be here and celebrate with you are going to do it with their whole chest."

Bhram thought of his cousins and then nodded. He took Rafael's free hand and brought it to his mouth. He kissed the cold leather glove, a mirror to the ones he'd bought for himself. "Let's go to Staten Island."

BHRAM AND RAFAEL rode in silence all the way to the Diaz residency. Halfway through, Rafael had gotten a series of text messages that had kept him occupied and then darkened his mood.

That was fine with Bhram. He was still processing what had happened earlier.

By the time they finally pulled up to the modest two-story colonial home in Staten Island, it was almost four. Traffic had

been a disaster, and they'd been bumper-to-bumper across the bridge. Then the Staten Island Expressway was like a parking lot. It gave Bhrum a lot of time to think about a backup plan if the proposal didn't go through. He'd ask for Rafael's parents' blessing just like he'd asked Abuela, then try to get them alone so he could set expectations about when the proposal was going to happen. Hopefully, the delay wouldn't be too long. Otherwise, Rafael was sure to find out. If the Diaz family was anything like his, there were no secrets.

"Are you ready?" Rafael asked as he motioned to the cake between them. "I think we're prepared."

"I'm ready," Bhrum said, even though he absolutely was not. He looked up at the house and gulped. There were string lights around the windows in bright twinkling colors. The lights stretched from the front porch to wrap in haphazard, uneven rows across bare bushes that lined a front walkway. It was like one of those Christmas movies he used to watch in secret when he was at Uni after his mates had gone home for holiday.

It was perfect.

Rafael smiled. "You'll be fine. Come and meet my mamá."

Bhrum exited the car after Rafael, cake in hand. They walked up the front walkway, and without pausing, Rafael opened the front door.

They were greeted with the sound of the fire alarm blaring throughout the first floor of the house, and a chorus of voices echoed from the kitchen in Spanish and English.

"Ay, Dios mio," Rafael murmured.

They kicked off their shoes as quickly as they could, adding them to the pile in the front foyer, and hurried down the narrow hallway into the kitchen.

There had to be at least twenty people crammed in the small space. Gray smoke was billowing out of an open oven, and a woman with Rafael's eyes, wearing a bright green Grinch apron, was shouting at everyone in Spanish while simultaneously waving an oven mitt.

The entire space smelled like charred...cumin?

“Mamá!” Rafael called out. He dropped the cake on the island counter, squeezed it between the humitas and empanadas, and ran over to the oven to help take out what looked like a giant, black turkey.

Every single person was talking at the same time. The cabinets each had a small wreath on the door, and the living room, which was off to the right, was taken over by a large Christmas tree decorated with giant colorful ornaments.

“This is great,” Bhram said, smiling to himself.

His words were like an atomic bomb in the kitchen. All the shouting stopped, and every person turned to look at him.

“Hello there,” he said, then cleared his voice. “Is there something I can do to assist?”

When they continued to stare at him while Rafael put the charred turkey on hot plates next to the sink, he repeated his question except in Spanish.

That seemed to get a reaction. He was suddenly enveloped in hugs and kisses. He was pretty sure a woman who was twice his age smacked him dead on the mouth before she petted his beard like he was a kitten.

Then Rafael’s mother stood in front of him, half his height, her eyes shining with tears. “Come give me a hug,” she said, reaching her arms up to wrap around his neck. He bent down so she could hold him, and then she whispered in his ear.

“Abuela told me your question. She is upstairs napping right now. Otherwise, she would’ve been the first to greet you. We are so happy that you make our Rafael smile. We cannot wait to have you in the family.”

Damn, Abuela beat him to it. Bhram hugged Rafael’s mother back, then pressed a chaste kiss against her cheek before she let him go.

“Gracias,” he said. He wanted to say more, wanted to tell her that he would do everything in his power to make her son happy, even if he didn’t know if he was going to propose on

Christmas. He would make sure that he loved Rafael every day regardless.

“Don’t worry about Rafael’s father,” she whispered in heavily accented English, interrupting his train of thought. She pointed to a man who glared at Bhram from across the room. “He’s happy too, even though he doesn’t look like it.”

He definitely did not, Bhram thought, but Rafael had warned Bhram that his father was a serious man. What Bhram didn’t expect was to see that he was built like a linebacker. Rafael had explained that he immigrated over from Argentina on a student visa, and after graduation, he was hired by a private school to teach seventh-grade students ESL and history. He was also a great chess player and grew his own tomatoes in the summer. He looked as stoic as Rafael appeared at work on most days, and he shared the same jaw line, although this man’s softened with age.

Because everyone was still staring at him, and Rafael was the only one frantically trying to salvage the burnt bird, Bhram motioned to the oven and spoke in Spanish. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m so sorry my travel schedule, and our work has kept us from making introductions earlier.”

And thankfully, Bhram and Rafael had deeply traditional family beliefs that partners didn’t meet families until they moved in together or they were getting married.

When Bhram was still faced with silent, curious expressions, he added, “Ah, Rafael didn’t mention that you do turkey for Christmas Eve. I’m honestly not familiar with a lot of your traditions, but I would love to celebrate with all of you today.”

“Ahh,” Rafael’s mother said with a tinge of embarrassment in her voice. “We normally have a ham. My friend Sanjana from down the street gave me a recipe for tandoori turkey. We wanted to share it with you, but we may have put it too hot.”

“Isabella, I told you that we should’ve made more food than the turkey,” a young woman who looked about fifteen months pregnant said. “Now, what are we going to eat?”

“Tandoori turkey?” Bhram asked. He’d never had a tandoori turkey before, but the fact that they were trying to make something to help him feel welcome warmed his heart. He smiled at Rafael’s father. “That’s so sweet of you.”

When the man’s expression didn’t change, Bhram shrugged. *Okay then.*

“Do you know how to save a burnt tandoori turkey?” Rafael’s mother asked.

“I don’t think this is salvageable,” Rafael interjected, hands propped on his hips as he inspected the charred bird.

“I know you wanted it to be perfect,” a woman who looked very similar to Rafael’s mother said.

“The fact that you made the effort to cook tandoori turkey is so appreciated,” Bhram said. “Thank you.”

“Do your parents celebrate Christmas?” Rafael’s father asked. The room silenced again. The onlookers volleyed back and forth between Bhram and the older man. “We went through all the trouble of making a turkey for them, but Rafael texted and told us they aren’t even coming.”

“I’m so sorry about the inconvenience,” Bhram said, stiffening. “And no, they don’t celebrate. But we’re Sikh. We respect all holiday traditions. For me, I will sing ‘Jingle Bells’ all day long if someone asks me to because it is important to Rafael.”

“Why did your parents choose not to come?” he asked.

“Papá,” Rafael snapped. “Enough.”

“Enough?” the man thundered. “Do not tell me enough, boy. A father has a right to know about the man his son has moved in with.”

Bhram couldn’t help but smile. Even though Bhram felt so ashamed because of his parents’ rejection and the truth that they would never be as protective of him as Rafael’s father was protective, he was familiar with these tangled family dynamics. The love that made family members stand to

attention. He respected it, admired it. A part of him even wanted it for himself.

“My parents didn’t come,” Bhram said, his voice firm and clear, “because my mom and dad come from a long line of wheat farmers and members of the Indian army. They are traditional, with outdated beliefs and customs. They don’t understand the choices I’ve made in my life. They never did. My grandfather was my biggest advocate, but he passed away. My uncle, my aunt, and my cousins, all of whom had immigrated to the US to start a new life, they understand me. And they love me. I will see them tomorrow.”

Rafael’s father grumbled something and then crossed his arms over his chest. “We were hoping to meet your family, too.”

Bhram’s stomach twisted. “I’d be happy to introduce you to my uncle and aunt. And I’m sorry if my family has offended you in any way, but I want the same thing that both of you do, which is to make Rafael as happy as I can in my life. Even if my parents were here, that doesn’t change.” He motioned to everyone in the room who continued to watch him. “I love Rafael with all of my heart, and I hope that I can prove to all of you as long as I can that I’m going to make him happy.”

This time Rafael’s mother let out a sniffle. She inched closer and wrapped her arms around Bhram for another hug. “Abuela is right. You will be a good husband to my grandson.”

“Mamá!” Rafael shouted. He was wearing a matching Grinch apron now over his suitcoat and jacket. “Can you please stop being so embarrassing? You are crying all over his very expensive suit. Papá, enough with the guilt trip.”

Bhram grinned and patted the woman on her back. “I truly don’t mind.”

Rafael’s father crossed the room, and as Bhram held his breath along with pretty much everyone else in the kitchen, the man extended a hand.

“Welcome to the family, son.”

Bhram took the hand and shook its firm, hard grip. “Thank you, sir.”

There was a shriek from someone standing next to the oven, and Bhram jerked around in time to watch flames lick out of the cracked opening.

“Where is the fire extinguisher!” Rafael shouted.

Bhram had made it halfway across the room when his love managed to efficiently pull the safety tab on the extinguisher he’d retrieved from under the sink and sprayed it in the oven.

There were more shrieks until, finally, the fire was out for good.

“Now, what are we going to serve for our main course?” Rafael’s mother shouted.

“I think Ami has an extra ham in her freezer,” someone called out. “I can run down the street and get it from her.”

“The grocery stores are closed, so there is no way we can get it ourselves,” someone else added. “I want a new turkey, not some freezer-burned door stopper from Ami.”

If there was one thing that Bhram had complete confidence in, it was his ability to problem-solve. His skills were the reason why he was put in charge of the Bharat, Inc. UK office at such a young age.

His mind worked overtime until, finally, the solution presented itself. He shrugged out of his winter and suitcoats and hung them on the back of a chair at the small kitchen nook. “Since you tried to make the turkey for me, I’d be happy to cook something that my family makes during the holidays.”

“That’s a very generous offer,” a woman with a sheet pan said as she fanned the open oven. The smell of char and smoke permeated the air. “But we can make do with what we have. There are a lot of us, and we’ve already amassed a feast.”

“At least let me make a call so I can contribute to replacing the turkey. I know a restaurant that is open that might be able to deliver.”

“What restaurant is that?” Rafael asked from his spot in front of the charred bird. He was also waving at it. “I didn’t think you were familiar with Staten Island.”

“I’m not. The restaurant is up in Jersey City, but I know the owner, and maybe they can make an exception and run a delivery for us. It’ll take an hour or so to get here, but the food is worth it. And in the meantime, we’ll eat everything else.”

Bhram looked around the room, and there were various heads that nodded. Some of the expressions were skeptical, but for the most part, they seemed to agree.

