



BAD GIRL SERIES

BAD GIRL
GONE

Wicked

SHILPA SURAJ

BAD GIRL GONE WICKED

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*TO Z, YOU DIDN'T JUST INSPIRE TARA'S SPIRIT IN THIS BOOK,
YOU ALSO INSPIRE ME EVERY DAY.*

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CHAPTER I

Tara

In a red mini skirt, halter neck black crop top and knee-high boots, I was ready to party.

I strode into the nightclub, my gaze scanning the dim space for the table Aisha had reserved on our behalf. The maître d had told me to go straight and right. Given I was now looking at an open hall with no right, I was clueless as to where I was supposed to go.

“Buy you a drink beautiful?” Someone slurred by my shoulder.

“Fuck off,” I said absently, still looking out for either my friends or this magical reserved table. Finding neither, I pulled out my phone scanning the screen for messages.

Oh shit. There were over fourteen messages on our Bad Girls group chat. My finger working double time, I scrolled through them and my shoulders slumped. They weren't coming. The bitches were ditching me on 'Girl's night.'

Shit. I should have checked my phone before leaving the stadium to come here. I could have gotten some extra practice in. I growled under my breath as I abandoned the search for the table and strode towards the bar. Gesturing the bartender over, I asked for a Martini.

“Anything to eat?” the bartender yelled over the pounding, pulsing music that filled the cavernous space.

I shook my head in response. I'd been saving my calorie count for the day for tonight and I planned to use it all on alcohol. Who needed food? Okay, maybe Inu did, more than others and I loved that about my babe. And let's not get started on Aisha and her Kayani Bakery biscuits. So maybe the only person who didn't need food was me? My stomach growled in argument of that trend of thought. Okay so my body wanted it, but my brain knew I couldn't indulge. Not too much, anyway.

Dammit, I missed my girls. Both Aisha and Inaya had found the loves of their lives and settled down into their happily-ever-afters and I was happy for them. Really! Not just happy, I was thrilled. But did they have to forget me along the way?

Loneliness, an unhappily familiar emotion in recent times, swamped me as I looked around at the laughing, dancing hordes. I missed connections, I missed simple companionship, I missed being the girl I was before my talent with a bat catapulted me into superstardom.

No one I'd met in the years since knew me, the real me. They knew Tara Wadhwa, Captain of the Indian Women's cricket team, star batswoman, blah blah. Boring, sober Tara.

Only Aisha and Inaya knew my heart, my soul, my true self. And now I was losing them too.

Feeling maudlin and more than a little weepy, I flipped my long hair forward to cover my face and drowned my sorrows in my drink. One drink and I was out of here. I was due at the nets at five in the morning and solo drinking was not worth facing Coach's ire with a hangover.

"Hey there."

The slow, seductive whisper drifted through my 'poor me' mental rambling.

Something about that voice made me sit up straighter and glance over my shoulder. My jaw dropped. The man was smoking hot. Tall, muscled to distraction and with the darkest, deepest most intense eyes I'd ever seen, he made me do a lot

more than sit up straighter. He was exactly my type. The Incredible Hulk minus the green skin was hitting on me.

Maybe, just maybe, I could be pre-cricket Tara tonight. After all, who was going to know? It wasn't like female cricketers were as recognisable as the male ones. I didn't whine about that as much as my teammates did. In fact, I viewed it as a plus. All I wanted to do was play the game I loved. The rest was both a bonus and an irritant.

“What's a pretty girl like you doing here all alone?”

I cringed at the cheesy line. Clearly personality didn't go hand in hand with the looks.

“I was stood up,” I told him, sipping my drink and eyeing him over the rim of the glass. I didn't need his personality for what I had in mind for tonight

The Hulk put his glass of whiskey down on the bar and smiled. “This night just started looking up.”

I groaned inwardly. Was there a way to get this guy to stop talking? Then I could just wallow in his sexiness for tonight, feel a little less alone, and go home. I did have net practice at five in the morning and even someone as mouthwatering as the Hulk wouldn't keep me from it.

“Another Martini?” The bartender's gaze went from me to the Hulk. Was there a hint of concern behind it? I figured I was imagining it. Why would the bartender be concerned about two strangers hooking up? Surely, he saw this all the time?

I nodded, letting him bring me another drink. The Hulk had drifted closer, the warmth of his musclebound body chasing the chill of my blues away, just a little. Sadly, only a little.

“What's your name?” he asked.

“No names. No information. Nothing,” I told him bluntly. “We talk to each other only for tonight, about tonight and nothing else.”

Hulk grinned appreciatively. “Just talk?”

Not just talk bozo, I thought. Not when you're such a boring conversationalist.

With that in mind, I leaned over and kissed him. One night, I promised herself. I would take this one night for myself and then tomorrow, I would go back to being Grown Up Tara.

Tonight, I let my inner Bad Girl out to play.

The Hulk was a surprisingly good kisser, if a little on the wet side. I told my mind to shut up. I was supposed to be kissing the man, not analysing the kiss play by play like I would old match videos.

He groaned against my mouth, his desire clearly going nuclear while mine started to fizzle like a lit chakra firework on a rainy day. I could almost hear the pfft as it went out completely.

"Listen," I tried to say against his marauding lips, but the Hulk was putting his muscles to good use and was holding me firmly in place. I squirmed, using my own hard-won strength to break free just as one large hand clamped down on my butt and squeezed. Hard. Damn that was going to leave a bruise.

"I need--"

But I never got to finish telling him what I needed. Hard, impersonal hands ripped me from the Hulk's grasp. Men in safari suits surrounded us, some even holding weapons. I blinked, dazed and disoriented as they formed a little circle around the Hulk and me.

Vaguely, the words being spoken started to fall into a pattern that made sense. Hulk was being arrested. By the Narcotics Bureau. I'd been making out with drug dealer. A fucking drug dealer.

I. Was. Fucked.

And that was before the first camera flash went off.

CHAPTER 2

Tara

“**E**xplain to me what you were thinking.” Manisha Chibbar, the head of the Women’s Selection Committee stared at me, gimlet eyes boring holes through my aching skull.

“Clearly I wasn’t,” I groaned, my hands going to my throbbing temples, in a futile attempt to stop the pain.

Silence descended on the room. The Hulk and the bartender had both, thankfully, corroborated my story of not knowing the freaking drug dealer until ten minutes before his bust. Or was it five? So basically, I wasn’t in any legal trouble...emphasis on the legal. I was, however, in for a shit load of grief from the powers above.

“You are the captain,” Manisha hissed. “CAPTAIN!”

The word resounded in my head like a death knell. I groaned again and buried my face in my hands.

“How mad is Coach?” I asked, peeking out from between my fingers.

“Let’s just say you’re going to be doing extra burpees for the rest of your tenure on the team.”

I shut my eyes again. Maybe the world would disappear while I kept my eyes closed?

“You’ve been so good for so long, Tara. How could you?” Manisha demanded. “How could you be so irresponsible?”

“Because of that okay?” I burst out, my frayed nerves disintegrating under the stern disapproval of a woman I respected, a woman who’d been my mentor and guide for years. “I’m so tired of being good. I’m so tired of being this person, this Tara who is the Captain of the Indian Women’s Cricket Team. I’m tired of being someone I am not.”

“Then retire.”

The implacable answer had me shooting to my feet.

“Retire? Just like that?” Rage roared through me, making it impossible to play nice. “I have given my life to this game, to be able to have the honour of leading a team that not just plays for this country but makes its name shine on every national and international platform there is. I have worked my arse off to make that happen, every hour of every day. All I wanted was a few hours to be myself. That’s all I was aiming for and you’re asking me to retire as penance for it? I made this team what it is dammit. I am their goddamn Captain and I have led from the front every single fucking day for the last five years. Every. Single. Fucking. Day.”

“Then remember that,” Manisha said softly. “Brand it into your brain and do what needs to be done. Stop whining about the public appearances, about the sponsorship shoots, about playing nice with the people who matter, the people who keep that captain’s hat on your head. Stop acting like you don’t know how to play the other game or this one will slip right out of your hands. Remember that every single fucking day.”

With a scream of frustration, I spun on my heel and stormed to the window of the hotel room Manisha had booked for me. A room I would be staying in until the media storm around last night died out. God, I hoped it wasn’t going to be too long. I wanted the comfort of my home, of my girls, of being able to let Public Tara slip while I cried on my friend’s shoulders.

“We’ll fix this, Tara, but if and when we do, you need to keep in mind that there can be no more screwups in the

future.”

I didn't bother pointing out that this had been my only one. One in an otherwise blemishless career. It didn't matter. A screwup on this scale wiped out my years of good behaviour. I knew that and I'd risked kissing the asshole anyway. It hadn't even been a good kiss. Certainly not one worth flushing my career down the toilet for. Ugh.

My shoulders sagged in defeat. “Tell me what to do and I'll do it.” I couldn't lose my career, not over this.

“No complaints,” Manisha warned, opening up a file.

Those two words told me that I was going to hate what was coming. Manisha slid a document across to me.

It was a resume of a guy who wore a perfectly pressed boring black suit that matched his perfectly combed boring black hair and his perfectly placed square framed black glasses.

Nerd, I thought with a mental sneer.

“Who is he?” I didn't bother scanning his credentials since Manisha was already leaning forward to fill me in.

“Your shadow for the next few months,” Manisha responded. “Nikhil Upadhyay, Brand and Image Consultant. In other words, a fixer. In fact, the best fixer in the country. Number one. The committee thought we needed the best.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. “A fixer?”

“He fixes problems, any problem. He will make all of this go away and ensure that the media and the rest of the country forget it ever happened. He will ensure they wake up every morning and go to bed every night believing that the sun shines out of your arse.”

“Basically damage control.” I tossed the resume to one side. “Fine.”

“Tara, this is beyond damage control. For the next few months, you will do whatever Nikhil asks you to do. No arguments, no semantics.”

The weight of what they were asking of me started to press down on my shoulders, but I just squared them and tried to act unaffected by it all. Like I always did. Like I always would. No one needed to know what it cost me. Not because I was ashamed of it but because they didn't care.

"Okay," I murmured, letting my public persona slide back into place. My tiny spurt of rebellion had been duly squashed. Now it was time to make amends. My entire future, my entire life was at stake. Because I was nothing without this game. "When do we begin?"

"Now." Manisha said, moving towards the door.

"Now?" Panic flared inside me as I stared at the door. "I haven't even changed out of the clothes from last night's fiasco or had a chance to wash up or—"

"Tara." Manisha's firm voice cut off my rising hysteria. "He doesn't care if you look a mess. That's what he's here for. This is his job. To clean up the mess. All of it."

Like I was what a puppy had pooped out in the middle of the living room rug. And this nerdy looking guy was going to clean it up and hide the evidence. Temper was starting to spark again eating into my resolve to be well behaved. Wonderful. I'd lasted all of five minutes and I hadn't even met this fixer guy yet. How was I going to keep this up for months?

"Now," Manisha said. "I'm not going to say it again. Behave."

When had she said it before, I wondered, as the door opened almost in slow motion. And Black Suit walked in.

My gaze travelled from his perfectly polished black shoes to his perfectly pressed black suit. Was he wearing the same outfit as his resume picture, or did he just own replicas of one outfit which he wore every day? God, this guy gave new meaning to the definition of nerd.

And then my gaze rose further and met amused chocolate brown eyes set in a face that devoid of life had been ordinary but lit up with spark and laughter like it was right now...

Hot nerd. Black Suit was a very hot nerd.

CHAPTER 3

Nikhil

She looked like a raccoon. Huge kaajal bleeds under her eyes with mascara trails, very impressive bedhead, though I had it on good authority that she hadn't even been to bed yet. Ms. Tara Wadhwa had been a very busy bee the previous night.

She glared at me making my own smile widen. There was nothing I enjoyed more than a challenge and the raccoon looked like a very interesting challenge. Even if she looked a bit rabid at the moment.

“Mr. Upadhyay.” Ms. Chibbar drew my attention to her. “You have all the facts of the project?” she asked.

Given that the facts of the project were plastered all over the media, I didn't really need the dossier she was brandishing at me, but I took it anyway. In my field of work, all information was useful, even the useless bits. Like the note on page three that told me the raccoon liked to use a lavender scented body lotion from a popular global brand. It was useless now, but it wouldn't be once I leveraged that into a collaboration or sponsorship deal.

“Tara, this is-“

“I know who he is,” she said abruptly.

Ahh. The raccoon was mad. Captains of national sports teams were generally talented, hardworking, disciplined and

completely control crazy. This whole situation must be driving her insane.

Ms. Chibbar seemed to have realised she'd pushed as far as she could because she gave us both a bland smile and said, "I'll leave the two of you to it then. Mr. Upadhyay, please ensure the committee receives weekly reports from you furnishing all statistics pertaining to the project."

She hustled to the door and left, not even waiting to shut it behind her. I pushed the door shut gently so we could have privacy before the scene that was just waiting to erupt.

"I don't need a babysitter."

And there it was.

"Especially not one who dresses like he's an extra in Men in Black."

I glanced down at my inoffensive black suit, one of several that I owned. "You don't like my clothes."

"I don't like what you represent." She folded her hands across her chest, and I did my best not to notice the way the motion drew attention to her rather considerable assets.

"And what do I represent?" I decided to make myself comfortable, sitting down on the uncomfortable chair in the corner. It was still better than looming over my new client while we had a 'whose dick is bigger' competition. Just for the record, it's mine.

"The moral police," she spat out.

That gave me pause. I'd been accused of a lot of things during my intense and varied career but this was new. Especially since, I was the last person to morally police anyone. I didn't care what their morals actually were. I only cared about how they were perceived.

I didn't bother correcting her though. I just stretched in my still extremely uncomfortable chair and asked, "Shall we order some breakfast? I haven't had a chance to eat as yet."

"Can't wait to use the expense account they handed you?" she asked caustically.

I waited patiently, shifting a little on the torture rack that masqueraded as a chair. She just continued to stare me down. This woman had endless energy for battles of will.

“You could go shower and come back?” I tempted, knowing she must want to burn the clothes she was in after the night she’d had. “The food will be here by then. I’m sure you’re starving.”

She hesitated, her need to fight with me warring with her body’s need for sustenance and maybe even hygiene. She sure as hell didn’t smell of lavender right now.

“I’ll have-“

“An egg white omelette with two eggs, brown bread toasted, a bowl of cut fruit and a glass of orange juice. I know,” I told her.

Her eyebrows shot up. “They must be paying you a phenomenal amount of money for you to do that kind of homework.”

“They could pay me peanuts and I would still do that kind of homework,” I informed her, reaching for the phone to call room service. “I’m very good at what I do, Ms. Wadhwa. When you’re in trouble, you absolutely want one of the Men in Black with you. And you are in trouble right now, a fair bit of it.”

The last was said gently but firmly. I might be willing to tolerate a few celebrity tantrums but I was the boss in this situation and the sooner Ms. Captain accepted it, the smoother the next few months would go.

She nodded, lips pressed together to hold back whatever snide remark had occurred to her and then disappeared into the bathroom. I heard the shower turn on a few seconds later and exhaled in relief. That hadn’t been as bad as some of my other initial client interactions had been. Maybe there was hope for this whole project yet.

Room service answered and I placed our breakfast order. I was idly flipping through the brochure Ms. Chibbar had handed me when the bathroom door opened again and she

stepped out. The raccoon was gone. She looked like she'd scrubbed her skin raw in the shower, all pink and glistening as she was.

Wrapped in a hotel bathrobe with her hair in a towel turban, she should have looked either enticing or ridiculous. Instead, she just looked lost.

I was about to say something reassuring when there was a discreet knock on the door.

"You want to?" I gestured with a tip of my head to the bathroom door. For the moment, it was best if no one knew she was staying here.

With a growl of frustration she disappeared back into the bathroom and I headed for the main door to let food in. Maybe a full stomach would work towards improving her mood. A full stomach, some sleep and then, only then, would I tell her our game plan for Project Tara.

I tipped the server and shut the door behind him, calling out, "Safe to come out now."

She slunk out, her face set in mutinous lines, accepting the plate with her omelette from me. I served myself, deliberately keeping conversation non-existent until a few morsels of egg hit her stomach.

I'd just sat down across from her when I saw her wince and massage her temples. A killer hangover, I was sure. Reaching for my laptop bag, I pulled out a strip of over-the-counter painkillers and slipped it to her.

She stared at it like I'd handed her a rattlesnake but took it without comment, swallowing a tablet without water. The pain must be truly intense.

I picked up my own plate, thinking maybe now would be a good time to discuss my game plan. "So--"

"You're going to die of a heart attack," she announced.

My fork froze halfway to my mouth. "Is that a wish or a prophecy or...?"

“You can’t eat like that.” She pointed her own fork at my plate.

I glanced down at my fried eggs sunny side up with their sides of mashed potatoes and bacon. I was a relatively calm and amiable sort, but this woman seemed to have only one setting; irritating.

“You’re going to die,” she announced again, finally managing to get on even my last nerve. “Don’t eat that.”

I should stay calm, I thought, reminding myself of the fat pay packet the hot mess sitting across from me was going to earn me.

“Don’t eat that,” she repeated loudly.

To hell with it. I picked up a sliver of bacon and popped it in my mouth, holding her irate gaze. Either I’d die of a heart attack, or she’d kill me with a stroke from high blood pressure. So be it.

At least I’d go with bacon in my mouth. I made it a point to chew extra hard and extra loudly when it came to the crunchy bits.

CHAPTER 4

Tara

I watched the bacon disappear into his gaping maw with alarming speed, envy curling in my healthier but unhappier belly. I grumbled to myself as I finished my breakfast, sneaking glances at my phone.

“Would you mind-“

“We need to-“

I fell silent when he started talking at the same time as me.

“You first,” he said, putting his fork down on his empty plate.

Hadn’t even left a sliver of bacon for me to sneak from his plate later, I moped silently. I needed to talk to my girls, get my head on straight and I couldn’t do that with Mr. Fixer eating an entire pig in the same room.

Taking a deep breath, I straightened in my chair. “I need a little alone time. Would you mind coming back after a few hours?”

What looked an awful lot like regret flitted across his face. “I wish I could,” he said gently. “But we need to get to work.”

“Work?”

“Yes. We can’t just hide from the world, I’m afraid.”

“Isn’t that why I’m in this hotel room instead of my home?” Irritation rose inside me. I didn’t appreciate being treated like an idiot.

“We’re hiding from the paparazzi, not the world. You’re going to get dressed, call your close friends, Aisha and Inaya, and then you’re going to go have a lazy, fun brunch with them.”

“I am?” He was giving me everything I wanted, and I was still irritated. Was I getting my period or something? It would explain why this man felt like an itch beneath my skin, one I couldn’t scratch.

“You are,” he confirmed, leaning back in his chair and resting his hands on his bacon filled tummy. “At a very hip, very public place.”

“I don’t want to,” I mumbled, just to be perverse.

“Yes, you do, Tara,” he replied, the firm tone making my eyebrows shoot up. “You are not hiding. You did nothing wrong. And step one of us proving that will be to get you out there and living your normal life. Which means brunch with your friends.”

“My friends are successful, busy businesswomen. This is not our normal life. We are not ladies who *brunch*.”

“For today, you can be. All three of you. I’ve already set it up.”

Words failed me. He’d already set it up when I hadn’t had a chance to call the girls as yet? Keeping my furious gaze on him, I reached for my phone and group called the girls. If he wouldn’t give me privacy, if he would invade my closest relationships, then he could damn well sit there and hear what I had to say about him.

Inu was the first to pick up. “Tara!” Her exclamation had me glancing away from the man watching me carefully to the screen in my hand. “How are you holding up? Aisha and I wanted to call but we thought you’d be resting.”

“I can’t rest because-“

Aisha logged on, her pretty face filling the screen with a wild-eyed look of concern on it. “Babe, are you okay?”

“Yes.” I hastened to reassure both of them. “But, I fucked up, so bad. And now I’m stuck with Tommy Lee Jones from MIB.”

“Tommy?” Nikhil raised an eyebrow. “I would have thought I at least rated a Will Smith.”

“You actually rate an alien. An alien in a boring suit,” I snapped.

“Tara?” Aisha’s voice wrapped in surprised laughter filtered through the phone. “Is Nikhil there with you right now?”

“You know him?” I looked at my friend who had the most inappropriate grin on her face.

“Of course.” Aisha rolled her eyes at me. “He’s the best fixer in the country and I have a lot of clients who need fixing. Hey Nik!”

“Hey Aish,” the bacon hog drawled from across the table.

“Listen guys,” I said, changing the subject. “I know you’re probably busy with your crazy schedules and all, but we don’t need to do this stupid brunch he’s set up.”

“Yes, we do,” Aisha interrupted. “You need to do what he tells you Tara. Bitch about it but don’t be a dumb bitch.”

I glared at her as Inu spoke up, her calm voice easing the tension seeping through the call. “And we’re never too busy for you. If you need us to brunch today, then we brunch today.”

“Listen,” Aisha said, her smile re-emerging. “I am happy to brunch every day. My work mostly starts in the evenings, but you’ve always got meetings, Inu, and Tara doesn’t eat.”

“Just for that,” I mumbled. “We’re making this a weekly brunch. Sunday mornings.”

Aisha’s smile slid off. “I don’t do Sunday mornings.”

“But you’re happy to brunch every day,” I cooed at my disgruntled friend.

Inaya laughed. “Enough, both of you. Now go get ready and we’ll see each other at Mona’s in an hour.”

Mona’s? The buffet there was supposed to be epic. My stomach gave an excited squirm and I ordered it to behave.

Aisha blew me a quick kiss and disappeared from the screen. Inaya stayed on for a moment longer.

“You’re going to be fine, Tara,” she said.

“I know,” I muttered.

“And we will always be there for you.”

“I know,” I muttered again.

“Chin up, Captain,” she said gently. “This is a match you can’t afford to lose.”

I smiled slightly as she blew me a kiss too and disconnected. My friends were right. I couldn’t let this disaster derail the career I’d worked so hard to build. This was just a small speed bump on my highway to success. This was-

“Giving yourself a mental pep talk, are you?” Nikhil asked, his eyes gleaming behind those squeaky-clean Clark Kent glasses.

I was and I’d just been getting to the good part when he’d ruined it, the buttmunch.

I rose regally from my seat or as regally as I could with a towel still wrapped around my hair. “I’m going to get ready,” I informed him.

“I brought you an outfit to wear,” he replied, picking up an apple from the fruit basket beside him and biting into it. How was he still hungry?

“What do you mean?” I asked wearily. “Why would you be choosing my clothes?”

“I’m not. I’m just telling you the carefree, breezy vibe you need to project today is laid out in fabric on the bed there.

With the necessary undergarments and accessories.”

I picked up the brown paper bag on the bed and looked inside. A floral sundress. I had never in my life ever worn a floral anything. But I didn't bother arguing. I scrunched the bag up in my fist and marched to the bathroom. I'd almost made it to the peace and quiet of the toilet, which is what my life has come to, when I heard his soft mutter.

“Maybe she could order the bacon at brunch. Might put her in a better mood.”

CHAPTER 5

Nikhil

I sat down one table away, my back to Tara's, as the ladies hugged and checked in with each other like they hadn't seen the others for years. I was close enough to keep an ear out for their conversation but far enough to not be associated with them. I stared at the menu ignoring the muted hum in the restaurant at Tara's presence.

"That dress suits you." I heard Aisha remark and hid my smile.

My client had come out of the bathroom looking fresh and pretty in the dress I'd chosen. She'd also looked murderous at my choice. I could see why. As pretty as she looked, she also looked uncomfortable. I'd keep this in mind when I was picking a look for her in the future. Then I remembered the lethal look she'd given me earlier and amended the 'when' to 'if.'

Tara leaned back in her chair, flipping her long, loose hair over one shoulder. The ends of the silky strands whipped across my face like a spider web. On purpose. The witch did it on purpose. The Black Widow's web also probably felt just as soft I reminded myself as I brushed my face off and stared at the menu.

"I'll have the bacon," I told the server who was waiting with her pencil poised over a little pad.

She stared at me. “Just the bacon? Nothing with it.”

I smiled at her, turning on the charm I knew I had when I wished to use it. “Just the bacon. Thank you.”

She blinked a little and then nodded, walking back to the counter to place the strange man’s stranger order.

I didn’t need to turn around to know the Black Widow had heard my order. The stiff, furious vibes emanating from her were making the whole restaurant uncomfortable, I was sure.

“I’ll have a fruit salad with a side of quinoa please,” she ordered.

She’d barely finished speaking when a middle-aged guy sidled up to the table. “Madam, autograph please.”

She stood up, smiled graciously for the phone camera he shoved in their faces for the obligatory selfie and then signed his damp, tattered paper napkin.

It was like a dam had burst. The minute the first man approached, several others did too and within moments, a tiny crowd had gathered. I watched until I was satisfied Tara was plastered over enough individual social media accounts that were not official press channels before messaging Aisha.

Break it up now.

Like the Queen she was, Aisha Rajput leaned back in her chair and signaled the restaurant security over. A quiet murmur later, the crowd had dispersed back to their respective tables and the girls sat down to their lunch again.

My bacon arrived right on cue, and I stared at it, wondering if my arteries had started clogging already in protest of the latest attack on them.

“You look tired,” the girl named Inaya remarked.

“I’ve been busy,” Tara joked weakly.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Inaya squeeze Tara’s hand. For obvious reasons, no one was discussing ‘the mistake’ as I called it in my head. I’d seen pictures of the douchebag Tara had been with. It infuriated me that she’d

jeopardized her career for a muscle-bound loser like that. She could do so much better.

Oh she could, could she? My inner voice piped up. *Like whom? You?*

Well, if you couldn't be honest with yourself, then whom could you be honest with? And so, I crunched extra loud on my second helping of crispy bacon for the day as I admitted to my snarky inner voice that I'd been a huge fan of Tara Wadhwa for a very long time. This certainly hadn't been how I'd envisioned meeting her. Nor would I have ever predicted her immediate dislike of me and my poor bacon.

In my pathetic daydreams, she'd been charmed and captivated by my, well my charm amongst other things. I am still unclear on what those other things might be but clearly they along with my charm were lacking.

Behind me, the girls chattered away as I scanned messages from my team. The photographer I employed had already got candid pictures of the girls at brunch and my team was in the midst of circulating them through a press agency that we often worked with. None of this would ever be traced back to Tara and her team. Most of it wouldn't even be traced back to my official public relations and branding firm, First Movers. While the firm was a legitimate business with an enviable roster of both individual and corporate clients, it also worked well as a front for my more lucrative fixer contracts.

The first hits started coming as I sat there eating my way through my bacon. We'd got a healthy mix of 'drug dealer's girlfriend eats lunch with girlfriends' to 'Indian Captain Tara Wadhwa caught in an informal moment with her friends'. Ahh well, you couldn't win them all. Shifting the narrative would take a lot more than just one lunch of quinoa and fruits.

When can she come home?

The text from Aisha had me glancing at my phone casually even as my stomach revolted, and I finally gave up my crusade to eat only bacon for the next three months and pushed my plate away.

By this evening.

The woman had freakishly fast fingers and her reply appeared on my screen in seconds.

So soon?

I painstakingly laboriously two-thumb typed my response.

*The sooner they see her get back to normal life the better.
Do me a favour?*

I shoved another slice of bacon into my mouth as her reply flashed on my screen. This stress eating thing was real, something I hadn't had to struggle with until now.

If it's for her, anything. If it's for you, I need to hear it first.

I smiled as I typed out my reply.

Ask her not to kill me when I tell her I've set up an interview for her on prime-time television.

Two seconds later, I had my answer.

A fluff piece? Sorry Nik. You're on your own.

CHAPTER 6

Tara

“You want me to do what?” I panted slightly as I stared at Nikhil in his black pants and black formal shirt. His polished to a shine black wing tipped shoes stood toe to toe with my grubby sneakers.

I, on the other hand, looked like I’d rolled in the dirt. Well, to be fair, I had been rolling in the dirt a few minutes back, I groused. I’d dropped that damn catch like I had butterfingers or something.

“An interview with Malaika Sharma. Prime time television. It will be light, fun and the perfect way to introduce you, the real you, to a non-sports audience.” He smiled at me, a bright, sunny smile that made me want to break his teeth. With. My. Bat.

“I am a sportsperson,” I gritted out.

“And a very good one,” he nodded, beaming at me like I needed his validation.

“Then why the fuck would I care about a non-sports audience?”

His smile collapsed like a badly made souffle.

“Tara!” The bowling coach, Kulpreet Sir, called out to me. “Break’s over.”

I nodded, acknowledging the subtle command to get my ass back to practice.

