



Fix MY
Heart



MADHURI TAMSE

FIX My Heart

*My **Heart** is Racing On...*



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PROLOGUE

Ishika

DELHI

It's late Friday evening. The end of another lovely overworked week, which I usually prefer chilling out with friends. Easing the clutch, I shift the gears of my car to slow down as there is a red light ahead where all the vehicles are waiting for the signal to turn green. Ever since I moved to Delhi last week, the days have been crazily chaotic, and all I want is to go for a long drive or nestle cosily in front of the television, binging on my favourite Netflix show, 'Formula 1: Drive to Survive'. Alas! It's all a wishful dream. And all the credit for my current predicament goes to the RC Group of Company. I've been working in their Mumbai branch as a lead jewellery designer for five years, and now this company has been taken over by another brand – *Ronishq Jewels*. I hate transitions like these as they change everything, beginning with your comfort level. So far, I've been happy working in Mumbai, but the new company, Ronishq Jewels, has its headquarters in Delhi, and I'm forced to relocate here. Tomorrow, I'm travelling again to Mumbai to brief the CEO of Ronishq Jewels on our vintage jewellery designs, which is, by far, the most profitable collection of RC Group. Vintage jewellery is rare and expensive, and what's best about them is they never go out of fashion. I design these classic pieces, retaining their antiqueness and crafting them into gold, silver, diamond and other gemstones to add extra grace to their value, and parallelly make them accessible in all our stores throughout the country. I know I'm not into management, nor am I the appropriate person to conduct such briefings. Still, these are my jewellery designs, and now that our Boss and the entire company structure have changed, I'm the one responsible for ensuring that my designs are well received by Ronishq Jewels. Also, since it's a new work environment for me, I would like to know their input (if any), so I can work on them accordingly and fit my designs to their Brand from now on.

“Ishika, where did you buy this gown?” asks my junior colleague, Supriya. I had just picked her up a few minutes ago so we could drive together to this party where my Ex-Boss of the RC Group, Mr. Anant Chopra, is going to introduce us to our new Boss.

“I didn’t buy it. I got it designed.”

My reply makes her chuckle. I give her a side glance and instantly read the sarcasm on her face.

“I forgot,” she shrugs. “You are Richie-rich. I don’t understand why you even need to work when you are from such an affluent family. You are rolling in money, Ishika, and can live without lifting your little finger your entire life.”

I’ve been told that a lot lately, and I hate it.

“Just because I am rich doesn’t mean I can’t build my life and career from scratch, Supriya.” I tap my manicured fingers over the steering wheel, accelerating the engine, only to apply brakes and bring the car to a shrieking halt as the signal turns red again. F*ck! I hate this. I have been driving for the past one hour, and the GPS location on my phone shows twenty minutes more to reach the venue of the event.

A gypsy car with four rich brats who look drunk pulls up beside us. The music in their car is already deafening, and the way these boys are singing the song in their drunken voices makes it even more annoying. But I ignore it and continue to wait for the signal to turn green when one of them whistles at me.

“Hello, Babe. Nice car.” He tries to touch the car.

“Get your hands off my car,” I shout from inside.

That brings the attention of the other boys to me. They look at me as if I am a fresh piece of meat barbequed and served before them.

“You have a gorgeous mouth too, Babe. What’s your name?” The boy driving the gypsy asks.

I slide my window down.

“B*tch!” I reply, showing him my middle finger. “Liked it?”

They all frown at my sassy reply.

Just then, one of them tries to stick his bubblegum on my car, screwing my mood further.

“What the f*ck are you doing?” I yell at him and am about to get down to teach him a lesson when Supriya grips my arm.

“Ishika, leave it. Let’s go. We are already late.”

She is scared by these brats, but I’m not. I know how to handle such boys who think they can misbehave with anyone.

“C’mon, Ishika. The signal has turned green. Drive.”

I give up my idea of teaching these boys some manners and grip the steering wheel again, trying to start the engine, which somehow doesn’t seem to work.

“A beauty like you is meant to ride a man, baby. Not cars.” The guy driving the gypsy mocks.

The cars behind us keep honking.

“You are right, bro. As it is, women are terrible drivers. Even her car seems to agree. See, it’s unwilling to kick off the road,” the other guy in the backseat, who tried sticking the bubblegum to my car adds, making everyone laugh.

Their unnecessary lewd comments already pissed me off, but now, they have gone too far. They dared to mock a woman’s driving skills—*my driving skills*, and for that, I’m not going to let them get away easily. The cars behind us keep honking, forcing the boys in the gypsy to drive away, cursing and howling.

Run, Boys! But you can’t run too far. My subconscious mind screams, seeing their car buzz off the road.

“Ishika, don’t,” Supriya warns me as she realises what I am about to do. I ignore it and once again start my car, which thankfully comes to life. Shifting the gears and easing the clutch again, I press the gas pedal down. *It’s time to Race, baby.*

Driving half a kilometre, I see the same gypsy ahead of me. The guys are still howling in victory and zooming away at full

speed.

I throttle the engine, chasing the gypsy as if my life depends on showing these men whom they are about to race with. *'Men drive better than women'* have been a sexist stereotype for ages. But in the past decade, I have proved that wrong time and again. And tonight, I'll show these rowdy boys a demo of the same.

Supriya keeps screaming at me to slow down the car, but I don't pay heed to her. I know she's worried about her safety, but she is safe with me.

My engine revs harder as I chase my opponents. This thrill is always different. It makes me feel powerful and in control. Coming from a wealthy background, I was always surrounded by fancy cars, but it was not the cars that fascinated me. It was the thrill of commanding the vehicle with just a pair of hands that enticed me. I was 19 when I got my driving license, and a month later, more than focusing on my academics at the university, I was seen on the race track in Noida, learning the basics of car racing.

The guy driving the gypsy realises I am coming for them and tries to block my way so I don't cross their vehicle. It won't take me a minute to push their vehicle off my path, hitting their gypsy from behind, but I would never make that reckless decision and put their lives at stake.

"Ishika, what the hell are you doing? Stop this madness." Supriya's voice breaks my chain of thoughts.

Madness!! She has no idea this is beyond madness; I've effing lived with it for years. Racing is in my blood now.

I try to chase their gypsy from behind, earning a scream from Supriya as she holds the handle above the car door to prevent her from getting thrown forward. Their gypsy keeps blocking my way, not letting me cross. *For how long?* They have no effing clue whom they are racing with. I slow down my car, allowing them to drive ahead before pressing the gas pedal again and speeding toward them from the right side. This is where the psychological aspect comes into play while racing. Play with your opponent's mind. I want them to think

my car would try passing theirs from the right side, and just as I had expected, they try to block my car from the right. When I am a few inches from colliding with the gypsy, I accelerate and steer my wheel sharply to the left, driving ahead at full speed. This sudden confusion derails the gypsy off the road, which was bound to happen, considering the guys were heavily drunk. As I drive ahead with full might and power, I look into the rearview mirror and see the gypsy behind me hit the pole at the divider and come to a screeching halt.

Damn! Applying the brakes of my car, I change the gear to reverse and drive behind until I reach them again. The drunk boys were totally disorientated and were still trying to get out of their car. One of them sees me parking and getting out of my car, and they stare at me in both horror and rage.

I grab the first aid kit from the backseat before striding toward them and handing it over to the one driving the gypsy.

“Gentlemen, never doubt a woman’s driving skills, especially when that woman is Ishika Bhatia.” I wink at him. “I’m not going to report you to the cops this time, but the next time I see you or your friends drinking and driving, I won’t let it go so easily. You’ll be going straight to jail, locked up behind bars and your gypsy to a garage. Got it? And now, clean yourselves up with this first-aid kit.”

They nod blankly at my warning, still frozen from the impact of the hit, while I turn back to get inside my car again. I’m *Ishika Bhatia*, a car racer by passion and the winner of uncountable legal and illegal races held worldwide. How could I let a few spoilt brats win over me this time? I am unbeatable.

After fifteen minutes of utter silence and my heart worrying in anxiety about what those gypsy boys must be thinking and doing about their damaged vehicle on that deserted road, I park the car at the venue where the party is organised.

“Finally, we are here,” I say, as I look in the rearview mirror to set my hair again.

“What was that, Ishika?” Supriya eases her hold from the door handle and glares at me. “We could have been in the

hospital and not this event tonight because of your rash driving.”

“I wasn’t driving, darling. I was racing.” I grin, correcting her.

“And what about those boys you raced with?”

“They got hurt because they were drunk. I or my car didn’t touch them.”

Supriya rolls her eyes.

“And furthermore, I didn’t do anything that risked *your* life and safety, did I? You are doing absolutely fine. And if you are not okay, don’t ask me to pick you up from anywhere next time. Book a cab and go wherever you want to.”

I give my lips a final touch of the gloss before getting down. Supriya follows me out.

“Do you always have to be this rude?” She asks.

“I wasn’t the first one who was rude between us. You doubted *my* driving skills, Supriya,” I clarify.

“Yes, I did because life isn’t always a race, Ishika. I know your craze for it but for God’s sake, we were just getting to a party. I understand those boys passed some nasty comments and judged your driving skills, but...”

“Darling,” I interrupt. “I’m in no mood for this. Let’s chill and enjoy the night. Okay?”

She doesn’t look okay with that, but I really don’t care now.

I handover my car keys to the Valet, asking him to handle my baby with care. But, it will need a bit of servicing after my thrilling encounter with the gypsy boys. The Valet tips his head before taking my car away to park. Supriya keeps fussing and blabbering as she follows me inside the venue. That’s why I don’t like befriending anyone. They have too many expectations and too many complaints. It’s not my cup of tea anymore. I’m doing great alone. Why do people even need friends? To share their joys and sorrows? Well, I don’t mind partying hard, even with strangers, for my successes, whether in the races I win or at work. And during my grief, I call my

dad and vent all my pain to him. He understands. He gets me and doesn't hesitate to travel from wherever he is, only to give me a hug, which rejuvenates my mood. All the other times, I like being alone and in complete control of my inner self. Boyfriends? Of course, I had a few in the past. It was nothing serious, or maybe I didn't want them to take me seriously. Let me be honest. I love the way I'm programmed to be, and no one can change that ever.