“Great,” Bhram said with a smile.

“Already feeding us,” an older man said from the corner. “You’ll fit in just fine.”

FIVE

Bhram liked to think of himself as a professional partier. Not in the beer kegs and clubbing sort of way that his cousins enjoyed when they were in school. But with business suits, small-talk conversation, and charming dinner gatherings. He'd assumed that was how his night would go at the Diaz family home.

It was so much better than that.

There was laughter and joy that pushed aside all the shadows in his heart and filled him up. He'd eaten until he was confident that his pants would pop. He played card games with Abuela, who was a dirty cheater if he'd ever met one. There was dancing in the living room, and Rafael's aunt taught him how to tango, which he was sure was only a ruse to pinch his butt. He allowed it, though. Rafael wasn't much of a butt pincher, and Bhram always liked being appreciated for the hours he put in the gym.

His energy didn't start to wane until he was ushered to Christmas Mass, where he learned Christmas carols in Spanish. And thankfully, the extended Diaz family was also feeling the effects of the day. They all dispersed with final goodbyes, and Rafael and Bhram followed Rafael's parents' home, where they planned to spend the night.

The kitchen was now eerily quiet compared to the party earlier in the evening. The countertops were spotless, and leftover tins were lined neatly next to the range that now only vaguely smelled of burnt bird. They had pitched in together after dinner to return the space to its charming former glory.

“Why don’t you boys get changed and then come downstairs for cookies and milk before bed, no?” Rafael’s mother said.

“Mamá, please—” Rafael said with a groan.

“Rafey, it’s *tradition*.”

“Cookies and milk?” Bhrum whispered as they made their way upstairs, garment bags and duffels in tow.

“In Argentina, Christmas celebrations go into January, and there are different customs that they celebrate during that time. But here, my parents couldn’t do that with work and other obligations. So, they tried to adopt some of the American traditions. My mother saw a show about putting out cookies and milk, and she thought that it was for the kids, not for Santa. I wasn’t a fool, so I didn’t correct her when I realized what she was doing. I used to eat the cookies and drink the milk before bed. When she realized what the tradition was supposed to be, we’d already been doing this for a few years.”

“Hey, I don’t mind cookies,” Bhrum said. He followed Rafael into a bedroom off the upstairs hallway. When the bedside lamp and the set of Christmas window lights flickered on, he felt like he’d stepped into a time capsule.

“Wow.” He picked up a small plastic trophy on Rafael’s wall shelf next to the entrance. “I know you mentioned you played football, but I didn’t realize you were in the... what year is this? First grade? On the Staten Island Stingrays!”

Rafael took the trophy from his hand. “Soccer, not football. Your British is showing. And yes. I loved it. Watching it, anyway. But I was better on the debate team or in the chess club.”

Bhrum could see that. He continued his slow perusal of the bedroom, admiring all the memories of Rafael’s childhood. His parents had practically enshrined the room, from the posters to the paraphernalia on the small desk in the corner to the dark blue comforter on the double bed. It was like glimpsing a Raphael that he had only heard stories of.

“Are you sure your parents are okay with us staying in the same room together?”

Rafael unbuttoned his cuff links and put them on top of the dresser. “They would be offended if we didn’t. Besides, their room is downstairs on the opposite side of the house. They won’t bother us.” He put both duffle bags on the bed side by side.

Bhram hung up their garment bags behind the closet door and began taking off his cuff links.

“Did you have a good time today?” Rafael asked.

“Love, your family is wonderful.” Everyone was warm and inviting. They embraced him like one of their own. Rafael had said they would, but it was so different to experience it firsthand. Most importantly, their love and respect for Rafael were obvious. As Abuela’s oldest grandson, people listened to him, and he took care of them in return. “I think it went well today, and I made a good impression. Yeah?”

Rafael smiled, then ran his fingers over his perfectly styled hair. “I think it went as well as I had hoped it would go. I’m so sorry about my father and mother and their comments, though. They can be so embarrassing sometimes.”

“What comments?”

“You know, their incessant reminder about marriage. It’s as if people can’t live together in this world without matrimony. They’re old-fashioned like that. Just don’t pay any attention to them. I’m sure your family is the same.”

Bhram froze. The way that Rafael spoke, it sounded like the very idea of getting married was embarrassing. If Rafael wasn’t ready, then the result of his proposal plans was about to get ridiculously complicated.

A part of him was so eager to just blurt it out at every moment. To share what he wanted to do, how he wanted to do it with Rafael right now, right this minute. It was difficult to have a best friend, who he told everything to, be the same person that he was supposed to keep the proposal a secret from.

“Do you know what I think is a little sad?” Rafael said quietly.

Bhram paused in unbuttoning his shirt. “What is it, love?”

“We are in our thirties and whispering in my childhood bedroom after you’ve met my parents for the first time in our relationship. And I haven’t met your parents yet at all.”

Damn them. Damn his mother and father to hell for ever making Rafael feel this way. “I am so sorry. I’ll talk to them and make them understand—”

“No,” Rafael said. He held a hand up to stop Bhram. “No, it’s okay. Really. Our cultures are different but similar enough to each other that I can understand the nuance of what’s happening in their heads. I guess I dreamed of being able to have this moment where we take a family picture. Maybe next year.”

Bhram didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. Not when he knew that making promises for other people was a dangerous game. He could only make promises...no, *commitments*, to Rafael for his own actions. And he was committed to making up for this.

Just as he reached out to stroke Rafael’s back, a buzz came from the dresser.

“Shit,” Rafael said. He practically jumped across the room to answer the call. Bhram watched as Rafael pressed the phone to his ear.

“Please tell me it’s good news.”

There was a hum of conversation from the other end, but Bhram couldn’t make out the words. Then Rafael turned to him and said, “Would it be okay if I had a moment?”

It jolted him, realizing that Rafael wanted him to leave for a phone call. There weren’t company secrets that were so important he wasn’t even allowed in the room for a one-sided discussion, were there? But he wasn’t going to argue. This was Rafael’s new position as Chief of Staff, and if that was how he wanted to maintain oversight over his work...he’d respect that.

Bhram quickly slipped out of his suit, tossed it on the bed with his comb and kirpan, then put on flannel pants and a cotton shirt before stepping out of the room for Rafael to continue the conversation in peace. When he heard voices coming from the first floor, he realized this was the perfect opportunity to talk to Rafael's parents alone.

He quickly made his way to the kitchen, where Rafael's mother and father were wearing matching pajamas. Rafael's father's shirt said "Santa Claus," while his mother's read "Mrs. Claus." It was so cute that it sparked a pang of envy. He'd never had that, even with his grandfather, his uncle, and his cousins.

"I heard there were cookies," he said in Spanish.

"More than enough to share," Rafael's mother said. She motioned him closer and pushed a giant platter toward him filled with all sorts of delicious treats, from thumbprints to blondie bars to gingerbread.

"Wow, did you learn this in Argentina?"

She chuckled. "No, I learned it here. I didn't want my Rafael to feel like he was having something different from what the other kids in his class were having. But dum-dum me didn't realize that my son was just as Argentinian as his parents. One day, he said, 'Mommy, I like the Argentine desserts better.' But by then it was tradition."

"Tradition," Bhram mused. "That's nice."

He picked up a small gingerbread man with a huge smiling face and looked up at two expectant expressions. "Oh. Uh, right. Okay."

He grabbed a napkin with poinsettias on it and put the cookie on top. "Mr. and Mrs. Diaz," he started, "I know that we've just met, and I am so sorry for that. But I want you to know that I am a man of my word, and I promise I will love your son every day for the rest of my life. Although Abuela has already shared my intentions with you, I would like to ask you directly for your blessing. I would be honored if I had your support to ask Rafael to marry me."

There was a long pause, then Rafael's parents burst out laughing.

"Son," Rafael's father said, then switched languages. "Tell us, how long did you have to practice that?"

"A long time," he said and let out a breath. He was pretty sure there was more to his rehearsed speech, but it escaped him at that moment.

"Take a drink to calm your nerves." Rafael's mother placed a glass in front of him. "We can see how much you love our son. You have our blessing."

"Really?" he said. He tried to pick up the glass, but his hand was still trembling. He didn't even know when the tremor had started. One minute he was thinking about work, and the next he blurted out his question. Was it really that easy? The moment felt so much bigger in his head. Maybe the easy moments made the biggest impact when it came to family.

"Um, thank you."

"Come here," Rafael's father said and pulled him around the counter for a hug. He clapped Rafael's shoulder hard, his embrace tight and warm.

There were tears in his throat. Damnit, there were tears, and he didn't expect that. He couldn't speak otherwise there would be no way to stop the floodgates. Instead, he hugged this big man hard and clapped him on the back in return before he hugged Rafael's mother with the same intensity.

They celebrated with milk and broke into the gingerbread.

"So," Rafael's mother whispered. She looked at the stairs, peering left and right as if trying to catch her son sneaking at the top of the steps. "You will be attending the Singh holiday party tomorrow?"

"Oh yes," Bhram said. "I, ah, wanted to extend my invitation. I don't know if you have additional plans tomorrow night, but on behalf of the Singh family, I would love it if you could accompany us to the Singh family holiday party."

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Rafael’s father said. “When my mother mentioned it, I knew that I was stuck wearing a suit tomorrow.” He picked up another cookie and barely escaped with it when Rafael’s mother tried to swat his hand.

“Is that where you plan on proposing?” Rafael’s mother asked.

This was the hard part, he thought. This was where he had to tell people that he really wanted to propose with something that meant a lot to him, something that was special, and if he didn’t have it, then the celebration would feel incomplete. At least to him.

“About that...”

“I’m sorry, that phone call went on for way too long—What’s going on?” Rafael stopped at the base of the stairs. He looked from his mother to his father and then Bhram. “What did I miss?”

“Cookies!”

“Nothing at all, son.”

“Your parents were telling me about your childhood,” Bhram said.

Rafael rolled his eyes. “Great. I had to make it just in time for the baby pictures under the Christmas tree.”

SIX

Today's the day.

That was the first thought Bhram had when he opened his eyes the next morning. He lay next to Rafael in the full-size bed that was a smidge too small for two grown men, and he hoped that he'd be in that same exact spot next Christmas.

He'd have to call Ravi Uncle to follow up about the ring. He still wasn't convinced that he'd have it in time, and he wasn't able to tell Rafael's family yet that there was a ring situation. The night before, they'd gorged on cookies, then watched a Bollywood movie dubbed in Spanish because Rafael's parents were interested, and then they went to bed.