“Look,” I said brusquely. “I don’t have time for this. I have to get back to work.” I jerked a thumb over my shoulder to where the other players were already lining up at the nets. I started walking backwards from him, unwilling to waste any more time.

“Tara.”

It was his tone that stopped me in my tracks. It was a no-nonsense, all-business tone. One I hadn’t heard from him before. I looked at him curiously.

“The non-sports audience is the one who is lapping up the drug dealer’s one night stand who captains the Indian women’s cricket team story. They are the ones who are continuing to talk about it, spread it through their rather miraculously effective grapevines, and keep it in the news long enough for the serious sports fans to take notice.”

My heart sank a little. Nikhil didn’t seem to notice. He continued talking like a steamroller on steroids.

“When we’re fixing your image, we start with them. We want that grapevine behind us. We want to make the right kind of news. The frothy kind. The kind they would lap up. Love stories, babies, family sob stories, stuff like that. I don’t suppose you’re dating anyone seriously, are you?”

I shook my head, unwilling to tell him just how sad my dating life was. I was practically a nun.

“And you’re not pregnant, are you?” His voice trailed off at the weird question.

“Not unless it’s the second coming of Jesus,” I quipped, the thought of me with a baby enough to have my body erupt in hives. I scratched the back of my neck in a reflexive action trying to control my reaction to the idea. “And before you ask, no family sob story to cry over in the media.”

He nodded. “Which is why we need the fluff piece. We need the froth and the bubble and the glitter.”

“But I’m not froth and bubble and glitter,” I said desperately, now scratching the back of my hand. The man had me breaking out in stress hives. “And I’m shit at pretending to be something I’m not.”

Sweat broke out on my already sweaty brow. Panic sweat.

“All I want is to play the game.” I gestured vaguely behind me to where I assumed the team had already started practice without me. Coach was going to be pissed. I’d be doing extra burpees today.

“You’re not going to be able to play the game much longer, if you don’t play *my* game well,” he said brusquely, no longer keeping up the pretense of coaxing me into doing his shit.

“You need me, Tara. You need to do the things I am setting up for you. We need to move the needle on the media fodder about you. We need to change that narrative, control it, and make it work for us.”

The passion with which he spoke held my attention. I knew passion like that. I recognised passion like that. I lived passion like that. And passion like that only came with knowing you were the absolute best at what you did.

I was about to concede when he went one step further.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he said.

I shut my mouth. This was getting interesting.

“Every time you do something out of your comfort zone, I’ll let you force me to do the same.”

Oooh. Very interesting. I quirked an eyebrow, waiting for him to finish fashioning his noose.

“Do the interview. I promise to prep you within an inch of your life and ensure it’s a fabulous success. And in return, I’ll do something you ask of me.”

“Anything I ask of you?” I asked, intrigued. The man was literally opening himself up to me, the Queen of Torture.

“Yes.” He shoved his hands into his black pants.

“Why?” I had to ask. This seemed like such a foolish bargain on his end. And I’d thought him many things in my head but never a fool. “I’ve already been ordered to do whatever you ask me to. You don’t need to do this.”

“We’re going to be working very closely over the next few months,” he replied. “I’d rather we did it with some semblance of cooperation. If we are going to fight each other every step of the way, it’s going to not only be exhausting but, also, not very effective.”

I crossed my hands across my chest and stared at him.

“You’re going to weasel out of this at some point,” I told him.

In response, he held out his hand for me to shake. “I don’t weasel.”

I stared at his outstretched hand, palm up and inviting me to put mine in it. Endless devilish possibilities swarmed through my head. If Inaya and Aisha had been here, they would have been warning this fool away from this lopsided bargain.

But they weren’t here. Only I was.

And something strange was happening inside me. In the little kernel of loneliness, of isolation, of boredom that had taken root and was flourishing, a sprig of hope, of fun, and of endless pranks sprung up. It was something that called to the Tara I was, not the Tara I’d become.

I placed my palm in his surprisingly strong grip and shook.

“Done.”

CHAPTER 7

Nikhil

I knew I was in trouble the minute her eyes lit up with an unholy glee that sent a shiver down my spine. Her hand squeezed mine in a surprisingly strong grip and still, I found it hard to let go, the feel of her hand in mine strangely addictive.

“When is the interview?” she asked now, tugging to make me release her hand. I didn’t.

“Tomorrow at 7. It’s live.” I said, running my thumb across the back of her palm. Did she shiver or did I imagine that slight tremble? “We’ll need to spend the day planning your look and working on possible tricky questions that might come up.”

“I have a practice match. I’ll be free by three in the afternoon for whatever you have planned.” She yanked her hand out of mine.

I nodded, mind racing as I flexed my fingers at the sudden loss of her long, lean fingers. “I can make that work,” I said.

“Good. You can meet me at four in the morning for your end of the bargain.”

My mind stuttered to a halt. “Four in the morning?” I asked cautiously. “I’m not exactly a morning person.”

“Weasel.” Her wicked grin widened.

Affronted, I stared down my nose at her. “I will see you at four in the morning.”

She tipped her head at me, that disconcerting smile on her face.

“I should go do what I’m paid for.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

I nodded. “I should too. I’ll get my team working on a script for tomorrow’s show.”

“See you later, MIB,” she said, trotting away from me. She was cackling under her breath, the little witch. I most definitely hadn’t imagined that. A deep sense of foreboding filled me. What had I agreed to? And would I live long enough to regret it?

I dialed Aisha as I left the stadium. “I got her to agree to the fluff piece,” I announced the minute she picked up.

“The primetime interview with Malaika?” she asked, her razor-sharp brain clicking in to our conversation like it was an ongoing one. People underestimated Aisha because of her party girl image, a mistake I’d never made after watching her decimate a politician’s son for assuming the show dancers at his event were also for sale for his personal pleasure.

“That’s the one,” I said now, smug in my victory. “I worked my magic and-“

“What exactly happened?” she interrupted my self-congratulatory spiel.

“I made her a deal she couldn’t refuse,” I told her, clicking my car open. I slid into the driver’s seat and checked the mirrors before backing out of the parking spot. “I told her for everything out of her comfort zone I pushed her to do, I would do the same. She gets to pick the activity of her choice.”

“You did what?” she asked, her voice getting very, very quiet.

“I told her that-“

“Hold on.” She put me on pause and a second later, the call beeped asking me to switch to video.

I accepted and found myself staring at not just Aisha but another window with Inaya in it as well. I pulled into another parking spot, thankful I hadn't yet left the stadium parking lot.

"Okay what?" I asked flatly, my earlier sense of foreboding returning.

"Tell her what you just told me," Aisha demanded.

I recapped the arrangement Tara and I had just come to. Inaya's eyes got rounder and rounder until I honestly thought they were going to pop out of her face.

"Did you hear him?" Aisha got a little squeaky that time.

"You poor, poor man," Inaya intoned, sounding rather funereal. I had the oddest feeling she was already planning my wake.

I definitely hadn't imagined that cackle.

"Why?" I asked, aggrieved. "What have I done?"

"Kabir!" Aisha screeched and a second later, a strange man's face popped up beside hers. "This is Nikhil."

"Hey," Kabir said, knotting a tie as he spoke.

"Do you know what he did?" Aisha proceeded to detail what I think would one day be carved into the headstone of my grave.

Kabir's fingers froze on his tie. "With Tara? Why would you do that?"

"I don't know," I replied aggrieved. "I thought I'd made a good deal but clearly I have screwed up in some way I can't even begin to imagine."

"Not so much screwed up as got screwed over," Aisha said. "What did she ask from you in return?"

"To turn up at her place at four in the morning tomorrow."

After that conversation was impossible. The deafening laughter made it hard to get a word in.

I disconnected and tossed the phone to one side, my brooding gaze on the exterior of the stadium.

My injured male pride was rising to the fore and informing me that I wouldn't be losing this challenge. Irrespective of what she threw at me, I would not only rise to it, I would dominate. I wanted to thump my chest and roar, working myself up into a dominance frenzy. I was not going to lose this-

A hard knocking on the door interrupted my internal pep talk.

“Saab, parking in wrong place. Fine lagega.”

I deflated at the sight of the security guard glaring at me.

“Going. Going. Ja raha hoon.” I reversed out of the spot and headed to the gates.

I'd managed to make a bad bargain, but I was determined to still make good on it. I was no weasel. And I would keep telling myself that even if the words sadly rang hollow with every repetition.

CHAPTER 8

Nikhil

This was probably the time of day when zombies attacked, I grouched as I drove through the fairly empty streets of Mumbai. This was an inhuman time of day. I'd dragged myself out of the comfort of my bed to make my way all the way over to the swankier side of Mumbai, to Parel to see what torture this woman had in store for me.

The building she lived in towered over the sidewalk, all simple elegance and quiet money. It certainly put my one bedroom in Andheri to shame. But with sending the bulk of what I earned home to my family, I preferred to keep my own life to the bare minimum.

Squashing the vague disquiet that flared inside me, I walked into the brightly lit foyer and went straight to the elevator after answering the security guard's nosy questions and learning that the Wicked Witch had put my name on the list of approved people for her flat. Punching the button for her floor with a little extra and rather unnecessary violence, I watched the lights indicating the floor glow.

When I stepped out in to the corridor, my eyes were immediately drawn to the nameplates on the doors. I knew Aisha and Inaya had the adjacent condominiums, of course, but knowing it and seeing the evidence of it was something else.

I was about to knock on the door with Tara's name beside it when the door swung open. She grinned at me, an obscenely happy beaming grin, that made my mood sour further.

"What are you grinning about?" I demanded. "It's too damn early for anyone to smile."

Tara rolled her eyes at me and bounced on her feet. "Alright Grim Reaper. Let's go."

I glanced down at my inoffensive black tracks and black t-shirt. Grim Reaper, it seems. She didn't even offer me coffee, I thought mournfully as I followed her back towards the elevator but then she kept going, towards the stairwell at the end of the corridor.

"What are you doing?" I asked warily.

"Taking the stairs," she said, her hand on the door leading to them.

"We're on the fifteenth floor." I stayed close to the elevators for protection. If I could have hugged it, I would have. There was no way the mad woman was going to make me go down fifteen flights of stairs.

All she did was raise one derisive eyebrow. "Weasel," she muttered.

I groaned and followed her with one last, longing look at the elevator doors. I would not weasel, I swore. We made it down to the ground floor and I was pleased to note that I was only slightly out of breath. Maybe it was time to step up those gym sessions. Once a week clearly wasn't enough.

"Let's go," she said, cheerfully, as we stepped out of the building and into the early morning sleepy chaos of a city that was waking up.

I nodded, walking towards where I'd parked my car.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asked.

I pointed to my innocuous Honda City. "We're going somewhere, right?"

"Yes," she grinned again. "To the stadium."

When she didn't move, I stared at her, my gaze flitting between her and my car. "Did you want to take your car?" I asked politely. Why was she still giving me that creepy grin?

"No." She started to jog backwards. "We're going to use our legs."

We. Were. Going. To. Use. Our. Legs.

She was going to make me run until my legs fell off. Fine. I squared my shoulders and started down the road with her. I would show her what I was made of. I wasn't a professional sportsperson, but I was no weakling either.

"We can't possibly be running the whole way, are we?" I asked after a few minutes of jogging in silence.

"Of course, we are," she replied, cheerily, her perky ponytail swinging at the back of her head.

"All the way to the stadium?" I gawked at her, even as I continued keeping pace with her. "That's, that's..." Far away, I wanted to whine.

"Yeah. It makes for a nice warmup." That ponytail swung like a pendulum.

I wanted to tug on it like a four-year-old in the playground. Or better still, wrap it around my hand and tug her head back so I could kiss that impish grin of her face. And then the rest of her words sank into my consciousness.

"A warmup?" Horror suffused me as I stopped running.

Taken by surprise at my sudden stoppage, a street vendor rammed his cart into my low back sending me hurtling into Tara and taking her down to the ground, the very dirty, grimy ground.

We landed on the pavement in a tangle of limbs. I managed enough presence of mind to tuck and roll so Tara didn't hit her head on the road. Winded, I lay on the ground, staring at the lightening sky over our head.

"You're trying to kill me before the interview tonight, aren't you?"

“Not kill,” the witch said, not sounding the least winded by our unexpected body meets road moment. “Just incapacitate.”

She got to her feet in one swift movement. I stayed on my back on the road. Maybe I could just stay here till my body atrophied and decomposed.

“Come on, lazybones.” Tara jogged in place, looking down at me. “We don’t go down with one fall. We rise and conquer even after the hundredth.”

I hated her. I wasn’t normally a hating kind of person but, in that moment, as the captain of the Women’s national cricket team gave me a pep talk I was sure she reserved for her teammates, I, her number one fan, hated her.

I got to my feet, ignoring her outstretched, supposed helping hand.

“Let’s go,” I gritted out. If her plan was to break me so she didn’t have to appear on television later that night, then she had made one gross miscalculation.

I hadn’t gotten to where I had in life by giving up. When I’d said, I don’t weasel, I’d meant it in an etched in stone kind of way.

I would not give in. I would not give her the pleasure of winning. I would not cry uncle.

But an hour later, as my heart pounded viciously and sweat dripped down my forehead and into my eyes, I realised that maybe, just maybe, there was something that I would do.

Have a heart attack and die on the side of the road.

CHAPTER 9

Tara

The wobbly duck wheezing beside me was probably going to have a stroke if I didn't let him cool off. I slowed down beside a sugarcane juice vendor who was just setting up.

"Something to drink?" I asked him, casually fixing my haphazard ponytail.

"Yaaghhsfbeh," he wheezed, his hands on his knees as he doubled over catching his breath.

I took that to mean that he would very much like to hydrate with sugarcane juice. His red face made for an interesting contrast to all those black clothes, I thought hiding my smile while I paid the vendor for the juices and handed Nikhil a glass.

He chugged it, more than a little spilling out of the edges and on to his already wet-with-sweat t-shirt. His breathing slowly steadied as we stood there on the pavement watching the sun come up, the sky gradually lightening.

"Let's go." He heaved himself to his feet and chucked the crumpled paper cup in his hand into the trash bucket by our feet.

Reluctant admiration rose within me. He was still lobster red, his chest still heaved, less alarmingly than before but it did still heave, and I was pretty sure his legs were going to be

stumps of agony later tonight but, and I will give the man this, he was on his feet.

On his feet and weaving. I snorted, laughter spilling out of me. “Sit down, MIB. You’re not going anywhere.”

He collapsed back on to a rickety plastic stool with a whimper. I thought I heard him whisper ‘Thank you God.’

“It’s me. I am God,” I told him, starting to slowly jog in place. I couldn’t afford to let all that precious warm up go to waste.

“You’re a monster,” he grumbled, his eyes tracking my jogging like he was hypnotised by it. “And to think I was a fan.”

A fan? That made my grin widen.

“Aww. Did you want an autograph?” The glee was a puffy balloon in my chest.

He glared at my balefully. “Why are you like this? Were you dropped on your head as a baby? Did someone wean the nice out of you?”

“I think the answer would be all of the above and somehow still, none of the above.”

Was that a needle of hurt at his words? Did I care what he thought of me? Why? He was here to do a job, to fix something. Me. To fix me.

And that hurt. One night in years of impeccable behaviour and someone is sent in to fix me. Like I was a broken clock that wasn’t telling the time correctly and they needed to fine tune me.

“I’m going to head to the stadium,” I said, crisply. “I’ll meet you in the evening to prep for the interview.”

I took off before he could respond. A second later, a heavy breathing, wobbly duck joined me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my breath even and steady as we ran.

“Holding to my end of the bargain.”

“You can’t do it,” I told him, my earlier ire still alive and kicking.

“You’ll be surprised at what I can do, Captain,” he replied, sounding just as irritated as I felt.

We ran in silence for a moment and then he huffed, “What keeps you going? Every day? What makes you do this to yourself every single day?”

I wondered how to answer that. The reasons were uncountable and yet impossible to string together in words. In the end, I went with the basic truth.

“This is my life. This has been my life for as long as I’ve known it. This is all I know.”

“Do you love your life?” He was back to gasping the words out. The man needed to run more often. His fitness was shit.

“I love cricket,” I replied, diplomatically, taking the turn that would lead us into the final stretch towards the stadium.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It most definitely is.” There was something about this man that always made me feel perverse and obstinate.

“It’s an answer but it isn’t the one I’m looking for.” He came to a heaving, panting stop at the entrance.

“Then you should stop looking. It’s the only one you’ll get.” He’d made it, I thought, a small smile playing on my lips. I could respect that level of obstinacy, after all I claimed no small measure of that personality trait myself.

As I watched he slowly sank to the ground, plopping like a starfish on the dusty ground.

“What are you doing?” I asked, looking around to see if anyone was looking. The last thing I needed was a picture of this to end up in the tabloids. Captain Tara Wadhwa attacked a man and left him in the dust. I did happen to be standing over him like the victor of a brawl.

“Dying,” he answered, his eyes closed, arms and legs spread wide.

“Shut up.” I ran a frazzled hand through the length of my ponytail. “And get up.”

“I want to be cremated,” he moaned. “Please tell my family my last wish was for them to spread my ashes in the Wankhede Stadium.”

“That’s not possible,” I laughed. “And why?”

“So, I can haunt you for eternity. Every over, every ball, I will be the voice whispering in your ear, Captain.”

“And what will you be saying?” I asked, even as I turned to head into the stadium to kit up.

“That was a brilliant shot, great follow through, the crack of the ball against your bat is a song that I never tire of hearing. You are poetry in motion.”

Goosebumps erupted on my forearms as I slowly turned to face him. He sat in the dirt, cross-legged and grimy faced, staring up at me.

“So, you’re going to be a friendly ghost then?” I asked, my voice coming out hoarse and choked.

He got to his feet, a pained groan escaping him as muscles protested and then he limped over to me.

“I will be the voice in your ear. Then and now. Then I’ll be the friendly ghost whispering to you. Now, I’m the voice of God. Tonight, when you go live, when you hear me through your earphones and I lead you down a path, you follow. Blindly. You were the voice of God this morning, Captain. You led. I followed. Tonight, it’s *my* turn.”

My throat went dry at the intent, focused look in his eyes as he laid down his version of the law. For a second, just one second, his gaze dropped to my lips and then flickered away. The goosebumps were multiplying at an alarming rate all over my body.

He leaned closer, his lips coming to my ear. “When I say jump, you jump. And when I do say jump, I want you to

remember this morning and this moment. And I want you to remember that *I didn't weasel.*”

CHAPTER 10

Tara

He put me in a silk floral pantsuit! I had a freaking hibiscus on my right boob. Which was nothing compared to the fact that the entire freaking thing was different shades of pink. My long hair had been curled and styled to fall over one shoulder, held back on the other side with a large, bejeweled clip, also in pink!

“Why are you glowering?” His voice was a silky, soft murmur in my ear. My goosebumps came out to party again. He leaned over my shoulder and smiled at my reflection in the mirror.

“You dressed me up like a barbie doll,” I gritted out.

He snickered. The ass actually snickered! “Do you know why it’s a pantsuit and not a dress?” he asked now.

Don’t ask. Don’t ask. I chanted the words like a mantra in my head.

“Why?” I asked even as my inner voice groaned in dismay.

“Because you’re Cricket Barbie.”

I was going to kill him. I was going to dismember him, starting with his groin and ending with his tongue and then I would...

“Happy thoughts Captain,” he murmured now, a laugh in his voice as he held my gaze in the mirror.

“They are happy thoughts,” I ground out. “To me.”

“How violent is my demise?”

“Gruesome and macabre.” I held his amused gaze with my own furious ones.

“And here I just thought you’d bludgeon me with a cricket bat.”

“No,” I retorted grimly. “But to begin with, I’d aim for your balls when I hit my next shot.”

He straightened. “It’s time. They want you on set.”

A weird sense of desperation surges within me at the thought of stepping out on that stage looking like this foreign version of myself.

Nikhil pauses at the doorway, those sharp eyes of his missing nothing. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything,” I said, rising to my feet and taking a deep breath. “But that’s not your concern, is it?”

Something flashed in his eyes, and I had the weirdest sensation that I’d hurt him. But how? And why? We barely knew each other. How could I have the power to hurt him?

I stepped up in my obnoxiously high heels which brought me to eye level with him and gestured for him to lead the way.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said.

His gaze roved over my set face, but he said nothing. He stepped back and let me precede him out of the tiny makeup room. A small part of me wanted to smile as he limped ever so slightly as we walked.

I’d need to plan something to exercise those sore muscles tomorrow, I mused. After all, once I did this, it would be my turn to set a challenge. For him. Anticipation lit a slow fire inside me.

“You remember everything we rehearsed?” he asked from behind me, and the fire fizzled out.

“Yes.” My heart was starting to pound, a rhythmic beat that echoed in my temples and at the base of my throat.

“And what will you say when she asks about Charan?”

God, that question made my stomach churn.

“Who?” I retorted, the flippant edge in my voice steadying me.

“Tara!” His voice was sharp, the reprimand clear. “The guy you picked up in the bar that night. The one who later ended up getting you arrested along with him. That’s who!”

I forced a grin over my shoulder. A bead of sweat trickled down my spine and pooled in the base of my lower back.

“And my answer will still be ‘who.’ Isn’t that the spin that was decided upon? That he is insignificant, irrelevant, and a silly mistake. One that will never be repeated.”

His frown receded but his eyes still scanned my face like he was searching for an answer to a question only he could hear.

And then it was time for me to take my place under the bright lights and face the subtly malicious sneer and otherwise outwardly brilliant smile of Malaika or Mallika or whatever her name was. The face of Prime Time Television.

The woman whose talk show ratings competed with the ratings of the daily Hindi soaps that boasted of a devoted audience of billions. The woman who’d been pursuing me to be a guest on her show for years now but had never succeeded until my silly error in judgement had forced me to surrender the last scraps of my dignity.

“Can you hear me, Captain?”

I shut my eyes at the sound of his voice in my ear. It was going to haunt me in my dreams tonight. For such an annoying man, he had a very sexy voice, one made for sin.

“A simple nod will suffice.”

I opened my eyes and tipped my chin in response. And through it all my heart pounded. Was I going to faint? Because

honestly there could be no greater disgrace than to pass out on national television.

I've led my team through several international tournaments and even that pressure had not brought on this tidal wave of terror. Because that Tara knew what she was doing. That Tara was in control. This Tara was about to hyperventilate herself into hibiscus heaven.

Across from me Malaika continued to chatter, inane celebrity gossip that she claimed was spilled on her couch and went on to become sensational news. Someone had had a wardrobe malfunction two weeks back and had flashed their boob to the nation, she informed me. I looked down to check on my own ladies who thankfully stayed secure and covered in their floral monstrosity.

"Listen closely now, Captain," Satan whispered in my ear.

And then I heard them. My girls.

Inaya and Aisha cheered and whooped and offered ridiculous suggestions on how to answer the sure-to-come intrusive questions, and in Aisha's case, an unsolicited opinion on Malaika's botched nose job.

A sense of calm spread through me as the recorded message came to an end. My heart settled and my nerves regained their legendary control. The steel spine I was known for slid into place and I smiled at the woman who was eyeing me like I was prey.

"There you are," he murmured in my ear. "There's my girl. Now, show them the Tara I've had the misfortune to get to know over the last few days. Make her cry."

His girl? My smile broadened into a grin at his words. "Did you?" I asked, the words an almost inaudible murmur.

"You made me bawl like a baby in the middle of an epic meltdown, Captain. You brought me to my knees, or you would have if my body was capable of lowering itself or bending in any shape or form. Show her the Tara you showed me. You've got this!"

I laughed, the sound bright and clear, slicing through the commotion on set. Every eye focused on me and I faced the piranha across from me.

I totally had this.

CHAPTER II

Tara

“You’ve chosen an unconventional career, Tara, and I’m sure it comes with its set of challenges. What would you do to change life, or your life, in a man’s world?” Malaika bared her teeth in a smile as she asked the question.

“Well, to begin with I wouldn’t call it a man’s world.” I bared my own teeth back at her. Dare I say, mine were whiter and more even? “When I step out onto the field, it’s my world. A sportsperson’s world.”

I leaned forward, the better to make my point. “I belong in this world, just like every boy or girl, man or woman, essentially every *human being* who’s ever picked up a bat or ball and realised that it fit them like an extension of their body. I didn’t choose this career. It chose me.”

Malaika’s smile got more fixed. “But surely you had challenges,” she insisted.

“Of course,” I answered. “Don’t we all? Haven’t you had to work very hard to get to where you are? The diva of primetime television?”

I figured a little flattery couldn’t hurt given the woman looked like she wanted to stab me with her ice pick heels.

Predictably, Malaika softened a little and relaxed in her seat. I relaxed in my own in reaction. How long had we been talking? Wasn’t this nightmare over as yet?

And then the witch went for my jugular.

“Like all successful women, do you also feel it’s lonely at the top? Not just work-wise, but as a single successful woman, is it also hard on your personal life?”

I stiffened again, knowing exactly where this was going.

“Easy there, Captain,” he murmured in my ear.

“I’m way too busy for a social life,” I told her politely, ignoring the gnat in my ear. He groaned. I wished I could have swatted him also like the pesky bug he was.

“But you weren’t busy on the night of January 16th?” she asked delicately.

Anger flared in the pit of my stomach. I knew why I was here. I knew this would come up. And still, I resented it. I hated the fact that random strangers thought they had the right to sit in judgement on me, on my life. To make fun of my missteps, my losses, my personal shames.

I hadn’t been living under a rock. I’d seen the memes, the jokes, the forwards doing the rounds. And as much as I tell myself that it doesn’t matter, it does. The hurt, the shame, the public humiliation, it was all a boulder gathering steam on its way down the hill. On its way to flatten me.

“Dhoni once said, ‘One thing about our country that is constant is cricket.’” He was back, his voice a low buzz in my ear. “The one thing about women’s cricket in recent years that has been constant has been you, Captain Tara Wadhwa. Remember that. Remember who you are.”

I found my voice. “No, I wasn’t busy that night. I had the night off and I was meeting my girlfriends for a quiet night out, a chance to relax, to unwind, to just be.”

“But your girlfriends weren’t there,” she purred in response.

“No.” I flashed her a brilliant but sickly smile. “Because my girlfriends, unlike me, have a wonderful work-life balance, which essentially means they *have* a life, one that isn’t all

about work. They couldn't make it that night. And I was alone."

"Don Bradman once said, 'If it's difficult, I'll do it now. If it's impossible, I'll do it presently.'" I didn't blink as I held the barracuda's gaze. "For eight years, I have played for this country. For five of those, I've led from the front. I've done my best, I've given my best, I've played with the best. I have never disappointed my country, my bosses, my mentors, or my fans."

"And that's why you're paid the big bucks," Malaika retorted.

I didn't acknowledge that. I was sure the witch made far more money than I did, dealing in the sleaze of gossip and other's weaknesses and human failings.

"I was alone that night," I repeated, going back to the previous point. "I met a man, a handsome, pleasant one. And we spent a few moments together in a crowded bar. That's all that happened and ironically, that's all I'm allowed to say. As you and the entire country knows, the matter is sub judice, and hence not up for public discussion."

"Have you ever taken drugs or steroids to enhance your performance on the field or off the field?" Malaika winked in what she probably assumed was a saucy manner.

"I've never felt the need for it," I replied coolly. "On and off the field, I am more than enough for anything thrown at me. Toss something at me and I'll hit the shit out of it."

Laughter rumbled through the stupid, little gadget in my ear. "Going off script, are we?" he asked.

He should have known better than to expect me to stick to his boring talking points. Sensible but boring. I had never been either in my entire life. Sweat trickled down my back as the barracuda watched me, wondering which tack to attack from next.

"So, what's next for you? Professional and personal?"

I relaxed, just the tiniest bit. The big hibiscus on my boob seemed to quiver with the force of the deep breath I took.

“Professionally, I look forward to bringing the World Cup home this year.”

“And personally?” Her beady, little eyes sharpened, weighed under half a kilogram of kaajal.

I shrugged. “I don’t really have time for a personal life right now with practice, training and of course, the World Cup looming in the horizon. But once we’ve won the world cup,” I flashed her a smile, “I hope to take my parents on an international holiday. Maybe Greece.”

“You’re holding out on us,” she said, with a sly smile.

Baffled, I stared at her. “I don’t know what you mean,” I said, sweat beading my temple as my anxiety flared again. I genuinely didn’t have a clue what she was talking about.

Malaika turned towards a large projection screen to her right. It had a shot of me in my uniform smashing the ball towards the boundary. As I watched, the image faded out only to be replaced by another one.

It was from earlier that morning, the stadium framed behind us as we stood together, almost touching. It wasn’t the proximity of our bodies that bothered me, it wasn’t the fact that someone from this witch’s crew had clearly been staking my place out and had followed me on our run for just something like this. It wasn’t even the fact that she’d moved the narrative from me being caught with a drug dealer to me being caught with another man in the early hours of the morning, to me being for all intents and purposes promiscuous, that had my throat closing up.