"Are you even listening, Ishika?" Supriya shrieks again. I pause my steps, wanting to get rid of her and turn around.

"I need to use the washroom."

That's my excuse to escape.

Supriya is my junior colleague, and after all this time, she knows when I am bored with her and her over-hyped advice.

"I knew it," she shrugs, finally giving up the argument. "I'll see you inside."

"Sure," I smile. "If you need me to drop you back home after the party, text me."

"No thanks. I'm perfectly capable of booking a cab this time," she replies before walking away.

Thank God she left. My eardrums had already started aching by her constant nagging. Whatever! I'm here to enjoy the night and also meet my new Boss, but for that, I'll have to make my presence known to my Ex-Boss, Mr. Anant Chopra. He is a sweetheart, to be honest, and is like a fatherly figure to me. He never even once let me feel privileged in these seven years I've worked for him. He treated me as a regular employee. If he appreciated my hard work, he also scolded me for my negligence. He definitely threw tantrums when I wanted breaks in almost every two months to fly across the world and participate in races. But, when I resumed work, he would ask me how the race went and was genuinely interested in knowing all about it as I narrated to him my thrilling experiences. I wish he hadn't sold off his jewellery subsidiary, where I worked for all these years, to Ronishq Jewels. I'll miss him as my Boss. But I know he wants to retire from his

business and wants all his chain of companies in competent hands.

As I enter the party hall, I glance around to find him talking to a group of people. He notices me, too, and smiles, waving at me to join them.

“Here she comes. Let me proudly introduce you all to her.” I hear him bellowing.

Yeah, he is always loud at parties. But today, his happiness knew no bounds. He has signed a deal with the Gupta Industries in their corporate sector too, for which he threw this party and invited us, the team from his jewellery subsidiary. He wanted to introduce us to our new Boss and get us acquainted with the new management who will lead us from hereon. The group he is talking to turns around to see me, and my steps falter the moment I look into his eyes, that of the guy I knew once upon a time. My only best friend in college a decade ago - *Rohan Oberoi!* What is he doing here at this party? I had no idea that my Boss knew him.

Rohan, the guy who once was my best friend and a meaningful part of my life, one with whom I had participated and won some of the finest races during those times. That very guy is here before me after all these years. I can't believe it. Why is Rohan in Delhi? Does he live here? I thought he would have settled in San Francisco, where he dreamed of opening a car showroom! How can I forget Rohan's obsession with each of his cars? One scratch on them, and he would throw a fit or tantrum, which could shock every living being on this earth. Can the world really be this small that we met again? Like this? At my Ex-Boss's party?

Ignoring that thought, I regroup myself and continue making my way towards them. I'd always seen Rohan in rugged jeans and t-shirts during our college days, but today, seeing him in a crisp lavender silk shirt and a charcoal grey suit jacket, I can't help admiring him a bit longer. Rohan has always been the coolest guy I've ever known, but tonight, the way he looks at me, shell-shocked and a little astonished, his steady gaze unwavering, makes me feel out of sorts. Rohan was never intimidating, but today I hold my breath to keep a

lid on this impromptu reunion with the guy I never expected to see again in my life. I see his arms flex as he tightens the grip on his glass between his fingers, and a pulse strains on his temple as he clenches his jaw. My My! The attitude he had back then, when he thought the whole world revolved around him, has definitely grown tenfold.

Somehow, I ignore that too, and with a confident smile, stand beside my Ex-Boss as he introduces me to the group.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, meet Ishika Bhatia, the lead jewellery designer of my company,” Anant Chopra introduces us.

I smile at the group only to realise Vansh Kapoor and Tanisha Gupta are a part of this group too. We all studied in the same college, and the same class, so meeting them after a decade feels weird. Though we all belonged to the same class and group, Rohan was the only one I was so close to. And now, meeting them all together after such a long time makes me confused and somewhat out of sorts.

With Tanisha here, whom we all fondly called Taani back then, I now connect the dots that the Gupta Industries, with whom my Boss’s corporate sector, the RC Group of Companies, have struck a deal, belongs to her. And maybe that’s why we have Rohan here too. Oh, Roh! I never thought we would meet again like this. *Roh!* Yeah. That’s what I called him back then, and he called me *Ishq!* And we were recognised by the pseudonym Roshika... as in #roshika if we ever happen to trend again. Those were the days! We were so thick that people compared our friendship to Kajol and Sharukh Khan’s from the movie ‘*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai.*’ Our friendship was always talked about and had set an example for many, yet it all ended rather abruptly. It doesn’t matter anymore why it all happened, does it? F*ck! Even imagining a day without him in my life felt like a sin, yet, we ended up distancing ourselves, never to look back at each other. The mere thought of it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. All those memories of our friendship flash before my eyes and mess with my brain.

“Do you all know each other?” Anant Sir asks, seeing Vansh, Taani and Rohan gaping at me, and I don’t want this awkward silence to stretch between us anymore.

So, before he can question us, I regroup myself and stretch my hand for a formal handshake with Rohan first.

“Hello, Rohan.”

He takes a few seconds to process what is happening before taking my hand.

“Hi, Ishika.” His voice is barely a whisper.

“Long time,” I add.

“Yeah. Long time.” Rohan nods in agreement while our hands are still linked.

“Rohan is the CEO of Ronishq Jewels, and now, your new Boss,” Anant Chopra adds.

I’m the first one to leave our handhold as Anant Chopra continues to speak.

Are you kidding me? Ronishq is *Rohan’s* Jewellery brand? How did I not know? Well, this is all my fault, as I never looked back since we parted ways.

I see the same surprise and hesitation on Rohan’s face when he learns I would be working for him hereon. He doesn’t want me. I mean, he doesn’t want me to work for him? Ditto!

I greet the rest of the group and share pleasantries, after which Anant Chopra takes me away, and I sigh in relief at the breath I was holding. I have to gear myself to face this biggest challenge fate has thrown my way. Rohan and I had a past, and I hope it will not interfere with my career at Ronishq Jewels. I have to find a way out or face it head-on without bringing the toxic past into our present.

**Have I told you yet,*
I kept fighting my feelings for long because a forbidden love so
true existed between us.*

**Have I told you yet,*
We were so perfect together but an unseen wariness existed
between us.*

**Have I told you yet,*
When my heart was caged in the darkness of my soul, you lit
the fire between us.*

**Have I told you yet*
As you stepped on the threshold of my heart, you breathed a
new life between us.*

**Have I told you yet,*
I loved you too much but spoke too little how much I cared for
what existed between us.*

**QUOTE BY [TSHREE](#) (AUTHOR OF YOU & ME
SERIES)**

Chapter 1

Rohan

I accelerate my car at full speed to get away from one of my life's most important business events to let lose my emotions and escape from the chains of the past, which involved my broken heart. The ghost of my past, Ishika Bhatia, is back in my life, and my silly heart immediately started beating with a renewed vigour as if she still fuels its survival. F*cking crap. I don't know how to process this or what I am going to do. The fog of my anger and this unexpected anxiety keeps zoning out my decision-making abilities tonight. A decade had passed since I last saw her. I had let her rule my heart once, which she smashed into a million pieces for someone else; yet one look at her after all these years and those hidden feelings and pain has resurfaced. What a tragedy!

My phone had been ringing ever since I left the party. My best friend, Vansh Kapoor, is aware of my sudden departure from the event, and I know he won't rest without making sure I am fine. But I don't want to speak to him now as he will immediately realise from my voice that I am not well. Everyone from my friend circle knew my feelings for Ishika from the first day of college. And just like that, our first meeting flashes in front of my eyes.

I was a week late for my first year of graduation at AMU college in Gurgaon, Delhi. My three-week-long vacation in Bangkok with friends ended yesterday, after which we all flew back home to focus on our studies. Vansh wasn't a part of this Bangkok trip as his grandmother was ill at the time. Though we all missed him, he was the one who kept giving us all the updates on what we missed in class while we all enjoyed our time in Bangkok. And boy! We seemed to have missed a lot. Also, a new student, Ishika Bhatia, had joined our class, and from what I had heard about her from Vansh, she was the kind of girl any boy would swoon over. Ishika, as I heard, was already every professor's favourite and the talk of our college because of her fiery red sports car. She must be a rich brat, for

sure! But so was I, and if cars were involved, my curiosity invariably doubled.

I drove my luxury car which Dad had gifted me on my 18th birthday, inside the college campus, looking for the best parking spot. Being a university of elite families, almost every student here owned a vehicle and drove one to college. There was a separate five-storey building exclusively constructed as a parking lot to accommodate the growing number of cars on campus, but I hated driving all the way there. I kept circling the open parking lawn, and after what felt like an eternity, I found an empty space to park my car very close to my class. I was about to park there when another car blocked my way, aiming for the same space. We both applied the brakes simultaneously, or else we would have banged each other's cars. Obviously, I wasn't going to give up this space to someone else, so I kept roaring the engine as a cue for the other driver to leave and find another spot. In return, the driver of the other car, whom I couldn't see due to the dark tints shielding my vision, kept doing the same. If I moved my car an inch ahead, so would he. We both were blocking each other and narrowing the space to get to the only parking area available for one of our vehicles.