A phone buzzed under Rafael's pillow, and he shot up to a sitting position, almost knocking Bhram in the head.

"Shit," Bhram said.

Rafael cursed, scrambled for the phone, then flopped back, hand over his chest. "What time is it?" he said, his voice raw with sleep.

"Early. On Christmas morning."

Rafael appeared to relax, his breath becoming more even. He scrubbed a hand over his face and the morning scruff. "Merry Christmas."

"Happy Christmas, love."

Rafael turned to give Bhram a kiss, but the phone buzzed again, this time with a call.

Bhram sat up as Rafael slipped out of bed to answer. He stood in the morning sunlight filtering through the windows framed by Christmas string lights, bare-chested with his flannel pants slung low on his hips.

“This is Rafael.... No, don’t worry about it. This is important. What did you find out?”

There was a long pause, then Rafael shut his eyes. “God damnit.” His tone sounded so defeated. “No, I’ll get them all together, and I’ll tell them. Zail will still be on the East Coast through the end of the year, so we have plenty of time to do it after the party tonight.”

There was more talking from the person on the other end until finally, Rafael hung up and returned the phone to the dresser. This time, Bhram couldn’t help but ask.

“I know you said that you didn’t want to ruin anyone’s holiday, but I think it’s time you loop me in. What the fuck, Rafael? It’s Christmas morning. What is going on? I’m part of the C-suite too, and even though I may not be privy to it right this moment, I’m going to find out eventually.”

Rafael dropped to the edge of the bed. “I have no idea how the Singh brothers are going to take it, but Sahar Ali Khan has taken a job with WTA Enterprises.”

“*What?*”

Rafael pinched the bridge of his nose. “I have a confidant who works in the organization. They just confirmed today.”

Bhram sat next to Rafael and began stroking a hand down his back. It had been months since the tech conglomerate had tried to stage a hostile takeover to swallow Bharat, Inc. They had even gone as far as planting a mole in Bharat’s security team to try and weaken Bharat so they could steal the tech software they needed to secure military contracts.

“Do you think that Sahar was really a mole all along?”

Rafael shook his head. “No. No way. I know we accused Sahar of being the mole in the first place, but when we found out the truth, it was clear that she was an innocent party who

lost her job because of our oversight. God damnit, I regret that happened every day.”

Bhram was intimately familiar with the situation since he had been part of the team that was rooting out the security leaks. The evidence may have been clear that Bharat was wrong in accusing their R&D director of espionage, but it was pretty damning that she was going to work for the enemy now. The question was: why? After all this time?

What was worse, Sahar and the youngest Singh brother, Zail, had been friends in college. Zail had been the one to recruit Sahar. Bhram was pretty sure that he had feelings for Sahar as well. He was going to be devastated.

“Can you keep this information to yourself? I don’t want this to be the topic of conversation at the Singh family holiday party. It’s not good timing.”

Bhram pinched the bridge of his nose. Damn. Rafael had no idea how right he was.

This also added a whole other level of complication when it came to proposing. How were they supposed to go from a marriage proposal, to informing the Singhs that their former employee was working for the enemy?

“Fuck me,” he said.

“What, *now*?” Rafael replied, bewildered.

Bhram let out a laugh. “Love, I was just thinking at how shitty today is starting out to be. There were a few disappointments yesterday, too—”

Rafael turned to face him on the bed. “I’m sorry about your parents.”

“Me too,” Bhram said. But he’d come to terms with their decision. They would never change, and Bhram had to stop asking them to. Yesterday was proof that there were other people in his life who could love him too.

When he looked up at Rafael’s pensive expression, Bhram knew that he was just happy to be able to spend time with this man.

“Hey,” Bhram said in a conspiratory whisper. “Have you ever had sex in your childhood bedroom?”

Rafael’s lips twitched. “Once. And I swear my mother somehow found out about it and gave me the strangest safe sex conversation.”

“Were you out yet?”

Rafael nodded. “Oh yeah. I was a senior in college. The thing was, I think my mother thought that the same safe sex conversation could apply to gay men as it did to straight ones, so I just sat there confused for twenty minutes.”

Bhram grinned. “If I utter the word ‘sex’ in front of my family, I feel like someone would have a heart attack. And I don’t say that lightly, considering my uncle had two last year.”

Rafael laughed, and the sound was so beautiful that Bhram leaned forward for a kiss to capture it for himself.

Rafael responded the way that he had since the first time they’d been intimate—with absolute control.

He tilted his head and cupped Bhram’s face in his hands, guiding the kiss as their tongues met, wet and hot. His heart began to race, his dick hardening, as Rafael reached between them and stroked him through the fabric of his pants.

“Yes,” Bhram hissed. He was acutely aware of other people in the house, but he wanted Rafael too much to stop. It had always been this way. His need for Rafael was an all-consuming intensity.

“We have to be quiet,” Rafael whispered against the shell of Bhram’s ear as he made quick work of undoing the drawstrings to his flannel pants. Bhram’s head dropped back at the first touch of cool fingers over his thick, hard cock.

“Love,” he said with a groan.

Rafael dropped to his knees in front of Bhram and slowly took his cock out. After a few testing strokes, Rafael leaned forward and licked from root to tip. Bhram fell back on his elbows and took a shuddering breath when his lover’s mouth

closed over him and, with hands and tongue, began sucking him in firm, deep pulls.

“Yes,” he gasped. “More, love. I want more.”

He felt soft strokes and gentle kneading on his balls then. His knees jerked when Rafael quickened his pace, but he kept them spread wide.

Then the pressure and sensation grew faster and stronger as Rafael sucked him hard and quick, his hands moving in synchronicity to the jerking of his head just the way Bhram liked it. It was heaven in a whirlwind as he was taken to the very edge and back. Rafael paused, making eye contact as he licked him from root to tip. With the flat of his tongue, circled the bulbous head.

“I’m going to come,” Bhram choked.

“Then do it,” Rafael said. “Do it.” He took all of Bhram in his mouth again, sucking harder than before, urging Bhram’s release until there was no holding back. With a deep groan, Bhram collapsed back, coming in Rafael’s mouth. His partner lovingly drank, taking all of him. Every drop.

Bhram was still breathless when Rafael climbed onto the bed and stretched next to his body. Their lips met, and Bhram’s eyes closed at the feeling. Rafael’s fingers toyed with the gold chain at his throat, nestled in his chest hair, his cock still hard, pressing against Bhram’s hip.

There were no words after that. Rafael undid the tie from Bhram’s hair and let the thick waves fall around them. With every touch and stroke, Bhram felt closer to Rafael, more intimate with the man who had just taken a part of his body inside him.

Then Rafael was stroking his hand through the curls, tugging gently, sending tingles through his scalp.

“I packed some lube,” he murmured. “Are you—”

“Yes,” Bhram said.

Rafael retrieved a bottle and a lubricated condom from the open duffel next to the bed.

Bhram got on his knees at the edge of the bed, bending forward. His cock thickened when he felt Rafael clean him with a washcloth from the adjacent bath. He fondled Bhram's tight hole and his hanging balls and penis with love and thorough attention.

His breath caught, and he closed his eyes, feeling the rush of air leave his lungs again. He relaxed under the administrations until his lover, his soul mate, readied him. Fingers and lube slipped inside his anus, in and out, and around his hole. Between strokes and squeezes, Rafael would pull Bhram up by the shoulders for a deep, hard kiss.

"Fuck," Bhram choked out when he finally felt Rafael press a hand between his shoulders. "Take me."

"I'm going to own you," Rafael whispered in Spanish. "Until all you feel is me. You are mine. You will always be mine."

Bhram felt incredible pressure and then an equal rush of pleasure as Rafael worked himself in and out until he had a slow and steady rhythm.

"You feel so good," Rafael choked out. "God, you feel so good to me."

They fucked together with Rafael's hands holding Bhram's waist, stroking his taut muscled back, moving in unison until there was the slap of skin against skin. Bhram stroked himself until his arms and legs trembled. The orgasm came fast and quick this time, and as Rafael's grip strengthened, his muscled thighs taut against the back of his, they both found their release together, a rush of pleasure that wiped his mind of anything other than the love he felt for this man and what they shared together.

SEVEN

They went back to sleep and didn't wake until the sun was higher in the sky.

"Hey," Rafael said, his sleepy voice melodic, his mouth next to Bhram's. "I love you."

"I love you too," he said.

"Even though our Christmas started with work?"

"Even though our Christmas is complicated," Bhram said with a grin.

Rafael's brows V-ed. "Are you talking about the fact that we now have my parents and also my abuela coming with us to the Singh Christmas party? Because you're the one who caused that complication. The only person you can blame for that is yourself."

Bhram rolled on top of Rafael and grinned. "Love, that is the least complicated part—"

There was a loud knock on the door and then a stream of Spanish from Rafael's mother.

"Come have some morning tea! Should I come in and—"

"No!" they shouted in unison and practically rolled off opposite sides of the bed before scrambling to the adjoining bathroom.

Because Rafael wasn't sure his mother was going to follow through on her threat to walk in on them naked, they rushed into jeans and shirts as quickly as possible. Rafael helped

Bhram retie his pagadi, and Bhram helped Rafael strip the sheets and collect the laundry for Rafael's mother. They looked refreshed and completely presentable when they walked downstairs and into the kitchen.

Rafael's mother stood from the table, dressed in a long black gown. "Merry Christmas!" she said with a grin.

"Mamá?" Rafael said. "Why are you wearing an evening gown at nine in the morning?"

Rafael's father stood as well. He was in a dark suit with a red tie that read "Feliz Navidad" on the end. There was a bright red bulb in the center that glowed. Bhram grinned at the thought of one of his students giving it to him.

"You both look incredible," Bhram said.

"But, Mamá, maybe you should change back into your day clothes for now. We're not leaving until four—"

"I had to try it on, no?" She did a little twirl. "I was up since five looking for the right dress, and I think this is the one!"

"Yes," Rafael said. "And you look stunning."

"Well, it's a special night, so I had to pull out my best dress."

Oh no.

"What's so special about—"

"We're meeting your bosses!" Rafael's father burst out. He made an incredibly obvious gesture toward his wife as if to say, *Be quiet.*

Bhram's prediction of Rafael's parents spilling the beans early was coming true. But what would happen if things didn't go according to plan? And then there was the added element of Sahar Ali Khan now.

"You've met my bosses before," Rafael said and crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't know why you're making a big deal out of this."