It was the expression on my face as Nikhil had leaned in to whisper to me, to tell me he would be the voice of God in my ear during this interview. It was the way I was looking at him...

“FUCK!” said the voice of God in my ear.

CHAPTER 12

Nikhil

She was going to kill me. I braced myself as I rang the doorbell to Tara's condominium. The door swung open, a strange man I'd never seen before on the other side.

"Nikhil?" he asked, his appraising glance sweeping over me.

I nodded.

"I'm Ayaz," he said, stepping back and letting me in. "Inaya's husband."

I was about to respond when I heard a low growl.

"I am going to kill you." Tara advanced on me, thankfully without her cricket bat in her hand.

Ahh. I was spot on. Just a few days and I already knew her so well.

"I figured," I eyed her warily. "Can we talk?"

"You were supposed to fix everything." Another growl. "This is your idea of fixing???"

Ayaz bravely stepped between us. "Tara--"

Her furious gaze swung to him. "When you broke Inu's favourite painting, who helped you fix the frame without her knowledge?"

Ayaz cleared his throat. "You did but Tara--"

“When Inu’s mother came to town, who told you her favourite sweets so you could stock up on them?”

“You did.”

“Move Ayaz.”

Ayaz moved, giving me a pitying look. I tried to send him a look that said I understood his predicament, but I think I might have just looked constipated.

“Can we talk?” Even before I finished the question, the door behind me swung open whacking me in the back and sending me crashing straight into Tara.

We landed with enough force to knock the wind out of me. A cramped wheeze escaped me as I tried to catch my breath. And then the realization that I was plastered to her, head to foot, for the second time in so many days, sunk in. And my breathing got a whole lot choppy. She was all lean muscles and sleek skin and angry glares.

Clearly, she was having no trouble with her breathing. The automaton under me shoved me aside and pushed to her feet. I followed suit, albeit a lot more slowly and with far less grace. I did have a certain something to hide as I limped over to the sofa and sat down, dragging a throw pillow over my lap.

“We are so sorry.” Inaya’s worried face came into view as I worked to get my body to behave.

I was mortified. I had never been this unprofessional, this inappropriate, this ... turned on in the presence of a client before. But then I had never had a client like Tara Wadhwa before.

“That’s okay,” I rasped now to Inaya who was still hovering in front of me. “You had no idea I was standing right behind the door. Is Tara okay?” I asked looking around her to where Tara and Aisha were having a hushed conversation.

Whatever Aisha hissed last had the effect of making Tara march over to me and mutter, “You want ice?”

For my errant body parts, yes. But I wisely shook my head and said, “No.”

“What are we going to do about this Nik?” Aisha asked now, sliding on to the couch beside me.

“I have a plan,” I croaked, my mind still churning with a variety of very not-allowed-not-to-be-considered thoughts. “Tara’s response on the show was that we were friends.”

Tara growled again. Stress did seem to bring out her inner animal or something. Would it have been too much to hope for that inner animal to have been a fluffy puppy?

“It was too cliché a response,” Aisha said. “The minute you say you’re just good friends, everyone’s mind automatically jumps to the fact that you are hiding a romantic relationship.”

“I said friends not good friends,” Tara huffed.

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe if you’d just stuck to the script...”

Across from me, Inaya and Ayaz sat on a double seater recliner. Inaya closed her eyes despairingly at my reply.

“There was nothing in your stupid script about you,” Tara shouted. “That picture...” She came to an abrupt stop.

Yes. That picture. That very strange, very incriminating picture. I wondered if either of us were going to address what we could see in that picture.

But Tara turned away from me and went to stand by the large bay windows that lined one entire wall of her drawing room. Clearly, we were not. An uncomfortable silence descended on the room.

I was about to speak when Tara’s phone started ringing.

“Shit.” She stared at the phone’s display. “It’s my father.”

Before I could wonder at that reaction, Aisha plucked it out of her hand and disconnected, tossing the phone into her own handbag and then shoving the handbag under another one of the throw pillows.

“There,” Aisha said, sounding very satisfied. “Sorted.”

What exactly had she sorted? I clutched my own throw pillow like a lifeline and looked around the room at this strange assortment of people who seemed to speak a language to each other that I didn't understand.

I cleared my throat trying to regain my legendary control. "Still, we're going to take that comment, the one about us being friends, and run with it. My team is tracking the hits across all media sources including the smallest of entertainment blogs. Everyone is speculating but no one knows for sure, especially since I've stayed out of the limelight until now. All they have on me is my name and my PR agency's details."

"So, what's the spin?" Inaya asked softly.

"That we are childhood friends who recently re-connected."

Tara snorted. Very helpful attitude I thought with another mental eye roll. I was going to eye roll myself into a fainting spell.

"We will seed that story across the media and augment it with select group outings. We'd need your help with that. All of you, all your help."

"Of course," Ayaz said. "Whatever you need."

"Aisha, if you could organize a group outing with other friends too? Your larger group of friends?"

"It's just us," she said, cutting through the rest of my spiel. "And Kabir of course, my boyfriend."

"Surely, you guys have more friends?"

"Not really." Inaya shook her head.

"Well, it can't be just the six of us. It will make Tara and me look like another couple in a cosy six-some."

"God forbid," Tara muttered.

Like I said, very helpful attitude. I heaved another sigh and reached for the very depths of my patience. "If you could get a group together, we can all go out for a night of dinner and

drinks. I'll bring some of my friends to round it out. I have plenty."

I couldn't help adding the last barb.

"I'll ask some of the girls on the team," Tara muttered, unwilling to let me score a point.

Good. At least that attitude was helpful.

"I'll set it up," Aisha said briskly. I nodded, happy to hand that off to her.

"In the meantime," I told Tara. "There is a print interview in a magazine scheduled for this weekend. The shoot will happen on Saturday morning."

"No," she said.

"No?" My eyebrows shot up. "This isn't negotiable. Or have you forgotten what the board told you?"

"After this screwup-" she began heatedly.

"They don't see it as a screwup," I replied tersely. "They think this will go a long way towards softening your hard-ass image in the public's eye. They like this screwup, or somewhat like it. They obviously don't want a romance ruining focus on cricket story either."

She fell silent, a strange expression on her face.

"You didn't honestly think I hadn't been in touch with them already? They sign my paycheques."

I had the uneasy feeling I'd somehow manage to slice through her invisible armour, leaving her bare to the collective gaze of the room. Without another word she turned away from me and faced the windows again.

I stood slowly. "I'm uh going to leave. I want to sit with my team and track the metrics on Tara's interview."

The others mumbled goodbyes, but she didn't look back, her stiff back telling me all I needed to know. I was almost to the door when she spoke.

"Tomorrow morning. Five AM. At the stadium."

I stopped, my hand on the doorknob.

“What?”

She turned her head and looked at me over her shoulder, one eyebrow arched delicately.

“It’s my turn.”

So, it was.

“I’ll be there,” I replied.

A lamb to the slaughter except that I was a stupid lamb, gleefully skipping off towards my demise, head extended. But if it meant more time with Tara, then bring on the axe.

CHAPTER 13

Nikhil

“Everyone, this is Nikhil.” She waved a hand in my general direction. “Nikhil, this is everyone.”

I stared at a sea of hostile faces. Tara’s team had closed ranks around her. And I was clearly the enemy. I sighed. It was exhausting being a villain before the sun had even risen.

“Why is *he* here?” One of the girls, Asha, asked. I riffled through my mental files before landing on ‘wicket keeper’.

“He is here to join our practice.”

The words landed like stones.

And then another girl spoke up. My mental files whirred until I landed on Niyati Babu, ‘vice-captain’.

“Our practice? Why would he join our practice?” She aimed a look at me that made me grateful that I wasn’t meeting her in a dark alley.

“Mr. Upadhyay is in charge of raising the profile of the team.” Tara raised her voice to be heard by everybody.

I was? My legendary poker face betrayed nothing. My legendary poker face with a slightly obvious tic in my right eyelid.

“As you all know, he’s been making me more visible in the media, building my image or something like that.” She started

to pace in front of her team, a slow measured tread that sounded my death knell. “There is no me without all of you. My image is our image. Tara Wadhwa is a sum total of every one of my girls. And so, Mr. Upadhyay will be working on raising all of our profiles.”

She turned to look at me directly for the first time that morning. “And how can he do that without first getting to know each one of us, without learning what makes us tick, without first living our lives? Without joining us for practice.”

It was an excellent speech, the kind that captains gave before career defining games or more specifically monarchs gave before wars. And in that moment, I realised that that was exactly what Tara was doing with me.

She was declaring war.

My gaze travelled the length of the girls arraigned at her back. Her army looked more than ready. And I was I was in big trouble.

“Warm up!” Tara’s voice cracked through the quiet and with one last dark look in my direction, the girls started laps around the field.

I saw the coaches saunter on to the field and wandered over for a word with them. They’d been briefed on my assignment, so I wasn’t worried about their reactions to my presence.

“Screwed that up, didn’t you?” Kulpreet, the bowling coach drawled.

Maybe I should have worried about their reactions.

“It was a clusterfuck that no one could have seen coming.”

“Figured *you* should have,” Mahesh, the senior coach mumbled. “Isn’t that the definition of your job?”

Irritation swept through me, a lot of it aimed at myself. They were right. I’d gotten careless. I’d been so busy sparring with Tara and enjoying myself that I’d missed the fact that this was a job and only that. It wouldn’t happen again. I’d worked

too hard and too long to let my reputation flounder on an inappropriate, unreciprocated attraction.

“What now?” Mahesh asked.

“Tara has asked me to join practice and spend some time getting to know the girls,” I paraphrased her earlier words to my advantage. “I trust you don’t have an issue with that?”

They exchanged glances and shrugged. “Don’t see why we would.”

Kulpreet squeezed my shoulder as they walked past me. “Try and keep up though, okay? We can’t have you slowing the girls down. We have a World Cup to get ready for.”

I took a deep breath and followed them to where the girls were stretching now. As I watched, a few of them dropped to the ground and started on one arm pushups. Tara was one of them. Her fluid grace and strength were mesmerizing.

“What are you waiting for?” Mahesh shoved me between my shoulder blades. “Get started.”

I stumbled forward. “With what?”

“Warm up.” He raised his bushy eyebrows at me. “How will you join practice if you just stand around staring at everyone?”

I was tempted to point out that that was exactly what he was doing but pride, stupid, brainless pride, had me dropping to the ground and starting on my own pushups.

Sweat beaded my brow and trickled down my temples as I tried to keep up. Less than ten minutes later, I knew I had no hope of keeping up. By the time the girls moved on to net practice, I was a trembling, liquid mass of flesh. My bones had dissolved from the stress of more activity in the last fifteen minutes than they had seen in the last fifteen years.

I lay flat on my back, convinced I was dying. There was no way I was ever going to regain my feet again. I turned my head slightly to watch as Tara took her position on the crease. She wasn’t at net practice but in the centre of the ground at the stumps. She listened intently to something her coach muttered

in her ear and nodded. And then, she was in position. If I was going to die, this was a great final vision to go with.

The crack of the ball connecting with the bat was only superseded by the flawless form with which she took the shot. Okay, I might be a tad bit biased, but I really didn't want anyone finding out that I was such a large fan of Tara Wadhwa and I honestly thought she would go down in history as one of the cricketing greats.

Her bat sang again and this time her coach stepped up to make some corrections. As they were talking, I saw her angle her head ever so slightly to look at me. I knew that look! I slowly pushed myself into a seating position so I could better handle anything she threw at me.

Kulpreet walked over and tossed me a ball. I caught it reflexively.

“Let's see your bowling arm.” He winked at me, clearly in on some joke that was going to get me killed.

So, I was the one who was going to be throwing things at her. A devilish imp of excitement woke within me. I'd played cricket like pretty much every kid who was born on Indian soil, and I'd been decent. Not great, not exceptional but decent with the bat. But when you put a ball in my hand, I'd been a shade better than decent.

Still not national level decent but better than Tara's impression of me decent. A slow smile widened my lips as I got to my feet. I would enjoy taking her cockiness down a notch or two. Well-deserved cockiness but cockiness nonetheless.

I stepped up to face her and she took her position, a small smile on her lips. I ran up to my end of the pitch and bowled, an easy one. The ball went flying and I ducked, convinced she was aiming to take my head off with that shot. It whistled past my right ear and made its way all the way to the boundary.

She laughed, the sound a musical lilting one that had goosebumps erupting over my forearms. It was like the sun had broken over the horizon. Or so I would have thought if I

was the fanciful sort. Which I was not. Nope. Not at all. Even if I did feel like basking in the moment like a cat in the sun.

“Again,” she said.

I tipped my head in assent, more than happy to let her have the moment. I ran up to the pitch again and bowled a slightly wide ball.

“Wide!” Kulpreet called.

“Try to focus MIB,” Tara called, her bat braced on her shoulder. She was grinning, a wide, toothy grin that poked at my competitive self again.

This time when she took her position, I saw it in the loose lines of her posture, in the relaxed slope of her shoulders.

Now, I thought. I loped up to the pitch and threw, my wrist turning to add my signature spin to the ball. One that I’d perfected over years and years of gully cricket.

Tara moved forward to meet the ball and for one breathless moment I thought she was going to smash it for a six. And then, I saw it slip past the bat and strike right in the center of the stumps. They flew apart with a crack that would have brought tears to my eyes if I hadn’t been desperately clinging to my illusion of manly pride.

Tara froze, her disbelieving eyes going from her bat hanging uselessly at her side to the stumps lying in disarray on the ground behind her. Silence descended on the ground as everyone stared at the impossible sight.

She was going to kill me for humiliating her. She was going to make my life living hell for the rest of this assignment. She was never going to speak another civil word to me again.

I should have known better than to show up a client, that too publicly. I should have-

And then I heard it. Tara Wadhwa, Captain of the Women’s Indian Cricket team, threw her head back and laughed. A deep, loud, belly laugh that had everyone around joining in.

She walked up to me, swinging her bat over her shoulder and stuck her hand out for me to shake.

“Well played,” she said.

I stared at her hand and slowly placed my own in it. She closed her fingers around mine, her grasp warm and steady.

And that was when it happened. That was when I fell the tiniest bit in love with a woman I could never have.

CHAPTER 14

Tara

I tipped my head back as the warm water from the shower cascaded down on me. Sore muscles sighed in relief as they slowly loosened and unclenched.

Someone pounded on the bathroom door.

“Ten minutes,” his voice announced.

My muscles clenched right back up. The stupid friends night, I groused. Did it have to be tonight? I’d been in back-to-back practices followed by strategy sessions with my coaches and then some stern talking to from the board with regards to my ‘image’... Okay fine, if you thought too much about the last one then the so-called friends night out made sense.

My shoulders slumped as exhaustion settled around me in a cloud. I didn’t want to go out and party. I wanted to crawl into bed and sleep. Preferably, for the rest of the week.

The pounding on the door started again. I turned off the shower, stepped out of the cubicle and wrapped a towel around myself. Then I opened the door and glared, the glare that usually had my team falling to the ground for extra burpees.

It had the opposite effect on Nikhil. His gaze dropped to my towel clad, still dripping body, a slight flush highlighting his cheekbones and then he cleared his throat and looked over my head at the bathroom wall.

“We need to leave in the next half an hour,” he said, his voice low and rough.

It did strange things to me, that voice. I wasn't shy about my body or the fact that I was wrapped in only a towel. Being a sportsperson rid you of all your inhibitions but for some reason that voice made me want to dive for cover.

“I'll be ready,” I mumbled. “But only if you get out of my way.”

“I have some outfit choices on your bed,” he said, still talking to the bathroom wall behind me.

“I'll wear my own clothes,” I said sullenly. “I can dress myself for a night out.”

I expected him to argue, to convince, to...well to do anything but swallow hard, nod and then turn on his heel and run from the room.

My brows came together as I considered the puzzle of the man who'd just left. In the short time he'd been interacting with my friends, he'd ended up completely assimilated in the group. Everyone who met him loved him. Even my team was thawing towards him especially after his epic bowling stint earlier that day. A small smile touched my lips at that unexpected surprise.

And then my gaze snagged on the clothes strewn on my bed. He'd set three different choices for me. One was skintight jeans with a black vest, a cropped leather jacket and boots. One was a no fuss, frill free fire engine red dress that started with a halter and skimmed down my body to end just above the knee, teamed with killer studded stilettos. And the final choice was a simple silver sheath that would slide like liquid smoke over me when I slipped into it.

All three were outfits I would have chosen myself. MIB seemed to be getting to know me. My gaze went to the door he'd just run through. And maybe, I was getting to know him too.

I grabbed the outfit that called to me that night and slipped back into the bathroom to get ready. I was many things, but I

was never late.

Exactly seven minutes later, I strode out of my room, ready for the night ahead. No matter what it brought, I had Aisha and Inaya with me tonight. I needed nothing and no one else.

I walked into the hall and saw them all congregated there. Aisha wore a sparkling pink sequin concoction of a dress and looked like the prettiest flamingo in the world. Inu had on the famous mauve pantsuit that had launched her own Bollywoodish love story and I ... well, I was rocking the biker chick look Nikhil had added to my choices. I didn't know where these clothes were coming from or who was sponsoring them, but I needed to ask him if I could keep them.

"It's party time!" Ayaz said, channeling his inner Ranveer Singh. He smacked Kabir on his back and had Kabir almost bobbling his glass of water.

I grinned, loving the men in my friend's lives. They made it easy with their open adoration of the women who formed an undeniable part of my heart. My gaze caught on MIB who was standing to one side, his eyes on me. As they had been from the moment I walked into the room.

That dark, intense gaze slid down my body from my loose, left to dry in its own style hair to the tips of my boots. That strange tightening in my chest happened again as I forced myself not to hide from his scrutiny.

I couldn't make out what he thought. Did he like it? Did he not? And why did I care? Something was off with me tonight. I had never felt this unbalanced, this uncertain of myself and of what was to come in a very long time.

As the entire party started its mass exodus to the door, Nikhil fell in step beside me.

"Where are your friends? The many, many friends you claimed you had?" I asked, poking at him in a desperate attempt to return to our status quo.

"They'll meet us there," he replied quietly.

The others grouped around the elevator, waiting for the doors to open and I pivoted on my heel.

“See you guys on the ground floor,” I called out, heading for the stairs. The girls didn’t even argue. They knew better than to waste their breath with me.

He followed me without a word.

“I didn’t think you were assigned to be my bodyguard.” I eyed his tight profile. Mr. Sunshine looked a little grim tonight.

He shrugged. “I need to get fitter to survive whatever you decide to throw at me.”

I felt bad on the heels of that comment. I had been torturing him a little more than necessary. My pique had brought my petty out in spades. It was time to dial it back.

“So, your spin today was on point,” I said, trying to lighten the look on his face. “And not just your spin on a story spin.”

He didn’t respond, his gaze still on his feet.

“Did someone kick your puppy or something?” I asked, just as we reached the ground floor and pushed through the double doors leading to the foyer.

The others were clustered near the valet as the cars were being brought to the front. I could see them through the glass walls, laughing, talking and in Aisha and Kabir’s case, adding in a little stroking and groping too. And strangely, for the first time, in a very long time, loneliness didn’t start its slow, sinuous slide through me. Why?

“You look incredible,” MIB said abruptly, cutting through my thoughts. I glanced down at myself and back at him. Why did he sound angry? He had chosen this outfit, hadn’t he? Shouldn’t he be thrilled that it worked?

“Thank you,” I replied, starting towards the rest of the gang as my Land Cruiser pulled into view.

“Tara...”

I stopped and turned, cocking my head questioningly, waiting for him to continue. He seemed to be struggling to find the right words which was surprising for Nikhil. He was a

man of effortless words, something that had always annoyed me until this point.

“We should go,” I said, when he didn’t formulate any kind of sentence, the silence between us stretching and ballooning.

He walked up to me, stopping inches away, one hand going to push a lock of hair behind my ear. “You’re going to stop hearts tonight. Try not to pick a drug dealer to revive with a kiss.”

I wondered if I could grind the heel of my boot into his foot. My petty woke and stretched within me. Game back on.

He stepped around me and towards the doors. “And I don’t have a puppy. I have a bunny.”

CHAPTER 15

Tara

I was a boss babe. I looked like one. I talked like one. I danced like one. But I just didn't feel like one. I was still feeling off after my last encounter with MIB.

Also, he had a bunny? Who had a bunny for a pet? Nikhil, that's who.

Nikhil's friends had joined us at the nightclub and the man hadn't been joking...he had a looooot of friends. About ten random folks were crowded around our little tables. The club had opened up their VIP section for us so we had some breathing space but that also meant that a large number of mobile phones were trained in our direction trying to figure out exactly who we were.

It made me twitchy. It wasn't the bubbly, chirpy, poured into a bodycon glittery candy floss pink dress, girl that was draped all over Nikhil who made me twitchy. It was the eyes of the crowd. That was my story and I was sticking to it.

Even as the thought crossed my mind, candy floss let out a high pitched shrieky giggle and slapped Nikhil's chest with one dainty hand. I scoffed as I reached for my glass of water. My eye was starting to twitch now but I ignored it.

"Just water?" One of Nikhil's friends sat down beside me.

I nodded, smiling politely. "In training. I can't afford to have anything else at the moment. Advait right?"

He nodded. “I have to say I’m having a total fan moment right now. I would never have imagined I’d be talking to you, forget actually partying with you.”

I shrugged, awkward as always with this kind of attention. I handled it better when I was with my team as the attention was more spread out. For years, my girls had complained that only men’s cricket got attention but a spate of endorsements in recent times had launched a few of us into the public eye.

If I hadn’t already known it, my recent experiences had told me exactly how much I hate being in the public eye. Another squeal rent the air. What was he doing to her, I wondered disgruntled. Gutting her like a pig?

I refused to look over. Instead, I smiled at Advaith. “So, what do you do?” I asked, or rather shouted over the loud music blaring over our head.

“I’m a financial planner. I work with an investment firm.” He shrugged, a self deprecating smile on his lips. “I’m the guy who likes the boring stuff. Numbers, spreadsheets, nights at home with a book.”

I liked him. Boring was good. Boring didn’t hurt you. Another loud giggle had my teeth grinding together. I shoved some grilled chicken Inaya had specially ordered for me into my mouth and chewed silently.

“So, how did you get dragged into tonight?” I asked, trying to pitch my voice over the music and that infernal giggling. Was he tickling her?

“Nik is a childhood friend. Our mothers are good friends and we kind of got thrown together a lot resulting in a bromance that’s lasted decades.”

A particularly loud squeal had my eyes finally cutting to ‘Nik’ and Candy Floss. She was on his lap now, his face buried in her neck. My hands clenched into fists, my blunt nails digging into my palm.

“That’s Laila,” Advaith said, his gaze following mine to the source. “She’s, umm, she’s got a thing for Nik.”

And did Nik have a thing for her? I wondered savagely even as I reminded myself that I didn't care. I wouldn't care.

"Would you like to dance?" Advaith asked me. I shook my head. The last thing I wanted to do right now was dance.

"Or you could just sit here glaring daggers at Nik and Laila."

Now, I was glaring at him. He shrugged, his easy smile not slipping.

"Fine," I ground out. "Let's dance." Maybe the physical exertion would help rid me of my crabby mood.

I let Advaith lead me on to the small open space in the VIP section where a few of the others were dancing. He put his arms around my waist and we were just about to start moving to the music when a hard hand landed on my shoulder and pulled me back.

"No couple dancing," Nikhil said tersely.

My earlier irritation bubbled over. "And who died and made you God?" Especially after he'd spent the whole evening canoodling with Candy Floss.

"This evening is about emphasizing you and I are friends, hanging out with a larger group of friends. Unless you are going to dance individually with every single guy here, I suggest you keep the dancing to larger groups of people. Or the media is going to think you've hopped to another new guy."

"This is stupid," I seethed.

"No," he replied flatly, his eyes burning into mine with indecipherable emotion. "It's strategy."

We stared at each other, the noise and the crowd fading into the background. It felt like the anger, the irritation, the worry, the want, the strange, inexplicable yearning, it all formed a tight cord...one that stretched from me to him, hard, aching and unbreakable.

There was nothing in that moment but each other and the weird dynamic between us.

“Smile Captain,” he said, his own lips tipping up in the smallest smile, smallest and fakest. “The world is watching.”

I wanted to throw something at him, but I forced my own smile to appear. A second later, Aisha and Inaya wrapped their arms around me and my smile got more genuine.

A second later, Aisha had the entire group doing an organised hustle on the floor even as ‘Gimme Hope Jo’anna by Eddy Grant’ began to blare from the speakers. How Aisha managed to pull this shit off would forever be beyond me.

I found myself right in front of the group, Aisha and Inaya to my left and Nikhil and Candy Floss to my right. As we stepped and twirled in unison, I didn’t miss the fact that MIB moved with a sleek grace that meant he was no stranger to the dance floor.

As I moved to the right, my hand grazed his, the barest contact but one that burned a trail down my skin. I heard his sharp intake of breath in the slightest lull of the music and yanked my hand back into safer territory just as the music picked up momentum again.

I let my hair fall forward as I moved, forcing myself to focus on the music, on the rhythm I enjoyed so much, on the flow of my body, on the...his hand grazed my upper arm this time. And I stumbled. Right into Inaya who was frowning at her feet in concentration, willing them into the proper steps. Inu was a perfectionist in everything, including dancing for pleasure. Unlike Aisha who was hopping around like a rabbit on steroids.

“Are you okay?” Inu asked, her concerned gaze taking in my flushed face. It was a valid question given my elbow had just landed on her shoulder blade.

I nodded.

“Switch places with me,” I shouted into her ear.

Her gaze went from me to something behind my back. Whatever she saw had her asking no questions. I took my new place between my girls, my jittery nerves settling at the comfort of friends who were family.

I knew who I was with them, with my girls. I knew who I was with my team, standing at the crease. I knew who I was with everyone except the man who danced with feline grace, his dark eyes tracking my every move even with the distance I'd not so subtly put between us.

No. I didn't know who I was with him at all. And I wasn't sure I wanted to.

CHAPTER 16

Nikhil

Laila's hand caressed my back making my skin crawl. I gritted my teeth and smiled down at her. I'd asked for her help to make people think I had a girlfriend or a prospective love interest. But honestly, she was taking her role very seriously, a little too seriously. I thought I'd made it clear that this was playacting but she seemed to either have forgotten that bit or was deliberately ignoring it.

I stepped out of reach of her fingers, but one still slid down my spine stopping to hook in my belt loop.

"And where do you think you are going?" she purred, her perfume wafting over me in noxious clouds.

Away, I wanted to tell her. Far away from you and your suffocating, probably frightfully, expensive perfume.

Instead, I smiled and said, "Just getting a drink. Would you like anything?" Forever the gentleman. God, I was starting to hate that role, but it was a mantle that had been drilled into me and wasn't easily shrugged off.

When she shook her head, I escaped to the bar. Relief coursed through me at the thought of having a few moments to myself. I spotted a few of the paparazzi my team had tipped off about our night out and allowed myself a quick peek at the news, scrolling through the most popular entertainment blogs. The fastest hits always appeared there.

“Working?” Advait asked, stepping up beside me and signaling the bartender for a refill.

“Hmm?” I asked, distracted by a blog that had a picture of Tara and her friends dancing. She looked luminous. My thumb traced the contours of her cheek in the grainy picture on my phone screen.

“You’ve got it bad,” Advait laughed, dragging my attention back to the moment.

I straightened, putting my phone away. I picked up the beer the bartender set in front of me and forced my tense shoulders to loosen up.

“Laila is just...”

She was just what? How exactly was I going to end that sentence without being an absolute asshole?

“Not talking about Laila,” one of my closest friends murmured.

“Don’t man.” I closed my eyes, willing away the image of Tara swinging those trim hips on the dance floor in those painted on jeans which I, the masochistic bozo that I was, had chosen for her.

Advait stayed silent. The beauty of childhood friends was that they knew when to stop pushing.

“She’s amazing and pretty damn perfect for you.”

And then again maybe they didn’t.

“Perfect for me?” I turned on him, my frustration needing an outlet. “Do tell. Exactly how is Tara perfect for me?”

Advait took a sip of his drink and stared at me, his quirked eyebrow telling me exactly what he thought of the unravelling of my legendary composure.

“Did they surgically remove your chill when you started your firm?” he asked now. “What the hell happened to the easygoing Nikhil we all knew?”

“I grew up,” I bit out.

“And growing up means you can’t have fun?”

“No.” I took a mutinous sip of my beer. And then I sighed, “Sorry, I’m being a dick.”