*I flashed the front lights, which he repeated, almost passively asking me to 'F*ck Off.' What the hell! Whoever was behind that wheel was just as stubborn as I was. I was about to lower my window and holler that I had come here first when suddenly, I saw that car door opening and a woman in ripped blue jeans and a red crop top, showing two inches of her milky white midriff, getting down from the driver's seat. Damn! I had no idea I was fighting over a parking space with a gorgeous woman. Wow! She was every guy's dream come true. A sexy woman behind those sexy wheels! Her short hair bounced over her shoulder as she sauntered towards the parking space. Though her back was facing me, I could feel every cell in my body humming for her. She cat-walked to the end of the vacant space and turned a signboard that I hadn't seen before, which read 'RESERVED FOR ISHIKA BHATIA.'*

Ishika Bhatia? The moment I read that name, she turned around, and my heart spun in my chest. Women definitely

*caught my attention, but Ishika was not just 'any' woman. There was something exotic, something alluring about her, and my hormones were instantly on high alert the moment she walked towards my car. Our eyes met through the front glass shield of my car, and a tingle ran down my spine. My pulse raced, seeing the confidence in those hazel eyes as she approached me and tapped the bonnet of my car, wanting me to take the cue and back off. She was the one. I just knew it. The arrogance, the confidence, the 'I-always-get-what-I-want' attitude and that winning smirk on her face made my heart flutter, thumping twice as fast and awoke a deep yearning in my body. Yes, she was the one for me. I didn't know where that thought came from, but I just knew it. I, Rohan Oberoi, had never been mesmerised by a woman at first look, but at that moment, I clearly visualised Ishika and me happily married with our two children in the future. I was confident she was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. F*cking Crazy Shit!*

The guy who never backed off finally decided to break his own rule for her. Revving my car engine again, I reversed my vehicle, indicating to her that I'd got her message loud and clear. Ishika had probably self-allotted that parking space for her fancy car in my absence last week, and I was more than willing to let her keep it.

The moment Ishika realised I was driving away, the corner of her lips tipped into a smile. With a shake of her head as if acknowledging my approval of her silent demand, she moved back to her car to park it while I wheeled mine towards the parking building to find another spot for my vehicle. That was the first time I had backed off from a challenge, but I had no regrets.

And just like that, in the coming days, Ishika's beautiful dimples made my heart flutter every time she flaunted her smile. Her sultry voice made me forget every damn priority I had then, only to see that smile on her face. However silly it all sounded now, there was a time when I would do anything for her. Anything! And yet she broke my heart for someone else.

The horn of a passing car breaks my reverie and brings me back to reality. Damn! Gripping the wheel, I weave through the traffic, ignoring the yellow traffic lights blazing behind me as I speed off again. I'm breaking signals! I haven't done that in a long time. I haven't done many things in ages, which at one time, Ishika and I did together. Like couple racing! And now that she is back, the memory of the smell of burning rubber, the screeching of the tyres underneath my legs, the adrenaline rush as Ishika and I changed the gears together, holding hands, the psychological games we played with the competitors to show them they are better than us, only to fool them with our masterstroke towards the finish line, the jumps of our cars over the sharp turns of the racing tracks, the almost fatal crashes of our opponent's vehicles as they tried to chase us and so much more, came rushing back. Ishika introduced me to this crazy world of racing. If cars were my obsession, racing was her kink. But Ishika's departure from my life a decade ago made me wave goodbye to racing forever. I'd vowed never to race again because I knew the moment I took the hot seat again in the arena, on the real track, it would remind me of her. And now, I had no desire to continue that deadly sport as I love my cars too much to put their beautiful bodies at risk. Their safety is more important to me than my own. Yet, tonight, all I want to do is race to my home, the only place which can make me feel in control again. *I hope so!*

Home. That one word tonight reminds me of my one-time plan to settle down in San Francisco, where I wanted to build my business. I also shared this dream with Ishika of starting a car manufacturing unit there. Cars, which could change the future of racing. But once again, with Ishika breaking my heart, the plans of my dream business went down the drain, and I joined to further my family legacy instead, here in India. My ancestors had been in the jewellery business for decades, and since Dad wanted to take a backseat and retire, I volunteered to take over the reins of the company and grow our business to new heights.

And now Ishika is back.

F*ck! How am I supposed to process this? Anant Chopra, the CEO of the RC Group of Companies, whose jewellery

subsidiary I took over under my brand Ronishq Jewels, introduced Ishika as the lead jewellery designer, which means she is going to continue holding her position in my company, working right under my nose. This is what I call an effing coincidence. Out of all the crazy shit that keeps happening in my life, this one has blown me off in one shot. If I knew she was a part of that company, I would have changed my business plans. Yep! I'm determined to not let her ruin my present and future, knowing how brutally she kicked my heart in the past. But again, who knew Ishika Bhatia, a woman who wanted to make her career in racing, who was ready to fight with everyone who would come in her way, would make her career in jewellery designing? I knew that designing jewellery was a passion she had inherited from her late mother, but I'd thought it was just a passing hobby. Never did it cross my mind that she would pursue it in the future and make it her full-fledged career.

And now she is back.

This thought has started daunting me. Ishika still had those gorgeous features which could turn every pair of surrounding eyes on her. I remember she liked keeping her hair short when we studied together, whereas now she's grown them in long waves, just as I love it. I thought I was hallucinating when I saw her first at the party. But the moment our eyes met, heat flared up my body on realising she was there for real, and it took me back to our last bitter conversation, which ended everything we had between us once. Ishika might have just lost her best friend, *me*, that night. But I lost my best friend as well as the woman I'd secretly given my heart to.

Everyone in my college knew I was in love with her. My close friends, including Vansh, had coaxed me to propose to her, but I was a fool to delay it and waited for the perfect opportunity. And when I got that chance, I realised it was too late to even think she could ever be mine. Ishika went away from my life without any remorse, leaving me heartbroken by her rejection and developing trust issues with every other woman I've been with after her.

With all these thoughts still in the back of my head, I finally skid to a halt in the parking lot of my building, where I own a five-bedroom penthouse on the top floor and slam out of my car. Though I live in a palatial bungalow in Lutyens Bungalow Zone, I am in no state to drive there as my mind is currently clouded with this unexpected turn of events. So, I drive straight to my penthouse, which is close to the hotel, to escape from Ishika's thoughts. I message Vansh about my whereabouts as I know he will be worried about me.

"All okay, Sir?" the security guard at the parking lot asks curiously.

I know why he asked me this. I'm always this sweet smiling guy they are used to seeing, unlike the broody-sulking one I am tonight.

"I'm good," I reply flatly before turning to my left.

"The elevator is to your right, Mr. Oberoi."

Yes. To my right.

"I know." I bark. "I'm just taking the stairs tonight."

"Stairs, Sir?" He looks baffled.

"Yeah, why? You have a problem with that?"

"No... No, Sir. Have a good night."

Have a Good night? Huh! My nights have been busted forever. But I grudgingly admit that the re-entry of Ishika has awakened the same thrill and excitement I felt years ago in every fibre of my body, which I'd successfully calmed down fighting a war with myself for the last decade.

Having lied to the security guard, I take the stairs to save my big fat ego. I climb the stairs two at a time, but 40 floors flight of stairs is practically impossible for me and my legs give up at the 8th floor itself, forcing me to finally take the elevator and reach my penthouse. *Good call!*

I have been pacing my floor for an hour, reminiscing and trying to push away the memories of Ishika and my friendship with her, when the doorbell rings. Wasn't the constant ringing on my mobile not enough that someone was here to intrude on

my privacy too? The doorbell rings again, and I march to the door to fire the person responsible for this intrusion. I open the door to find Vansh leaning against the door frame, staring at my face, and reading it accurately.

“And the plot thickens,” Vansh says with a shrug.

“You are here to tell me that?” I snap.

“No. I’m here to check on you, idiot.” He punches me playfully on my chest before walking inside. “Why did you leave the party?”

He knows why I left. Vansh wants me to let my thoughts out on Ishika’s re-entry into our lives, but I am not going to let them out. Years ago, I’d buried them deep in my heart, and they will always remain there... in the dark.

“I am not interested in digging old graves again, Vansh,” I say aloud.

“I know. Here, drink this,” Vansh replies. I turn toward him and find him already perched at the corner bar of my living room, making a drink for us. I need one for sure. So, I shut the door and make my way to him. As soon as he hands over the whiskey-filled glass to me, I gulp it down in one go and put it back on the table.

“One more.”

Vansh exhales but pours another peg for me, which I empty the same way.

“One more,” I demand.

“Slow down, Rohan. At this rate, you’ll drown the whole building in alcohol.”

“I wouldn’t mind even a tsunami of alcohol tonight. Haha.” I mock, snatching the bottle from his hands and taking a large swig of whiskey directly from it.

Vansh pulls the bottle away from my mouth and puts it away.

“Don’t lose your shit for her again, Rohan. Grief doesn’t suit you.” Worry laces his tone, and why not. We are

childhood buddies and can read each other as no one else can.

I, Vansh and Taani have shared every highs and lows of our life together. And then came Ishika in college. After that, everything changed in my life except for my friendship with my old friends. I shut my eyes to stop thinking about her or those golden days of college when I lived my life to the fullest with Ishika. It's not that I don't enjoy my present. I've everything I need. I'm rolling in money, power and fame. Ronishq Jewels, one of the subsidiaries in Oberoi Group's chain of businesses, is my newfound baby, the brand I plan to expand worldwide in the coming years. So, I have a successful business, friends to chill out with, and a casual dating life at my convenience. I don't need anything or anyone else, do I? Then why the hell am I still sulking and getting drunk for Ishika?

“Rohan?” Vansh pats my arm.

“Yeah. I am okay. I'm fine.” I put my glass down, easing his worry, though I know Vansh isn't convinced.

“Ishika is back—” He begins the conversation I know he's here for.

“So what if she is back?” I interrupt. “It means nothing to me, Vansh. She made a decision that I've respected till date. We all have moved on now, haven't we?”

“The way you left the party after meeting her again didn't imply that *you* have moved on.”

I pick up the bottle and pour another drink for myself.

“I just... I just got a bit disorientated after seeing her suddenly after almost a decade. That's all. Now I am okay.”

I take a swig, and the drink burns my throat. I don't want to lie to Vansh, but there's no point in telling him the truth that seeing Ishika again tonight has cracked open the stitches of my bruised heart.