“I’m glad you’ll be able to spend time with them tonight,” Bhrum said smoothly. “They had similar concerns that they haven’t met you yet, and I am living with Rafael. Would you like to drive with us? I can call the car service and schedule a bigger vehicle now—”

“I can drive!” Rafael’s father said. He pulled out a set of keys as if he was ready for the invitation to do just that despite the fact that they weren’t going to leave for at least another six hours. “I have not driven to New Jersey in a long time. I’m looking forward to it.”

“No way,” Rafael said. “You have cataracts. I know you like driving, but it’s not safe, especially at night.”

“All gone,” his father said. “The doctor blasted them in my eyeballs with a laser. Didn’t I tell you?”

“You failed to mention it,” Rafael said dryly.

“Well, I can see now, and I’m happy to drive.”

When Bhrum saw the mutinous expression in the fine lines at the corner of Rafael’s mouth, he said, “There is a wonderful open bar and a huge menu from what I’ve heard. If you come with us, you can enjoy it and stay as long as you’d like.”

“You do like an open bar,” Rafael’s mother said to her husband. “And it’ll be late.”

“Fine,” Rafael’s father said with the same expression that Rafael often made. “But only for the open bar. A man should be able to get himself to where he needs to be on his own without some fancy driver if you ask me.”

HOURS LATER, Bhrum was tied up in nerves. He’d tried to call Uncle to ensure that the ring was ready, and he’d bring it to the party, but there was no answer. None to the phone calls, to the text messages, or to the WhatsApp pings. Bhrum had no idea what to do. If he was ever in a dilemma this bad, he’d usually talk to Rafael, but that was obviously out of the question now.

And then there was work. Rafael was still getting consistent messages from his WTA Enterprises informant about Sahar Ali Khan's role and whether any of it was similar to what she had worked on at Bharat, Inc. during her years leading R&D. Bhram wasn't getting the play-by-play, but judging by Rafael's expression, it wasn't good news. When Bhram offered to help and lend some of his contacts that he'd used a few months prior, Rafael snapped at him.

"I don't need anyone's help. I can successfully complete the investigation on my own."

At four on the dot, the car service pulled up in front of the house. Everyone piled into the foyer, and Bhram helped Rafael's mother put on her coat.

"Mrs. Diaz?" he asked, bewildered at the sound of sniffing. "Is everything okay?"

She turned, her eyes shining under her black mascara lashes. "Now I have two sons," she said.

"Mamá!" Rafael shouted. "Jesus."

"Watch that tone with me, boy," she said, pointing her finger at Rafael. "Now, come. Let's go to this party."

They carefully climbed into the back seat of the upgraded limo, which had room for six. Bhram leaned back against the heated leather, praying that his anxiety wasn't going to send him to the hospital. He kept fiddling with his phone, willing it to ring.

"We have to stop at Sophia's before we pick up your abuela," Rafael's mother said.

"What?" Rafael burst out.

"I am not going to see your partner's family home for the first time and come empty-handed," she replied, adjusting the front of her jacket. "Sophia has made some extra dessert for tonight, and she has flowers from her heated greenhouse that she is putting into a bouquet for me." Rafael's mother leaned toward Bhram. "She also has money, but that is because she is a doctor. We wanted Rafael to become a doctor too, you know.

But he always had his own way of doing things. Regardless, we are so proud of the man he has become.”

In an attempt to hide his nerves, Bhram said, “It’s a good thing you didn’t go into medicine. Love, don’t you pass out when you see a spot of blood?”

“It’s an actual medical condition,” Rafael said blandly. “And yes, I didn’t become a doctor because I don’t like seeing blood. Unless it’s over a contract negotiation, of course.”

He began to recall old family memories while Bhram listened, praying that he didn’t look like he was crawling out of his skin. He waited until they were on the main road before he discretely sent a text to his cousin’s wife.

BHRAM: I tried to get in touch with the jeweler, but he’s not answering. Do you know if he canceled? Do you think he’ll be at the party? If not, then I’m just going to have to wait for the proposal. I need you to tell me so I can let Rafael’s parents know.

HE WILLED his phone to buzz in his hand, but there was absolutely nothing. Damn it, why was today the day that Mina decided not to have her phone on her?

Ten minutes later, they pulled up in front of a small ranch-style home with a lawn filled with Santa and his reindeer inflatables. Rafael’s mother opened the door and scooted out. “I need help to carry my things.”

“I’ll help,” Rafael said, and after giving Bhram a wink, he exited the car as well. The door slammed shut.

Bhram turned to face Rafael’s father. The cheerful expression the man had plastered on his face for the entire length of the drive immediately disappeared.

“What is it, son? Is it the proposal? Are you having second thoughts?”

Bhram scrubbed his hands over his face and down his beard. “I was trying to tell you last night, sir, but Rafael came in.” He started at the beginning and blurted out the whole story about the ring and then about Sahar.

“Honestly, I shouldn’t have told you that last bit about our former employee. I usually talk to Rafael when I’m stressed. Sometimes my cousins, but they’ve been occupied lately. My parents are obviously out of the question. I don’t have the same relationship with my father that Rafael does with you.”

“I’m sorry, son,” Rafael’s father said quietly. He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. “But I’m glad you’ve told me.”

“Me too,” Bhram said. The weight on his shoulders eased a tiny bit. He looked out the window to watch for Rafael and his mother.

“Rafael may not say yes either,” he said quietly, voicing the tiny fear that had been planted in the back of his brain.

“What makes you say that?”

“Yesterday, when your wife and you hinted at a long-term commitment and relationship, he was apologetic on your behalf. Maybe it’s too soon after we’ve moved in.”

“Rafael likes to pride himself on understanding people. Knowing Rafael like I do, he was most likely trying to ensure you were comfortable. He loves you, Bhram. Believe in that if you don’t believe in me.”

When Bhram looked up at the steady, kind eyes that were so much like his partner’s, he realized why Rafael was always so stable, so self-assured. Because he had these wonderful role models in his life, if he was being honest with himself, his aunt and uncle had similar energy. It’s just that they never felt like they were his. Not that his aunt and uncle hadn’t always welcomed him as a fourth son. But he had always been a nephew, then an employee. The lines were very clearly defined in his head.

“Rafael is lucky to have you as parents,” Bhram said quietly. “But that still doesn’t mean he’s going to say yes.”

“I think he will,” Rafael’s father replied. “He’ll wait a respectable time for you first, or he’ll just ask you himself.”

Bhram grinned at the thought. “Maybe I should just wait then?”

“No, no,” Bhram’s father said with a chuckle. He sat back in his seat and straightened his coat as if whatever problem existed was officially resolved. “You are not a coward, from what I can tell, Bhram. I’m sure you’ll muster up your courage when the time is right. But I will say, if you choose to ask tonight, you won’t need a ring for the occasion. I didn’t give one to Rafael’s mother until one year after our marriage. We were both so young and still in school when I asked.”

And their love was still so evident, even to this day.

The car door opened, and Bhram jumped. Rafael leaned down to peer into the cab. “Can you hold these flowers? I have to go extract my mother before we have dinner here first and then again at the Singhs’.”

EIGHT

When they arrived at the Singh family estate, Rafael's parents and Abuela were glued to the windows as the iron gates swung open and their car slowly pulled into the long drive. In the distance, Bharat Mahal glowed with holiday lights, tasteful wreaths, and festive garlands. A valet service was set up in front of the staircase, with a guest security check before a red carpet led the way to double doors at the front entrance.

"Are you sure this dress is appropriate for today?" Rafael's mother asked her husband.

"I think you look beautiful. But my tie may be out of place."

"I look the prettiest," Abuela said, patting her freshly dyed hair that was a stark, inky black.

"You all will be a hit," Bhram said.

The car crawled up the drive past three bungalows that were built for each of the Singh brothers when they stayed on the property. They were similarly decorated with wreaths, garlands, and string lights.

When they stopped in front of the valet and guest checkpoint, Rafael got out of the car. He helped Abuela first, then his mother and his father before Bhram was the closer. Since Bhram and Rafael were high profile employees of the family business, security instructed their party to proceed up the red carpet without delay.

"Are you ready?" Rafael murmured to Bhram.

“Absolutely not,” Bhram said. He felt like he was sweating through his clothes already.

Rafael’s eyes narrowed. “My family won’t be embarrassing, I promise you.”

“Love, how could I ever be embarrassed by your incredible family? No, I’m not worried about your parents.”

“Then what—”

The front doors opened at the top of the steps, and Ajay Singh, CEO and head of Bharat, Inc., stepped out into the cold.

“Welcome to Bharat Mahal! Merry Christmas! That is what you celebrate, right?”

“Feliz Navidad!” Rafael’s mother called back. “I don’t know if you remember me, but I’m—”

“Rafael’s mother,” Ajay said. In his tux and shiny black shoes, he descended the stairs and reached out to take her hand. “You’re a splitting image of your son. If I haven’t said it before, I have to say it now. Thank you for gifting us with our best employee and one of my trusted friends.”

Rafael’s mother turned around, her face glowing, eyes shining as she took Ajay’s hand. “Rafael, I like your boss.”

“Tell him you’d like him more if I got a raise.”

Ajay shot Rafael an irritated look before he turned to Abuela. “Oh, my goodness, we didn’t realize we had royalty visiting.”

Abuela smiled. Bhram was pretty sure she had no idea what his cousin was saying, so Bhram quickly translated. The woman beamed like a strobe light.

“The whole family is charming,” she said.

Ajay continued to speak to her in English, and she politely nodded as she was helped up the stairs, her red-and-white striped cane tucked under one arm.

Rafael and Bhram followed Rafael’s parents, and they entered the foyer lit by a crystal chandelier. A twelve-foot tree

stood in the foyer decorated with twinkling white lights and red bows. Next to the tree was the rest of the Singh siblings. There was Ajay's wife, Raj, who looked stunning in her layered velvet sweetheart neckline gown. Then there was Hem, the oldest of the Singh brothers, wearing a similar tux. His statuesque wife, Mina, stood by his side in red. Then there was Zail.

Bhram's younger cousin, the closest to him in age, looked broody. He was always full of life and joy, but since Sahar Ali Khan had left, it was like the life had gone out of him. Despite his mood, he mirrored the rest of the Singh brothers, except he opted for a pagadi that matched the color of his tux.

"Rafael, this must be your sister," Hem said. He picked up Rafael's mother's hand and pressed a kiss to it. "Welcome to our home."

"I'm his mother, thank you," she said pertly. "I earned all of my wrinkles and folds through hard work."

"And they look lovely," Mina added. She leaned in for a cheek kiss. "Welcome."

After formal introductions were made, Rafael said to Ajay, "Where are your parents?"