“Less than two minutes.” Advaith grinned, tipping his drink at me. “Welcome back, my friend.”

I growled.

“She’s a job.”

Advaith hummed in response.

“Just a job. And once I’m done with it, with her, I can forget about the bratty celebrity I had to tolerate for a few months for a paycheque.”

“Uh huh.”

I took another sip of my beer, determined to not let him get to me. I was the chill one, remember? Surely, that chill hadn’t deserted me now. The back of my neck flamed at the lie I was trying to sell. I looked over my shoulder to where the rest of the group sat, laughing and chatting.

She was looking at me. Across the crowded nightclub, strobe lights searing our retinas, music assaulting our ears, and all I saw, felt or heard was her.

Well played.

The husky murmur, her hand in mine, the smile on her lips, all of it a memory I pulled out when I needed to feel that rush of warmth again, that heady moment that her complete, appreciative attention was on me. Only on me.

Well played indeed. I was pathetic. Hoarding crumbs when I could never hope for the cake.

And still, I couldn’t look away. And neither did she.

The moment stretched, ballooned and gained weight that it had no business owning.

“Just a job.” Advaith chuckled. “Keep telling yourself that.”

I wrenched my gaze from hers, turning my back on their table, a deliberate message. I downed the rest of my beer, the bitter liquid doing nothing for the churning in my gut.

“Fuck off man,” I told him, dropping my head and squeezing my eyes shut. I needed to get a grip. A fucking tight one.

“You know Nik,” Adhvik said, all teasing leaving his voice. “You’ve spent your entire life being responsible, being the one who did the right thing, the one who took care of everyone. No one would grudge you a moment of fun.”

Fun. I looked over my shoulder again. She was still looking back at me, her gaze a challenge, a taunt, a dare.

Tara Wadhwa was many things but to me, she’d never be just a moment of fun.

This time I managed to get a grip. A fucking tight one.

CHAPTER 17

Nikhil

“Just a job,” I mumbled to myself as I waited in her living room for her to change out of her party clothes and join me. We’d left the others to party longer and come back early as Tara had practice in the morning. She’d wanted to get home and I...I didn’t seem to want to be there if she wasn’t there too. We had, of course, left separately and at different times so no one thought we were together. The complicated webs we weave, I thought.

I had the latest report from my team to show her. It covered all coverage, offline and online, distilled into graphs and projections plus my strategy for the next couple of months. I was calm. I was collected. I was professional.

And then she stepped out of her bedroom. Damp hair trailing down her shoulders, face scrubbed clean of makeup and a pyjama set that had clearly been around since the 1800’s. It looked like the material would just disintegrate around her slim frame. I wished it would get on with it and fall to pieces now.

She’d never looked better. I was a dead man. I mentally smacked myself upside the head and ordered myself to focus.

Tara yawned and plonked herself down on the couch in front of me. I sat like the uptight, self-righteous dumbass that I was on a straight-backed chair across from her.

“It’s late,” she said, leaning sleepily against the cushions. “Do we have to do this now?”

“I just want to show you the trajectory of your recent press coverage,” I replied gruffly, squashing the urge to scoop her up and cuddle her. “Our strategy is working.”

“Good.” She yawned again. “I don’t want to see anything. If you say it’s working, it’s working.”

“Just like that?” I asked nonplussed.

“Yeah MIB.” She rested her head on the cushion, a small groan escaping her. The sound had my fist clenching against my thigh. “Just like that. I trust you,” she murmured, her eyes practically closing.

She trusted me. Why did that matter so much? I shut my laptop with a snap. “We’ll discuss it tomorrow then.” I cleared my throat, wanting to say something, anything that made sense of the feelings churning inside me. “You should get some rest,” was all that came out.

I stuck my hands in my trouser pockets to keep from reaching for her. I needed to leave before I volunteered to tuck her into bed. She’d probably knee me in the groin if I tried.

I collected my things and was about to leave when the doorbell rang. Both our heads snapped up as we stared in the direction of the door. Who the hell could it be so late at night? The security in the building was too tight for it to be anyone but a known person. A stranger wouldn’t have been allowed to reach her front door.

Whoever it was started banging on the door next. Startled, I was about to go check when Tara beat me to it.

She pulled the door open and faced the older man standing on the other side.

“Namaste Papaji.” She bent at the waist and touched his feet, her eyes not making contact with either him or me.

She straightened and stepped back to allow him to enter. Her gaze snagged on me, standing motionless in the center of the hall.

“We’re done for tonight, Nikhil?” she asked, her tone distant and dismissive. None of the snark or bite that I was used to from her. None of the warmth or joy either.

“Who is this?” her father interrupted, rudely, before I could answer.

“Nobody important. Someone who works for me. Endorsements and all.” Her eyes locked with mine, demanding I go along with the lie. Nobody important. The words rankled far more than they should. “He was just leaving.”

“Coke ya Pepsi lathe,” the older man said to me. “All waste endorsements you have her doing. Some stupid shoes.”

I opened my mouth to refute that knowing the brands in Tara’s kitty, but Tara’s pleading gaze had me shutting it again.

“And now tho she won’t get anything, even those stupid shoes. Everybody only knows her for being disgusting rubbish.”

“Being disgusting rubbish?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I stared at the man in disbelief.

“Aur nahin tho kya? Drug dealers, stupid romance nonsense and tonight out partying as if she is just some waster. What is going to happen to your fitness? What are your latest stats?” His gaze rakes her up and down. “Have you put on weight? Moti dikh rahi hain.”

With each biting question I could see Tara wilt, her shoulders sloping downward, her body closing in on itself like it could shield or protect her from the hurtful words.

“Sir, I don’t think you have any idea-“

“I don’t have any idea?” Those hard, cold eyes swung towards me. “I don’t have any idea? Who are you? What do you know about anything? I was her first coach. I made her. I made Tara Wadhwa, Captain, National Champion. Without me she would be nothing. Gully cricket she would have been playing. And you are saying I have no idea?”

“Nikhil, just leave.” Tara’s flat voice had rage igniting in me. This man had no right to snuff out the spark in her. He had no right to make her feel small when she was anything but. She was a fucking giantess.

“No, I won’t just leave,” I erupted. “He-“

“He’s my father.” Her toneless voice cut me off. Even without any emotion in her voice, her warning rang through loud and clear.

“We’ll talk tomorrow. Please leave now.” She held the door open for me.

With a last impotent glare for the other man, I walked through the open door and to the other side.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked her, pitching my voice low enough to be audible only to her.

The saddest smile I’d ever seen graced her lips.

“I don’t need a white knight, MIB,” she said. “I’m perfectly capable of slaying my own dragons.”

“That particular one was just roasting you alive though.”

“That particular one is owed the roasting. But that’s a story for another day.”

I grabbed the door as she started to shut it.

“If you need me, you’ll call?” I asked.

“My friends live right next door. If I need help, I’ll call them.” With that subtle jab to put me in my place, she shut the door in my face.

I stared at the thick wood that separated us.

“Just a job,” I whispered to myself as I stepped away. “Just a job.”

It didn’t stop me from texting Aisha and Inaya about the toxic storm brewing in their friend’s living room. It wasn’t concern. It was protecting an asset. Just doing my job.

CHAPTER 18

Tara

I ran an extra lap, my breath puffing out of me on an even note. I was not fat. I was not unfit. I was not disgusting rubbish. I repeated the words to myself, even as my father's digs from last night played on loop in my head. My muscles burned from the exertion even as my cheeks flamed from the memory of Nikhil's shocked expression as he'd listened to my father lay into me.

Little Mr. Perfect probably had the perfect, loving, supportive family to go with his wholesome self. The guy even had a gazillion friends to drop everything and turn up for a random night of socializing. And let's not forget the lovely Laila. Like it was even possible to forget her. Images of her snuggling up to MIB and at one point even licking his neck were branded into my brain after the previous night.

Almost like I'd conjured him up, I saw his black clad form lope into the stadium and take a seat in one of the front rows. He opened up his laptop and sat down, making himself comfortable. Didn't the man have any other clients to stalk and torture? Why was I the sole recipient of his undivided attention?

I ignored him, determined to have a few moments to myself before I had to deal with whatever new shit-stirring stuff he'd brought with him. My father had, as always, left me feeling flayed. I didn't need Nikhil's cheerful, sunshiny

outlook wafting over it. I wanted to be a grump today and by God, that's exactly what I would be.

The girls gathered around me, their own warm up done, and we took to the field to work on our fielding today. It had been our downfall in the tour of Australia we'd just finished, and the coaches and I were determined to work on our weakness. India was hosting the World Cup this year and the pressure of playing in front of a home crowd rested like a heavy rock on my shoulders.

Your stats have been better. Fix them or I'll speak to your coach myself.

My father's insidious voice wormed its way through my brain as I listened to my coaches list the training schedule for the day. And through it all, some part of my mind tracked the man on the edge of the ground who worked furiously on his phone and laptop. Why the hell was he here and not in his office? I ignored the way the wind ruffled his hair and his suit jacket flapped in the breeze moulding his shirt to his lean frame.

"Tara," Mahesh Sir snapped. "Pay attention."

Okay fine. I was trying to ignore it and clearly failing. I nodded at my coach and took my assigned spot on the field. Before long, all the cobwebs in my mind cleared, leaving nothing but the game. The noise, the confusion, the world itself dropped away as I settled into the zone I lived for.

Three hours later, our coaches relented enough to let us take a break. I flopped down on the grass, Niyati, my vice-captain dropping to sit down beside me.

"We've got some pretty cool eye candy for these rounds of practice," she commented, her gaze on the black form that was pacing and tugging at his hair in frustration.

I sipped from my water bottle wondering what exactly was pissing the man off. Had I screwed up again? My mind ran through the last few days. I hadn't done anything as far as I knew. But then I also did shit without realising it was the kind that could cause a shitstorm.

As I watched, MIB started to march across to us. Uh oh, I had done something. Apparently.

“Tara?” he said, stopping in front of me and looking down his perfectly straight nose at me.

“Yes, that’s me,” I answered agreeably. Beside me, Niyati snickered.

Mr. Sunshine glared at me. “We need to talk.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing? Or does it not count when you grind your teeth together like that?”

He shut his eyes, tilted his head up to the sky, and moved his lips in what I was sure was a prayer.

“Lunch!” Mahesh Sir shouted out from the other end of the field and everyone started to slowly push themselves to their feet.

“Joining us?” I asked affably as he glowered at me. This switch in roles was nice. I was enjoying being the sunshiney one for once.

I stretched my arms out hoping to ease my sore shoulder muscles. My right hand still holding my bottle connected with his chest and a startled ‘oof’ escaped him.

“Sorry,” I said, amusement shining through as he rubbed his chest with one hand.

Niyati shook her head at me and started towards the lunch hall. ‘See you there’ she mouthed at me as she walked backward.

“We can walk and talk?” I asked Nikhil, gesturing towards the building in the distance. I didn’t want to lose out on time to eat lunch especially since it was followed up with strategy sessions with the coaches.

He fell into step beside me without another word.

“What bug crawled up your arse?” I asked him, bringing my water bottle back to my mouth for another sip. A strong breeze blew over us cooling my still heated, sweaty brow. I sighed with relief and tugged at my sticky shirt to get some air

but that felt like a losing battle. Nikhil's gaze followed my motion and then cut away quickly.

“Your father has given an interview.”

I stopped walking. In the distance, I could hear the team laughing and joking as they sat down together. It was impossible to do what we did every day without forging strong bonds, without in many ways being family to each other. We may not always see eye-to-eye, but I knew that each one of those girls would always have my back.

Unlike my actual family, it would seem.

“Show me,” I rasped, holding my hand out for Nikhil's phone. My own phone was locked away in the locker room along with the rest of my belongings.

He held his phone out to me but didn't let go even when I grasped it. I tugged but he had a surprisingly strong grip.

“You don't have to read it,” he said gently. “But you have to let me do damage control.”

“I do have to read it,” I replied, my mouth dry and my heart pounding. “Let go of the phone.”

He didn't. “It's not important. It's one interview and we have a cascade of them set up for the coming days that will counter it.”

“Let go of the phone.”

“Tara, listen to me-“

“LET GO OF THE FUCKING PHONE.”

I swear birds took flight from nearby trees at my volume. I think even the chatter from the girls in the distance dimmed a little.

Nikhil held the phone up to his face for it to unlock and then handed it to me without another word.

Tara Wadhwa, always a loser. Until her father and coach taught her how to win.

An innocuous little clickbaity headline that had bile rising in my throat. I scrolled and skim read the rest of the sweet on the surface but viciously gaslighty article.

Always a loser. The words added to the weight of the rest he'd uttered in person just the previous day.

Always a loser. I'd show him. I was going to win the damn World Cup and then shove it down his throat if it was the last thing I did.

Thanks Papaji. I had all the motivation I needed now to bring it home.

CHAPTER 19

Tara

When I finally pushed through the door to my home, my sanctuary, my muscles were screaming from the torture I'd put them through. But it was nothing compared to the screaming in my head.

My coaches were pissed at my father's insinuations of their incompetence in the interview, the board was pissed that he'd given an interview without prior approval, and I was pissed that once again, my father had upended my life...all because he wanted the limelight. He wanted the recognition he thought was his due and it didn't matter to him that he stepped on me to get it.

I flopped face down on to my sinfully comfortable couch and groaned, every inch of my body in agony. I should probably fill the bathtub with Epsom salts and soak in it so I could get some relief but that would involve moving. And right now, I didn't want to move at all. Not one, single, fucking inch.

My front door swung forward, and I opened my eye to see Nikhil walk in shutting the door carefully behind him like an angry mob was going to stream in and lynch me. Actually, that might happen given the way things were going.

"Who gave you the code to my front door?" I mumbled, not moving an inch.

“Inaya,” he said, coming to sit beside me. “You can change it after I leave.”

I sighed into the throw pillow under my face. “I don’t have the energy to discuss your strategy MIB. Or to perform for any media interactions you might have planned. Can whatever it is wait?”

He hesitated and then nodded. “Sure,” he said softly. “It can wait till tomorrow.”

I buried my face back in the pillow in gratitude. Blissful silence descended around us.

“How are you?”

The gentle undertone to his voice had a lump forming in my throat. How long had it been since anyone had asked me that? Anyone other than Aisha and Inaya that is. They hounded me on a daily basis, a fact I never took for granted. But then, they were mine. Nikhil was...I had no idea what he was.

I turned my head to look at him and groaned when my neck muscles protested the movement.

“Where does it hurt?” he asked, dropping to his knees beside me.

Everywhere, I wanted to tell him. But the softness in his eyes made it impossible to respond. So, I just went back to burying my face in the cushion.

A silent few seconds later, I felt his hands reach for the tight muscles in my neck and shoulders. Slowly and firmly, he started to massage them. You didn’t spend so many years in sports without having team physios massage every inch of your body. But this...

Nikhil’s hands on my skin worked impossible magic on the stressed and strained muscles. But even as he worked out the kinks in my body, a flaming line of sensation sprung up in the wake of his magic fingers. My fists clenched at my sides even as I bit back a moan.

“Tara?”

The husky question had me mumbling something incoherent in response.

“May I?” he asked.

It took me a moment to realise he was asking me permission to straddle my body so he could massage my back. Anticipation slid through me, a syrupy, honeyed trail that had my core clenching even as I nodded, my eyes tightly shut. If I opened my eyes, I’d need to let reality in. And I didn’t want reality in this moment. I wanted the fantasy.

His leg slid over me and on to the other side of the spacious sofa. And then his hands were on my back, blazing liquid flame down every inch of it. It was as he eased the twisted knots in my lower back that his knuckles grazed the curve of my butt.

I gasped, the soft, breathy sound echoing like the crack of a gunshot in the otherwise silent room. Nikhil froze, his hands still on my lower back. And then, slowly, ever so reluctantly, they clenched into fists, my grimy t-shirt wrinkling in their grasp.

We stayed like that, silent and unmoving. I kept my eyes closed, my face buried in my cushion but when his hand tentatively moved to caress my cheek, I leaned into his touch. It was all it took to snap the leash he kept himself on.

With a harsh groan, he flipped me over and slid one hand into my hair, his large hand cupping the back of my head.

“Yes?” he asked, his dark eyes glittering as he looked down at me.

“Yes,” I breathed, no other answer fitting the moment.

And his lips crashed down on mine. Teeth clashing, tongues tangling, frantic hands stroking and grasping whatever they could find, it was the most inelegant kiss in the history of kisses. But, my god, it was smoking hot. My body erupted in his arms, forgetting all about its aches and pains.

With a groan, he fisted his hand in my hair and deepened the kiss even as I practically levitated off the couch trying to get closer, impossibly closer to him. Warmth flooded me as his

strong, sure hands stroked their way down my body making me wish I could freeze time so we could live in this moment forever.

One lean fingered palm cupped my right breast and a broken sound escaped me, one he captured with his mouth even before the breath had left my body. I brought my hands to his face, cupping his cheeks and holding him in place, unwilling to let go.

Sensation blazed through us, a tangled inferno of need, want and an inexplicable yearning that shouldn't have existed.

And then the blasted doorbell rang. He ripped his mouth from mine, those tormented eyes looking into mine, searching for something I didn't think I had to give.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern lightening the intensity in his eyes.

I nodded, still too breathless to speak. Whoever was at the door leaned on the bell again. It wasn't the girls, or they would be inside already. I was disproportionately grateful for that.

Nikhil had dropped his head into his hands and was taking deep breaths while muttering something about a 'job' under his breath. I shoved a cushion at him to cover up his lower body from whoever was at the door and sat up, loosening my hair from its ruined braid.

And opened my door to find Manisha Chibbar, the woman who'd set this whole mess in motion tapping her foot and glaring at me.

CHAPTER 20

Nikhil

I kept my head down and concentrated on my breathing as Manisha Chibbar gave us the dressing down we deserved. It didn't help. All I could think of was Tara in my hands, her slim body moving to my touch, her moans in my...okay, I had to stop! Or I was going to spontaneously combust.

"Honestly, Nikhil. How could you have let that interview happen?"

I dragged my mind back from the moment when Tara's fingers had slid through my hair and looked at the irate woman in front of me.

"I wasn't aware he was a loose cannon," I said coolly. "That information wasn't in the file."

"He is my father." Tara's calm voice sliced through the tense moment. "Not a loose cannon. Or a footnote in a file."

"He's an opportunistic, materialistic sleazeball," Manisha seethed.

"Still my father." Now, Tara just sounded tired.

It made something inside me ache to hear that defeated, exhausted note in her voice. Clearly Manisha heard it too for her face softened as she glanced at her protégé. Then she looked at me and her face hardened again.

“Fix it,” she told me, steel in her voice. “Or this will be the last high-profile project you get.”

I nodded curtly, not trusting whatever would come out of my mouth if I spoke at that moment. With a last look at Tara who was now staring out of the huge bay windows at the end of the hall, she left.

A heavy, oppressive silence filled the room. I should go. I should leave and come back only when I was ready to be the epitome of professionalism. I should call Aisha and Inaya and ask them to come. I should do a lot of things but instead, I stepped up to where she stood and placed my hands on her shoulders.

Tara stiffened, her entire body turning into a plank of wood.

“You should leave.”

“I should,” I replied, resting my chin on the top of her head. Her hair tickled my nose and I wiggled it to stave off a sneeze. I didn’t need to drip snot into the hair of the woman of my dreams.

Slowly, she relaxed into me, allowing herself to lean against me and take the little support and comfort I had to offer.

“My father was always ambitious. He played for Punjab and was the best that they had on the circuit at the time. He was tipped to make the national team when he met with an accident.”

She fell silent. I knew where this was going. The man’s cricketing career had ended and he had decided to live out his dreams through his daughter, irrespective of what it cost her.

“We were going triples on his bike. We’d just finished watching a show of Main Hoon Na and he was in a really good mood. Anything to do with Shah Rukh Khan put him in a good mood. We stopped at a dhaba on the highway for tea. It was one of those chilly winter nights where tea was all anyone wanted. Milk for me though.”

“How old were you?”

“Six. I had my favourite doll with me. I mean I was six! Even Shah Rukh Khan wasn’t going to hold my attention for three hours.”

She attempted a laugh, but it fell short. I wrapped my arms around her, holding on tight even knowing that I was not going to be able to make a difference to the pain saturating her voice.

“I was playing some stupid game with my doll and a huge gust of wind caught it and flung it out of my hands. I...I ran behind it. I didn’t see the lorry. I really didn’t.”

Her voice caught and I held on tighter, burying my face in her hair.

“Papaji threw himself at me and pulled me out of the way but his trouser snagged in the lorry’s tyre. He was dragged fifteen feet before the lorry slowed. He made a full recovery.”

I felt a tear fall on the arm I had wrapped around her waist.

“But he never played cricket again.”

“Tara,” I breathed her name out, her sorrow, guilt and pain a living entity in the room. She turned her face to the side, burying it in my shoulder.

“Your mother?” I asked.

“She was a good wife.” The words were muffled against the fabric of my shirt. “She knew where her duty lay. She was there for him every step of the way.”

Anger burned a hole in my gut. And who’d been there for the six-year-old child who’d watched her life fall apart on that dark highway?

“He was my first coach you know,” she said briskly, shoving at the emotions to make way for practicality. “Taught me how to hold a bat, taught me everything I needed to know to get that sports scholarship to St. Columba’s. That’s where I met Aisha and Inu.” Her voice softened. “Directly or indirectly, he gave me that. He gave me friends who loved me. He gave me family.”

She turned in my arms and tipped her head back to meet my gaze.

“Manage him. Handle him. But don’t embarrass him. Don’t humiliate him. Because if you do,” the steel in her voice was back. “Chibbar and you will deal with me.”

I nodded, my fingers tucking a stray lock of hair behind one ear. “Got it. Leave it to me. This is my thing. I’ll make it all okay. Trust me Captain.”

Her shoulders sagged with relief. I allowed myself one last kiss to her temple before I said, “Tara, about what happened earlier...”

She looked up at me, eyes wary and anxious. “It was a mistake,” she said, jumping in before I could.

It landed like a punch in the gut, but I forced myself to stay calm. Tara had had an emotional day. Today wasn’t the day to push boundaries, to make demands that had no right to exist.

I had a job to do and from what Tara had just told me, that job had gotten infinitely more complicated. For now, she was right. It had been a mistake. I was many things but unprofessional was never one of them. My business was built on the reputation I’d painstakingly earned for always doing the right thing, for always making the principled decision, for being the good guy.

But as I looked down at Tara’s worried face, I ached to do the opposite. My body wanted nothing more than to steal another kiss and see where that took us, and my heart wanted her. Simple as that. It wanted her and wanted me to break down every stupid, logical reason that stood in the way of that.

But that wasn’t what Tara needed right now. Tara needed Nikhil Upadhyay, the country’s foremost fixer. And that was what she was going to get. Because I realised there was suddenly nothing more important to me than what Tara Wadhwa wanted.

I stepped back from her, letting my arms fall to the side, my body already missing the warmth of hers snuggled against it.

“We don’t have to complicate things. We can forget that kiss ever happened and maybe we can be something other than

that. Not adversaries but maybe friends?" I asked her, holding out a hand for her to shake.

She stared at it like it was a live snake.

"This is how you collected that platoon of friends you have, isn't it?" she asked, sounding disgruntled.

"If it makes you feel any better, I never kissed Advaith. He decided to be my friend anyway."

She laughed, a short burst of sound that I collected and added to my memories of her. My memory box was already overflowing with snippets of her and her different moods. A little hoarding never hurt anyone, did it? Because I knew I was never going to give away any of those snippets. They were all I could have of her and they were mine. Forever.

CHAPTER 21

Nikhil

I clicked through the performance report my team had sent me. We had three more proactive, forward-looking pieces with leading magazines and one with an entertainment blog which had more traffic and readership than all of the previous three magazines combined.

And still, I knew it wasn't enough. I knew what I had to do. Chibbar wasn't going to like it. Hell, I didn't like it. But it needed to be done.

I picked up my phone and dialed Chibbar. "I'm going to set up a joint interview with Tara and her father. Ideally, something on television. Preferably not live since the old man is a loose cannon on steroids and we can never predict what will come out of his mouth."

Silence on the other end of the line.

I sighed. "I know. It feels like shit to me too. But we need to control the narrative and this is the best way to do it."

Now, Chibbar sighed. "And?" she asked, astute enough to know that this wasn't the end of my plan.

I stared at the wall of my office. A gorgeous Ravi Varma painting of a beautiful woman with a pot graced it, reminding me of the investment I'd made in building my brand. Reminding me of the responsibilities that rode my shoulder every single day. Reminding me why I did what I did.

I cleared my throat. “I want a representative from the BCCI and her current coach to be a part of it too. Her first coach, her current coach, her boss and the champion who is going to bring the World Cup home. It’s the perfect panel. It shifts the needle from her personal life to the game and keeps it there.”

“That’s a big ask.” She didn’t sound angry as she said it though. She sounded thoughtful.

“There is tremendous buzz in the media right now with the Under-19 Women’s team’s win. It’s the right time for this move. You know it.”

“I can’t stand the idea of giving that man a national platform to speak at,” she sighed. “I may come off as a hard ass, but I have nothing other than that girl’s best interests at heart. I can’t say the same for him. He is going to say or do something to put her down. And the network folks will want to keep it. It will, after all, make for good tv. He’s not a good man, Nikhil.”

An image of Tara sprung out of my mental keepsake box. Eyes hard, face strained as she demanded I not embarrass her father.

“And still, he’s her father,” I echoed her words from the previous day. “If handled right, we’ll have the family loving quota of fans in our pocket.”

“Always with an angle.” Chibbar laughed, a dry sound.

“It’s what you pay me for,” I told her, my eyes still on the painting but my mind on a far more captivating woman. One that I felt I was betraying by bringing her personal demons out on display and then making them perform for the entertainment of trolls who had nothing better to do with their lives than tear down someone as wonderful as her.

“Set it up,” she said abruptly. “I’ll represent the BCCI. Mahesh will come from the coach’s team. And you can send us your invoice.” Again, that dry, mocking laugh. It chafed against my raw nerves, but I held my tongue.

“I’ll do that,” I replied evenly before disconnecting the phone and placing it carefully on the table, aligning it with my bulging planner.

I stared at my neat, clutter free desk, control slipping and sliding in my otherwise iron grip. And then I lost it.

On a roar of frustrated rage, I swept my hand through the innocent contents of my desk sending it all flying to the ground.

“Well, that tells us all we need to know, doesn’t it, Inu?”

Chest still heaving with suppressed emotion, I looked up from the mess on the floor and saw Aisha and Inaya looking at me, goggle eyed.

“What do you want?” I snapped at them, my legendary calm completely deserting me.

“Easy tiger.” Aisha sauntered into my cabin like she owned it. She sat down in the chair across from me, an amused smirk on her lips. Inaya stepped daintily around the mess before stooping to pick up some of the files on the floor and place them on the desk.

“Thank you,” I told her quietly. She smiled and sat down in the chair beside Aisha’s.

“Why are you guys here?” I asked, sinking wearily into my own chair and trying hard to ignore the mess on the floor. I was a cleanliness freak and the carnage from my temper tantrum was making me twitchy.

Aisha examined her nails as if they were the most important things in the world. “We’ve come to ask you what your intentions are,” she murmured.

“My intentions?”

“You can’t just kiss our friend, decide you want to be another friend of hers, and then toss her to the wolves on national television and not expect us to feed you to the piranhas,” Inaya said, in her calm, sweet voice.

I shut my eyes and squeezed my temples with my hands. It didn’t help.

“You were eavesdropping,” I muttered.

“Of course we were,” Aisha said.

“And Tara told you about the kiss.”

“Of course, she did,” Inaya added, still smiling sweetly at me. I had a feeling she would do that even when she gutted me with a serrated knife like the shark she clearly was.

“Tell us your plan,” Aisha ordered.

“You’re not the boss of me.” I mentally rolled my eyes at my own petulant response. I was clearly not having my best day.

“Tell us anyway,” Inaya said. “For Tara’s sake.”

I looked at her and in her soft eyes, I saw the understanding of where I stood. And so, I took a deep breath and told them.

“It gives her asshole father visibility,” Aisha muttered.

“Aisha!” Inaya’s reproofing tone had her shrugging.

“What?” Aisha threw her hands up in the air. “He is an asshole.”

“And still her father,” Inaya and I chorused together.

“And still her father,” Aisha agreed grudgingly and only I knew, for Tara’s sake. These girls had her back like no one else ever would. They would be there for her long after I disappeared from her life.

I was grateful for that. I was, even if the thought of disappearing from her life sliced through my insides like razor blades.

“It’s a good plan, Nik,” Aisha said now.