“You sure?” Vansh nudges my arm again, and this time, I fake a grin.

“Sure as hell. Now go back to your wife, or else she will be the one to knock on my door next, kicking my car on the way to the parking lot, and I don’t want that. She’s a pro at damaging my cars. I don’t know what’s her problem with my sexy babies.”

Vansh laughs hysterically at my remark.

“After you left, Vidhi was adamant about coming with me to check on you, but you know how much this party means to Taani. We were there to celebrate the Gupta Industries merger with the RC Group of Companies, and Vidhi had to be there for her sister. So, I insisted the girls stay there while I drove here to check on you.”

Of course, he did. Vansh and my other friends have always been there for me and vice versa. His wife, Vidhi, is the cutest and is like the little sister I never had. I adore her, and she is equally protective of me, despite the fact when we first met, we disliked each other with vehemence. I’d even stopped Vansh from secretly marrying her for whatever reason. But, after all these years, they, too, have evolved as a couple and resolved their misunderstandings, transforming their hidden marriage into a happily-ever-after. Taani, Vidhi’s elder sister, is happily married to Sameer Khanna, the world’s sanest husband, who is willing to go to any length to accommodate Taani’s demanding work schedule, for which we all applaud and respect him. Their slow-burn arranged marriage romance got its much-needed blaze of love when Taani realised Sameer’s importance in her life and was ready to sacrifice her career to give him the priority he deserved. I’ve practically witnessed these two couples fall in love over time with their partners and make peace with their marriage. And now, they never miss the opportunity to find a suitable partner for me who can give me my share of solace. But nope. I am not interested in that anymore. I’m happy being single and am satisfied with my casual hookups.

But Ishika is back.

My subconscious mind reminds me again and again. Yes, she is back. So what? It doesn’t change anything. She might be the only woman my heart beat for once, but not anymore.

Whatever happened in the past has already broken a piece of my heart that no one can fix again. Not even *Ishika Bhatia*. I'm aware she is going to be a part of my life now for no idea how long. So, I need to have a possible contingency plan to deal with her. We severed every possible link between us years ago, so now, she is just a professional asset to my company. We will work collaboratively, period! Nothing more than that. I want Ishika to realise that the Rohan Oberoi she once knew and the man I am today are no longer the same, and she is the one responsible for that.

Chapter 2

Ishika

MUMBAI

Today is my first meeting with the team of Ronishq Jewels in Mumbai, where I landed last night. I never saw Rohan again after our short, shocking meeting at the party the day before yesterday. He walked out of the event immediately after I was taken away by my Ex-Boss to meet the rest of our team. I believe his sudden disappearance had something to do with meeting me again. Meeting him took me by surprise as much as it did him. Nevertheless, I am happy to see Rohan again. It's not that I didn't miss him in the last decade. I did. And the proof of that tagged along with me wherever I travel.

Unzipping my luggage bag, I take out the 5x8 inch photo frame with a picture of Rohan and me winning our first car racing trophy as a couple. We were hardly 19 years old then. Racing! This one word is a compilation of all the sweet memories I have amassed in my entire life. It all started when I was 10 years old, and Dad enrolled me on the Go Karting cadet class during my summer vacation in Hyderabad, where he had his business set up initially. Unlike other girls my age, I had a different set of interests. Whilst my friends were travelling abroad, vacationing at Disneyland or going to their native place to spend time with their extended families, I was busy learning to ride a 60cc two-stroke engine capable of reaching 50 mph. It was thrilling and so much fun. Apart from boosting my adrenaline, it strengthened my reflexes and helped me to master skills like apex turning and brake thresholds, and to also confidently take the right decisions while steering the wheel. Apart from that, I also learnt vehicle maintenance and, most important of all, the strategies of racing. The first time I raced on the go-karting track was with Dad, and I can never forget that day. We were so engrossed in racing against each other that none of us noticed another car coming toward us in speed until it dashed with mine, and I fell off on that rough road, hurting my back. I was fortunate that the injury was not serious, but that incident shook Dad, and he

decided not to let me continue the sport anymore. However hard I tried to ignore it, that thrill and passion for getting back onto the racing track and controlling the wheels kept haunting me. After I got my driving license, I told Dad about my interest in continuing my passion for racing.

Of course, it didn't go well with him, and he tried to keep me away from racing, thinking I was too young to be a part of this dangerous sport. But in a matter of a few weeks, he was convinced that the madness of racing was imbibed in my heart and would never go away, no matter how much he tried to keep me safe. That's when my journey in this dangerously thrilling sport began.

And then I met Rohan and got him hooked on racing too. I look at our photo longingly before putting it on my bedside table. My two-year-old friendship with Rohan in college is still the best time of my life. I know things are not the same anymore. We all have moved on, but I believe destiny has planned our reunion for a reason, and I'll use this opportunity to the fullest to reignite the friendship between us. Moreover, because Rohan and I will be working together, it is imperative for us to be cordial with each other.

With that spirit, I get back to my walk-in wardrobe and pick my favourite outfit, a black midi bodycon dress. The dress moulds my body perfectly, and the round neck and full sleeves give me a professional look.

Today, the briefing session with Rohan and his team of designers is at the new office space owned by Ronishq Jewels. After meeting Rohan the other night, I did a quick search and discovered that Ronishq Jewels was a new subsidiary under the Oberoi brand and was solely Rohan's brainchild, which specialised in exclusive, high-end crystal jewellery coveted by the rich and the famous. His brand was a collection of glamorous and versatile pieces of jewellery made from high-class crystals, adding flair and oomph to any look. From minimal office collections to party wear jewellery, Ronishq had it all. And why not! Rohan was always a visionary, the kind of guy who thought outside the box and was unconventional and creative in his approach.

I keep my makeup subtle, just kajal and finish my look with my favourite Coco Flash lipstick, before dumping it in my purse. It's one of many from my collection of lipsticks from all over the world. That is one thing I am crazy about; luxury personal care and makeup products. Rubbing my lips together to even out the lipstick, I give myself a once-over in the mirror before grabbing my laptop and heading out. The moment I open my door to leave, the apartment door opposite mine also opens at the same time, and to my utter shock, I see Rohan coming out of that apartment. What! What on earth is he doing here? In this building? In the apartment bang opposite mine? Is Rohan my new neighbour for the next two months of our stay here? Who even accommodated him here, on the same floor and in an apartment opposite mine? Of course, the RC Group of companies! Who else? But seriously? He's going to be my neighbour now?

Rohan is once again shocked to see me, just as I am to see him here. He is dressed in another grey suit and a white shirt underneath, unbuttoned at the top to expose his tanned chest. He looks dashing in such suits and surprisingly very *sexy*.

Hold on. Where did the word 'sexy' come from? Rohan is just your friend. Hold on to your horses, girl.

My subconscious mind screams, bringing my frantically thudding heart to a sudden, steady halt. I'm about to greet him when Rohan does the unthinkable. He shuts his apartment door right in my face the moment I part my lips to greet him. Seriously? What the F*ck!

Ronishq Jewels Head Office

It's just a bad day. I snap at myself for the umpteenth time to satisfy my heart, giving it a feeble excuse as to why Rohan would ignore me so blatantly. Yes, we did not part on good terms a decade ago, but c'mon, we were too young at the time to even know who was right and who was wrong. Is he still harbouring that decade-old grudge and will continue to ignore me like that? Will he? As far as I know him, he will. Rohan was always very sure and stubborn about his decisions once he

took them. He would never break a promise given to his friend or give anyone false hopes. If he was into something, he was into it for a lifetime. And yet, I mindlessly pushed him away. Now, I wish I hadn't.

“Miss Ishika.”

The voice of an elderly woman whom I got to know is Rohan's secretary, Mrs. Aarti Roy, interrupts my thoughts. She gives me a friendly smile as I rise from the couch to meet the team I am going to be working with at Ronishq Jewels.

“The team is waiting for you in the conference room along with Mr. Oberoi,” she announces.

“Mr. Oberoi?” I repeat blankly. “The senior one or junior?”

She stifles her laugh before responding.

“Mr. Rakesh Oberoi doesn't intervene in the administration of Ronishq Jewels. His son, Rohan Oberoi, helms this brand. So he and the team are waiting for you inside.”

Oh! Rohan reached the office? Before me? Impossible. After he shut that door in my face, I stormed to the elevator and drove straight here for the meeting. When did he drive here, then? He can't drive better than me, can he? Hold on. I'd driven to Starbucks first before coming here for a takeaway Cappuccino. Maybe that's how he reached earlier, before me. Shucks!

“This way, Miss Ishika.”

I nod and follow Mrs. Aarti to the conference room. The head office of Ronishq Jewels is elegant with modern décor and is situated in one of the business centres in Mumbai and manages the administration, marketing and customer relations of the brand. But this is not where we'll be working. I'll be based in the Delhi office, where I'll lead the designing of all their vintage jewellery from now on if my dear ex-friend doesn't fire me from the job today. Yeah, Rohan is capable of doing that. If he can shut the door in my face, insulting me, he won't think twice about firing me so that he could take his revenge for all the bitter things that happened between us back

in college. And here I thought, he must have become a bit mature after all these years.

Mrs. Aarti shows me to the room, and I take a deep breath composing myself before the real showdown, and sliding the door open, I walk inside. It's a huge conference room with dim lights and an oval-shaped centre table with a seating capacity of 15-20 people. A large TV screen displays images of several jewellery designs, which I realize are mine. The person with the remote in his hands and the one who is frequently flipping those images one by one is none other than Rohan Oberoi. He is seated at the edge of the oval table, turning his back to me and attentively looking at the TV screen. While the rest of his team is sitting here and greets me with a smile, Rohan is busy flipping the designs. He is probably looking for flaws so he can mock me before everyone. Nah! My Roh would never make fun of me in a crowd. But then he was no longer the friend I knew. Had he been the same, he would never have shut the door of his apartment in my face. Ugh! That gesture really was a mood killer, and I'll never forgive him for it.