"They had some sort of ice sculpture emergency," Zail replied.

Mina elbowed him in the gut, and he grunted. "What Zail means to say is that they are getting dressed and should be down shortly. You're one of the first few guests to arrive! Please come on in."

They walked through the foyer into the large living room. The couches had been removed, and dinner tables filled the space. Two bars were set up on either side of the home, and the kitchen was sectioned off with tall curtains decorated with twinkle lights. All the table settings included miniature trees that matched the enormous twenty-foot Fraser fir that sat against the glass wall of windows. There were garlands everywhere.

Bhram always loved the Singh family holiday party. They did up the room like a perfect winter wonderland.

“This is so beautiful,” Rafael’s mother reverently said as she looked up and around.

“We’re so glad you think so,” Ajay said. “Let’s get you a drink.”

Bhram waited until the group headed for the bar before he touched Mina’s hand to hold her back.

“Why didn’t you answer my texts?” he whispered.

“I wasn’t *allowed* to respond,” Mina hissed back.

“What do you mean?”

Mina glanced around, then leaned forward and said, “Bhram, when you called about the jeweler not having your ring, I was helping Mom in the kitchen. You were on speakerphone. Everyone heard me.”

Bhram could feel his soul leave his body at that moment when he realized that the entire Singh family knew that he was getting ready to propose to Rafael.

“Mina!” he hissed.

“I know, I know, I’m so sorry,” she said. She took Bhram’s hand and squeezed it. “When they realized what you were talking about, they got so excited and swore me to secrecy because they didn’t want you to know that they knew! They thought you might not come.”

Bhram’s mind was reeling now. “Mina, I need to know if Ravi Uncle is going to be in attendance. The family jeweler. He said he’d be here, but I’ve been trying to get in touch with him, and he hasn’t responded to any of my messages.”

“I don’t know,” Mina said, her expression pained with regret. “Mom took over managing the list because she has a personal connection with most of the people that were invited.”

There was no way Bhram was going to ask his aunt whether the person who was supposed to bring his resized ring

had sent in an RSVP. She'd grill him like a stuffed sausage over an open flame. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fuck me."

"I'm so sorry, Bhram," Mina said again. "But you can propose without the ring! When Dad found out, he was so excited for you. He ordered a big display—"

"Mina, my parents refused to come today. Did you know that?" God, he was so tired of having to explain himself as to why he wanted to propose this one particular way that meant so much to him and the memories that shaped the man he'd become. "I love my uncle and aunt, but it was very clear to me growing up that there were the Singh brothers, and then there was me, the cousin. My grandfather's ring is important to me because I need him here with me and Rafael. If that piece doesn't show up...I don't know."

Mina ran a hand down his arm. "I know he's with you with or without a piece of jewelry. Trust me. As someone who lost her mother a long time ago." She leaned in and, with a smile, said, "What made you want to do it here with everyone at the party?"

He had thought it would be a nice way to make Rafael feel included in the family. With both the Singhs and his parents celebrating together. Because family was important to Rafael, but now, after his night at the Diaz home, he knew that celebrating with the people in his life was important to him, too.

"The Singh family holiday party is where it all began," he said simply.

"What's going on?"

Rafael's voice intruded on the moment, and Bhram and Mina sprang apart. The Singh brothers and Rafael's parents, and Abuela stared back at them.

"Just some work details," Mina said smoothly.

"Bhram," Ajay said. "I have a few work things I have to ask you too—"

“If it’s Singh business,” Rafael started, “then shouldn’t I be involved?”

“No, it’s okay—” Bhram started.

“Ah, about the employee who left for that other company,” Rafael’s father said, nodding. He let out a low whistle. “I’m so sorry. That’s tough.”

Everyone went eerily quiet.

“What employee?” Ajay asked smoothly.

As if he knew that he’d made a snafu by saying something he shouldn’t have, Rafael’s father tucked his hands in his coat pockets. “You know what? I would love to go back to the bar and pick up that holiday cocktail they are working on.”

“You told him?” Rafael said to Bhram.

“He asked me what was wrong in the car, and I couldn’t lie to your father,” Bhram said. He shrugged, trying for a charming smile, but Rafael’s cool expression remained unchanged.

“I’m so sorry, Bhram. I know you said it was a secret,” the older man added, his brows furrowing.

“I bought flowers and some dessert,” Rafael’s mother hurried. “The driver said he’d bring it in for us. Maybe we can start with that!”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Hem replied. “Mina and Raj, why don’t you show Rafael’s parents and grandmother to their table? We’ll have dessert delivered and those drinks. Bhram, Rafael, Zail, Ajay, and I will be right back. We’re just going to have a quick talk.”

“What a wonderful opportunity for us to get to know each other better,” Mina said. “I do have to work on my Spanish.” She guided Rafael’s family with Raj by their side. “You have to see the dinner display. There is so much food! Where in South America are you from again? Do you have any traditions during Christmas? I grew up Hindu so I never celebrated, but I do love all the lights and the festivities. It

makes me think of the stories my mother used to tell me about Diwali in India.”

Her voice faded along with the footsteps until there were only five individuals remaining.

“Let’s go,” Ajay said. His easy demeanor slipped into the ruthless mask he often wore at Bharat. He led the way back to the foyer, then off to the side into a large office with wall-to-wall bookshelves. A massive mahogany desk centered between two floor-to-ceiling windows was the centerpiece, with dark leather couches facing a larger fireplace filling the remaining space in the room.

“What’s going on?” he said when Zail closed the door behind them.

Rafael leaned closer to Bhram and whispered in Spanish, “I told you I didn’t want to have this conversation until after the holidays.”

“How was I supposed to know that your father would say something?” Bhram replied. “He asked me how I was feeling in the car and that I looked nervous. It just came out.”

“Bhram, this is a new position for me, and sharing this information before I can give a full brief, undermines my authority. It makes me look like I’m not doing my job.”

Bhram’s jaw dropped. He had absolutely no idea that this was going through Rafael’s mind. “Is that why you’ve been working around the clock since yesterday morning? Because you think if you don’t stop working and putting in the hours, the Singhs will assume you’re not doing your job? Rafael, that’s the farthest from the truth!”

“My promotion is important to me.”

“And I would never jeopardize it for you. This was an honest mistake, and I promise it won’t happen again, but remember, we’re all here to come up with the answers together. No one is going to berate you if you don’t have them figured out—”

“It’s rude to talk in another language in front of us, you know,” Hem said.

“Oh, you mean like you talk to your brothers in Punjabi in front of me?” Rafael replied.

“The faster we find out what’s happening, the faster we can take care of it and get on with the holiday party,” Ajay said. Even though he was the middle brother, his glare and his stance in front of his father’s desk were imposing enough to have all the Singh brothers quiet down. “It’s obviously something that we need to know.”

Bhram couldn’t dispute that. He went to wrap an arm around Rafael’s shoulders to give him support, but for the first time in a long time, Rafael pushed him away.

“I have a contact,” he said coolly. “Someone at WTA.”

Bhram watched the surprise and shock flash across his cousins’ faces.

“Didn’t they forgo any attempt at a hostile takeover after we rooted out their mole?” Ajay asked. “They didn’t get anything from us that we weren’t able to recreate better and faster, anyway.”

Bhram turned to Zail. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”

There was a prolonged silence, and Bhram watched the shock slowly seep into his eyes. “Wait, this was about an employee. And you’re looking at me. Is the employee Sahar Ali Khan? Is Sahar the one who went to WTA? *My* Sahar?”

“She started this week,” Rafael said after a beat.

“Hem,” Ajay said.

Hem held up his phone. He had started scrolling on his device the minute Sahar’s name was mentioned. “The noncompete agreements in our employee contracts back then were for six months. We didn’t want them to be too restrictive. December 1 was her six-month mark.”

Ajay turned back to Zail. “When you finally caught up with her, did she indicate that she’d been approached by WTA for a job?”

Zail's eyes were glassy now. His arms hung at his side. Bhrum vaguely recalled that after Sahar was escorted out of the building, Zail had tried to find her. They'd gone to college together. To grad school. They worked together for years building the R&D department that Deepak Singh started. And together, they had been unstoppable. But after she was falsely accused and let go, she'd been in hiding for months before Zail rooted her out at her family's home in Illinois. When he came back colder, more distant than ever before, Bhrum and his cousins had assumed that the meeting had gone poorly and did not ask any more questions.

Zail shoved his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. "We didn't get to conversation when I showed up," he admitted. "The door slammed in my face, and after being in town for a week, trying to talk to her directly without any success, I turned around and came home."

"Why would she go work for them?" Hem asked. "There has to be a reason. She used to tell us that their technology was shoddy. That they cut corners. There has to be an ulterior motive."

"She's not the mole if that's what you're thinking," Zail said. "We found out who was really selling my code to WTA. She was just the scapegoat."

"Then I guess we'll just have to wait and see what she does," Ajay said. "We'll be cautious about WTA in the interim."

Before anyone could move, the library door opened, and Deepak Singh, the patriarch of the family, strode in. "What is going on?" he asked.

"Papa," Hem started. "You should sit—"

"Don't you dare tell me to sit," he said in a thunderous roar. "I may not be CEO anymore, but I started Bharat, and I am the reason why all of you are here. What the bloody hell is so serious that you have Rafael's poor parents worried outside? I hear there is an employee problem?"

Rafael was the first one to step forward. He and Deepak Singh had a long mentoring relationship since Rafael had started as Bhram's uncle's assistant. He relayed the message of Sahar like he was ripping off a Band-Aid.

Bhram did not expect to see the hurt and the shock.

"I think I will sit now," Deepak said after Rafael finished. He fell heavily into the high-back leather chair that Hem scooted forward.

"Papa?" Ajay said. "We can't stop her—"

"No," Bhram's uncle said, holding a hand up. "No, and don't approach her, either. She has the right to make whatever decisions she feels are in her best interest. We did not treat her right when WTA was trying to buy Bharat. She deserved so much better. And if she thinks she can get that at her new company, then she has my blessing."

Zail spun on his heels and left the office without another word.

Bhram's uncle closed his eyes, then said, "He will take this the hardest."

"Maybe the best thing we can do right now is to enjoy the holiday party," Bhram said, echoing Rafael's thoughts from earlier that day. "We can think about this again on Monday."

"I think it'll be hard for us to think about anything else," Hem said.

Rafael stepped back, increasing the distance between himself and Bhram. "Excuse me. I'm going to check on my parents. I'm sorry I brought you such a terrible gift tonight."