She understood. Of course, she did. Her business and mine were soul sisters, parallel paths but not so different. We both worked in the public’s eye. She in the center of the storm, me controlling the damage the storm would do.

“Will Tara understand?” I asked, knowing the hurt I was causing by bringing this idea to the table.

“No,” Inaya said, watching me carefully and seeing far more than I wanted her to see. “But she’ll do it anyway.”

CHAPTER 22

Tara

I sat on the bleachers running the girth of the stadium and stared down at where my girls were practicing. Beside me, Mahesh Sir was pointing out areas of improvement and suggesting changes to the batting lineup.

I shook my head, disagreeing with sending Niyati in to bat at No. 4. Niyati and I were a great opening partnership, and I didn't see the need to mess with what was already working. We were still arguing varied permutations and combinations when I saw MIB approaching us. He was followed by a younger girl who was dressed in every colour of the rainbow.

Mahesh Sir let out a disgruntled huff when he saw Nikhil approaching. I eyed my coach speculatively, knowing that there was more to that sound than he was going to expand on in that moment.

“Good morning.” Nikhil came to stand in front of us. He took off his aviators and attempted a smile. A rather pathetic attempt at one, to be honest. The man looked exhausted. Beside him, the girl a rainbow had thrown up over bounced on her toes.

“Morning,” I replied, even as Mahesh Sir tipped his chin brusquely at him. Oooh drama! Intrigued, I looked between the men wondering what had happened to cause all this stress. But neither one was saying anything to indicate the reason.

The strange girl standing beside him bounced again. “Hi,” she chirped at me. “I’m Smriti. I’m a huge, huge, huge fan of yours. So so so excited to meet you. I can’t believe this is actually happening. I think I’m going to faint. My heart was going dhad dhad dhad from then. And now that you’re here, it’s going phat phat phat.”

Nikhil groaned and buried his face in his hands. “My younger sister. She wanted to meet you,” he mumbled from behind his fingers. “I am so sorry. I should never have brought her along.”

Smriti’s verbal diarrhea stopped long enough for her to give her brother an affronted look.

“Accha? I am so embarrassing, is it? Shall I tell Tara ma’am about you?”

Nikhil dropped his hands and glared at her. “Stop talking now or you will never see another rupee of your pocket money.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I don’t care about that. My side hustle makes me more money than the pocket money you give me.”

“Then why are you still taking money from me?” he asked, outraged. “And what side hustle? Is this safe? What are you doing?”

Smriti waved an airy hand dismissing his anxious big brother wrath. Her coloured ribbons glimmered in the air as she tossed her hair and pointed her little nose skyward.

“Strategy session in ten mins,” Mahesh Sir grunted at me at this point and then loped off without a backward glance at Nikhil. Interesting, I thought, glancing at the man who was looking more than a little frazzled today.

“So, Tara Ma’am, can I interview you for my vlog?” Smriti plonked herself down next to me.

“Your vlog?” Nikhil sounded like he was choking. “That’s your side hustle?”

Smriti gave him some side-eye. “Keep up, won’t you?”

“Keep up? Keep up???” Nikhil looked to be frothing at the mouth. For a moment, I worried his sister was going to give him a heart attack.

“I can’t actually,” I interrupted gently. “Until you clear it with my agent and your brother. They’re in charge of any public interactions I do and I can’t do anything on the public front without their permission.”

“But why?” The words were practically a wail.

“Because there might be some conflict of interest if I do something as a personal favour and that could upset my sponsors.”

It was time for my strategy meeting and for me to corner Mahesh Sir and try and figure out what he had going on with Nikhil. I got to my feet and dusted my hands off. “But it was lovely to meet you, Smriti. I hope we meet again.”

“And it’s not a conflict of interest when the man who’s had a crush on you for years, who had your picture as his screensaver, is representing your interests, is it?”

I turned slowly to look at the girl who was glowering mutinously at her brother, who just might be having the heart attack I’d predicted earlier.

“I beg your pardon?” I asked, delight unfurling inside me at the look on Nikhil’s face.

“He-“ All she managed to get out was that one word before Nikhil wrapped a hand around her mouth and silenced her.

We stared at each other, neither saying anything for a moment.

“So, did you have a poster of me on your wall that you kissed every morning and night?” I asked, unable to hold it in anymore.

He growled, the sound doing strange things to my insides even as I struggled to hold in a laugh. He looked down at his sister who was making incoherent noises against the palm of his hand.

“This one is going to be grounded forever.”

Smriti eye-rolled so hard, I was sure she was able to see through the back of her head. I laughed, the sound strangely freeing after the stress of training and my father's shenanigans.

"It was lovely to meet you Smriti," I told her with a wink. "We should catch up sometime so you can tell me more of your brother's secrets."

I turned to leave with a last wave of my hand.

"Tara, a moment?" Nikhil's voice stopped me.

"Don't worry, I'll pose for a selfie with you before you leave," I deadpanned.

"Haha, you're hilarious," he snarled back. "But this is important."

I sighed. "I have a strategy session to get to, MIB. In case you haven't noticed, we are in the final run up to the World Cup. I don't have time to discuss my favourite shade of nail polish on television."

Smriti snorted in agreement from behind the firm grip of her brother's hand. I liked this girl, I thought with a grin.

"It's about your father and the damage control we're planning," Nikhil replied.

And I stopped grinning.

CHAPTER 23

Tara

“It’s a good idea babe,” Aisha said, sympathy coating her voice as she nudged my shoulder with her own.

I made a noncommittal sound. I wasn’t ready to discuss anything that ruined the mood today. I had my girls to myself for a rare evening in and I fully intended to make the most of it.

Inu was at the dining table mixing something in a bowl. I eyed her warily. Whatever that was, it was going to end up on my face in a few minutes. I only hoped I didn’t erupt in red splotches like last time. Inu seemed to think we made better beta testers for her products than the people actually paid to do that job.

“It may be a good idea,” Inu said briskly, sniffing at her scary bowl of God-knows-what. “But we don’t have to like it.”

“Of course not,” Aisha said loyally. “We hate it. All of it.”

And I would still do it. I shook the maudlin mood off and sat up straight on my couch.

“Do me first,” I told Inu. “I need the glow after all those hours running around in the sun.”

“Baby, you glow brighter than the sun,” Aisha proclaimed, trying to slink away from Inu and her gloop wielding brush.

Wait a second, was that paste purple? But it was too late now for Inu was on me with her brush.

I lay back and shut my eyes, surrendering to my fate. Inu plonked two cucumber slices on my eyes. Whatever was in the face pack, it was cool and soothing. And right now, I was all about inviting cool and soothing into my life.

“Sooooo,” Aisha drawled.

I ignored her. Cool and soothing I reminded myself.

“What’s the deal with Nikhil?” Inu swiped busily at my face as she poked her nose into my business.

“There is no deal other than that he is a royal pain in my ass,” I mumbled.

“Don’t scrunch your face,” Inu ordered. It looked like she was done because she moved away from me and I heard Aisha groan. I wanted to smile evilly but whatever purple mud was on my face had hardened already and I was scared my face would crack.

“You know, I like him,” Inu said conversationally, as Aisha made whimpering noises in the background.

“You like everybody,” I retorted. “And why are we talking about Nikhil again?”

“Because we think *he* likes *you*,” Aisha squeaked. “Inu that’s cold!”

“You do know we’re not thirteen and back at St. Columbas discussing boys and our crushes no?” I asked caustically.

“No, we’re twenty-five, in our homes, and discussing men who set our libidos on fire.” Inu stepped back and surveyed her handiwork before looking at me and screeching, “Tara stop eating your cucumbers!”

I stopped mid crunch, the evidence of my crime still between my teeth and making it very hard to protest my innocence.

But damn it, I was hungry. “Did Kabir get you any more Kayani biscuits Aish?” I asked hopefully.

“No ya,” my purple faced friend said woefully. “He’s on some health kick and is trying to make me eat sugar free oatmeal cookies instead.”

“The horror!” I said drily. As someone who suffered through clean meals every single day I had very little sympathy for her little toe dipping into the same waters.

“And he even wants to try baking them at home!” Aisha widened her eyes as much as she could to convey the implausibility of the idea. “The romance in my relationship is dead,” she moaned. “It’s gotten all boring and healthy.”

“It’s just biscuits, Aisha,” Inu said calmly, as she slathered her own face with purple goo.

“Oh ya?” Aisha sat up indignantly. “And what did you have for dinner last night may I ask?” She wagged a finger at Inaya. “And don’t try to lie. The fragrance wafted all the way over to our flat.”

Inaya’s right cheek, still bare of the face pack, blushed. “Ayaz made mutton biryani for our at home date night,” she said, smiling down at her bowl of purple hell.

“It’s just biscuits, it seems,” Aisha huffed.

I grinned, or rather tried to grin, as I wondered if Inu would notice if I ate the other cucumber. I mean, only one eye was relaxing at the moment. It didn’t seem fair to the other eye.

“Don’t get snippy.” Inu worked on her right cheek now. “I ordered food for us already. It should be here any minute now.”

On cue, the bell rang and I popped off the couch. “I’ll get it,” I sang out. This way, I could eat the other cucumber slice without Inu noticing too. I doubted I could eat too much of whatever she had ordered but then food was food and...

I hauled the door open without a thought and heard what could only be described as a shriek. I stumbled back in fright even as Nikhil stared at me aghast, one hand seemingly clutching his heart. Apparently, I looked scary enough to give

him a heart attack. Inu might want to work on this product a bit more before she released it.

“Tara?” he asked tentatively.

“Who the hell else is going to answer the door to my house?” I asked surlily. I wanted to cock a sarcastic eyebrow at him, but my face wouldn’t move.

A large grin split his face as he took my entire look in. I’d paired the purple face with old, threadbare boxers and a frayed blue tank top. I was rocking the look, even if the only person who felt that way was me.

“What do you want?” I demanded, even as my silly body reacted to the sight of him in his black trousers and black shirt. That kiss had been incendiary and in other circumstances, I would be in his arms smearing purple goop all over him. But these weren’t other circumstances. These were these circumstances and sadly, I would have to keep my purple face to myself.

His eyes softened even as Aisha’s laughter trailed towards where we stood. “I was worried about you. I just came to see if you were okay. Clearly, the girls have it all in hand.”

And then it was my turn to soften. Dammit, this didn’t help. I needed to stay hard and solid and unaffected.

“I’m a hard boiled egg,” I muttered.

“I beg your pardon?” Nikhil stared at me, clearly wondering if I’d been drinking. As if, I thought morosely. That was never an option during training, especially not when we were training for a tournament.

“Nothing. I’m sorry you wasted your time coming all the way here.” I looked away from him, unable to look at him anymore without launching myself at those magic lips.

“You’re never a waste of time, Tara.” The soft words had my eyes shooting back to his. “Not in my eyes at least. And I’m sure, not in most people’s eyes either.”

A hard knot of emotion choked me as I stared at him.

“So,” I whispered. “Did you have a poster of me in your bedroom? One that you kissed?”

A wry smile touched his lips. “Never going to live that one down, am I? Not that I want to. I am your number one fan, Tara Wadhwa, always have been. I was when I didn’t know you and now that I do, my fanboying has only gotten exponentially worse.”

We looked at each other as silence descended on us, the weight of his words making it hard to do anything but wish for something that didn’t look possible.

Nikhil cleared his throat and stepped back. “I should go,” he said, his hand raising as if to reach for me, then stopping in mid-air and dropping back to his side.

I didn’t argue with him or tell him not to leave. It was better this way, for both of us.

“I like your sister,” I told him, my rebellious streak surfacing and trying to keep him in place for a few minutes more.

“I like her too,” he smiled ruefully. “On most days. Today, maybe not so much.”

I smiled, or rather I tried to. Purple flakes dusted the ground between us.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. “We have a meeting with my team at eleven in the morning.”

I was still trying to gather the purple dust to one side with my foot, when I felt him move close to me, his cheek pressed up against mine. Sensation surged, emotions whirled and I forgot all about doing the sensible thing.

“Nikhil, I-“

A click sounded and I glanced, startled, at where he was holding his phone up, clearly to take a picture.

“You promised me a selfie,” he said, his grin tipping over from wicked to evil. I glared and more purple rain fell around our feet.

He dropped a light kiss to the top of my head and stepped away, regret and affection mingling in the look he sent me.

“I promise to print this one, frame it and put it up on my wall. I’ll even kiss it every morning and night, just like you hoped.” He walked backwards towards the lift, almost like he was unwilling to take his eyes off me.

“See you in the morning Captain,” he said, just as the doors of the elevator slid shut, hiding him from sight.

“See you,” I whispered to myself, a strange restlessness taking hold inside me.

CHAPTER 24

Nikhil

My phone buzzed relentlessly. I ignored it and stared at the monitor in front of me. The more Tara's father, Mr. Pankaj Wadhwa, spoke, the tighter her face got. It wasn't the look we were going for.

"When's the next commercial break?" I asked the technician sitting next to me.

"In five minutes, Sir," he replied, fiddling with some knobs that controlled the sound output on set.

My phone rang again. Cursing, I grabbed it and stepped aside.

"I'm working, Ma," I bit out, not waiting for her to launch into her spiel.

"When are you not?" she retorted. "This is important. Baba needs some money."

Baba always needed money. The man had two passions in life, producing children and horse racing. Both were expensive propositions when he refused to work to fund his hobbies. I squeezed my eyes shut in a vain bid to push the uncharitable thoughts out of my mind. My six siblings were not hobbies. But to the man who'd fathered them, they were. Seven kids. The man had never heard of birth control. And luck of the draw had landed me as the oldest.

"Nikhil, awaaz nahin aari."

“Because I didn’t say anything,” I gritted out.

“Accha don’t do drama and all. Smriti told us about all the big jobs you are doing. Now with the famous cricketer and all. Paisa tho hai and Baba is not asking for much.”

“Why can’t Baba ask me himself?” Impotent rage churned inside me even as I kept my expression bland and pleasant. The last thing I could afford was for this to leak and mar my reputation.

“Men have their pride, Nikhil,” my mother said, completely unaware of the irony in her statement. “Now, stop fussing like a baniya moneylender and transfer five lakhs to Baba.”

Five lakhs. It was what I’d just locked into a fixed deposit for Smriti’s college education. She was looking to do a Bachelors in Brand Management which now made sense with her vlog’s success. A vlog I hadn’t known about until she’d brought it up. I should have known. Parenting my siblings wasn’t just about meeting their financial needs, was it? I should do better. I should be better.

A wave of exhaustion crashed through me. I’d been working nonstop from the age of seventeen when I realised that my father had no interest in being the head of the very large family he’d produced and continued to add to. He was not a bad person. He wasn’t verbally or physically abusive. He wasn’t adulterous. In fact, quite the opposite. He was the fun one. The life of the party. The jovial one. The one everyone wanted to spend time with. He was also very much in love with my mother as was evidenced by his constantly growing brood.

He was a good husband. He just wasn’t a good father. So, I’d had to be.

“Ma, I can’t,” I said. “There are a lot of bills piled up for the kids and you guys just had the kitchen renovated at home. There just isn’t a lot of extra money to throw around. Especially not on his reckless and irresponsible gambling.”

“Such a miser you are.” The explosion was predictable. “You want your father to die? He will have a heart attack and die. Or maybe those goons who keep asking for money will kill him. How can you be like this? So selfish. He’s your father!”

And still my father.

Tara’s words echoed in my head. I shook my head and said, “I’ll transfer the money tomorrow.”

“No today,” my mother insisted.

“Tomorrow, Ma.” My tone brooked no argument. “Today, I’m working.”

I had to earn the money to cover not only education, medical, and housekeeping bills but also gambling bills, after all. I clicked the phone shut and turned to find Tara standing right behind me. Clearly, I’d missed the call for the break from shooting. How long had she been standing there, listening to me. My mother had been screeching loud enough to be heard by other people too. She was watching me, a soft, compassionate look in her eyes.

Oh hell no. No. No. No. I did not need her pity. I firmed my jaw and said, “We need to talk.”

“Okay,” she said.

“The interview is going like crap,” I told her.

She nodded agreeably.

“You can’t look so tense and so closed off, especially when,” I hesitated. “When he’s talking. I realise he’s hard to take but...”

“I can take it,” she shrugged, looking very zen with the idea. Her calm acceptance of her father’s not-so-subtle bullying ignited a fire in my blood.

“You shouldn’t,” I said shortly.

She gave me a speculative look and then pointed a finger at her chest. “Me pot, you kettle.”

I shook my head, not in the mood for jokes. “Keep your responses focused on the game. No matter how much he taunts you, don’t react. Chibbar and Mahesh know not to do the same, although Mahesh is slipping too. I will speak with him. But Tara, the focus of this panel will always be on you. I need you to bring your A-game.”

She nodded, her gaze going beyond me to where they were setting up for the next segment. Her father was chugging from a bottle of water and checking himself out in the mirror across from him.

I crossed the room to where Chibbar and Mahesh were sitting. Chibbar was on her phone but glanced up and gave me a grim smile as I approached. Tara had walked with me, matching my stride so she didn’t get left out of whatever conversation was about to happen.

I went down on my haunches before them and started to outline our strategy. The first segment had focused on Tara’s early years which meant her father had managed to hold fort. It was fine. There was a reason why I’d ensured that went first. By the time the next three segments followed, that first bit about her childhood would be a distant memory. Provided, the other man didn’t try to hijack the narrative. Which he would. I had no doubt about that. We just had to take control back from him.

“Mahesh Sir, you’ll take point on all questions regarding form or game statistics. If he interrupts, I want you to clap back and remind him and the audience that you are the man who is training her now. Not him. His opinion is irrelevant.”

Mahesh nodded, his face grim.

“Ms. Chibbar-“

“I know what to do, Nikhil,” she retorted. “I’ve been doing this longer than you’ve been alive.”

“Then you should also know that if you pay someone for their expertise, it’s only common sense to listen to what they have to say,” I snapped, my temper fraying.

Tara made a choked sound beside me. And then before I could react, I felt her strong hand on my back, patting and slowly moving in small circles, hoping to calm and soothe but only causing my stress to ratchet up further. Because now, I wanted to drag her off to a dark corner and let her stroke and pat other parts of my body.

“Places,” someone called from behind the light and all three of them rose to their feet as the interviewer took his place at the large u-shaped table the panel was seated at. Tara’s father had already hustled off to sit down in the chair allotted to him, puffing his chest out like a rooster about to crow.

I took a deep breath and stepped back as they moved to join him. Bringing up the rear, in a killer black pantsuit and looking like a wet dream in heels, Tara walked with a sexy confidence that was mesmerizing. What was also mesmerizing was the subtle sway of her slim hips.

I didn’t even realise those hips had stopped moving until she said, “Nikhil?”

Not MIB. Nikhil. I dragged my gaze up to meet hers.

“Are you okay?”

CHAPTER 25

Nikhil

Am I okay? A strange sensation swamped my body at that question. When was the last time someone had asked me that question, had cared enough to? I was usually the one asking, checking, making sure everyone else was okay.

Throat tight, I nodded once. “Go kill them,” I told her.

“Literally?” she asked, eyes dancing.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “I wish it could be literal, but it isn’t.”

“Don’t worry, MIB.” She raised both her hands, thumbs up, in my direction. “I got this.”

I was very worried. She had a gleam in her eyes that didn’t bode well for my future heart problems. And then she sat down in her chair, turned to look at me and winked. And my heart just collapsed under the strain of it all, dissolved into a pile of mush and oozed to a puddle at her feet. I was never getting it back. I wasn’t sure I wanted it back.

“So, Captain Wadhwa, what do you have to say about your Vice Captain, Niyati Babu not being in form? Is it true that the only reason she’s still on the team is because she’s your friend?”

Bringing out the big guns, I mused as I watched Chibbar straighten in her seat and lean forward to intercept the

question.

“I wish,” Tara said, a husky laugh escaping her. “I really wish I had that kind of power.”

Chibbar subsided in her seat, a small smile on her lips.

“All sportspeople have phases, I guess you can call it. Times when things go beautifully and times when they don’t. Not being in form is a phrase that’s often bandied about to describe players who are unfit or not training to be at their peak. I can assure you that not just Niyati, but every member of my team, is training their very fit butts off to be ready for the tournament. And I can also assure you that every single one of us has earned our spots on that team. Nothing was handed to us.” Her gaze flicked towards her father. “No matter what anyone might claim, nobody did us any favours or offered us any handouts. We earned all of it with our sweat, tears and sometimes blood. We earned every little bit of it, and I’ll be damned if I’ll let anybody say otherwise.”

Mahesh started a slow clap and had Chibbar joining in with an approving smile. “Spoken like a true Captain,” she said.

Tara’s father was turning a virulent shade of purple. I smiled. Now the interview was on track.

My phone rang again. I looked down to see my mother’s name flashing again, silenced it and looked out at the woman under the spotlight. She was something else. For now, she was all I could see.

The interview went smoothly after that and the message that came across was loud and clear even to the man who sat at that panel and looked progressively more unhinged. When the interview was done, he ripped his microphone off and stormed off the set without a word to anyone. Tara watched him go, a sad look in her eyes.

It made me stride over and say, “You look like you could use a drink.”

“I’m off alcohol until the tournament is done.” She sighed and stood up.

And suddenly, I didn't want her to leave.

"I'll drop you home," I blurted out.

Her brow furrowed. "I have my car here."

"Then I'll follow you back, so I know you reached home safe." I closed my eyes in despair. Of all the pompous, stuffy comments to make.

When I peeked at her, Tara looked to be fighting a smile. "And are you going to do this every day for the rest of my life?"

"If you'd let me," I told her honestly, the words coming from a place I wasn't ready to examine too closely.

The world faded away as we looked at each other and then she said, "Let's take it one day at a time."

"So, I can follow you back today?" I asked, falling into step beside her as she strode for the door.

"Yes." She tossed her long hair over one shoulder. "You have my permission to stalk me for today."

And for every day after if I had a say in the matter. The certainty inside me solidified. She was mine. Whether she accepted me as hers or not, there would never be another woman for me. Tara was it.

We were standing outside on the pavement waiting for the valet to bring our cars when she spoke.

"I'm not the only one with daddy issues, huh?"

I snorted, welcoming the irreverent nosiness.

"He's..." I sighed, my voice trailing off. How did I explain my father?

"He's not a bad person."

Again, she grinned, not letting the sympathy in her eyes leak into her voice. "Careful MIB. You are starting to sound like me."

"Then I would sound very smart," I replied, watching as my car pulled up first. I accepted the keys the valet held out to

me, slipped him a tip, and waited.

“You can go,” she murmured. “I’ll catch up.”

I gave her a sideways glare which had her shrugging. “It would be terrible stalking but ...”

We waited in silence for a few more minutes and then, she prodded again.

“So, you’re financially responsible for everyone, your family?”

I nodded.

“How many siblings do you have?”

“Six.”

Her mouth fell open. “What?”

I huffed a laugh. “My youngest brother is five. My parents...they are not responsible people.”

“So, you turned into Mr. Responsibility.” Her eyes softened even more making me want to wrap her in my arms and snuggle close. I clenched my fingers around the car keys, letting the sharp edges dig into my palm, the pain a reminder to not overstep any boundaries.

“I guess so,” I answered. “But don’t feel bad for me or anything. I chose to. I chose this. I chose my family and to step up for them. It was my choice. I chose it.”

And I should probably choose to stop saying chose so much, I thought, gluing my lips together to stop the rambling.

Tara’s Land Cruiser came into sight and stopped in front of us. She took the keys from the valet, smiling and adding a generous tip.

Opening the door, she had one long leg inside the car when she turned to look at me, her gaze as always frank and direct.

“And who chose you, Nikhil? Did anyone?”

I stared at the door that shut behind her before blankly making my way over to my far more humble vehicle. I slid behind the wheel, her words still circling my brain.

Who'd chosen me? No one.

CHAPTER 26

Tara

I watched his headlights in my rear-view mirror, steady and unblinking. Much like the man himself. I'd eavesdropped shamelessly during his conversation with his mother, wanting that glimpse into the man behind the façade he showed us all.

And now I couldn't forget. The desire that erupted every time I looked at him reared its head again. Who knew 'good' would be such a turn on? Or was it just Nikhil who was? Dressed in black but with a heart of gold?

I drove into my allotted parking bay and got out of the car, my mind still whirling with a confused tangled of 'should do' and 'want to do'. I clicked the car lock and slowly walked towards the elevator. I got in and took a deep breath as I punched the button for the foyer. It opened to show me Nikhil standing in there, watching me, the same confusion reflecting in his eyes.

"You got here quick," I smiled, trying to lighten the charged atmosphere.

"Visitor's parking is more accessible to the foyer." He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the Italian marble beneath our feet for a long moment.

"Shall we?" I gestured towards the elevator.

He continued to stare at the marble like it was the most fascinating thing on earth.

“You’re home safe. I should leave now.”

“Is that what you want to do?” I asked softly.

Now he raised his head and looked at me. My breath caught in my throat as those eyes brimming with need met mine.

“No,” he said, equally softly. “It’s not what I want to do. It’s what I should do.”

“And what do you *choose* to do?” The look on his face had me stepping closer to him, one hand going to rest against the dark column of his throat. He swallowed hard, his skin moving beneath my hand and making a hot thrum take up residence in my blood.

An older couple who lived on the second floor entered the foyer, glancing at us askance. I didn’t bother to acknowledge their judgement, stepping closer to Nikhil and saying, “Choose. I’m waiting.”

His eyes drifted over me, latching on to my lips. I was glad I’d let Inu do my makeup tonight. She’d experimented with my face and it looked to have worked if Nikhil’s expression was anything to go by. Behind me, the old folks got into the lift with one last dark look at us and left. We were alone in the foyer again.

But he still didn’t say anything.

I pushed myself up on tip toe to whisper in his ear. “What do you want, Nikhil?”

“You.” The single word landed like dynamite between us.

I smiled, pleasure coursing through my body. Finally. “Then come get me.”

I stepped away from him, backing up towards the lift, one hand held out for him to grasp and follow.

He grabbed it and held on tight, tugging me to a stop. “Tara.”

My name sounded ominous in that moment.

Eyes dark with desire, he pulled me closer until there was nothing between us but desperate need and unvarnished longing.

“I don’t do casual. If we’re doing this, we’re doing it right.”

My breath hitched. “What does that mean?”

“It means I want to date you. I want to get to know you the old-fashioned way and I really, really want to see where this goes. I want to explore the possibility of a future with you.”

My cheeks flushed even as my insides squirmed. No one had ever looked at me this way or said these things to me.

“And here I thought you just wanted to get in my pants,” I joked, unsure of how to respond to his declaration of intent.

His head dropped to whisper in my ear. “Don’t get me wrong, Captain. I fully intend to not only get in your pants but also help you lose your panties. By the time I am done with you, you’ll be screaming my name and gasping for more.”

A shiver worked its way down my spine. “A little overconfident, aren’t you?”

“No. I am a fixer.” His thumb gently rubbed circles against the tender underside of my elbow. “I never take on something I can’t deliver to precision.”

“Nikhil,” I gasped, trying to get the right words out. “I can’t do relationships right now. I have the World Cup starting in a few weeks. It’s going to need all my focus and-“

He brought one hand up to clasp the back of my head, his fingers curving against my skull and making my eyelids flutter shut, my face tipping up for a kiss that never came. Instead, he leaned forward and slid his thumb over my cheek blazing fire in its wake.

“I promise you that I will never come in the way of your career. I will neither distract nor detract you from your goal or your game. You have my word, Tara, that I will never be a liability. But I need to know that I am more than tonight.

Because I can never go into something thinking it's only temporary. I will never get in the way of you being who you are but I need you to realise that this is who I am. If you want me, you have to want all of me."

"And if I say no?" I whispered, fear digging its talons into my heart.

His fingers eased their grip on the back of my head. He took an infinitesimal step back.

"Then we go back to how things were. We'll work together until the end of the World Cup and go our separate ways. Maybe even work our way towards being friends some day."

He seemed to think he was smiling at me, but it was the most godawful grimace. I reached forward and fisted a handful of his shirt.

"Then I say yes."

He blinked. "You do?"

The elevator doors beeped open behind my back and I hauled him in as I stepped back into the elevator car. He fell against me, the feel of his trim, solid body a pleasurable weight that I reveled in.

"I do, MIB. I choose this. I choose you."

CHAPTER 27

Nikhil

We crashed through her front door all flailing limbs and desperate caresses. I kissed my way down her neck, her head falling back to give me more access. I took it, every delectable inch.

Tara moaned, her hands fisting in my hair, tugging hard and bringing my mouth to hers for a kiss. I devoured her, the, sweet with a tinge of tart, taste of her burning its way through my system. Tara wrapped one long leg around my hip. I cupped her butt with my palms and boosted her up into my arms. She came willingly, her legs encasing me like we'd been doing this forever.