"Sir, Ishika is here," one of the women sitting close to Rohan, almost our age, tells him to get his attention.

Rohan stops flipping the images and turns his chair, looking straight into my eyes.

"Impressive." He murmurs, giving my face a once-over.

I know Rohan can read my mood. He could always tell when I was happy, when I was sad and when I was annoyed, as I am at this moment.

But wait, did he just say before his team that *I am impressive?*

"Your *designs* are impressive, Miss Bhatia," Rohan corrects my silly thoughts.

Miss Bhatia? Not Ishika? Wow!

Raising my brows, I try hard not to frown as I recall how he had insulted me an hour ago, and now he is praising my work.

"Are they?" I ask.

“Very. But they lack one thing.”

“What?”

“Take your seat, Miss Bhatia. This meeting is going to be long.”

He is purposely keeping me on edge by delaying his reply. Had he been my friend, like we used to be once, I would have grabbed him by the lapels of his suit and ordered him to tell me what was missing in my designs. But now that he is my boss, I have to adhere to his whims. I take a seat opposite him and wait for Rohan to explain.

“What is missing in these designs?” I ask him curiously, coming straight to the point.

Rohan leans back on his chair, looking at me intently, taking his own sweet time. He was never like this. *So deeply observant*. He would always lose when we played ‘*who-would-blink-first*’ because he always hesitated to keep looking at or admiring someone for too long. How much has he changed now? He’s completely opposite to the guy he was once. No smile, no pranks, no empathy! Or is this stern attitude only towards me? I need to find out about his rapport with others. Soon!

“You look miffed, Miss Bhatia. Is everything okay?”

He has the audacity to ask me this question? Well, if that’s so, I have a ready reply.

“Oh, nothing, Mr. Oberoi. I just came to know this morning that my new neighbour is a grumpy ill-mannered man.”

A smile forms on his lips, but he controls it.

“Grumpy ill-mannered man...” He repeats, rolling the paperweight in his hands, and smirks before pausing it. “You form an opinion about others too soon, Miss Bhatia.”

There he goes! Rohan kept telling me the same when we were friends. That I judged people too early. Well, yes, I did. And yes, I admit I even went horribly wrong with a few. But

that's what makes us human, isn't it? Making mistakes and learning from them, so we don't repeat them next time?

"I think we are meeting here to discuss my designs, not my opinions." I remind him.

The team keeps oscillating their heads between us to understand where this conversation is going. As Rohan realises that, he clears his throat and continues to speak, taking charge.

"Miss Bhatia, your vintage jewellery designs are impressive, but Ronishq is all about crystal jewellery, and this time, we are adding a new bridal collection to the brand. Since you are skilled and accomplished at vintage jewellery, we want you to design our newest line, keeping vintage aesthetics in mind. Exclusive crystals, modern yet traditional, will be the theme of this bridal collection. Would you be able to work on that?"

Oh! I take a few seconds to think about it and nod.

"Of course. If that's what we are looking for, I have a few things in mind."

"Good. Avantika will brief you in detail about this new collection. She is well versed with what we do at Ronishq and will be your first point of contact here," he says, pointing to the woman at his left, the same woman who blushed whenever he glanced at her. Do I see an office crush here? Maybe! Good going, Roh! You were always a charmer! You still are!

"Rohan, I'll be glad to do this for the brand. Thanks for putting so much trust in me," Avantika mentions, flashing him a seductive smile.

Don't go for it, Roh! She is flirting with you. I wish I could say that aloud. Rohan smiles at Avantika as though he is unaware of her flirting. Idiot!

"And who is she?" I suddenly ask, silencing everyone around. They probably hadn't expected me to speak my mind, but I have the right to know. "I mean, what is Avantika's role in this project?"

“She is the Design Head at Ronishq Jewels,” he replies. “If she approves your designs, I approve. If she thinks they need rework, you’ll re-design.”

What? Is he serious? I want to kill Rohan, but I restrain myself from striding over to him and demanding that I be my own boss. I know all eyes are on me, and for the team, he is my boss. So, I shift my focus to Avantika instead. She is staring at me, a sly smile etched on her face. Intuitively, I know this woman is going to be a thorn between us whenever I try to approach Rohan for anything. Damn her! And damn Rohan! Despite knowing, I don’t gel well with anyone bossing me unnecessarily, he is routing me to Avantika with my designs to reach him. Whatever! If he wants to do this, I’ll follow his protocols, but on my terms.

Avantika chairs the meeting from hereon and begins briefing us on the new collection, outlining the design plan like a pro. And here, I thought I would be in charge and brief the team on my designs and how I could incorporate them into Ronishq’s new bridal collection. This wasn’t the kind of meeting I had in mind. And the most irritating part was that Rohan was focused entirely on Avantika during her speech. He barely even looked at me, his one-time best friend. I, his bestie, was back in his life, and he wanted nothing to do with me, let alone talk. Huh! His silent treatment was making me mad. I was eyeing Rohan, gesturing for him to look at me, but he was blatantly ignoring me. Life was just not fair. But he can’t ignore that fate has brought us together now, and I genuinely believe it must be for a reason. So, let’s play it your way, Roh. Let me see how far you can pull this ‘*ignoring-you*’ drama.

Chapter 3

Rohan

Ishika is riled up, and I could see that on her face. And why not! I left no stone unturned for her to even think that things could ever be the same between us again.

Today, I landed in Mumbai early in the morning, and though I'd planned to stay at my usual hotel, Mr. Anant Chopra insisted I use their luxurious, state-of-the-art company apartments instead, where most of his VIP delegates stayed during their Mumbai visits. I could have denied him, but he was gracious enough to make such a kind offer; moreover, I could never survive without homely food for more than a week. *I loved cooking my own meals.* I wasn't a pro at it, but I frequently indulged in cooking as I loved feeding my stomach with my culinary skills. I didn't get much rest after settling down in the apartment, as I had a briefing session with Ishika and the rest of my team. No matter how much I wanted to avoid meeting her again, the curiosity and desperation to see her were rooted deep in my heart. I'd decided to keep a check on my unbridled emotions on dealing with her, but the moment I saw her coming out of the opposite apartment when I opened the door to leave for the office, I lost every ounce of self-control I had gathered. There was a time when I wanted destiny to give me an inkling that Ishika and I were meant to be together forever, but it had failed me then, and now when I'd finally moved on from her, it gave me signs I wanted to ignore. So despite wanting to talk to or compliment her on her black dress hugging her sexy body, I shut the door in her face when she was probably going to greet me after her surprise at seeing me as her neighbour.

I waited for her to leave first before I headed out to go to the office. There was no way she would have waited for me after that kind of insult. And the Ishika I knew would do everything but would never take too kindly to a man snubbing her like that. Good for me. I wanted to maintain a professional front with her for whatever period we worked together. There was

no point in befriending her again since I had nothing left to give her back, not even my loyalty.

At the office, the meeting with Ishika went well, and I purposely put Avantika as a go-to person between us, so I don't have to deal with Ishika directly. That should keep our meetings to the minimum, and I can continue with my life the way I was leading it so far. After the meeting, I didn't see Ishika again as she was busy meeting the rest of the team.

Of course, I knew Ishika and Avantika would never get along. But I was just following my company protocols. Ishika was transferred from RC Group to Ronishq and was not a direct employee, so I could not let her lead this project. As per the protocols, she would have to report to a senior designer, someone like Avantika, who has been an integral part of my company since its inception. Though, as the boss, I could overrule this and let Ishika helm the new bridal collection on her own, I would never do that as it would draw unnecessary attention from the team, thereby questioning my relationship with Ishika.

“Sir,” my assistant Mrs. Aarti Roy follows me to the door.

I stop and sign the few cheques she hands me before smiling back at her.

“How's your son?” I ask her, recalling her son had his board exams starting last week. Yet, she didn't hesitate to travel with me here to Mumbai, leaving her family back in Delhi, like she did every time. I really appreciate and admire the way she doesn't bat an eyelid when she has to leave her only son at home, the one she had pretty late in life, after extensive medical treatments.

“He is good. Studying too hard and giving his father a tough time,” she replies.

I chuckle.

“He is brilliant. I am sure he'll pass with flying colours.”

“I hope so too. Anyway, how's your stay in the apartment? Do you want me to shift you to the hotel?”

I think for a moment before denying her.

“No, I’m fine there.”

“You... sure?”

I roll my eyes at the worry in her eyes. Mrs. Roy is like a mother to me, fussing over me just as my mother would have if she was alive. After I took over this business from dad, Mrs. Roy was kind enough to guide me through the ins and outs of the company, as she had been working for us since a few years. Apart from keeping me updated with the daily schedules, she also takes care of my timely meals and ensures I take enough rest and do not overload myself with more work. If I skip any of the above, she directly takes my complaint to Dad, who gets worked up, wondering if the workload is stressing me out. It isn’t... to be honest. I love what I am doing, and that is my future now. To grow the brand and take it to the next level.

“I can book you into a hotel suite instead, where you can still cook and rest, Sir.” Her words break my thoughts.

“No, I am fine at the apartment, Mrs Roy. Thanks for asking, though.”

“You are welcome. Your driver is waiting down to take you back. If you need anything else, give me a call.”

“I think I need a beer.”

She laughs this time.

“I wish I could give you company, but I’m occupied with the team-building event.”

Team building? Oh, yes. Since Ronishq Jewels have taken over the jewellery subsidiary of RC Group, the HR team has a team-building event planned for the coming weekend. The intent was to break the ice between the employees of the two companies and help them all establish a bond to coexist, elevate teamwork and energise them for the upcoming projects. It was a good decision, and even the CEOs had to attend. I have to be a part of it too.

“That’s why I keep saying, Sir, get married. You’ll have your personal someone to give you company for drinks.”

That makes me grin again.

“You are talking like Dad now. Please don’t. Why the hell is everyone jealous of my single status?” I fake being annoyed. “Anyway, I’ll find someone to share a drink with tonight.”