"There will always be trouble in business," Deepak Singh said to Rafael. "But you did bring us a gift tonight. Your presence and the presence of your family. We don't shoot the messenger here, beta. You should know me better than that by now."

Rafael softened, but he still refused to look in Bhram's direction before he exited the library after Zail.

“I should probably go too,” Bhram said. He had taken two steps to the door in an effort to follow Rafael when his uncle called his name.

“Not so fast, Bhram Singh. You and I are due for a long conversation. We might as well have it now.”

“Busted,” Ajay sang. He clapped a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s give Dad some space so he can roast Bhram on his own.”

“I hate both of you,” Bhram grumbled.

Then, he was finally alone with his uncle.

“Puttar? Come closer. Let’s talk about this plan you were cooking up today.”

NINE

Bhram knew if it wasn't for the generosity of his uncle, for the cousins he loved as brothers, he wouldn't have survived into adulthood, into the man he'd become. That's why whenever his uncle expressed disappointment in him, it hurt.

He approached Deepak Singh, who sat behind the desk. His crisp white sherwani, with an ice blue pocket square for contrast, was a statement. This was the brilliant engineer and businessman who was inviting Bharat employees and friends into the home he built from the American dream.

"You know," Bhram said, without preamble.

Deepak Singh pursed his lips, then folded his hands over his midsection. "I know," he said.

Bhram sat heavily in the chair across from the desk. "I'm sorry if you expected for me to share the news, but I wanted to get Dada's ring resized first and ask Rafael's parents for their blessing. But now everyone is aware of my intentions, and I feel like I'm going to disappoint both sides of the family tonight if I don't go through with a proposal."

The older man chuckled, then shook his head. "Puttar, you are as dense as your cousin-brothers," he said.

"Yes. Wait, why?"

There was a long pause before he spoke again. "You know, when your aunt and I were to get married, traditions were different. And we were in Punjab. We barely ever had time alone together. Our families knew before we did about our

wedding. Both of us wanted to get married, but we would've loved to express our feelings for each other first."

"This isn't Punjab forty years ago," Bhram said.

"No, it's not. But the way people love each other has not changed," Deepak Singh said. He leaned forward, his eyes sparkling. "On the night before the official engagement party, I snuck onto her father's farm and climbed the trellis to the rooftop where she and her friends were having their mehndi done. Her friends were the distraction while I helped her down the trellis. We took a walk, and I asked her proper. I had no ring, no plans, no fanfare. I just spoke from my heart. She said that meant more to her than anything with a ring."

Bhram wasn't sure how to explain that he had those quiet moments with Rafael. He wanted something different. Something that marked the special relationship between them when so many people in their respected communities didn't want them to be happy. A big 'we're here, and we're happy together as two gay men of immigrant families!'

"I'm disappointed," he finally said, speaking the truth in his heart. "That I can never count on my parents to be here."

The sound of the office door opening had Bhram turning in his seat. His aunt entered, looking regal. With hair perfectly coiffed and an ice blue and silver sari that matched Bhram's uncle's pocket square, she strode in like she was being escorted on a palanquin.

"Bhram," she said coolly.

Bhram sighed, then stood so he could press a kiss to her cheek. "You are upset with me," he said. There was genuine hurt on her face, and Bhram hated that he was the one who put it there.

"What I don't understand is why you just told Mina, and you didn't trust us with your plans too," she said.

"Chachi, it was supposed to be a surprise for you, too." At least, that's what he had intended for the proposal to be.

When his aunt glared at him, he hunched his shoulders. She was a foot and a half shorter than him, and she could still

make him feel like a five-year-old child.

“You have a lot on your plate, and I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Bhram,” she said sharply. Then she reached up and tugged on his beard.

He yelped and leaned down until he was face-to-face with her in an effort to ease the pain.

“Do not lie to me.”

He managed to extract himself from the hold. “I’m not lying,” he said quietly. He rubbed at his aching jaw. He wouldn’t have been surprised if she yanked out a chunk of his facial hair. “I didn’t want to bother you both because you’re busy with your health, with retirement, and with this party. And my parents should be here for me. They should be here, and they aren’t, so as usual, I’m just going to handle my business myself.”

The pity was evident on their faces. He hated that pity.

Even though they didn’t deserve anyone defending them, Bhram said, “They can’t help who they are.”

“Yes, they can,” his uncle roared. The sound was so surprising, Bhram took a step back. Okay, maybe it wasn’t pity.

“My brother should be here with you to celebrate. The fact that he is not is shameful. But, Bhram, you will always have family and people who want to help you find your happiness.”

“I know—”

“No, listen to me.” He stood from behind the desk and approached Bhram. “I realize that this is partially my fault. You traveled to the UK by yourself at seventeen, and since then, you have always been so capable. Even when my younger brother needed a place to stay and a person to watch him while he recovered from his addiction, it wasn’t your parents but you who stayed with him. You helped him get counseling, and you gave him back his will to live. You did this all on your own. You are always there for the family, but

when it comes time to asking for help, you never do. It's time you realize, Bhram that you are never alone, too."

He opened his arms, and in a move that was both familiar and surprising, Deepak Singh enveloped Bhram in a hug so tight and strong that Bhram felt his hold even when it was over.

"I am here for you," he said, pressing cheek to cheek.

The words had Bhram's chest tightening.

I'm here for you. He'd just told Rafael the same thing. But why did he find it so hard to believe for himself?

"We all are," he continued. "And we want to be involved in your life more than we have been."

His aunt, tears shimmering in her eyes, opened her tiny potli that was discretely pinned to her waist. Bhram hadn't even noticed the purse at first because it matched the pattern of her sari.

"I spoke to Ravi Uncle," she said. "He will be here with your dada's ring."

"He will?" Bhram said, emotion caught in his throat. "Really?"

"Really," she said. "You can propose exactly as you've planned. But there are two of you, and you should have something special too. Give your dada's ring to Rafael while you wear this one." She held out a thin gold band with three diamonds at the top.

His fingers trembled as he took the ring. "It's beautiful," Bhram said softly. "Whose is it?"

"It's mine," his uncle said.

"Yours?" The thought that his uncle would give him any jewelry when he had three sons was baffling to Bhram.

"I bought it for him," Bhram's aunt said, a smile gracing her face. "The first year that the business turned a profit. It's a symbol for us. Of new beginnings. Of success and joy. And

because you are like another son to us, we want you to have this.”

Bhram was touched beyond words. He never imagined that his uncle and aunt would want to support him in this way.

He brushed at his eye, then cleared his throat. “I love you both.”

This time it was his aunt who sniffled. She looped an arm around his waist and squeezed. “We’re so happy you’re here in the States with us finally. And that you found such a good partner, Bhram. We love you no matter what.”

He returned the hug and looked down at his uncle’s ring. “There is still one problem.”

“What is that?” his uncle replied.

“Rafael is upset with me after he asked me not to say anything about the Sahar news.”

His aunt shook her head. “That is easily fixed. All you have to do is go and talk to him.”

“It’s going to take a lot more than a few sweet words to get Rafael to change his mind.”

“Now you’re just being a chicken,” his uncle said in Punjabi as he clasped Bhram on the shoulder. “There is never going to be the right time and the perfect moment.”

Bhram grinned at their expectant faces. “You just want another kid to get married now.”

“Yes,” they said in unison.

“But also, I want to see my favorite nephew happy,” his uncle said. He ushered him toward the door. “Now come on. We’ll get you a shot of whiskey for courage.”

He left the office with a spring in his step, his heart pounding at a rapid rate. His uncle was right. He just had to talk to Rafael. To tell him how sorry he was and that he wanted to spend the rest of his life making mistakes and apologizing.

Bhram stopped in the middle of the steady stream of people walking through the house to the party space. What the hell was he thinking?

I can't tell him I want to make mistakes for the rest of our lives. Damn it, I knew I should've written out my speech.

Truthfully, he hadn't rehearsed what he wanted to say to Rafael at all. And that was because he intended to speak from his heart.

What a dumb idea.

He was Sikh through and through, though. He had poetry in his blood. But if any such thing as a Christmas miracle existed, he could really go for it right about now.

TEN

Rafael was standing in the distance near the buffet line. There were almost a hundred people in the house now made up of coworkers and familiar faces. Conversation and laughter twined with the string quartet's soft, magical holiday music.

As Bhram waited for the right time to propose, he could feel Rafael's parents looking at him, as well as the Singh family.

He made it to the bar setup, a hundred feet from Rafael when a familiar face stepped into his line of sight.

Ailana smiled brightly, her shiny black hair falling straight to her waist clipped back with a sparkling red bow. "Hello, stranger."

"All the way from Edinburgh," Bhram said warmly, then wrapped her in a hug. "What are you doing here?"

She motioned to her black gown and then did a slow shimmy. "I'm here to party!"

"On your way to Hawaii?"

"Yes," she said with a grin. "The idea of flying from the UK to Hawaii in one go was too exhausting. Then the boss"—she motioned to their chief financial officer who was standing in the corner on his phone—"said that I should spend a day or two in the New York office as a pit stop before going home for the next two weeks. Our team is pretty sparse over the holidays with most employees on vacation, but it's nice to get some face-to-face time with the ones who are here."

“It’s definitely good to see yours,” he said. She had been a part of his Bharat global team for years, and even though he knew everyone in the New York office, he wasn’t as familiar with them as he was with the people back home.

No, that was no longer home. His place was with Rafael now.

“Kicking party for Christmas Eve,” Ailana said. “But aren’t the Singhs Sikh?”

“Yes, but most of our US employees don’t celebrate Indian holidays,” Bhram explained. “The staff prefers taking time off during Hanukkah and Christmas instead to coordinate with schools and their family members.”

Ailana retrieved a Coke from the bar before she motioned to the milling guests in front of them. “I still don’t think that explains why a Sikh family is hosting a Christmas party.”

“*Holiday* party,” Bhram corrected. “It’s more inclusive.”

“On Christmas Day?”

Bhram smiled. “When my uncle opened the business, he didn’t have a wide network of Punjabi and South Asian community members here. His small group of employees would work through Diwali, but they would always take time off for Christmas leaving Deepak Singh by himself in his office.”

“The holidays *can* be a lonely time,” she said. “I know from experience because I come from a large Hawaiian family. Moving to Edinburgh for school, then work, was isolating.”

“Exactly,” Bhram said. Memories of his own holidays were an old wound that had finally scabbed over. “As the company grew, my uncle and his wife would hear stories about how other people celebrated, and they wanted to give that experience to their boys. Diwali was important to them, but not everyone understood. At least not back then. But Christmas and Hannukah? Well, it had the same message of love, family, and celebration. So my uncle would reach out to his employees and say that if anyone was alone during the

holidays, to come to his house because they would always be welcome. That was before Bharat Mahal was built.”