I carried her through the large open plan living area and into her bedroom, dropping her on to the king-sized bed there. She bounced once and came up on her elbows, her gaze raking over my body like laser beams.

I palmed her calves through the silky material of her pantsuit. "How do I get this off of you?" I asked, feeling around for the zip.

Tara laughed, her right hand going to the hidden zip and pulling it down. The snick of its release had my breath catching in my chest. She shrugged out of it, letting the material pool around her waist. Her bra, a confection of black lace and satin with hot pink bows, made me wonder if I'd died and gone to heaven.

“Are you just going to stand and stare, MIB?” she asked, huskily. “You promised me some brain melting action if I remember right.”

“I think the sight of you melted my brain,” I told her honestly, kneeling on the bed to look down at her. She smiled up at me, all impish, uninhibited charm.

I cupped her cheek and kissed, softer, gentler than before. She hesitated at the change of pace but after a second, relaxed into my embrace. I followed her down on to the bed, the feeling of her bare upper body in my arms making it impossible to keep this to a slower pace.

“Shirt off,” she mumbled against my lips and I obliged, unbuttoning and shucking it with little regard for the piece of clothing.

She moaned as skin met skin for the first time ever and I almost shot my load right there like a teenage virgin at his first sight of a naked breast. I slipped a hand behind her back and unclipped her bra, pulling the cups down until I could see her. She was perfect. All dusky and pert.

I leaned down to take her in my mouth just as her hand slipped between us to cup me through my pants. My eyes rolled back in my head even as I kissed, nipped and sucked on her breasts.

“Dammit, Nikhil,” she moaned. “Lose the rest of the clothes.”

Her wish was my command. It took less than a second for our clothes to vanish over the side of the bed and when I looked back at her, she was laid out there, a feast for my senses, every single one of them. I must have done something very, very good in this lifetime or a past one to deserve the honour of having Tara Wadhwa in my bed.

And then she crooked a finger at me, summoning me to her and I went. I had a feeling that I always would.

Her legs fell apart to cradle me against her core. I groaned as the slick wetness of her slid along the length of me. She kissed the sound from my lips even as her hips moved against

mine in a movement as old as time. I kissed my way down her body, ignoring her mewl of protest, as I moved closer to my goal.

And when I finally got there and placed my mouth on her, she screamed, the sound echoing off the high ceilings of her condo. Her hand came to clench in my hair and just when I thought she'd pull me away, she only pressed me closer. I worshipped her the only way I knew how, with my body. The words could come later, if I ever found the right ones.

“Nikhil, now!” she rasped, but I wasn't done. I continued to lick and suck her until she came with a shriek that petered into short pants. Legs lax and trembling around my head, she lay there, completely undone. I kissed the inside of her thigh and slowly, moved up her body.

Her eyes were glazed as she stared at me. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

“God isn't here,” I whispered back. “Only I am.”

She started to laugh, a chuckle that led to a full throttled belly laugh and I joined her, ridiculously happy to be here, in this moment.

She reached for me, a big smile on her face. “My turn,” she said, but I shook my head.

“Not this time. I want to, need to, be in you this first time.” I reached for my wallet and grabbed the, years old sure to be perishing, condom in it.

I looked at the packet doubtfully. “Do condoms have an expiry date?”

She chuckled, her hand encircling the hard length of me and making me drop the shady condom. My eyes rolled back in my head as she retrieved the packet, opened it up and rolled it on to me, all the while stroking and tugging me towards a glimpse of a heaven I'd never known before.

“I'm on the pill,” she whispered in my ear. “This is just double precaution.”

She straddled me and tossed her hair back over her shoulders. And then with one smooth movement, she took me in. Both of us gasped as she hit the halfway mark, muscles quivering, body shaking, breath heaving.

I moved a hand to her sensitive nub, flicking a thumb over it and making her moan. “Easy sweetheart. Take your time. It’s okay if it doesn’t-”

“Fuck you,” she snapped, eyes blazing down at me. “It will fit. I don’t give up so easily.”

And just like that I was laughing again. I didn’t ever remember laughing like this, my body shaking with desire at the same time. Only this woman could bring me to this. Only this woman could hold my heart in her fist the way she does.

She shifted, back arching, her hands going to brace herself on my thighs and slid lower, sheathing me completely. And I stopped laughing.

“Told you,” she said, her voice a breathy whisper. “Told you it would fit.”

I started to move, a hand on her hip urging her to move with me and she did, the motion seamlessly joining us together. I brought her forward so I could capture her mouth with mine.

“God, Tara,” I groaned as our hips thrust faster and faster.

“God isn’t here. Only I am,” she gasped against me as I pushed deep.

I was still laughing when I felt her go over a second time, taking me along for the ride.

CHAPTER 28

Nikhil

I woke up sometime later that night to find myself being smothered by a sated, snoring woman. They were very cute snores really. Like little snuffly huffy sounds. And I was a goner if I thought her snores were cute.

There was also the fact that my arm was going to sleep under her back and I really needed a glass of water to drink. I tugged, trying to free myself but the snuffly cuddly baby bear next to me didn't budge. I tugged again and she grumbled, slowly sliding off my arm and curling up on the other side. I already missed her weighted blanket impression.

Shaking my head, I shoved off the bed and went to the kitchen to get myself some water. I should probably pour it on top of my head to cool myself off. A small sound had me turning to see Tara leaning against the door, her old as the hills t-shirt slipping off one shoulder. I could even see a hole near her waist.

"I thought you'd left," she said, her voice still husky with sleep.

"I would never do that to you," I told her, annoyed that she was lumping me in with whatever losers she'd dated in the past.

"I know, Mr. I don't sleep with women I don't date."

I gave her a level look. "I gave you a choice."

“Like I was going to pass on brain melting sex,” she teased, still looking sleepy and dreamy. “I can manage a few dates for that, Mr. Old Fashioned.”

I grumbled under my breath even as I walked over to wrap an arm around her waist and haul her close, kissing the top of her head.

“You’re a real pain in the butt.”

She grinned and kissed the side of my neck, adding in a little nuzzle. “I aim to please.”

“Why do you wear decades old clothes at home?” I asked, taking a small sip of my water to try and cool off from the fantasies overheating my brain.

“Why do you always wear black?” she countered.

I hesitated, wondering if the truth would be too much for our fledgling connection.

“It’s practical,” I said, finally, settling for a half truth.

She hummed against my neck, making me cuddle her closer. “This is a Steve Jobs thing? The whole minimise decision fatigue when it comes to clothes thing.”

I laughed. If only. The truth pinched but I took a deep breath and said, “I don’t have a lot of extra cash lying around once I’m done with everything that needs doing. Clothes feel like a last priority in my life. So, I have a few quality outfits that I can repeat regularly.”

“Why black?” Her gaze luckily held nothing but curiosity.

I shrugged. “People think it’s a style statement. They don’t realise it’s just necessity.”

She squeezed me around my waist, her arms wrapping tight. “You are a very good person, MIB.”

I huffed in response.

“What are you doing with a bad girl like me?”

I looked down at her drowsy, peaceful face and the truth spilled out of me. “Falling in love.”

Tara stiffened in my arms, instinctive denial on her lips.

“You don’t have to say it. You don’t have to feel it. You don’t even have to worry about it,” I said, stalling the words I knew were coming.

“Nikhil,” she sighed.

I dropped my face into the crook of her neck. “Let’s just forget I said anything okay. All I want to do for now is to spend time with the fascinating woman in my arms, getting to know her better.”

“There isn’t much to know about me,” she mumbled into my shoulder. “My stats are public knowledge and that’s really all there is to me. I don’t have much of a life beyond the game.”

I drew back, looking down at her face. “That’s rubbish. You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

She looked away, her answer as clear as day. My anger at her father began to grow with every layer of her emotional armour that I peeled away.

“Cookies or brownies?” I asked her.

“What?” Confused, she glanced at me.

“Cookies or brownies? Which do you prefer?” I nudged her towards the bedroom and her very comfortable bed.

“Cookies,” she mumbled, climbing under the covers. “Who in the world would choose brownies over cookies?”

“I would,” I said, tucking myself around her slim frame, spooning her. Everything inside me sighed and settled at the rightness of her in my arms.

“Weirdo,” she replied, poking one bony elbow into my stomach. “Beach or hills?” she asked.

“Beach,” I said, not even needing to think about it.

“Me too. Maybe not so much of a weirdo after all,” she decided.

“Books or movies?” I asked her, nuzzling my face into her hair.

“Movies.”

I pulled back aghast. “This relationship is over. There is no coming back from that.”

“Okay. B-bye.” She slipped her hand between us, gently stroking my semi-hard length which went rock hard at her touch.

“What are you doing?” I asked, trying to get my scrambled brain to focus.

“What does it look like? I’m saying goodbye to my favourite part of you.”

And her favourite part of me was standing up to salute her in farewell. I turned her over to face me and lowered myself to kiss that smirk off her face.

“Maybe, I can forgive you for the movies thing,” I allowed, nipping at her lips.

“That’s mighty big of you,” she said breathlessly, with another squeeze of her strong fingers.

I kissed her, long, lazy kisses that deepened until there was nothing left but sensation, a bottomless ocean of it.

“Books or me?” she asked, as we came up for air.

“I’ll burn my entire bookshelf the minute I get home,” I replied.

I was done talking. This time we didn’t come up for air for a very long time.

CHAPTER 29

Tara

I adjusted the grip on my gloves as I stared out at the field in Chennai. Today was one of the first practice matches for the World Cup and we were playing against Australia. They were a strong team, but we were as ready as we were ever going to be.

I'd won the toss and opted to bat. Niyati finished suiting up and came to stand beside me.

"Ready Cap?" she asked. I nodded, my mind already out on the field, the pitch report running in my head.

We walked out on to the grounds to a smattering of applause. We didn't draw the same audience crowds as men's cricket but the numbers were improving in recent years. A fact that caused a little bloom of pride in my chest. I was about to take my position at opening bat when a speck of black caught my eye.

I smiled. MIB was here to watch. When had he flown into Chennai? He'd come for a practice match, not a final or anything. Why that caused warmth to spread like hot honey through my chest, I didn't know but it did.

It was probably the first time I had someone in the stands who was there just for me. Aisha and Inaya had always meant to come but somehow or the other with work and everything else it had never happened. They weren't free to keep flying to

different locales to watch me hit a ball around. They'd promised to come for the final this time, *if* we made it to the finals.

"Let's do this, Cap," Niyati called from the other end, always gabby and twitchy when her nerves hit.

I nodded and winked at her in reply. I settled into position and watched the Australian fast bowler, Melinda Barnes take her place for her run up. The crowd, the noise, Nikhil, even my vice captain who was now hopping at the other end and giving herself a pep talk all faded into the background. In these moments, there was never anything but me and the game.

Let's do this.

We steamrolled right over them. When we walked off that field with our helmets in our hands and bats tucked in, it was to louder applause than when we walked out. 247/4 was a very defendable score. Niyati and two other teammates had gotten out but not without posting respectable totals. My own seventy five runs, not out, had gone a long way to shoring it all up.

I ripped my rubber band out and unraveled my tight braid. It was dripping with sweat. I let the wet strands fan out as I took a bottle of water from one of my teammates and dropped down onto the bench in the changing room.

I wondered what Nikhil was doing or thinking. We didn't have access to our phones until the game ended and he wouldn't be allowed back here. Mahesh Sir strode into the room and I shoved all thoughts of Nikhil from my mind and focused on his debrief and strategy for the second half. Two hundred and forty seven was a good score but while it was defendable, it was also defeatable. And the Australians did not believe in giving up. They would come out on the field all guns blazing.

Mahesh Sir wound down with his rather long-winded speech and said, "Tara, a moment?"

I nodded, bundling my still damp hair into a loose bun and following him to the side. Had one of my girls screwed up?

Had I screwed up?

“Majnu sent you a message,” Mahesh Sir grumbled, shoving a crumpled, grimy note into my hand.

Majnu? Realisation hit a little late and I flushed, my cheeks going fire engine red. Mahesh Sir glowered at the ground and scuffed his shoe against it, as embarrassed as I was.

I opened the note and snuck a quick glance at it.

You make me proud just by existing but watching you on the field today, damn Tara, you are poetry in motion. Always. Every single time.

I cleared my throat. “Could you tell him I said thank you?” I muttered, scuffing my own shoe on the ground.

“I’m not a bloody courier service. I’m your coach,” Mahesh Sir blustered. “Tell him whatever you want yourself.” He pointed a finger at my face almost poking me in the eye. “After the bloody game. No time for all this now.”

I nodded sheepishly and disappeared back in the direction of the rest of the girls. I tucked the note into my pocket after one last look at the words that were now burned into my brain. Cheeks still flushed and heart doing a little hippity hop, I joined the others for our lunch break before we needed to take to the field again.

The rest of the match was a disaster. Things went steadily downhill with three dropped catches and a misfield near the boundary line. The Australians creamed us and then proceeded to rub our noses in the dirt. By the time we walked off that field, I was ready to scream.

I was pacing the changing room, frustration and anger pouring out of me.

“It’s just a practice match,” Varsha, one of my bowlers who hadn’t managed a single wicket and had in the process also given away six boundaries and four sixes, had the audacity to say.

I stopped pacing, pivoting on my heel to look her in the eye. She quailed in her seat, as she should.

“Just. A. Practice. Match?” The words came out between gritted teeth but the ferocity behind them had the whole team shifting in their seats and looking anywhere but at me.

“Come on, Captain,” Varsha mumbled. “It wasn’t the final or anything.”

“We won’t make it to the final,” I roared. “Not with performances like that. We had that match, dammit. We had it! And then we threw it away.”

“That’s absolutely correct.” Mahesh Sir stood with the other coaches in the entrance to the room, his expression telling us we were in for a solid reaming. As we deserved.

I sat with the rest of the team and listened as our coach proceeded to hand us our asses. Anger, frustration and defeat roiled in a toxic mess inside me. My father was going to have a lot to say about this later tonight and he wouldn’t be wrong.

Poetry in motion.

The words which just hours earlier had me flying now felt like a taunting brand emblazoned across my forehead. How had we gone from that high to this?

“Go home, rest and remember this moment when you take to the field in Bangalore for the next practice match,” Mahesh Sir said, his eyes boring into us. “We will not have a repeat performance of this.”

I made it all the way to the hotel lobby without losing it. And then I saw him, standing there, waiting for me.

And I lost it.

CHAPTER 30

Tara

The picture of us hugging in the lobby as I cried my eyes out made the news the very next day. Why the fuck I was headline fodder for trashy tabloids I would never know, but clearly I was, for some obscure reason. Either the impending World Cup or the sudden interest in women's cricket was fueling it but whichever way you looked at it, I could have thought of a million better ways to start my morning than the way I was right now.

No-focus Captain leads India to a resounding loss.

Romance mein clean bowled, cricket mein lbw.

Bad time for love. The run rate doesn't support it.

I shoved back from the breakfast table and rushed into the bathroom, making it just in time to lose whatever little food I had managed to shove down earlier. I was still retching hard when Niyati pushed her way through the door and banged on the stall.

“Cap, you okay?”

I slumped on the ground, my head in my hands. No, I was not okay. But that was the last thing Niyati needed to hear right now.

“I'm fine,” I rasped. “Tell the team I'll see them on the ground in ten minutes for practice.”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and saw the billion unread messages and missed calls on it. I ignored them all, scrolling through until I found the people I wanted.

I'm fine. Don't worry.

It was all I could manage to send to Aisha and Inaya who'd flooded my phone with over a hundred messages and the same number of calls.

I stared at my phone screen for a long moment before I pulled his name up.

Don't come to Bangalore.

It was all I said. All I needed to say. I knew he would understand. He was the fixer after all. This was what he would recommend too. The fact that my hands shook and my heart ached meant nothing. Nothing, I insisted to myself even as tears welled. I sat on the dirty toilet floor and reminded myself that this was the right thing to do for the game. Which meant it was the right thing to do, period.

My phone buzzed in my hands. I glanced down assuming Nikhil had replied but all I saw was a message from my father light up the screen.

You're a disgrace.

A disgrace. Alright then. This disgrace was going to pull herself off this toilet floor and go out there and show them what she could do.

For just the slightest tremor of my heartbeat, I waited and stared at my phone, hoping to see a reply from Nikhil. An acceptance, an understanding, an argument, a fight anything... but there was nothing. There was only silence.

I shoved my way out of the stall and stepped up to the sink to wash my face and hands. I studied my bloodshot eyes and haggard face. It was a good thing Nikhil had already left for the airport this morning. He'd been on a different flight to ours and I was ever so grateful for it. I didn't need the added stress of facing him and letting him down gently to everything else that was going to play out today. For now, the text would have to do.

I stepped out of the bathroom and stepped right into him, smashing my nose against his hard chest.

“Shit.” I stumbled back and fell against the wall, knocking my shoulder hard. So much for poetry in motion.

“I thought you’d left,” I said, rubbing my shoulder and trying to ease the pain. “Didn’t you have a flight to catch.

In response, he held his phone up, the screen open to my message. The anger and hurt on his face had my soul quailing but I squared my shoulders and stiffened my spine. This was necessary. Face to face, it was going to be then.

“I told you,” I sighed. “I told you that I can’t afford any distractions right now. I told you I couldn’t afford to lose focus.”

“Is that all I am, Tara? A distraction?” he asked softly.

I wanted to shake my head and scream about the unfairness of the whole thing. I wanted to tell him that I wanted him, that I was falling in love with him too. But I couldn’t do any of that.

So, I looked at a point somewhere above his shoulder and said, “I can’t afford to lose focus. Look what has happened.”

“You played your fucking heart out yesterday,” he snapped. “The loss was not on you.”

“The loss is always on me,” I blazed back, fury and grief making it hard to form words. “I am the captain. It. Is. Always. On. Me.”

“Fuck that. Fuck who you are. Fuck your title. Look at me and tell me you don’t want this. Tell me you don’t want me.”

“Fuck you!” I screamed back. “What happened to not being a liability to my career, to not coming in the way of it? Have you seen the fucking news? You’re the biggest fucking liability my career has ever seen.”

The silence that fell between us was deafening.

Someone cleared their throat on the side and I turned slowly to see Manishaji and Mahesh Sir standing there.

“Should we come back?” Manishaji asked, her voice gentle.

“No.” Nikhil was the one who answered. “We’re done here.”

I’d never heard him sound like that, so hard, so cold, so distant.

“Yeah,” I said, blinking back tears. “Nikhil was just leaving.”

“Actually,” Manishaji gave me another sad look. “He’s not. We called him and asked him to cancel his flight and come back to the hotel.”

My insides turned to ice. I knew that whatever was coming next was not going to be good.

“We need to fix this Tara,” she said, her voice still low and soft. “Nikhil and his team will be travelling with us for the duration of the World Cup working on managing the problem.”

“How can he do that? When he is the problem?” Mahesh Sir asked his voice brusque and his body angled towards me, his support clearly and freely given.

“That’s my job. You all don’t have to worry about it.” His voice was steel coated in silk.

“That’s what we thought before also,” Mahesh Sir grumbled, his glance going from Manishaji to where I stood, frozen.

“Don’t worry Mahesh Sir. There won’t be any mistakes made in the future. I will no longer be a liability.”

With that he turned his back on me and said, “Ms. Chibbar could you follow me? I have somethings to discuss with you in private.”

I wanted to say something, anything. Swallow the hurtful words I’d hurled at him, soothe the pain I knew I’d caused but I didn’t. I stayed motionless, my voice stuck in my throat, fingers curled into my palm so I didn’t reach out to him.

It was better this way. It was better if he hated me. Better for whom though? He was hurting, destroyed by my words. I was hurting, my heart and my career hanging in shreds around me.

Better for whom?

I still hadn't figured out the answer by the time he'd walked down the corridor and vanished from my sight.

CHAPTER 31

Nikhil

I stared out of the bus window as it trundled along to the stadium in Bangalore. We had decided, along with the powers to be, that my office staff and I would travel with the team to show that we were working members of the entourage. The spin being that Tara and I are or were friends and colleagues and all they caught was a moment of comfort being offered and received.

I let my head drop against the headrest and shut my eyes. In all my years of spinning things for the public and the press and finding the angle that works for my clients, I'd never imagined that I'd one day be doing the same for my own heartbreak.

I looked out of the window into the just lightening sky. The team had to be at the stadium by five in the morning for the day to begin. This was the second practice match they were playing, the last one being the one that imploded my life. Today, they played England. All around me, the girls sat subdued and lost in their own thoughts. None of the earlier bravado and cheerful ribbing on display.

And in the very first row of this same bus sat the woman who held my heart in her palm. Even if she didn't want it.

I sighed as the bus reached the stadium. That wasn't fair. She'd tried to tell me that she wasn't open to dating, that her life had too much going on. I was the dick who'd pushed for

more. Because I'd wanted it so desperately. I'd wanted her so desperately.

And yet, she'd chosen me, hadn't she? I hadn't forced her to. She'd chosen me, the only person in the world who had until...she'd un-chosen me.

I shook my head trying to dispel the anger and the hurt that coursed through me, trying to focus on the job I had to. I got off the bus with my assistants, right behind the players who filed into the stadium, heads down, avoiding the questions and requests for pictures being flung at them.

On the bright side, there were only a few paparazzi littering the entrance. Most seemed to think it wasn't worth their time to wake up so early for women's cricket. Assholes.

“Tara Madam, aaj dhyan kidhar hain aapka? Game mein ya shaadi ke prep mein?”

Impotent rage filtered through me as I watched her shoulder her way into the stadium not lifting her head once, her shoulders hunched in as if to protect herself from the words.

“Sir, aap tho bata do,” the ass jeered at me.

I turned to give him a bland smile that said nothing of how I wanted to pound his face into the dirt. And then I followed everyone else in without saying a word. For now, silence would have to do. I had an opinion piece coming out in a leading feminist women's voices magazine tomorrow. The journalist writing it owed me a huge personal favour and I was calling it in. The piece which I'd practically written and force fed the journo was going to be a gamechanger. In every which way.

And then, we would take questions. Until then, my gaze tracked Tara as she disappeared from my view. She was nodding in response to something her vice-captain was saying to her.

I rubbed my hand against the ever-present ache in my chest.

“Sir,” Aman, my assistant, called out. “Shall we start?”

I nodded and followed my staff to the team's personal box. I chose a prominent, very visible seat, pulled out my laptop and got to work. For anyone watching, anyone photographing, anyone with any interest in the situation, this would be all they saw. A member of the team working on the women's cricket team's public relations activity. That's all they'd view me as but then again, that's all I was now, wasn't I?

An hour or so later, I sipped on my coffee and watched as the captains walked onto the field for the coin toss. India lost and England opted to bat first. Tara shook the other captain's hand and walked off the field. She looked everywhere but in the direction of where I sat. How long would it hurt this bad?

I wasn't sure how much longer I could take this. But then like the liability I was, I had no choice but to keep my butt in my seat and let the pain eviscerate me as I worked on a way to fix it.

On cue, my phone rang. I glanced at it just as the Indian team took to the field, Tara filling the spot at square leg. My younger brother, Akhil. All of eighteen and in his first year of college, he was being badly bullied by a couple of his seniors. It wasn't a call I could ignore.

"Hello," I answered, my eyes still on the figure stretching her quads on the field. Was it my imagination or did she glance this way? I shook my head, trying to stop acting like a lovesick loser.

"Nikhil bhai," Akhil's soft voice told me it wasn't going to be a good day.

"What happened?" I asked him, my attention zeroing in on my brother's anxiety.

"Nothing," he blurted out. "Nothing."

"Are those boys troubling you again?"

He sighed. "The usual but that's not the problem today. I failed my mid-terms."

My brain took a moment to process that. My brother had always been good at his studies and this wasn't an issue I'd foreseen with him. With my other brother, Manoj, maybe. That

doofus wouldn't touch a book unless he was hit on the head with it.

"How did that happen?" I asked, my voice sharper than intended.

"Just everything that's been going on," he hesitated and then continued. "The anxiety just messed with my head and now the principal says he wants to talk to my family. I didn't know what to do so I called you."

I ground my teeth together. When I complained about the bullying, the principal had brushed it off with a genial 'boys will be boys' and now that the stress was causing my brother to fail his exams, he wanted to meet?

"I'm in Bangalore on work," I said just as a cheer went up on the ground. My eyes tracked immediately to Tara who was congratulating her bowler who'd apparently picked up a wicket.

Things were going great without her liability to distract her, I thought bitterly, before yanking my mind back to my real-world problems.

"I can't come but I'll figure something out," I told Akhil. After reassuring him a bit more, I hung up, my shoulders slumping as I tried to figure out how to sort that issue out. Sending my mother would be a disaster. She would only antagonize the principal further. Which left me with only one choice.

I dialed his number and he picked up immediately.

"Nikhil beta, hello hello."

The jovial tone had my teeth grinding themselves to dust in my mouth.

"I need you to go to Akhil's college and meet his principal," I said without preamble. "He's struggling with his studies and they want to speak to a parent."

"Accha? Waise I am very busy today. I have a lot of work. I can't go. Tum batao? You're in all the news nowadays. Famous girlfriend and all? Nice. Nice."

“Focus, Baba,” I told him, my temper on a slippery leash. “Akhil is being bullied by some boys in school and it’s affecting his mental health and his studies. I need you to go to the college and-“

“Bah, that boy is always so sensitive. He needs to toughen up, be a man.”

I shut my eyes and massaged my temples. Another shout went up on the field but I didn’t look to see what they were celebrating.

“Baba please. I need you to be his father for a day. Just one day.”

“I told you na beta, I am very busy. I need some money for a new business deal. So, I am busy with that jugaad only.”

A muscle ticked in my jaw. “How much?”

“Six lakhs, but you don’t worry. I will manage. I will get from somewhere. That’s why I am busy. I can’t go to the college and all.”

“If I give you the money, will you go?” I asked, another crack snaking its way through my heart to add to the rest I’d collected over the years. At this rate, all that would be left of it would be a pile of shards.

“Arrey beta, so nice of you. Haan then tho I am free only. You were always a good son, the best son.”

I ignored the effusive, smarmy praise. “You have to be there at two in the afternoon. Don’t be drunk, dress well and charm the fucking pants of that principal. If I get a good report from Akhil and he tells me that everything is sorted, then and only then will you get your money.”

“Leave it to me,” he said grandly. “You know I will do this well.”

He would. I knew. The man could charm anyone. It was how grifters generally got by.

“I’ll send you the location pin,” I said before disconnecting without a goodbye.

I opened my clenched eyes, blinking against the early morning sunlight that was getting brighter by the moment. As always, my gaze searched her out. The girls were in a huddle on the field, taking a short break.

But when my eyes finally found her, I realised that I wasn't the only one looking. She was looking right back.

CHAPTER 32

Nikhil

I moved my head from side to side, trying in vain to get rid of the crick in my neck. I'd just gotten off back-to-back online meetings. I had other clients to attend to, marketing and branding strategies to tweak and refine and a family to corral and try and keep on the straight and narrow. Somehow, that last one was always the hardest.

India had won the match by one run today, a real cliffhanger. Still, a win after the last catastrophic loss. Although Tara had gotten out at just ten runs, a fact that I knew was probably eating her up.

I glanced at my phone, fingers itching to dial her number. But I shook my head at my own idiocy, wincing as pain shot through my stiff neck. The last thing she'd want was me calling her to check on her. She had Aisha and Inaya for that.

A knock sounded on my hotel room door. I groaned, not wanting to get dragged down for dinner or whatever other nonsense my team had in mind. I just wanted to order room service and get into bed like the grumpy, old man I was turning into.

The knock came again, this time a little harder than before. I grumbled to myself as I walked over and yanked the door open.

Chibbar strode past me, Tara following in her wake, again looking everywhere but at me. This was really starting to piss me off. I might be a liability but I refused to have her treat me like a shameful secret.

“Hell no,” I said firmly, keeping the door wide open. “I’m done for the day.”

“We need to talk about something very important.” Chibbar sat down in the only chair in the room leaving Tara to perch like a heron on the very edge of my bed.

“Whatever it is, it can wait till morning.” If there was something my team thought I should attend to immediately, they would have already flagged it for me.

“No, Nikhil. It can’t.”

I exhaled heavily. “Chibbarji, I have a lot of respect for you, but I would really appreciate it if you would let me do my job. I sent you my report with the latest media hits. You know the strategy is working. Once the op-ed comes out tomorrow...”

“Tara’s father had a heart attack.”

My protests died on my lips. I took an involuntary step towards her and stopped.