Winking at her, I leave for home.

“Good night, Mr. Oberoi,” she wishes me.

“Good night.”

I head straight to the parking lot when my phone rings. It’s Vansh’s wife, Vidhi. A smile automatically settles on my lips before I answer her.

“Does Vansh know that you are missing me more than him?” I tease her.

“Haha. Vansh doesn’t give me a chance to miss him. We are always glued together.”

I laugh. She is right. Vansh and Vidhi are inseparable. The two are always together wherever they go.

“Of course. But in that case, it won’t take long for you two to get bored of each other. What will you do then?”

“I’ll never get bored of my Vanshy,” Vidhi coos. I immediately know Vansh is with her and is listening to our conversation, which is why the sudden endearment from her side.

“I wasn’t talking about you getting bored of Vansh, dumbo. But vice versa.”

I love teasing Vidhi, and that’s the USP of our relationship. Our banters are never-ending.

“How mean of you, Rohan. I know Vansh will never get bored of me. We have enough spice in our life to sustain our marriage if you know what I mean. And even if I face this problem in the future, I’ll come to you for help,” she chides. “Your ideas are very creative in spicing our relationship.”

I am about to reply when I hear Vansh’s muffled voice as if he has snatched the phone from her to speak to me.

“Rohan, your creative ideas are always in her favour, never mine. So, no thanks. I’m not doing anything that will force my wife to come to you for help.”

“Ha Ha. Don’t forget I am on your speed dial, Vansh. You call me more frequently than Vidhi for such naughty ideas to spice up your nights,” I tease back, reaching the basement.

“How’s Mumbai?” Vidhi inquires again, making me slow down.

I can sense her worry, and I know all my friends are trying to look out for me. But I don’t need their advice at the moment. By ignoring Ishika today, I have realised how to deal with her in the future too. With that thought, I continue walking towards my car, only to stop again as I pass by a canary yellow imported sports car.

“Stop babysitting me, both of you. Mumbai is awesome, and so am I. For now, I need to end the call and drive back to the apartment. You guys take care.”

“Alright, Rohan. You, too, take care.” Vansh and Vidhi say together as I disconnect the call and stand aside to admire the car.

This car is luxury personified. I gawk at it from every angle. Cars like this one are my weakness; they have been since my teenage days. I’m enamoured by them, and I wouldn’t mind buying every model of my favourite luxury car and parking them at home, but if I do that, my garage would be the size of a car showroom and service centre. That’s why I have only limited editions now. My garage is filled with beauties that I absolutely cannot resist buying. But who in my office would own and drive such an expensive car? I’m still thinking about it when I hear her voice behind me.

“5.2L V10 engine, Max power 640 Kilo Watts, acceleration from 0 to 100 km/h in 3.0 seconds. They call her the monster of the roads. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Ishika comes ahead, sliding her palm over the bonnet of the car, clearing all my earlier doubts. It’s *her* car. Of course! Only Ishika can be crazy enough to ride a racing car to work. But

yes, the car is beautiful and sexy, a little less though, than the woman who owns it.

Whilst Ishika is busy admiring her vehicle, I give her a quick look. She's always been breathtakingly beautiful to me. I've seen her dressed in baggy pullovers and denims to elegant and sexy designer dresses which could burn the ramp if she ever decides to walk it. Ishika has set the bar so high that no matter how many women I have dated or had casual flings with, none of them could even scratch the surface of my heart in the feelings department. Ishika's beauty, intelligence and her daredevil personality outshine all the women I've been with so far. She is not just a pretty face but a whole package. Like all those exclusive cars I have a thing for.

I snap from my thoughts to find her looking at me and waiting for me to initiate the conversation. She's so wrong if she thinks I will. We have ended things for good in the past, and that won't change.

"Want to drive it?" She taps her nails over the bonnet of the car with pride and stretches her hand with the car keys.

She can't tempt me to talk to her again by letting me drive her sporty car.

"No thanks." I shrug. "I only drive beauties that belong to me."

Saying that, I make my way towards my car, which is parked next to hers.

"Roh," Ishika calls me from behind. "Roh, c'mon. At least talk to me. Don't zone me out like you don't know me."

I keep walking ahead. The moment I reach my car, my driver opens the backseat door. I'm about to get inside when Ishika grabs my wrist and turns me around.

"Roh, stop it."

I look at our handhold and then at the driver, who is confused about what to do.

"Miss Bhatia, I suggest you let me go."

“I’m your Ishq, your once-upon-a-time best friend, Ishq. Stop calling me so formally, Roh.”

“And you stop calling me so casually because I’m no longer that once-upon-a-time best friend, Roh. I’m Rohan for you, now.”

“I like calling you Roh, and you effing know that.”

“Don’t swear, Ishika,” I rebuke. “I don’t like anyone calling me by that name anymore. Now, will you just let me go? You are creating a scene,” I bark at her.

Ishika clenches her jaw and turns to my driver.

“Can you give us five minutes, please?”

The driver nods and is about to leave.

“Stay here,” I shout at him and turn to Ishika again. “He is going nowhere; *you* are.”

“Really, Roh? That’s how you treat your old friends?”

“That’s how I treat people who don’t want *me* in their lives.”

“I never said I didn’t want *you* in my life.”

“You didn’t choose *me* back then, Ishika. It means the same.”

“It doesn’t mean the same. You being my best friend, shouldn’t have put me in a situation where I had to choose between my crush and my best friend, which was you, Roh.” She taps her nail angrily on my chest.

I wrap my fingers around her wrist to stop her from doing that.

“Well! I can’t change our past, can I?” I shrug off her hand from my body. “And let’s not forget, you clearly showed me my place in your life by choosing your crush over me. So now that it’s done, you stick to your decision and let me adhere to mine.”

“Damn you, Roh,” she shouts back. “You were not like this.”

“I’m a lot better than the man you chose over me.” I snap. “And I don’t need your certification. This is who I am now, for better or worse.”

I gesture to the driver to get inside the car, and he instantly obeys my silent command. Ishika glares at me while I hold the backseat door open for me to get in. I won’t lie; it hurts me to my core to see the sadness in her eyes because of me.

“Ishika, you don’t have to take our unexpected meeting after a decade so seriously. It will only make matters worse. I have no ill feelings, but I am also not interested in taking a trip down memory lane. Let bygones be bygones. We are both mature enough to work together professionally without the past coming between us. Good night.”

She crosses her arms at the front, looking away from me in anger, a gesture I know. It means she is not okay with what I just suggested. But I’ve done my best to show her that things will never be the same between us ever again. No matter how hard she tries to fix the gap in our friendship, it’s too late now and starting afresh is like asking for trouble, stressful enough to cause migraines and make my life miserable. And moreover, my fragile heart will never be able to withstand it if she ever leaves me again. With that thought, I get inside my car and tell my driver to take me home. It’s already been a long stressful day having Ishika in the same workspace as mine. And it’s going to be a long night, too, knowing she is just a door away from me. If day one was like this, how would the remaining days be? I definitely need a beer now, and I’m striking off my idea of going out and buying a drink for any other woman to give me company tonight. I just want to be alone tonight, all by myself, and not let Ishika or her memories haunt me. I’ll drink alone at home in my own comfort. Yeah. That’s my plan for tonight, and it sounds effing good!

Chapter 4

Ishika

My eyes well up at what just happened. Rohan was hell-bent on not letting me in his life again, and it hurt. It f*cking hurts. All these years, I often wondered what would happen if Rohan and I met again. How would we react to seeing each other again after a long gap? Would he hug me? Would he be pleased to see me, or would he take out his resentment on me? No matter how many permutations and combinations I tried, I knew Rohan would never forgive me and that things would never be the same between us again. And today, I learned firsthand the aftereffects of my impulsive decision to choose my crush over my best friend. Rohan has moved on in his life, leaving behind only those sweet memories of our friendship which had once set an example for everyone. Wiping my tears, I stride towards my car and drive speedily to my apartment to call it a day. I'd faced enough drama on the first day of my professional life with Rohan and could only hope this would lessen in the coming days, if not end permanently.

Two hours later, I opened my apartment door to accept my pizza delivery. Whenever I had a bad day, the only thing that could lift my mood was pizza with coke. I didn't need anything else. Or anyone else. I take the pizza and am about to shut the door when I smell something burning. The acrid smell is quite strong, and to my shock, it is coming from the opposite apartment where Rohan lives. Damn hell! I hope he is okay. I keep the pizza box away and ring his doorbell. When no one answers, I bang on Rohan's door.

"Roh," I call out, banging the door harder this time whilst I keep ringing the doorbell too, but to no response.

I know he is home. Then why isn't he opening the door? Is he safe inside? Keys! I need the keys to his apartment to get inside. I run back to my house and dial the reception area.

“I smell something burning in Flat number 1810. I rang the doorbell, but no one opened the door. Send someone with the keys, please.” I shout. “Send it fast,” I add before disconnecting the call and running back to Rohan’s door.

“Roh.” I bang the door again. “Roh, please open the door. If you are doing anything stupid because of our fight this evening, I will not spare you.” I kick the door this time. “Do you hear me, Roh?” I kick the door again. I am so worried and so angry.

Rohan is not someone who would inflict harm on himself or anyone else over a conflict. But I have a bad feeling about it. He has already changed a lot from what I saw after meeting him again. The Rohan I knew was tough as a nut to withstand anything that came his way. But what if, over the last decade, he had become vulnerable and could no longer hide his emotions? Oh my god. The last thing I want is Rohan hurting himself.

“Roh, open the damn door, you idiot.” I keep banging but to no luck.

Smoke. I can smell smoke inside the house, and my heart stops beating. Something is wrong. Rohan is definitely in danger. The elevator opens, and someone from reception rushes out with the duplicate keys. I snatch it from the man and try to open the door myself.

“Roh, hang in there. I am coming.” I shout again, not knowing if he can even hear me.