They both paused in reverence to the gorgeous home they were standing in.

“And as the company grew, the holiday party became a staple event,” Ailana said.

“That’s it.” Bhram toasted Ailana as he thought about his family and friends all here together while the ring burned a hole in his pocket. “Hopefully, this is a memorable night in a good way.”

Ailana nodded, her eyes sparkling. “Yes, I heard you were going to propose to Rafael.”

He promptly choked on his whiskey. “What did you say?” he croaked.

Ailana laughed so hard that several people standing nearby turned to smile in their direction. Bhram cleared his throat with a few deep wheezing breaths.

“What the hell, Ailana? How did you find out?”

“Please,” Ailana said. “Like your uncle has ever been able to keep a secret about his family. He’s so proud of all of you. I walked in the door, and he practically jumped at me to tell me that there was going to be a celebration tonight.”

Okay, there was no way that Bhram could be mad at that. It was...sweet. While being incredibly terrifying at the same exact time.

Good god, what if Rafael said no? Okay, he wouldn’t have moved in with Bhram if he didn’t love him and want to be with him, but it could be a “too soon, not right now” type of no.

“Can we not talk about it?” Bhram said, pressing a palm to his stomach.

“Come on,” Ailana said. “You can handle this. You and Rafael have been circling each other for so long. None of us are surprised that this is where you’ve ended up. The next step is inevitable. All you have to do is take it.”

Bhram nodded. “And somehow, that is a lot harder than it feels it should be.” With one last hug, he wished Ailana a happy holiday and moved toward the end of the buffet line where Rafael was waiting.

ELEVEN

“Hi,” Bhram said when he reached Rafael’s side.

Without a word, Rafael handed him a plate. “Can you hold this? It’s for Abuela. She wasn’t sure what to eat, so I’m giving her a little bit of everything.”

“I should’ve helped you get them settled. I’m so sorry.”

“I think you’ve helped enough for one day.”

“Love—”

“Bhram, I am so irritated with you, but I don’t want it to ruin our Christmas. This is supposed to be our first holiday together. I know we’ve had some snafus with your parents, but we had such a great time with Abuela, Mom, and Dad. And you invited them tonight, which was so sweet of you, but I can’t believe—”

“There you are!” Hem said, bursting through the crowd of party guests. Behind him stood Ajay and Zail. They all seemed out of breath.

“What is it?” Rafael asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” Zail said. He straightened his bowtie. “Why would you think something was wrong?”

“Because you all look panicked,” Rafael replied.

“Bhram,” Ajay said slowly. “There is a man that you need to meet in the foyer.”

“A man? What are you talking about?”

“The man that you wanted to see last week, but he delayed your meeting to today?” Hem asked. “He’s *here*.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Bhram said. His cousins were going to be the death of him after all. They were like a bumbling group of fools that ran around and knocked into each other until someone blew a whistle to get their attention. “I just have to talk to Rafael, so if you could excuse us for a moment—”

“What *man* were you supposed to meet today?” Rafael asked. His brow arched.

“Bhram really doesn’t have the time to go into it right now,” Hem said.

“You all are acting guilty about something,” Rafael added.

“Not as guilty as we’re about to get,” Zail said, then he swore.

Bhram’s stomach dropped as Ravi Uncle appeared behind them. He wore a sharp blue suit which was a change from the sweater and jeans Bhram had seen him in the last time they met to exchange Bhram’s grandfather’s ring.

“Bhram! Hello! I’m so sorry we couldn’t meet yesterday.” He squeezed through the Singh brothers, pushing them aside as if they weighed nothing, and enveloped Bhram in a hug.

This cannot be happening.

“Ravi Uncle,” Bhram said, pulling back. “Why don’t we go into the hallway to talk?”

“I really am sorry I wasn’t able to drop off the package,” he said apologetically. “My son was determined to drive the car since he’s home from college for winter break. I hope this doesn’t mean you’ll go to that horrible monstrosity in the city that starts with a T in the future.”

“Package?” Rafael said, interjecting.

It was as if the scene slowed, and Bhram was watching everything in slow motion. Ajay and Hem’s mouths moved at a comically slow pace as they started to say “*No*.” At the same time, Zail tried to dive between Uncle and Rafael.

He was too late. Uncle extended a hand, Rafael accepted it for a shake, and then the jeweler said, “This must be your lucky partner. Congratulations!”

“Congratulations for what?”

“Well, for the w—”

“Enough!” Bhram burst out.

The soft instrumental holiday music playing in the background came to a screeching halt. The conversation died until all that was left was the soft shuffle of the party waitstaff.

Bhram held a hand palm up to Uncle. “If you have the package, I’d really appreciate it now. Thank you.”

Ravi Uncle looked bewildered at the outburst. He nodded, mouth gaping, and pulled out a nondescript box from his pocket that thankfully did not look like it held a ring inside. Bhram quickly took the box and shoved it into the pant pocket opposite the one that held his uncle’s ring. Then, without preamble, he looped an arm around Rafael’s shoulders.

“We need to talk,” he said loud enough for everyone to hear. “Now. Ajay, Hem, and Zail?”

“On it,” Ajay said. With a quick flick of his hand, the music resumed, and conversation started again, even though most of the party patrons were still staring in their direction. The waitstaff began uncovering the food and motioning for people to enjoy the hot dinner buffet line.

“Come on,” Bhram mumbled and walked Rafael straight to the patio doors. With one flick of the lock, they stepped outside into the blistering cold.

TWELVE

Bhram knew that everyone from the party had to be watching them from the windows, but if he focused too much on that, he was going to lose his nerve. He and Rafael strode to a corner of the patio that was decorated like a staged photo opportunity with soft drapes, twinkling lights, and an arbor of poinsettias.

The air burned the tip of his nose and the shell of his ears. The cold whipped through his coat. Despite the weather, he could feel a trickle of sweat form at the base of his neck.

Rafael stopped in front of the arbor since it was the only part of the patio that had any lights. The rest of the expansive stone platform was bare. All of the furniture had been packed away for the winter. With the yellow gold flickering bulbs casting warmth across the planes of his face, Rafael turned to Bhram. “What the hell is going on with you?” he burst out.

“Well, since you asked—”

“I told you not to say anything to anyone about Sahar Ali Khan. And now you’re excluding me from secrets with your cousins?”

It took a moment for Bhram to realize what Rafael was saying. He scratched the underside of his beard. “You’re focus right now, right this second, after the scene that just happened inside, is the fact that I accidentally shared some information about a former employee with your father while we were waiting in a limo earlier today? And that you think my cousins know something you don’t?”

“Yes,” Rafael said. He glanced at the house and then rolled his eyes. “Jesus, I wouldn’t put it past one of them to know lip-syncing and translate what we’re saying out here.”

“To hell with the party,” Bhram burst out. “Rafael, you can’t really be *that* mad about—”

“—yes! Yes, I can be that mad. Do you think I can’t handle the Sahar situation or whatever else comes up from it?”

“What in the world would make you believe that? You’re the most competent and intelligent person in the executive offices. You were young, with a sliver of experience, when Deepak Singh himself hired you as an executive assistant. You quickly became an invaluable member of the team, and you are heavily involved in every single major project in the company. Hell, even I don’t have that kind of visibility!” Bhram reached out and rubbed Rafael’s arms. “I have never, not even in the years we were fighting, believed that you couldn’t single-handedly run this company yourself.”

Rafael hesitated. His eyes darted towards the windows and back at Bhram. “Even though I started as an assistant?”

“Love, I think you and I both know that you have never been *just* an assistant. It was truly an accident that I blurted something out to your father like that.”

The tension in Rafael’s shoulders was still as rigid as when they’d first stepped out onto the patio. “Bhram, that could’ve gone a lot worse than it did. We got lucky.”

“So what if it did?” Bhram said. He thought about his cousins and his uncle and the shock and dismay when they found out. “We would’ve managed the response.”

“We?” Rafael said.

“Yes,” Bhram replied. “We.” He moved closer until they were only inches apart. “I was really, really hoping that work didn’t interfere with this weekend after you got that first call on Christmas Eve morning. But things haven’t gone according to plan for the last twenty-four hours, so I shouldn’t have expected any less. I’ve been...a bit chaotic, haven’t I?”

When Rafael chuckled, it eased the knots ever so slightly in Bhrām's stomach. "I know we just moved in together, and we've only been dating long-distance for a year, but I feel like I've known you. I feel like I've wanted to be with you from the moment we met at the Singh family holiday party years ago. And through the years, even with your stubbornness, and your petty travel pranks, not once did I ever change my mind about how important, how incredible you are as a person."

Rafael cleared his throat. "Being with you—" He stopped, took a breath, then began again. "Being with you has felt like an island of serenity in this chaos that I constantly feel in my head. I'm always trying to maintain control, but I know when I'm with you, I can just let go. I'm sorry if I overreacted."

Bhrām's chest ached. He felt so undeserving of Rafael's love, of this beautiful, incredible man whom he was blessed to have in his life. He leaned forward until the puff of air from their lips mingled. "You don't have to shoulder work, or family or personal highs and lows on your own. I want that for us, Rafael."

"I want that too," Rafael whispered. He reached out and linked his cold fingers with Bhrām's until they held hands, facing each other. "Is it selfish of me to say that today has been so busy that I just want to go home with you to our apartment?"

"Not selfish at all," he said. He could feel the rings burning holes in his pockets. "But before we go, I, ah, I have something I have to ask you."

Rafael looked amused now. "Is that the conversation that happened with the older man inside?"

"Yeah, it was. And with your parents. And with Abuela yesterday morning."

Now Rafael looked confused. "What is going on?"

"Wait, you really mean to tell me you don't know?" The fact that there were so many clues throughout the day, and his Rafael, the man who was the most intuitive person he'd ever

met in his life, hadn't realized that Bhram was proposing, felt like a small gift after everything that had happened.

Bhram motioned to the light setup they were standing in front of, to the people in the house staring through the windows.

“Rafael? I love you more than I can even put into words. I knew that when we first met, and I knew a year ago when you finally agreed to go on a date with me as if I was daring you to step outside your comfort zone. But most importantly, I knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you when we decided to live together and to build a home together of our own.”

Bhram watched as shock and then realization dawned on Rafael's face. The only word that whispered out of his mouth was, “Oh.”