“Tara is leaving for Mumbai on an early morning flight to see her father but depending on his prognosis, which we don’t know yet, she may not be able to make it back to Delhi for the last practice match. Niyati might have to lead the team if it comes to that.”

“We’ll draft two separate press releases for both eventualities,” I said quietly, my eyes on Tara’s bent head. My heart ached for her, for the grief, guilt and remorse I knew was swirling through her.

“Thank you,” Chibbar nodded briskly. “In case Tara doesn’t make it to the practice match in Delhi, the press will probably again launch into the whole not in form, too busy with love life drama. So, I wanted to brief you in advance.”

“Noted.” I shoved my hands into my pockets and forced myself not to reach for her. I didn’t need to add to her problems.

They stood to leave and I found it impossible to stay detached anymore.

“Tara, a word?” I asked.

She looked at Chibbar which pissed me off, but I corralled the bite of anger.

The older woman nodded. “I’ll be waiting outside,” she said, giving me a small smile and walking out. “Two minutes Nikhil. Let’s not push our luck.”

And then the door shut behind her and we were alone.

“Are you okay?” I asked her, as she continued to study her feet.

She nodded, chewing on her bottom lip like it had done something to offend her.

“Are you?” she asked in return.

When I didn’t answer immediately, she rushed to expand on her question. “I saw you earlier. You looked worried, stressed out.”

She either had really good long distance vision or she was watching me really closely. I didn’t want to think too much about which explanation I liked.

“Yeah,” I exhaled. “I’m fine.” And I was...now that I got to be near her, got to talk to her, I was fine. God, I was pathetic. She was right. I really was a liability.

“Why aren’t you flying out tonight?”

“There is no flight to Amritsar so late at night. I spoke to Ma and the doctor in charge. They said he’s stable for now. I got an early flight tomorrow, via Mumbai.”

“Oh.” I fell silent, not sure what else to add that could make a shitty situation better.

“I should go,” she said, stepping towards the door.

I nodded. That was probably for the best. This was neither the time nor the place to unpack everything that had gone down between us. That could come later.

Tara stopped with one hand on the doorknob, her gaze back to her feet. Then she swung those huge headlights she called eyes at me and lasered me in place.

“I miss you,” she whispered.

Pain lanced through me at the admission. “Don’t Tara.” The words came out harsher than I intended. “Just don’t.”

She stiffened, her entire body frozen in place.

“You can’t have it both ways,” I told her, unable to keep the pain from spilling out.

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t choose me when it suits you and then shove me away when it doesn’t.”

She reared back like I’d slapped her. “That’s not what I’m doing. Nikhil-“

I held a hand up, palm out to get her to stop talking. “Just stop please.” I used that same palm to scrub wearily at my face. “You were right. I am a liability and you did the right thing when you ‘un-chose’ me. It was the right thing for you and your career. Don’t let that soft heart you hide from the world make you change your mind now.”

“I was wrong and I am sorry. I was scared and I lashed out.”

“No.”

“No?” Her eyebrows rose. “You’re going to tell me how I feel now?”

“You didn’t want a relationship. I pushed for one. You didn’t need another scandal at this stage in your career. I was supposed to fix that but I ended up making it worse, jeopardizing your career and mine. You told me, repeatedly, that your career meant everything to you and you didn’t have the bandwidth for anything else. I should have listened

carefully. I didn't. So, don't tell me something now to make me feel better just because you're feeling bad for me. Just don't."

"Well," she said, finally, her tone cool. "You seem to have it all figured out. I'll leave you to plan your next steps, your next spin then."

"I hope your father gets better soon."

She nodded, opening the door and stepping away.

"Just for the record," she said as the door slowly swung shut between us. "I never 'un-chose' you."

CHAPTER 33

Tara

“Kabir and I are going to get on the next flight out,” Aisha announced on our group video call. I was sitting near my boarding gate waiting for them to announce my flight.

I sighed. “You don’t have to do that, Aisha. I told you I’ve already spoken to the doctor. He says Papaji is stable and there is nothing to worry.”

“But Kabir can come and check everything again,” Aisha insisted. “Then we’ll know for sure.”

“Let it be Aisha,” Inaya interjected, her perceptive face taking in the stress on my own face. “Tara, once you get there why don’t you send a copy of all the reports to Kabir. He can look at it here and give us an opinion. And then if he thinks it’s necessary, he can fly out.”

“Yes.” I grasped at that solution like it was a lifeline. “That’s a great idea.”

“Okay,” Aisha said, her thoughtful gaze telling me she realised how close to tipping over I really was. “Would you like Inu and me to come?” she asked gently. “Just us?”

My throat tightened. “I feel like maybe this time it should just be me.”

“Why?” Inu asked. A valid question given the fact that I’d never refused their support before.

I nibbled on the skin beside my fingernail. “Because he’s going to have a lot to say,” I said softly. “And I don’t want you guys hearing all of that.”

Aisha’s face was red with rage even as Inu’s softened with sympathy. I didn’t have the energy for either emotion in that moment.

“So, anyway,” I said brightly. “It’s time for me to go. They just announced my flight.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Aisha started.

“Bye!” I yelled over her voice. “I’ll call once I reach.”

I disconnected and slumped back in my uncomfortable seat. A man in a garishly pink shirt with headphones around his neck and a baseball cap pulled over his brow flopped down in the seat beside me.

He grunted a greeting at me that I ignored. I tapped my foot on the ground as I stared at the gate like I could will it into opening.

“You think the flight’s going to be delayed?” A very Nikhil sounding voice asked me.

I startled in my seat, turning to gape like a goldfish at the pink shirt to my right. “What the hell?” I exclaimed.

“Could you keep your voice down?” he grumbled. “You’re attracting unnecessary attention.”

“What the hell?” It seemed to be the only words I could manage in the moment.

He pulled his baseball cap lower and pushed his wraparound glares up his nose.

“What are you doing here?” I found my voice and made it a point to lower it too.

“Coming with you, obviously.” He slouched in his seat like a gangster in a c-grade movie. What did he mean by obviously? There was nothing obvious about any of this.

In the background, I heard the airline ground staff announce my flight. Nikhil stood up, his oversized pink shirt

flapping around him.

“Let’s go. It’s our flight.” He started marching purposefully towards the entrance of the aerobridge.

Our flight? Our flight?? I slung my haversack over my shoulder and followed him towards the gate. I mean, honestly, everybody would follow that pink shirt. It’s probably what planes used to guide them towards the landing strip.

What in the world was going on?

“Nikhil.” I caught up with him and grabbed his arm. “Did Chibbar send you to babysit me again? Because I’m not going to get into any trouble at a hospital while I am visiting my sick father. You can tell her that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, shaking his arm out of my hold. “The last place Chibbar would want me right now is with you.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because the only place I want to be right now is with you.”

We stared at each other, passengers streaming around us on their way to the plane, several shooting irritated looks at us.

Finally, Nikhil broke the silence, looking away from me and taking a minute step back. He banged into an old lady who smacked her walking stick against his ankle. Wincing, he stepped closer to me again.

“I won’t let you go through something like this alone, Tara. Not even if you ask me to. I just won’t.”

Not knowing what to say, I turned away to walk towards the plane before any more passengers assaulted us. Nikhil fell into step beside me.

I found it very hard to care about that in the moment. Relief, overwhelming relief cascaded through me along with a strong thread of sadness. Tears, wimpy tears, threatened to spill over and I blinked them back.

This was the nicest thing anyone had done for me. I'd been strong and independent for so long, I didn't know what to do with this. What did people do when they had a shoulder to lean on?

"Thank you," I murmured, huskily, too overwhelmed to string more words together.

"Don't thank me," he muttered. "I might be jeopardizing all the hard work we've put into shifting the narrative. If someone recognizes us together, we're screwed. Although," he added, proudly. "I doubt anyone would recognize me in this disguise."

I started to laugh, hysterical snorty giggles but laughter nevertheless as I took in his entire dazzling pink glory.

"No," I choked out. "Nobody will recognize you. Not even your own mother."

His proud smile faded. "I doubt she'd know me in a crowd even on a normal day," he muttered.

I was about to say something, but he stepped up and handed his boarding pass to the hostess. He turned towards the economy section, and I paused, for a second, before turning towards business class.

Two steps forward and then I retraced them to the hostess. "Would it be possible to upgrade a friend of mine to business class?"

"I'm sorry madam. But business class is full."

Right. Of course, it was. I smiled at her and turned towards economy. Nikhil had already settled into the middle seat in row eighteen.

"What are you doing? Are you okay?" he rumbled as I approached. I ignored him.

"Hey." I tapped the guy in the window seat on the shoulder. "Want to sit in business class?"

Less than a second later, I slipped into my cramped little window seat, elbows brushing against a virulent pink shirt clad one.

Now, I was okay.

CHAPTER 34

Tara

I woke up with a sudden jerk. The pilot seemed to have decided to land the plane in Mumbai with all the finesse of a rookie on his first sortie. And I seemed to have fallen asleep on MIB's shoulder. All through the flight. I'd slept like a log. Which wouldn't have been bad by itself but then I also seemed to have drooled on him. There was a rather large wet patch on his pink shirt.

I snuck a look at his face to find him watching me, an inscrutable look on his face, eyes shielded by those frustrating wraparound glares. Since when did Nikhil do inscrutable? Restless, I shifted in the narrow seat but all I managed to do was rub my thigh against his. Freezing again, I looked out of the window as the plane finally taxied to a halt.

"You're going to get some breakfast?" he asked the back of my head.

I nodded, still not able to make eye contact with him. The strangest disquiet had taken hold of me and I found myself struggling to make sense of it.

"I'll see you later."

He got up as the passengers slowly started emptying out of the plane and pulled his bag out of the overhead bin. I hefted the haversack I'd shoved under the seat in front of me and followed him off the plane.

The minute his feet hit the aerobridge, he strode off, striding into the distance like my proximity would set him on fire. I sighed, following more slowly.

“Excuse me, Madam?”

I looked up to find one of the airline’s ground staff smiling at me nervously.

“Can I have a selfie?”

I smiled and nodded and before I knew it, I was surrounded. By the time I was done signing autographs and smiling for badly clicked pictures, my stomach was in full revolt. I made my way through airport formalities to the food court in the transit area. I glanced around but I couldn’t spot Nikhil which was probably just as well given the swarm of people looking at me and pointing.

I placed an order for a plate of idlis, waited in line to grab my plate and then sat down at the first empty table I could find. I had an hour to kill before boarding my next flight. I slid my phone out of my pocket and dialed my mother. She didn’t pick up. She was probably busy taking care of Papaji anyway.

I sighed, fatigue more mental than physical dragging me down. I was digging into the first hard-as-stone idli when a neon green shirt slid into view. My mouth hung open at the sight, a small piece of idli sliding out of it and on to the plate. I closed my mouth and stared at him. He even had a thin, fake moustache glued on to his upper lip.

“Ridiculous,” I said finally.

“I know,” he agreed, spooning some terrible looking khichdi into his mouth. “Honestly, I don’t know why they even sell stuff like this. I mean, who would buy it?”

“Apparently you!”

He gave me a repressive look. “It’s my disguise,” he said again like repeating that would make it sound logical.

“Nikhil, *this* is ridiculous. We should be allowed to be seen in public without any of this cloak and dagger shit.”

He shrugged, spooning in another mouthful. “We should,” he said, wiping his mouth and patting down his fake moustache. “But until the World Cup is done, we don’t want to rock the boat.”

That strange disquiet welled again. “I’m not ashamed to call you my friend,” I said.

His hands clenched around the fork, knuckles whitening.

“Yes,” he agreed, his tone deliberately bland. “Being your friend was never the issue. The little detour we took was another story though.”

“Don’t talk like that.” It felt like live hornets had taken up residence in my stomach.

“Biggest liability your career has ever seen,” he reminded me, his gaze on his plate of horrible food.

The pit in my stomach bottomed out and the hornets settled in to nest.

“That was wrong,” I said quietly. “I was wrong.”

“Can we please not do this?” He put his fork down, gaze still on the plate rather than on me. It almost felt like the sight of me pained him. And that hurt more than I could have ever imagined.

I stared at this man who had been nothing but good to me, a man who had done nothing but think of me from the moment we’d met. And I had hurt him. Badly. My insecurities, my childhood grooming, my need to prove myself to my father and to the world had all brought us to this moment. Where I hurt someone who had done nothing but be there for me. Every single time. Even now, after I had treated him like crap. He was still here. Still stepping up for me. Still choosing me. Even when I hadn’t chosen him.

When had I fallen in love with him? And how had that love brought us to this?

“Nikhil...” I leaned forward. I needed to tell him, to make him understand...

“Madam, ek selfie?” I hadn’t even seen the young boy materialise near our table. With a stiff nod, I stood and posed making sure I kept Nikhil out of range of the camera.

But by the time the boy left and I turned back I realised it didn’t matter. Nikhil had finished his meal and gone. His neon green shirt was nowhere to be seen. And I was all alone.

The knowledge hit hard. Was this meant to be my destiny? To always be alone? My father always said that you needed to be committed to the game, to be married to it, to the exclusion of all else. The rest of life was just a distraction.

But was it?

Aisha and Inaya had never been a distraction. Their friendship hadn’t shifted my focus from the game. Their love for me had, in fact strengthened me and grounded me on days when my game had spiraled out of my control.

And then there was Nikhil.

The flight to Amritsar was called. I picked up my haversack and joined the line to board the plane. One of the ground crew recognised me and came forward to usher me forward and aboard the plane so I didn’t have to wait in the queue. I followed him, my mind a whirl, not looking back or looking around for that virulent neon green.

This time when I took my seat, it was the one I’d paid for. I didn’t wander towards the back looking for a seat to exchange. I sat in my very spacious, very comfortable business class seat and stared out the window. This time, I didn’t sleep at all.

CHAPTER 35

Nikhil

The closer we got to the hospital and her parents, the more I felt Tara tense up. Here in Amritsar, it didn't seem like too much of a risk to take the same taxi. When I'd messaged Tara with the idea, she hadn't bothered to respond beyond a simple thumbs up. I glanced at her now, huddled in the other corner of the seat, her face looking out of the window like the dirty, crowded roads were fascinating.

The taxi pulled up outside the small hospital entrance and Tara pulled out her wallet.

"I've got this," I told her brusquely. "Go in to your parents. You must be anxious to see them."

Her shoulders got tighter, but she only nodded once, opening the door and getting out to head into the hospital. I paid the taxi driver and got down more slowly. I looked up at the board proclaiming the hospital's name.

Ujjala Nursing Home.

It wasn't even a full fledged hospital. Why was Tara's father in such a small, shady looking place? She'd mentioned something about knowing the doctor who was treating him, a family friend or something but surely even then, they wouldn't pick a place like this. It didn't even look very hygienic.

I made my way through the dusty, dimly lit, lobby looking for the reception so I could ask them where I should go. A

second later, I didn't need directions. I followed the raised voices.

"You have got to be kidding me," Tara raged, standing in front of her father. Her surprisingly robustly healthy looking father. He sat up in a chair in a tiny room, an elderly lady in a salwar kameez standing beside him and looking anxiously between Tara and him.

I glanced around the room. No machines, no IV, no nothing. If I had to guess, I would say there was no patient admitted in this room. Which meant...

"You lied to me." Tara was white faced with fury. "There is nothing wrong with you. Ma, you went along with this and so did Ahmed Chacha? He was willing to lie about a medical diagnosis for you? You both made me miss a match and for what?"

"A practice match." Pankaj Wadhwa waved his arm through the air, dismissing her statement and all the points she'd raised in it. "Waise bhi you were doing nothing special in those. Now, the first match is India versus Pakistan so you listen to me."

"No," she said, the word coming out with tightly clenched control. "You listen to me. If you have something to say to me, pick up the phone like a normal person. Don't fake a heart attack!"

"How can I? Phone tho thu utathi nahin hain. Bahut badi VIP ho gayi hai na."

The older lady made a sound of distress. Reflexively, I stepped closer to Tara, drawing everyone's attention.

"You brought him here also?" her father asked, his disdainful glance sweeping over me from head to toe. I bet the neon green was doing me no favours.

"Told you that disguise was shit," Tara said, her voice flat. Her eyes stayed on her father who stared derisively back. "Yes, Papaji. I brought him here also. I was worried that my father might be dying and he came along to give me some

support and comfort. You know, the kind of thing decent people do.”

Her father made a noise that sounded a lot like ptch. My hands fisted at the way the man treated his daughter, but it wasn't my place to say anything.

“Listen to me, your form is so bad right now, forget winning the world cup, you and your team are going to get thrown out in the beginning only. You tho will be out for a duck for sure.”

Okay that was enough. My place or not my place, I was not listening to him say this shit to her.

“Your daughter came here to see you out of concern, out of love, and out of regard for you and her relationship with you. She did *not* come to you for coaching tips. Like she just reminded you, if you two need to talk about something, all you need to do is pick up a phone. The fact that Tara hasn't done it means she doesn't want it. She doesn't want your so-called expertise, she doesn't want your so-called knowledge, and she most definitely doesn't want your toxic interference.”

Silence fell after my outburst. And then the other man started to laugh.

“Now your guard dog is going to bark also for you,” he asked in Punjabi. “Tell him to bat also no. Maybe he can do it better than you.”

“Don't talk to him like that.” Tara's quiet words were the first she had spoken in several minutes.

Anger coursed through me, but I understood where she was coming from. I really didn't have the right to talk to her father like that.

“Tara-“

She cut me off as she advanced on her father, who was still seated and now had to crane his neck to look at her.

“You will not talk to Nikhil like that again,” she said clearly and firmly. “Ever again.”

I froze as the meaning of her words became clear.

Slowly, her father rose to his feet to meet her gaze.

“Or what?”

Tara shrugged. “Or you might find yourself talking to yourself because we’re not going to hang around to listen. You are my father.”

“Haan tho?” the older man began his diatribe, but Tara held out a hand to stop him.

“You are my father, only my father. You are not my coach. You are not my trainer. You are not my selector. Your opinions regarding my game or my career are not required. Nor will they be listened to. By anyone. And definitely not by me. Not anymore.”

The shock on the older man’s face had me wondering if he was really going to have a heart attack.

“I love you Papaji. Even after everything, I love you and Ma. You both are the only family I have. I will always love you. But I will not let you treat me or anyone that I love like this anymore.”

My heart jolted like it had been prodded with a live wire. Love? Did she just say love?

She glanced at her mother who’d stood teary eyed and silent through the entire scene. “I’m sorry,” she told her, saying more with her eyes than her words.

She looked back at her father and her gaze hardened.

“Call me when you want to talk to me as a father should, not as a coach.”

“And if I don’t?” he challenged, rage lining his features.

“Then I guess we won’t be talking again,” Tara said quietly.

CHAPTER 36

Nikhil

The trip home was made in relative silence. It was too late for Tara to make it to the practice match but the two of us watched it on her phone. Niyati led the team to a crushing defeat. Tara didn't say a word but every flinch and wince when a wicket fell, or a catch was dropped told me exactly what she was feeling.

Neither of us addressed the elephant in the room or the l-word she'd dropped while putting her father in his place. There wasn't time for that. There was only time for Tara to focus on getting into the right headspace for the team's first match against Pakistan. It was set for three days away in Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium.

We landed in Mumbai in the middle of a sweltering summer afternoon. Tara disappeared into the ladies washroom and I used the time to grab my suitcase from the conveyor belt. I hesitated for just a beat before doing what I needed to do. I texted her as I strode out of the airport.

Leaving now. Not smart to be seen together in Mumbai airport. Not even in my orange shirt.

The ticks turned blue seconds later, but no response came. I kept staring at my phone's screen like I could will those three dots into existence, something, anything to tell me she was looking to reply.

But there was nothing. I slung my suitcase into a taxi and then slid into the backseat.

“Kidhar bhaiya?” The taxi driver glanced at me over his shoulder.

I opened my mouth to tell him to take me home, to Andheri, but what came out of my mouth was, “Mira road.”

Watching Tara stand up to her father had shaken something loose in me. I watched the people crowding the street, busy, chaotic, and colourful. I watched them live their lives, some looking stressed, some looking happy, but almost everyone looking busy.

Was that all there was to life? Being busy? Frantically paddling to stay afloat like ducks in the water? I loved my work and I loved my life but also, I was starting to realise that the love I had for Tara had grown to eclipse both. I hadn't known it was possible to love someone so deeply, so fast. But I did. I didn't know if she felt the same way but what she'd told her father had led to a small kernel of hope budding in my silly, goofy heart.

Unfortunately, we were in a sticky situation and it wasn't one we could circumvent, not at the moment. There was a World Cup hanging in the balance. And I had meant every word I'd ever told Tara. I would never be the reason her career or her game got derailed. If I couldn't be the wind beneath her wings, I wouldn't be the tsunami drowning her either.

The taxi pulled up in front of my parent's apartment building and I paid the driver and got off, dragging my suitcase behind me. Slowly, ever so slowly, I started to climb the staircase to the third floor.

My heart started to thud forcefully. This had been a long time coming but I'd needed a kick in the pants to get here. And the woman who'd administered it had done so with a firmly toned and extremely strong leg. I could still feel the pain of the impact when her words had finally seeped into my thick skull.

I stopped in front of my parent's front door. I pulled out my phone and checked my messages. Still nothing from her. Was she angry I'd left like that? I'd checked that her driver was waiting to pick her up before I had. Surely, she understood why I had to leave. We couldn't let all the hard work we'd done go to waste by turning up at the airport of all places together.

The op-ed had released on time and to rave reviews. Talking about women in sports and the fact that society continually chose to focus on their personal lives and not on their professional achievements, it was a stunning piece. Poignant, precise, and pertinent.

And I was stalling. I took a deep breath and rang the bell. Chaotic high pitched barking erupted on the other side of the door as my mother's annoying Pomeranian lost his shit like always.

The door opened and Smriti stared at me, perplexed. I didn't blame her. I rarely came home and never unannounced.

"Ma and Baba are there?" I asked her, shouldering my way past her silent form and into the flat.

"Yaaaaaa...." She drew the last syllable out as she wandered in past me wondering what the hell was going on.

"Call everyone," I told her, dropping on to the sofa set.

"All okay?" she asked, concern furrowing her brow.

"Yes, grandma." I rolled my eyes at her while Bitsy, the Pomeranian, ran in circles around my ankles. I normally liked dogs but this one was a creepy, little thing.

"Who is it Smriti?" I heard Ma before I saw her. And then she entered the room, coming to an abrupt halt when she saw me. Her shoulders tensed and the grooves around her mouth deepened. "Don't start a fight, Nikhil," she warned. "Baba doesn't need your stress. He has a weak heart."

Smriti made a scoffing noise behind her and Ma whirled on her. "Behave yourself." She turned back to me. "See what a bad influence you are on your siblings."

I didn't bother to reply. None of this was anything new to me or to my siblings. I just looked at my sister. "Go call the others," I said.

Whatever she saw in my face had her nodding and leaving the room without argument. A second later, my siblings streamed in. All except for Akhil who was away at a friend's place. The rest were home as it was a Sunday and they had nowhere else to be. My father followed and sat down beside my mother, his wary glance watching me as I greeted the boisterous mob I loved so much.

After a round of hugs and some nonstop chatter by my youngest brother, Param, everyone settled down.

"What do you want?" Ma asked again.

"Maybe he just came to see us," Sanam, my middle sister, and the peacemaker in the family said. "Nikhil bhaiya I'll make chai for you?"

I shook my head and smiled, tugging at her hand to get her to sit down.

"I need to talk to all of you. It's important."

"And if you say, it's important, it has to be important to all of us, is it?" Ma snorted. My father grinned enjoying her irritation with me.

"Yes," I told her evenly. "It is since I pay all the bills. So, if I ask for a few moments of your time, you will give it to me."

Outrage ballooned on my mother's face, but my father took her hand and patted it, cautioning her to hold her tongue.

"So, tell us high flyer," he said, his genial smirk in place. "What do you want to talk about?"

I pulled my laptop out and opened an excel sheet that I spent hours every month agonizing over. "This is our family's expenses sheet." I pointed to the figure at the bottom. "That's the amount I pay for all of us to live the lifestyle we have."

"So?" my mother asked sullenly even though her eyes widened at the sight of the amount.

“So, this is all I can afford. I have no more money for extras.” I met my father’s gaze. He dropped his quickly. “If anybody has any expenses beyond this, they are going to have to figure out how to pay for it too. This is final. I won’t change my mind or allow anyone else to change it for me.”

My mother’s mouth tightened, struggling to hold in the hate I knew she wanted to spew.

“Understood,” Sanam said before anybody else could, her tone daring anyone to contradict me.

Nobody did. I snapped the laptop shut and stood, moving towards the front door. I’d overstayed my welcome. Better to leave while the going was good.

“Don’t come back again.” My mother’s voice was glacial.

I glanced at her and nodded, strangely not saddened by her decision. I looked at my siblings. “You guys know where to find me when you need me,” I told them.

And then with a last hug and some whispered goodbyes, I left. It didn’t matter if Tara didn’t choose me. I had chosen myself today. I stepped out on to the landing and took a deep breath. It felt like my first lungful of air in forever.

Smriti snuck out behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Nikhil bhaiya,” she whispered earnestly, her small, pixie face looking up at me. “Let me help. I can give you the money I earn from my vlog.”

I laughed. “Thanks Smriti. But you keep your pocket money. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“I made a lakh of rupees in the last three months,” she said, a mutinous expression on her face.

And I stopped breathing fully all over again.

“You did what?” I roared. “Open up that damn account. I want to see what the hell you’re up to.”

CHAPTER 37

Tara

I sat in the team room with the girls, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Today was the first match of the World Cup and we were playing against Pakistan. We were also going into this match after a few disastrous practice matches. To say we had a lot riding on this would be the understatement of the century. I was pretty sure we would get egged if we lost.

Mahesh Sir walked in and stared at us all. His glance taking us all in, some nervous, some despondent, some just so far in their head they couldn't find their way out. That last one would be me.

"Today." Mahesh Sir cleared his throat and stopped. Words seemed to fail him.

After a second, he started again. "Today is a big day. Maybe even the biggest for some of you. Because today, you're going to play the match that will set the tone for the rest of the tournament. The energy you bring to the field, the passion with which you play, and the numbers that you post, these are going to define you in the future."

No. The word echoed in my brain even though I caught myself from uttering it out loud. No, this didn't define me. It defined my career, my professional goals, maybe even my tenure in this game but it didn't define *me*.

My chest loosened as the thought bounced around my brain and settled. I'd spent my whole life thinking that there was nothing to me but cricket. It was cricket that had gotten me the scholarship to St. Columbas where I'd met Aisha and Inaya. It was cricket that had afforded me success and fame and enough money to be able to stay close to my friends.

But it wasn't cricket that had me graduating from St. Columbas with distinction. It wasn't cricket that had taken me from being a junior player on the team to being captain. It wasn't cricket that had made Aisha and Inaya befriend me or stay friends with me all these years.

And while cricket had brought Nikhil into my life, it wasn't what had made him fall in love with me.

All of that was all me. Only me.

Mahesh Sir's pep talk wound down. "I'll see you girls on the field," he said, nodding at everyone, and giving me a curious look. He knew I hadn't been paying attention.

He stepped out of the room and all around me the girls shifted, restless energy permeating the very air of the room.

"We've got this girls," Niyati said bouncing in the corner, her manic energy, as usual, bursting out.

I wasn't sure we did.

"What do you love the most in the world?" I asked, looking at them as their nerves shimmered in the air.

Everyone looked at me like I'd lost my mind but no one answered.

"Lakshmi?" I gestured to one of my bowlers.

"Taking wickets?" she ventured, looking around at everyone with a nervous giggle.

"Always good for us," I replied with an encouraging smile. "But what do you love the most in the whole wide world?"

"My family." This time the answer came easier.

"And what does your family do when you play a good match? When you win?" I asked now.

“Amma makes boondi laddoos.”

“Fit to fat,” one of the other girls chortled. Lakshmi laughed. “Ya but those laddoos are worth it yaar and only when we win so not like I get it all the time.”

This time the idiots laughed even louder. I rolled my eyes at them noting the nerves settling and the camaraderie returning.

“Captain? Toss time.” One of the lower managers of the team, Rudra, stuck his head through the door.

I nodded, acknowledging his reminder. And then I looked at the team again.

“Remember those laddoos, all of you. Remember the joy it gives, remember the high, remember the moment the flavour explodes in your mouth. That’s what you’re playing for.”

“What do you play for, Cap?” Niyati asked, for once standing still.

“I play for the privilege of representing the nation,” I told her quietly. “I play for the love of the game. I play for each and every one of you and for the honour of stepping out on the field with you guys at my back.”

“And?” Niyati prompted with a small smile on her face.

“Today, I also play for one man’s smile.”