In a few seconds, the fire alarm starts ringing on my floor, and I know it’s because of the smoke coming out of Rohan’s apartment.

“Go call the maintenance and security,” I tell the man who got the keys to Rohan’s apartment.

“I’m on it, Ma’am. Please don’t risk your life going inside by yourself. I’ll be back.”

“Don’t tell me what I have to do. Just call security. We need more help.” I shout, taking the keys from him.

He rushes back to the elevator, speaking to someone on his walkie-talkie.

The moment he leaves, I open the door to Rohan's apartment with the keys, and a fog of thick smoke immediately hits my nostrils. I wave my hands to clear the air and keep heading inside.

"Roh," I call out in panic. "Roh, where are you?" I scream.

The smoke is coming from the kitchen. Since the apartment is almost a replica of mine, I know where every room is. I reach the kitchen and see it filled with thick smoke. And I also see the water sprinklers installed on the ceiling doing their job of putting out the fire, which I now realize is due to the food burning on the stove. Rohan must have been cooking and must have left the gas burner unattended. Despite being on a slow simmer, the food had burned, producing a thick smoke that would have triggered the fire alarms and activated the water sprinklers. If the pan had caught fire, it could have caused significant damage. I'm so glad it didn't. The water sprinklers had thankfully extinguished the small fire, but I see no trace of Rohan in the house.

I look for him in the first two bedrooms, and not finding him there, I finally enter the master bedroom.

"Roh, where are you?" I holler. Not finding him in the room either, I push the bathroom door, and to my shock or delight, I am yet to decide; I find Rohan inside the bathtub with his head against the wall and in deep slumber. There is a beer bottle just next to the tub. Here he is, blissfully dozing, totally oblivious to the mess he has created in his apartment. The eye mask and earplugs make it evident why he couldn't hear the doorbell or my banging on his door. *How Reckless and Ridiculous!* But I am glad to see him safe and sound. This incident had nearly taken years off my life, imagining him in grave danger. I march further inside and rip the eye mask from his face. The moment I do, Rohan wakes up. He is shocked to see me, as I am, when it dawns on me that he might probably be naked under all that soapy water. Thankfully, he doesn't make much movement for me to confirm that.

“What the f*ck are you doing in my bathroom?” Rohan yells.

He is asking *me* that? I take off his earplugs, too, so he can hear the fire alarm and the moment he does, he panics.

“F*ck!! It’s the fire alarm. Ishika, run!”

Now he is hearing the alarm. Huh! Before he can rise from the tub in a hurry, I grab a towel next to me and throw it on his face.

“Cover yourself before you step out of that tub,” I mock.

His jaw drops at my reminder, as though he just realised his state of undress and doesn’t waste time wrapping the towel around his waist. I walk out of the bathroom to allow him the time he needs to get presentable.

Since the fire had been extinguished in the kitchen by the water sprinklers, I turn off the alarm from the switchboard in the living room.

“Shit. How the hell did this happen?” Rohan utters in complete shock, seeing the state of his kitchen.

There is water everywhere, along with the smoke smell. It could have been worse.

“F*ck.” He rakes his fingers through his hair, entirely frazzled.

Yeah. That’s exactly what he should feel like at the moment.

“You could have burned down the entire building, Roh. Thank your stars that I sought help at the right time or else—” I pause, not wanting to think about the repercussions of my delay in reaching here.

But that still doesn’t mellow my anger.

“How can you be so careless? You were boozing and relaxing in your bathtub, leaving the food on the burner. How irresponsible.”

Rohan is still staring at his messy kitchen in horror, wondering how it all happened.

“Is this how you risked your life all this time, Roh? I cannot imagine *you* being so careless.”

“Look who’s talking?” he mocks. “As if you were Miss Responsible throughout, Ishika. Stop pointing out my mistakes and count yours,” he snaps.

What the hell! I march back toward him in a fury and stand at an arm’s length from his body.

“I was always in control of my actions, Roh. Don’t blame me unnecessarily.”

“In control? And you?” He chuckles. “Racing is the most dangerous sport where you have no control over your life, remember?”

Racing? Why is he bringing that topic here?

“Stop talking about something that isn’t relevant here.”

“I won’t,” he argues.

I am about to retort when the towel that he has draped over his lower body starts to come undone, but Rohan is quick to hold it back in place, though.

All my anger vanishes the moment I notice him grappling to wrap it tightly around his waist again. Meanwhile, my gaze shifts upwards to admire his impressively toned physique sprinkled with light hair on the chest. Water droplets slide down the valley of his chest towards his abdomen in slow motion, making my heart race at an abnormal speed. *Hot.* I know I should not be thinking along these lines and that such thoughts aren’t appropriate for just a friend, yet I can’t help wondering how lucky those women must be whom Rohan might have dated so far. Has he met his Miss Right yet? I ignore pondering over that question for the moment and continue ogling his body.

Rohan even has a small tattoo just below his belly button, but before I can see it further, I realise Rohan going still seeing me gawking at him. Surprisingly, even after two years of our friendship in college, I never felt my hormones tingling for him like they are at this moment. I’ve seen Rohan bare-bodied before also, in his shorts working out in the college gym. But

now, after a decade, seeing a grown-up version of the man I once knew is giving me goosebumps. If this hadn't happened before, why is it happening now?

The security knocks at the door and enters inside with the maintenance team. As I turn around to face the men, Rohan hides behind me, gripping my shoulders so I don't move much.

“What the hell. Who called them here?” Rohan barks.

“Me. Who else? And why are you hiding behind me?”

“Because I am only wearing a towel.”

He keeps shifting behind me, keeping me closer and not letting the other men see him. My heart warms, and I hold my chuckle. Rohan only pretended to be the cool guy, but in reality, he was the shy one among all of us.

“The fire was in the kitchen.” I direct the men to ease Rohan's discomfort, and the team rushes into the kitchen to inspect the damage and handle the situation.

“Chill, Roh. They are here to clean up the mess you created. They have no interest in your teeny weeny.”

“Excuse me?” he scoffs behind me.

I don't know why but I always liked to rile him up like this. He is still the same effing adorable guy when he argues with me.

“What did you call my—” he pauses, unable to continue the conversation as I turn around to face him again.

“If you don't want me to call your teeny weeny as teeny weeny, then get dressed. We will wait in my apartment until this mess is sorted.”

“I'm not going anywhere. Especially not with a woman who thinks so little about my—” he pauses again, clenching his jaw and looks away shyly.

I finally give way to the laughter bubbling inside me.

“Roh, you know I won't hesitate to drag you out in your towel if needed. And I can't guarantee it will stay on your

body until you reach my door. You want me to do that?" I dare him. "Imagine your teeny weeny will be out in the open for public display in every security camera of this building. We have many lady security guards too. I am sure they will enjoy the free show," I wink at him.

Rohan gives me a cold stare challenging me to stop teasing him unnecessarily. Fine!

"C'mon, Roh. Your food is burnt, and I know you must be hungry. I have ordered pizzas. We can share."

"I hate pizzas."

"But I love pizzas. And that's all you are getting for now. Once your apartment is cleaned, you can order something else for yourself and call it a night."

"I can wait till everything clears."

"No, you can't. I know hunger makes you do weird things."

He stares at me in surprise. Yeah. I still remember each and everything about him. Rohan can't control his hunger. Even in college, I used to get him chips and biscuits to munch on during our classes. We were backbenchers, so our professors didn't know about our munching.

"Sir, Ma'am," one of the maintenance staff interrupts us. "It will take an hour or two to fix the kitchen."

"Good. Just ring my doorbell once you are done," I reply. "We will be there."

"Sure." He walks away.

I have been staying here for quite a few years, so the staff knows me. Rohan is new and a guest for them. Whether he considers me his friend anymore or not, I don't care. At the moment, all I know is that he needs help and food, and I would be more than happy to let him wait at my house and share my dinner with him.

I turn to Rohan again, who is still confused about whether to accept my offer.

“Are you coming in this towel or without it?” I tease him.

“Without it,” he mutters, suddenly making a face, feeling embarrassed. “I mean, I’ll change into something else.”

I hold back my grin, seeing Rohan walk away from me inside his house.

“The bedroom is to your right, Roh.” I remind him, seeing him take the wrong turn.

His leg hits the dining table.

“Stop telling me. I know where I am going.” He shouts before picking a water bottle from the table, pretending he didn’t miss the way to his bedroom and was just thirsty. I know all his antics. And now that I am getting a chance to relive them again, I am overwhelmed with lots of emotions. I hope this little incident has broken the ice between us, and henceforth we will be more than just cordial to each other. I still see the glimpse of my friend in him, which he was to me once, and if God gives me another chance, I would like to rekindle that friendship between us again, this time to hold on to it until my last breath.

Chapter 5

Rohan

My heart and kitchen both were on fire some time back. After coming home from that unexpected face-off with Ishika at the office parking lot, I opened the beer bottle, kept my ordered chicken curry to heat, and decided to take a relaxing bath after having my food. But the thoughts of Ishika had me in a tailspin, and I completely forgot about the chicken curry I had kept to heat on the burner. And instead, I soaked myself in the hot tub while drinking beer and put on the earplugs to immerse myself in the music to soothe my aching heart. And when I learned about the fiasco of the fire, the fire alarms and the water sprinklers, Ishika came to my rescue, though I wasn't really in danger... I think. Just a few hours ago, I was so confident that I knew how to avoid her, and now, here I am... at her apartment because the maintenance team is cleaning up the mess in my kitchen.

“Are you going to enter, or do you plan to guard the door?” Ishika's voice breaks through my thoughts.

She invited me to her house and offered to share her food with me. I wanted to jump at her offer as I was famished at the moment to deny anything in the name of food. Otherwise, I am very picky.

Amid all this mess, I don't know how I failed to notice Ishika's night dress; a lacy white tank top with denim shorts, flaunting her long legs and her sexy midriff. Looking at her brought forth those naughty thoughts in my mind that I had for her once. *I still have them.* Swallowing hard, I look back at her.