Bhram cleared the lump in his throat and touched the metal kara, a symbol of his faith, on his wrist in an effort to draw strength. “I hated that our first holiday together, I acted callous and rude. I should've kept you with me from that moment on, so it didn't take this long to get to where we are today. But I want to rewrite our holiday memories. Our Christmas Day memories.”

“That's why you invited your parents to come for this year's holiday party,” Rafael said. “Oh my god, Bhram, I'm so sorry they refused to come—”

Bhram chuckled, and the hurt of his parents' absence dimmed just a bit more. “It's just like you to be worried about my feelings over your own. I love you so much more for that.”

“If you want, we can go to India.”

“Maybe,” Bhram said. “But right now, I'm happy we're here with my family and with yours.” He could see Rafael's parents standing eagerly now in the window, their faces pressed against the glass. “I asked Abuela and your parents for their blessing, and they were so welcoming and generous to give it. The reason why I've been out of my mind is that the

package that I was supposed to pick up yesterday, the one that wasn't ready, had the ring that I wanted to get resized for you."

He took out the box from his pocket and carefully pried off the lid. Inside was a thin gold band with the same shine and texture as the kada he wore every day on his wrist. Bhram slipped the ring out of its slot. "This was my grandfather's. He was the most important person in my life, and he would've loved being here today to meet you. Since you're just as important to me as he was, I want you to have this as a symbol of my love for you."

This time, Rafael was the one clearing his throat. There were tears in his eyes. "I didn't think that, as the immigrant son of an Argentine family, I would find love the way that I wanted to. And then I found you."

Bhram's chest tightened with so much joy he felt like he was going to burst. "Rafael, I want our apartment, our new home, to be the start of our life together. I promise to always hold you down, to be your safe space in the chaos. And I know you'll be the same for me." He tucked the box under his arm, then lifted Rafael's hand in his.

"I'll always come to family dinners—"

Rafael snorted. His eyes were wet.

"—and deliver lilies to your office when I make you mad," he added, referencing all the flowers he'd sent to make up for his snafu. "And I'll do dozens more that I haven't even thought of yet to show you how much you mean to me. Will you marry me?"

Rafael choked on his tears, then wiped them away with a quick flick of his thumb. "Yes. I thought I'd have to wait for at least another year before you were ready. I'm glad that you are able to surprise me after all."

Bhram burst out laughing even as he slipped the ring on Rafael's finger. "You know, you could propose too."

"No way," Rafael said. "This was the final payback for kicking me out of your bed all those years ago." He looked down at the ring, then cupped a hand behind Bhram's neck, his

fingers touching the base of Bhram's pagadi. He pulled Bhram into a long, warm kiss.

When they came up for air, Bhram said, "is that a yes?"

Rafael's eyes glittered. "Yes."

He leaned in to kiss this beautiful man once more, but the Singhs had other plans.

They both jumped apart when a loud boom shook the ground. Then there was a piercing whistle, and the sky exploded with red, green, and gold fireworks.

Bhram looked back at the house, and his uncle, aunt, and Rafael's parents stood glued together, side by side, clapping.

"They never do anything half-arse," Bhram said.

"They are your family, so it's no surprise that they wanted this moment to be big for you. It's important to them that you're happy, Bhram."

"Now they're your family, too," Bhram said. He retrieved his uncle's ring from his other pocket and held it out. "This was my uncle's ring. Deepak Singh wore it after the company he built, with the support of his family, finally became successful. Will you do the honors?"

Rafael slipped it on Bhram's finger, and it fit as if it was made for him.

"You know, with both the Diaz and the Singh families together, we're going to have a hell of a wedding," Rafael said.

The fact that Rafael was excited about a big wedding celebration felt like the burst of fireworks in the sky. Maybe Bhram could have everything he wanted after all. With his family close by, and the love of his life by his side, he had gotten a present that he could've never imagined would be his.

Bhram leaned in for another kiss, even as the patio doors opened behind them and their family spilled out into the cold night air under a twinkling sky of bursting sparkles and color.

"Happy holidays, Bhram," Rafael whispered.

“Happy Christmas, Rafael. My wishes have definitely come true.”

EPILOGUE

Zail

This was a big night for his cousin Bhram. He deserved all the love and attention. But Zail could only pretend to be in the celebratory mood for so long. He retreated to the back of the living room and stood in the shadows as family members, Bharat employees, and friends watched the bright, shimmering fireworks through the multistory windows. There were cheers, oohs, and ahhs. Couples leaned into each other while his brothers toasted champagne flutes.

Dad had pulled out all the stops for Bhram and Rafael, just as he'd done for Hem and Ajay after they'd announced their engagements. From the moment Dad had found out that morning that Bhram was planning on proposing to Rafael, he'd called in every favor he could to get a cake and fireworks set up before the party.

That morning, Zail was ready to celebrate with the rest of the Singhs. But now, all he could think about was the news that he and Rafael had brought with them when they showed up at the house.

Sahar Ali Khan, his Sahar Ali Khan, was working for their biggest competitor. He felt like someone had plunged a knife into his chest and twisted hard. Sahar, the woman who he met as a freshman at MIT, the woman who was his study partner, then friend, then lover, had not only left the state of California, but she'd done everything she could to hide from him. After his family had accused her of selling corporate secrets to

WTA, she'd been escorted off the property and kicked out on her ass before Zail could fly back in time from New York.

He'd spent months looking for her, but when he found her, she refused to see him. She'd wrapped herself in the protection of her family. The one time she'd come to the door, she threatened to call the authorities if he showed up ever again.

So, he'd left her all those months ago. There was a gaping hole in his heart at her absence, but like his father said, no one could blame her. She was mistreated by Bharat, and Zail couldn't protect her. He'd brought her into the company, giving her all the promises that he could. And the betrayal lay heavily on his shoulders.

Zail downed the rest of the whiskey. He knew that his brothers thought of Sahar's move to WTA Enterprises as an act of betrayal even if they hadn't said the words. Their faces told their stories. But Zail had intimate knowledge of the way Sahar worked. She was honest, loyal, and had a justice streak a mile wide. There was something more to her decision.

“Zail?”

The question came from a daughter of one of Bharat's board members. She slid up next to him, dressed in soft white, with her hair in thick, shiny curls falling around her shoulders. Zail had known her as an acquaintance for years, but it had been quite some time since they'd met in person.

“Hi, Supriya. It's good to see you again,” he said. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss against her cheek, then moved back to increase the space between them. She followed him to maintain the same distance.

“I could say the same thing, but it looks like you're in hiding.”

“Just watching my family enjoy Christmas Eve,” he said coolly. He hated this type of small talk. That's why he was stationed in the R&D office out in Silicon Valley. His family knew that he didn't like to shake hands the way his brothers did.

“Do you want some company,” she said smoothly, “or do you prefer some solitude?”

Zail would absolutely like to be alone, but his parents would kill him if he said that to one of their guests. “I wouldn’t mind the company. If you’d like, I can get you something to drink?”

He motioned to one of the waitstaff weaving through the crowds of people around his parents’ living room furniture.

“A whiskey neat would be great,” she said. She reached out and ran a slim fingertip down the side of Zail’s empty whiskey tumbler.

Zail racked his brain to remember their last encounter. Thankfully, he still had a clear head. “As I recall, your father is a Scotch whiskey fan? You’re the same.”

Her ruby-red lips curved in an inviting smile. “I didn’t realize my drinking preferences made such an impression.”

“It’s a common beverage,” he said. When he saw her falter, he cursed himself. “I mean, for your father. But I remember because it was uncommon to see someone as beautiful as you prefer a drink that burns.”

“I do like to play with fire,” she said.

He had to fight the urge to cringe.

After putting in the order, Zail turned to face Supriya. “Are you enjoying the holiday party?” he asked, counting down the minutes until it was acceptable to leave.

She inched closer, leaning into his personal space ever so slightly. “Yes, so far. But I haven’t received a present yet. Do you have what I want?” she asked.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. He couldn’t do this anymore. If he spent another minute with Supriya, then she’d get the wrong impression, and that was unfair to her and unfair to his memory of Sahar.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.” He spun on his heels and walked out of the room and through the front doors into the cold. His

tux was definitely not warm enough for the icy wind, but he needed the wake-up call.

He would go home to the bungalow that was situated farther down the lane, and he would grieve for the Sahar that was once his. Then he would find out what Sahar Ali Khan-the-employee was planning to do at the largest tech company in the world.

Zail would need to prepare. If she was joining forces with WTA to take revenge against Bharat, then he needed to be at the top of his game. Because no one was as good of a computer engineer as Sahar Ali Khan, if she was coming for his family, she was out for blood.

-END-

THANK you so much for reading A SINGH FAMILY CHRISTMAS! Subscribe to Nisha's Newsletter for information about upcoming books, events and giveaways. You can also find a draft of the first chapter of the last book in the Singh Family Trilogy [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nisha Sharma is the critically acclaimed author of YA and adult contemporary romances. Her books have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Entertainment Weekly* and more. She lives in Pennsylvania with her Alaskan husband, her cat Lizzie Bennett and her dog Nancey Drew. You can find her online at Nisha-sharma.com or on Twitter and Instagram @nishawrites.



PRAISE FOR NISHA SHARMA

Praise for *My So-Called Bollywood Life*

Winner of the 2019 RITA Award for YA romance of the year

NPR Best Books of 2018

“A strong, winsome heroine; a solid supporting cast, including family; and a romantic triangle that rivals any Bollywood plot.”

—*Booklist*

“A delightful and humorous debut.”

—*Kirkus* (starred review)

Praise for *Radha & Jai's Recipe for Romance*

NPR Best Books of 2021

“Sharma deftly crafts a sweet romance steeped in food, dance, and Desi culture.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for *The Legal Affair*

“An engaging love story peppered with intrigue and insight.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Sharma’s sexy sequel to *The Takeover Effect* sizzles, and fans of workplace romances will be aching to find out what happens next in The Singh Family trilogy.”

—*Booklist*

Praise for *The Takeover Effect*

“Sharma effortlessly blends the rituals of the culture she celebrates on the page.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Sharma’s latest is highly recommended for lovers of...big business and family drama.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

Praise for *Dating Dr. Dil*

“With a light touch, Sharma immerses readers in a deeply emotional and witty story of love arranged and love inevitable.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Buoyant!”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“The character development is top-notch, and readers will love seeing the protagonists realize that love can be a welcome surprise. Verdict: This first book in Sharma’s ‘If Shakespeare Was an Auntie’ series is a recommended first-tier purchase.”

—*Library Journal*