Woots and cheers erupted in the room making me laugh. Some of the goofballs stood up to do a silly dance. I hoped they were more coordinated and had more grace on the field than they did as they twerked to music only they heard.

I also played for the possibility of a future with that same man but that wasn’t something that I was ready to talk about with them. Not yet. Not until I’d spoken to him first.

Rudra stuck his head back into the room.

“Cap,” he called over the ruckus in the room. I nodded again and this time I followed him out of the room.

As I walked past another small, windowless room, I saw Nikhil and Manisha Chibbar huddled at a desk, deep in

conversation. I drank in the sight of him, brow furrowed in concentration, hands waving in the air as he made an impassioned point. He was back to dressing all in black. I missed his newly acquired neon wardrobe. I wondered if I could coax him back into it one day, just for private viewing.

“All the best Tara,” Manishaji called out.

“Thanks,” I said, my eyes still on Nikhil whose head had snapped up, those dark eyes meeting mine.

He didn't say anything. Neither did I. I made to move past the door and was almost gone when his quiet words floated over to me.

“You've got this, Cap.”

I turned to look at him and again, words failed me. I nodded, throat tight and stepped away. I hoped at the end of everything, I didn't just have this. I hoped I also had him.

But that was for another day, another moment.

First, I had a match to win.

CHAPTER 38

Tara

I lost the toss and the other team opted to bat first. We'd taken the field and owned it. My girls brought their A-game and in the first six overs, Pakistan was at 45-4. A score that made me grin widely.

Niyati came up to me, her beaming smile rivalling mine.

"Let me bowl," she said. An all rounder, she had a wicked spin to her bowling that rivalled Nikhil's surprise talent.

I nodded and signaled to Lakshmi to give Niyati the ball for the next over. The first ball got smashed for a six and made my gut clench. But then Niyati settled in and though she didn't get a wicket, she managed to keep the rest of the balls contained. The match settled into the slower middle overs before it was time for the pace to pick up again in the last six overs.

They started to smash but that also gave us plenty of opportunities for catches and run outs. We picked up another three wickets and then the overs ran out. They'd posted a respectable 235 runs on the board. As with all scores like that, easily defendable and, also, easily defeatable.

As the teams filed off the field, I stopped to stare at the scoreboard, imprinting it onto my brain. My girls and I were going to blow that total off the board before this day ended.

And we were going to do it in style. I turned to follow the others and a flash of black in the team box caught my eye.

He sat in the last row, a laptop beside him, his trademark wraparound glares aimed in my direction. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed like his entire body stilled when I looked in his direction. I saw someone from his office tap him on his shoulder but he didn't look away. All that intensity, all that want, all that need, always aimed at me, only me. It made me feel like I'd already won this match and every match I'd ever play after.

Except I hadn't, as yet. So, in the end it was I who broke the eye contact and turned away from him, walking towards the pavilion and our lunch break. I had forty five minutes to breathe before we took to the field again.

The break went by in a flash and before we knew it, Niyati and I had padded up and were walking out again, swinging our bats. The dull roar of the crowd watching us had a pit of anxiety opening up in my stomach. I took a deep breath blocking it all out and letting my mind and body step into a zone as familiar to me as breathing.

My vision narrowed to the view from the other end of the pitch as the bowler took her run up. I stepped forward and let swing. The crack of the bat meeting the ball made my soul sing even as I took off running towards the other end of the pitch without waiting to see how far it went.

"Boundary," Niyati squealed like a rabid racoon as she ran past me. And I threw my head back and I laughed, the sound erupting from me. Reflexively, almost without volition, I turned towards the team box and saw him, on his feet, clapping with the biggest smile on his face. And my own smile widened.

The next ball only afforded us one run and I ended up watching Niyati as she took position. And so, it went. Until the middle of the second over when Niyati overreached and left herself open to a stumping. I groaned as the bails went flying. She'd managed only seven runs. Shaking her head in disgust, she marched off the field not making eye contact with me.

Mayawati walked in to take her place and I put the rest of the world from my mind and settled in to play my innings. Except that the winds of fate didn't seem to be in our favour. Fourteen more overs in and we'd lost another three wickets. The Pakistanis were celebrating giddily, and I was left at the pitch, grinding my teeth to dust from frustration. I hit my bat against the ground, careful not to damage it.

We were in trouble. I was the last person left who could truly wield the bat. The rest of the girls coming in were bowlers and fielders at heart.

When Lakshmi walked in, I met her in the center of the pitch.

"I just need you to play safe, don't lose your wicket and keep giving me the turn at the crease," I told her. "Don't get flashy or over ambitious. Leave the run taking to me."

She nodded, her face tense under her helmet. I grabbed the grill and turned her face, so her eyes met mine.

"Look at me. We're going to do this. Tonight, when you're stuffing laddoos in your mouth, you'll think of this moment and remember what I told you. We are going to win this fucking match."

She smiled, tensely, but went to take her position with a slightly less tense frame. She managed one run and gave me back the batter's position. I settled into my spot and squinted down the pitch, the rest of the world forgotten.

I smashed the next ball into the boundary, not even bothering to move from my spot to run. The force of the shot and the placing told me it would net me the four runs. I saw Lakshmi exhale at the other end and shook my head. We were nowhere close to being able to exhale in relief, but I wasn't going to tell her that. She'd probably lose her wicket in panic and run screaming from the field.

I continued to hit and smash the ball as much as I could towards the boundary and on the occasion that I couldn't, I made sure we didn't take more than two runs so I could retain control of the batting.

The runs continued to steadily add up as the bowlers got rasher and wilder in their frustration looking for any possible opportunity to take my wicket. All it did was give me more opportunities to take my shot. And I did. I'd hit my stride and I wasn't going to let anyone derail me.

The first fifty runs came easily. But when I was at sixty three, Lakshmi and I got ourselves into a tricky run out situation. For the few minutes that it took the third umpire to weigh in, I could feel my heart pounding in my throat ready to leap out and land with a splat at my feet.

I looked over to the team box and there he was, elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together under his chin, gaze on me. Always on me. It centered me, grounding me in the moment and releasing the breath trapped in my chest.

The light of the third umpire glowed green and I steeled myself to get back into the game. I was nowhere close to being done for the day and there would be no more silly chances taken like that one.

The minutes bled into one another as we cranked it out from over to over and then Lakshmi's wicket fell. Sweat dripped down my face, trickling from my temples into my eyes and making them sting. I hugged her tight and whispered, "laddoos." She gave a watery laugh and walked away as Asha, our wicket keeper, took to the field.

Bumping gloves with her, I told her exactly what I'd told Lakshmi. Stick at the crease, don't lose your wicket and let me do the rest. At ninety four runs and counting, I could feel the adrenalin coursing through me, making my heart thump at a steady but accelerated beat. And then, with one small sneaky look at my favourite black shirt, I turned back to take my position.

But the Pakistani players had gotten smarter, and they tightened their fielding, drawing players closer to the pitch. They had one goal and one alone, to keep me from making my century.

I grinned, a feral baring of my teeth, as I dug my bat into the ground and took my position. They sent in a medium pacer

to bowl and my vision narrowed until all I saw was the ball leave her fingers and make its way towards me.

I swung, my braid flying to whip me in my face as the bat connected with a thwack that resonated right down my arm with a hum that spoke of a shot timed just right. It sailed high over the heads over the players who were clustered around the pitch to stop my boundaries. Up, up and away, it spun until it landed high up in the stands that was now filled with cheering hordes who were on their feet screaming with a feverish excitement that echoed to the heavens.

Asha let out a war cry and barreled down the pitch to launch herself into my arms. I caught her reflexively and hugged her back before releasing her. Yanking my helmet off my head, I wiped the dripping sweat off my forehead with my forearm.

And then, I turned, carefully and deliberately towards where I knew he would be standing and watching me. Face split in a grin, his hands clapping like they were going to fall off with the force of their impact against each other, he let out a whoop that I couldn't hear over the uproar, but I knew was resounding in volume.

He thrust his hands through his hair and looked up at the heavens like he was thanking God. I waited until he looked back at me before I moved again.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I kept my gaze on him as I kissed my bat and raised it. And pointed it directly at him. His smile slid off as shock settled on his features, the significance of the gesture not being lost on him.

Bat aimed at him for all the world to see, I held his gaze, not dropping it until every single person there realised what was happening, their heads swinging between me and where he stood.

And with that, I didn't just choose him. I fucking claimed him.

CHAPTER 39

Nikhil

We won the match. I mean, of course we did. Tara had been on a rampage as she singlehandedly carried the team to victory.

And yet, Chibbar looked ready to strangle someone and I had the weirdest feeling that someone was probably me. Although, I hadn't done anything other than watch the match like the hordes of other spectators. It might have had something to do with the shit eating grin splitting my face though. That and the fact that it felt like my heart was going to keep ballooning with happiness and just lift me off my feet and into the sky.

"This is not good," she said grimly.

I couldn't bring myself to agree. My heart was throwing a little party in my chest.

"This ruins the entire narrative we have been crafting," she continued, pacing in front of me like a caged animal.

I tried to peek over her to get a glimpse of Tara, but no one had emerged from the women's changing rooms yet.

"Nikhil," Chibbar snapped. "Listen to me. This is a disaster."

"No, it's not."

The words came from two different sets of lips, mine and *hers*. I caught Tara's eyes over Chibbar's shoulder and my stupid, sappy grin widened. She grinned back, an irreverent, carefree grin that had my heart soaring.

Her hair lay in thick damp ropes around her shoulder and her face was freshly scrubbed and clear of all the grime and sweat from before. In her tracks and faded India t-shirt, she was breathtaking.

A loud shriek rent the air and Aisha and Inaya appeared from literally nowhere and threw themselves at Tara. The girls hugged each other and jumped in the air like they were being propelled by air lifts.

And then Tara's hand snuck out and she yanked me into their group hug. And my world had never felt so perfect as it did in that moment.

Chibbar sniffed and muttered something about a disaster, but her ire seemed to be fading. I untangled myself from the mass of arms and legs and strode over to where she stood.

"I'll spin it," I promised.

"No," Tara said from behind me. "*I* will spin it."

I froze. Okay, now I was worried about what that firebrand was planning to tell the media.

"We have a press conference in five minutes." Tara was still grinning euphorically, the high of the day's victory making her face glow. "Let's go."

"Tara, listen," I began.

"Trust me, MIB?" she said, looking me dead in the eyes.

And I did...so, I shut my mouth and followed her.

She took her seat at the table flanked by Mahesh Sir and Chibbar, camera flashes going off like a fireworks display at Diwali and a million press microphones being shoved in their faces.

Aisha, Inaya and I stood to the back, leaning against the far wall, our eyes on our girl.

“Taraji,” one of the louder journos called out. “How do you feel about today’s win?”

“Ecstatic.” She flashed that million megawatt smile and leaned forward, comfortable in her own skin.

“And how do you feel about the man you dedicated your century to?” another sly voice asked from the crowd.

“Ecstatic,” Tara repeated, her smile’s wattage increasing.

The group of media laughed and the tension in my stomach eased a little.

“According to the news reports, the two of you were just friends.”

“Well,” Tara shrugged. “We were just friends when you guys kept reporting that there was something more. And now, when there is something more, you guys are stuck on the friends train. You’ve got to keep up folks. The news you’re reporting is outdated.”

More laughter permeated the room. I grinned. Where was this version of Tara when I was trying to get her to do media and press interviews before this?

“And you’re not worried about this new relationship distracting you from the game? You are in the middle of a World Cup tournament.”

“Do your relationships distract you from breaking news every day?” She smirked, the smallest little smirk that made me fall just a little bit more in love. If that was even possible. I was starting to feel like there wasn’t any more space inside me to love this woman more than I already did.

“Well, as you just pointed out, the news we’ve been reporting was outdated,” a smart ass from the back called out.

Tara laughed. “Touché.”

Silence fell for the briefest moment and Tara sobered. She straightened in her chair and leaned forward, her arms resting on the table.

“Here’s the latest, freshest news for you guys to report straight from the horse’s mouth. My girls and I played our hearts out on the field today. Some parts of our effort worked and some parts of it didn’t. But that’s what being a team is all about. When some of us are struggling, the others pull more of their weight and vice versa. And today, the *team* delivered.”

She took a deep breath and looked at me, her lips tipping up in a small smile. “Who we are, the passion we bring to the field, and the fire in our bellies, that comes from the people who love us and the ones we love back. They are the foundation we build on and we stand on the backs of giants. They deserve to be acknowledged. He deserves to be acknowledged.”

As one the press swung their heads to look at me, like a weird one-headed multi-bodied monster. And for the first time in my life, I was lost for words. She’d stolen them all along with my heart.

“Shall we talk cricket now?” she called out, a wicked grin on her face. And the media monster swung its attention back to her.

I took a deep breath, my stupid heart ballooning and clogging my throat again.

“Aww,” Aisha whispered beside me. “He’s all choked up.”

“Shut up,” Inaya sniffed, sounding like she was battling tears too. “So am I. That was so sweet. And be nice to Nikhil. He made Tara sweet!”

“That is true,” Aisha acknowledged. “Please stop that,” she told me. “I want my snarky Tara back.”

I grinned. “Do you honestly think that that Tara would go anywhere?”

No, she wouldn’t, I answered myself. I wouldn’t let her. I’d fallen in love with Tara exactly the way she was, and I would annihilate anyone who tried to change her. Including myself.

CHAPTER 40

Nikhil

“**H**ome sweet home.”

Tara sighed as we walked through the doors of her condo. She released the rubber band on her ponytail and let her hair stream down her back, massaging her scalp and the back of her neck.

She didn't get much further before I turned her around and crashed my mouth down on to hers. She erupted in my arms, a volcano of pent-up adrenalin and need. Desperate and frantic to get closer than we were, we tore at each other's clothes until they landed in a crumpled heap on the floor.

The first contact of skin against skin had everything inside me sighing. I rocked myself against the cradle of her core and she whimpered against me, her thighs falling open to give me easier access. But I wasn't ready for this to go there yet.

I slipped a hand between us teasing the wet folds apart and she moaned, arching her back and giving me access to her beautiful breasts. I took one into my mouth and worshiped it even as my other hand went to fondle the other one.

I walked her backwards to her couch and lay her down on it, thanking every God in the pantheon that she'd had the foresight to buy a couch larger than most people's homes. Her slim hand reached down to grab and stroke me and my eyes rolled back in my head.

“Fuck Tara!” I moaned.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Fuck Tara.”

I laughed, helplessly, even as I leaned forward to draw her breast in deeper, nipping, sucking and laving it until she was making breathy little sounds that went straight to my groin. I slipped one finger into her and her hand tightened around my shaft, promising retribution that made me see stars.

I slid lower and she curled one hand in my hair, tugging at it, stopping me from going further.

“I won’t last long,” she rasped.

I untangled her hand from my hair and twined my fingers through hers.

“Then don’t,” I said simply before placing my mouth to her core. A shivering gasp escaped her as I grasped her thighs and spread them giving me access to the sweetest, most luscious part of her. And then I set myself to showing her exactly what she meant to me. Her hand found its way back to my hair but this time she didn’t pull me away, she just forced me closer.

She came apart with a low, keening wail that had me gentling my caresses, licking and kissing, soothing her on her way down from the crest.

I slipped the new condom I’d stashed in my wallet, the one I’d bought when I’d been riding a wave of hope after the last time Tara and I were together.

“No,” she said, her voice a husky whisper that sent shivers down my spine. “I’m on the pill and we’re both clean. I want to feel you inside me. All of you.”

“Are you sure?” I asked her still clutching the condom in my hand like a chump.

“Are you planning on sleeping with anyone other than me?” she demanded, already dragging me back to lean over her.

“Not in this lifetime,” I murmured, dropping the condom on the table.

“Then, I’m sure. And fuck you,” she muttered. “Not in any other lifetime either. You’re mine now.”

I dropped my forehead to hers, our breaths mingling as we stared into each other’s eyes.

“I was always yours, right from the beginning.” The whispered confession had her reaching up to cup my face.

“Even when you had my poster stuck on your wall and you were making kissy faces at it?” she teased.

“Yes, even then.” I grinned. “I’m a lucky ass. How many guys wind up in bed with their celebrity crush?”

“Not every guy is you, MIB,” she murmured. “And you’re my ass.”

She flipped me on to my back, straddling me as she stroked her hand up and down my shaft, slowly dipping it into her slit. My breath caught in my chest as I looked at her, sitting astride me, a warrior goddess in all her glory.

She held my gaze as she slowly slid herself on to me, taking me to the hilt, until I bottomed out on a harsh groan.

“I love you.” The words were a vow, a promise to her and to the universe. One that was etched in blood drawn straight from my heart.

“I love you too.” She allowed me to draw her head down for a slow, sweet kiss. “I will always love you.”

And with that, we stopped talking. And we let our bodies take over. Every touch, every stroke, every fevered breath driving us towards a peak that seemed insurmountable. But we climbed it together, falling off the edge in a cascade of sensation that both cocooned and branded us.

If there was heaven on earth, then it was in this woman’s arms.

She collapsed on top of me in a boneless heap and I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close. Our hearts raced and thumped, working to come down from the high that still held us in thrall.

The chill blast of the air conditioner made its presence felt through our sated haze and Tara shivered. I snagged the comfy throw she always had draped over her couch and wrapped it around her frame, letting it cover both of us as she still lay slumped over me. I wasn't letting her move. I would rather stay like this for eternity.

She seemed to feel the same way as she snuggled in closer, her cold nose nuzzling the side of my neck.

“Am I squashing you?” she asked, yawning.

“Not at all,” I answered, a tad untruthfully. “You are as light as a petal blowing on the morning breeze.”

She snort-giggled. “Fuck off.”

“If you could just remove your knee from my balls, I would be most grateful.”

She laughed, that deep throated laugh that always made my heart squish itself in happiness. She moved her knee and settled in more comfortably.

We drifted off to sleep, holding on to each other and knowing that life, in that moment, and in every moment in the future, would be perfect. Irrespective of what was coming, as long as we had this, it was perfect.

CHAPTER 41

Tara

I was sleeping on a hard, poky floor in a training camp and the girls were all hammering their cricket bats against the door. Why were they doing that again?

I woke from my dream, disoriented and groggy. The hard, poky floor was Nikhil and his annoying chest hair and the hammering was someone actually at the door. I turned to stand up but instead slid off Nikhil and the couch and landed with a bump on the cold, hard floor.

I groaned, pain radiating from my bum, even as Nikhil shot up into a seating position.

“What? How?” He looked around wild-eyed, his hair standing on end like he’d been electrocuted. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” I groused as I slowly got to my feet. I was not a morning person. I checked the time on my watch, squinting with one eye. It was nine in the night. Correction. I was not an ‘after sleep’ person. We’d only been sleeping an hour or so dammit. Who the hell was this? “Someone is trying to break the front door down.”

I was halfway to the door when I realised I was naked and did a little detour to shrug into pyjamas and a t-shirt. Whoever was outside was determined to either get in or stay there pounding away on the wood for the rest of the night.

Nikhil had flopped back down on the couch, one arm thrown over his eyes and the throw I'd abandoned pulled over his body. He was apparently even less of an 'after sleep' person than I was. I walked through the living room, giving his reclining self the stink eye as I walked to the front door.

I hauled the door open and found my parents on the other side of it. My father's hand was still raised in mid-air like he was in half pounding position.

And Nikhil was sleeping in full naked glory on my couch.

I could win all the matches in the world. I could draw all the boundaries I wanted in my personal relationships. But the little girl who quailed at the first sign of her father's temper cringed inside me at the situation I was in.

"Papaji! Ma!" I squeaked like a strangled mouse even as I tried to block their view of the living room with my body.

My father raised one eyebrow at me.

"Can we come in?" he asked.

"Can you come in?" My voice got higher. I heard some weird shuffling noises behind me which I hoped meant Nikhil was running for his life.

"What is that noise?" my father asked, his eyes sharpening and his eyebrows coming together in a ferocious frown.

"Rats," I said.

"Rats?" Ma gasped.

Rats? Seriously? That was the best I could come up with? Rats??

Papaji shouldered his way in and I stepped aside, cringing. If I kept my eyes closed, could I unsee the disaster that was bound to unfold?

I couldn't make myself do it though. I squinted through my slitted close eyes and saw Nikhil standing there, the throw wrapped like a lungi around his waist, and an additional cushion held at his groin.

My mother whispered, "Haye rabba."

And I looked down at the floor. Maybe the earth would open up and swallow me? Wasn't that what it did to sinners? No? I checked hopefully but the Italian marble stayed in place.

“You will get married,” Papaji announced.

My head snapped up. Hold on. I was a mature, sensible, financially independent adult. I was not going to be coerced into marriage just because of family honour or societal pressures or some shit like that.

I met my father's hard, obsidian gaze and swallowed. I think I was getting married soon.

“Yes, we will,” Nikhil said agreeably, like he wasn't standing there in a woolly toga and fluffy abdominal cushion ball guard which showed more than it concealed.

“Papaji, you can't just-“ I spoke around the constriction in my throat.

“You asked me to only be your father no? Not your coach or anything else?”

I fell silent.

“I am being your father now and telling you that you have to get married. You love this boy no?”

I nodded.

“Then you marry him.”

It wasn't that I didn't want to marry Nikhil. I just didn't want it shoved down my throat or more importantly, I didn't want me being shoved down Nikhil's throat.

“Papaji?” Nikhil slid over to where I was standing, wrapping an arm around my waist and strategically positioning me in front of him. I supposed I was more substantial than a cushion. “May I call you Papaji? You're absolutely right in your worries and fears for Tara. I understand completely. You need to know that I love her, completely and rather irrationally at that. There is nothing in this world that I want more than to marry her. There is nothing in this world that I want more than having her in my life. But it will only happen when Tara wants it.” Steel infused his voice

though it still stayed cordial and polite. “It will not be because anybody else pushed her into it. Not even me.”

“We’ll get married,” I blurted out, my heart overflowing at his words.

“Tara, you don’t have to-“

“Shut up, MIB. Go buy me a fucking a ring that won’t get caught or stuck in my gloves and let’s do this.”

He grinned, the smile blindingly white. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” And then I forgot my parents were watching us and kissed him.

My mother moaned and started praying, a frantic, fervent appeal to the gods. I laughed and buried my face into Nikhil’s chest. His chest hair poked me again and I scrubbed at my face.

“Go get dressed and then come and officially meet my parents,” I whispered.

He grinned down at me. “We always do everything arse backwards, don’t we?”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, MIB.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “Neither would I.

EPILOGUE

Kabir

I paced up and down the small dog park in our apartment complex as I waited for Marshmallow to do his business.

The furry little bastard had stolen my pillow, my blanket and my girlfriend. And not content with that, he had also ruined my plans for a magical evening.

“Isn’t he done yet?” wheezed Tara, as she ran up to us. “Aisha’s looking for you, Kabir. We can’t hold her off any longer.”

“I told you we should have given him an enema,” I snarled in frustration. “Make, you little demon, make!”

“Hey! You’re giving him performance anxiety. Isn’t that right, my little cookie?” she crooned as she stooped to pet the traitor, who forgot all about the task at hand.

Honestly, he had the attention span of a caterpillar.

“Nikhil, tell your woman to stop distracting my dog. We’re wasting time.”

Tara’s fiancée, Nikhil, grinned at me.

“You’re on your own, dude. I want to get laid tonight,” he said unhelpfully.

With a sigh, I sat down and pulled Marshmallow over to me. When I opened my mouth to talk sense into him, the

doofus shoved his large wet tongue right into my mouth, and it was all I could do to not gag. Ugh!

“Why the hell are you french kissing your dog?” drawled the love of my life, walking up to us, Inaya and Ayaz hot on her heels.

“We tried to keep her upstairs, but she ran out when we... umm... you know,” stammered Ayaz.

“We *all* know,” said Tara, with a snicker.

Inaya swatted her on the head and blew her husband a kiss as he turned a bright red.

I decided to interfere before his head exploded.

“First of all, that’s *your* dog, not mine. Secondly, when is he going to learn to control his tongue? This is not normal, baby. It’s like he’s only got one functional brain cell, and it goes on the blip if he tries to do two things at once.”

Aisha picked up the wiggling little doofus and giggled as his head banged into her nose in his excitement to lick every inch of her face at once.

“What are you doing down here anyway? This isn’t his time to go potty,” she said, cuddling the dog against her chest.

As if on cue, Marshmallow barked and jumped out of her arms.

Then he squatted against the base of a bush and did his smelly business. *Finally!* I had been waiting sixteen hours for this stinky moment.

I waggled my eyebrows at Inaya and Tara, and they swung into action.

“Ugh! That smells awful. What are you feeding him, babe?” asked Inaya, pretending to gag.

“Get me out of here before the stink knocks me out,” said Tara dramatically.

They led Aisha away from the scene, and as soon as her back was turned, I slipped on a pair of disposable gloves and

steeled myself to reach into the pile of steaming poop that Marshmallow had just deposited.

“Fuck-fuck-bloody-fuckitty-fuck,” I chanted under my breath as my fingers slid through the mess. “Oh, thank God!”

I had finally found what I was looking for.

I held up the poop-covered object triumphantly, and Ayaz clapped me on the back.

“Good job, man! Although I still don’t get why you’d bake an engagement ring into a cookie,” he said, shaking his head.

It was a great plan. On paper, that is.

I had found the closest approximation of the recipe for a Shrewsbury biscuit - Aisha’s favourite cookie. The plan was that I’d give her a giant heart-shaped cookie after dinner, and she’d find the ring when she bit into it. And then, I was going to go down on my knees and beg my Bad Girl to marry me. In front of all the people who loved her.

It was supposed to be my big, romantic gesture.

I hadn’t accounted for the little cookie thief who was looking very pleased with himself right now. Marshmallow had made off with the cookie when it was cooling on Inaya’s kitchen counter, and he’d eaten most of it before we could catch him. One very expensive trip to the vet later, we brought him back home and waited for him to pass the ring out.

Sixteen hours later, after a happy evening with our friends where we celebrated Inaya and Ayaz’s wedding, and Tara and Nikhil’s engagement, I had taken Marshmallow down for one last try before our friends left.

And Aisha still didn’t know about the ring.

“What are you going to do now that your grand plan has flopped so disastrously?” asked Nikhil.

“I’m going to sanitise the hell out of this ring, for a start. And then, return it to the store and buy another one,” I replied, with a grin.

I didn't have any big romantic gesture left, I realised as I scrubbed the ring clean.

“Whatcha doing, Doc?”

I turned around and found Aisha standing at the door, staring at the ring in my hand.

“Umm...”

“Is that a ring?” she asked, hyperventilating a little.

“Yeah, but...”

“Gimme!” she demanded, holding out her hand.

“No! The ring was hidden in that damn cookie, and your idiot dog just passed it out. I'm not giving you a filthy ring, Aisha. I'll get you a new one,” I argued.

“Kabir, I don't want a new ring. I want this one,” she insisted.

My shoulders slumped in defeat.

“I wanted to make the proposal special, Aisha. Not like this. Standing in a bathroom, and giving you a poopy ring. This wasn't the big romantic gesture that I had planned.”

She shot me a watery smile.

“I don't care about big gestures, Doc. All I need is love. And standing in a bathroom with the man I love, with our tribe waiting for us outside, wearing a ring that my furbaby just pooped out sounds pretty darn romantic to me.”

I sighed happily as I went down on one knee on the damp bathroom floor.

“Aisha Rajput, will you be my Bad Girl forever?”

She knelt in front of me and held her hand out.

“Hell, yeah, Doc!”

I slid the ring on her finger and there was a loud whoop from behind her as our friends cheered. I leaned forward to kiss her, but a tiny tornado came yapping into the bathroom and wriggled his way into the tiny space between us.

“Kiss me quickly, before Marshmallow gets his tongue out,” I hissed.

Aisha laughed loudly and threw her arms around me. And just like that, my world was complete.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A published author with Harlequin India – Mills & Boon India Collection and Juggernaut, Shilpa Suraj's books have hit both the Hot New Releases and Bestseller lists on Amazon. Her next novel, tentatively titled 'Wrong,' has been contracted by Rupa Publications and will release later this year. She is also part of the Flipped Anthology by Harper Collins and had an audiobook book Insta Reddy release with Storytel.

She is, amongst other things, currently working on 'Frazzled and Fabulous,' a humorous, true-to-life parenting story that is part memoir and part nonfiction.

An avid reader with a passion for creative writing and storytelling saw her participating in writing competitions at school and dabbling in copy writing for an ad agency as a teenager. Twenty years in the corporate space, including a stint in Corporate Communications for Google, India, and a spell at entrepreneurship all hold her in good stead for her multiple current roles of author, mother and Head of Human Resources & Public Relations at an architecture and interior design firm.

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