“I can bring a Puja thali to give you a grand traditional welcome to enter my home if that's what you are waiting for,” she teases me again, and I shake off my lascivious thoughts and enter her apartment.

Her home is neat and clean, quite unlike her previous self when she was extremely messy. Everywhere, everything is in

its proper place. The centre wall has a huge cabinet flaunting all the trophies she has won in racing. I'm proud of her for following her passion and never giving up on it.

"Pizza is here, Roh," Ishika calls me from behind.

I turn toward her dining table and find her opening the pizza box. My heart warms at the mere thought of Ishika and me having our meals together again. We did that all the time when we were in college. While Ishika always kept a check on her diet during those days, pizzas were one thing she could never resist.

"C'mon, I won't call you twice," she adds, taking a bite of one slice. "Suit yourself."

"Where is your hospitality?" I pull a chair for myself and take a seat opposite her.

"Umm..." she relishes the slice before replying. "I never needed to be formal when I was with you, did I?"

That makes me speechless again.

"You can be your grumpy self again after the meals, Roh. C'mon. Have a slice. It's yummy."

She breaks a slice of the 12-inch pizza with probably extra cheese she's ordered and passes it to me. I take it from her without making a fuss.

I quietly eat my share of the pizza while she quickly finishes hers. Watching Ishika eat pizza is pure torture, erotic as hell. She opens her mouth wide and devours the pizza with extra cheese on top, rolling her tongue over her lips to wipe off the extra cheese. My lower body tightens, showing its appreciation, and I cannot keep my gaze off her sexy mouth. Ishika was wild, a total badass, and her stunning looks and intellectual prowess made every guy want to conquer and tame her. I was no exception, but I loved her as she was. We finish our food in silence. Ishika keeps stealing glances at me in between while I do the same when she isn't noticing.

"Remember the prom night? When Dolly challenged me to eat the large pizza in ten minutes?" She tries to begin the

conversation again, taking me back down memory lane that I'd locked away years ago.

"I don't remember," I lie, continuing to eat.

"Liar," she frowns. "It's on your face, Roh. You can never forget the incident that had me crying buckets for losing the challenge."

"You didn't lose the challenge. You won it." I refute her immediately, making Ishika grin.

She purposely tricked me into making me accept that I, too, remembered that challenge and everything else that Ishika and I had done together.

"See. I knew you remembered." She punches my chest lightly before grabbing the next slice. "Stop proving otherwise, Roh. My best friend was anything but a liar."

Best friend! She was always more than 'just' my best friend. Much more. No wonder that word hurt like hell. It bruised my ego as well as my heart.

"Yeah. I remember everything. I remember that challenge. I remember you winning it. I remember all our friends back then. I also remember the people I liked and hated. Like—" I pause for a second. "What was his name?" I pretend to think before continuing, "Aah, Sunny. Right? Your first crush. The guy you left your best friend for."

She pauses eating and gives me a glare.

"How's Sunny, Ishika?"

She stiffens at my sudden question but doesn't respond. Intrigued, I rile her again.

"Where is he? In the bedroom? Won't he join us for dinner?" I deliberately ask.

She swallows angrily before sipping her coke.

"The last time I saw Sunny was when I caught him red-handed, in bed with his Ex, who was also my classmate in Mumbai. So, I don't know, nor do I care where he is now and

what he is doing.” She shrugs casually, continuing to eat her pizza slice.

My eyes widened, but I wasn’t shocked because I knew the kind of guy Sunny was. I’d always tried to protect Ishika from him, but she was captivated by his charm to even hear me out. So, it seems after she chose him and moved to Mumbai from Delhi, she finally got to see his true colours. No matter how heartbroken I was about Ishika choosing him over me, knowing that he hurt her distressed me.

“He cheated on you?” I fist my fingers over the table.

“Yeah, he did. What will you do, Roh? Break his f*cking head?” She snaps.

“Don’t challenge me. You know I can do that, and I will do that if I ever meet him again in the future.”

Ishika calms down, but I am still seething. She covers my hand with hers to calm me.

“We all make mistakes, Roh. I made a colossal one by choosing Sunny despite my best friend warning me against him. I’ve learnt my lesson, though it took me some time. But, I learnt.”

I can see the anger and regret simmering in her eyes too.

“But in all this, I am glad to have found you again,” she whispers, gripping my hand tight. “After all these years.”

I don’t react to that, though I am equally thrilled to meet her again. It’s not that I couldn’t meet her if I wanted to or know about her. I could have, but I’ve refrained from doing that all these years because she didn’t choose me...and that still hurt.

And now that she is back in my life, I’m not going to be a putty in her hands again. So, I shove her hand from mine and lean back against the chair.

“You didn’t find me again, Ishika. It was just a coincidence. If you wanted me back, you wouldn’t have taken a decade to come back to your best friend.”

“Roh!” she gasps, swallowing hard. “I could say the same about you. I was your best friend. Why didn’t you come to

find me?”

“I was respecting your wish of not interfering in your life.”

“I never said that,” she retorts.

“It meant the same. It didn’t even take you a minute to choose him over me, Ishika. Why would I try to find that friend again, the one who never valued my friendship?”

Her eyes glisten with tears as she stares at me.

“I’m sorry,” she mouths.

Her delayed apology brings a forced smile to my face.

“I don’t want your apology, Ishika. Let’s just do our respective work and go our separate ways. It’s too late to rekindle that friendship again, so why even try?”

I get up from my chair, wiping my lips with the napkin.

“Thanks for coming to my help and sharing your meal with me. Good night.”

Saying this, I walk towards the main door.

“Roh,” she calls me from behind, but I don’t turn. I know if I stayed here for some more time, with the woman who was my world at one point, my lovesick heart would surely give up my resolve and be tempted to befriend her again.

My life was great before Ishika came along and made it perfect. It was only after she left me that I realised never to give the keys to your happiness into other’s people’s hands, no matter how much you trust them. I had made that mistake once; I wouldn’t want to repeat it again.

I keep tossing and turning on my bed, trying hard not to reminisce about those beautiful days of our friendship in college. I wish I had restrained myself not to give my heart to the woman who never considered me more than a friend. I forcefully shut my eyes to sleep, but the moment I do, memories of our college days begin to flash in my head.

After our first meeting, where both Ishika and I tried to occupy the same parking space for our cars, I met her again in the class. I was overcome with happiness as she was always around me in college, but I kept my feelings to myself, not wanting to make them public. In a week, my friends Vansh, Taani and the rest of our group started to tease me with her name when they had witnessed how I'd generously given my parking space to Ishika that first day and the way I ensured no one else blocked that space either from that day onwards. I gladly gave in to her every demand considering I desperately wanted to befriend her. She was a first bencher, while my friends and I always preferred back rows even if the front ones were vacant. Ishika used to speak to Taani for notes, and then, Taani introduced her to the rest of our group, including me. I was on cloud nine when Ishika recognised me as the one behind the wheel that day and thanked me for giving up my parking spot for her. I could feel the spark between us the moment we shook hands. A week after, her car refused to start, an issue I resolved before her mechanic arrived, and she thanked me again. I seized that moment to ask her out for coffee, and she gladly accepted. We spent almost four hours in the college canteen chatting about various topics, including my craze for cars and hers for racing. That was the day we began bonding, and from Rohan and Ishika, we became Roh and Ishq for each other. Only we were allowed to call the other by those nicknames. No one else.

Within a month, the first bencher, Ishika, occupied the last benches in the classroom along with my friends and me. Though she was a part of the same group, I realised we had a special bond between us that only heightened my liking towards her. We started going clubbing, shopping, to movies and cafés and did a lot of group studies to help each other out. Ishika stayed alone in a rented apartment as her father was based in Hyderabad. She had moved to Delhi to pursue her education at Delhi university, which gave her unlimited opportunities to explore various forms of racing. When her father came to meet her, I was the first friend she introduced to him, and it gave me a sense of pride that Ishika considered me special. I promised her father to look out for her in his absence. He, too, liked me and strictly told me to watch out for

her and keep her racing in check, if possible, as he didn't want his daughter to be hurt in any kind of accident because of her passion for that dangerous sport. While I agreed with him, I also knew nothing would stop her from getting on the tracks, just like nothing could stop me from falling in love with Ishika Bhatia. Despite knowing and loving her for over a year, I had still not proposed to her. But now that our second year of graduation had begun, I planned to do so. I'd just been buying time, mustering the courage to open up about my feelings for her. Ishika had still friend-zoned me, but I knew the day would come when she would realise that her feelings for me were more than that of a friend, and I was desperately waiting for that day.

I was busy going over Ishika's sports car, which had just come in after the maintenance checks and servicing. We were racing today, so I was checking up on the engine modifications when I overheard Ishika and one of our classmates, Arun, arguing about something — A girl and a boy can never be just friends. I'm not sure where they picked up this conversation, but Arun was teasing her, egging her on, while Ishika strongly opposed that statement. Finally, her patience wore out, and she clutched the collar of his shirt.

"Rohan, help," Arun yelled.

I ran to Ishika, slid my arm around her waist and pulled her back toward me.

"Ishq, stop," I muttered, telling her to stop arguing.

"A girl and a boy... can be just friends. In fact, they can be best friends. And Rohan and I are prime examples of that. We are besties, and not lovers." She repeated.

Ohh. Now I know what brought this on. She brought Arun here to explain to him that we were only besties, and though her statement was debatable, I kept my mouth shut from blurting out my feelings for her. I was already busy giving a final check to her sports car, which we were going to race that night at the F1 track, whose construction was still underway on the outskirts of the city. It should have been ready a year ago, but the plot was disputed. Hence the project was stalled

until the matter was sorted in court. But, it was a boon for the racers as it gave us a chance to trespass at night and bribe the security to let us race on that rough track which was not ready for racing yet. But that's the thrill of it. Isn't it? To do the forbidden.

I wasn't into racing at all, but Ishika introduced me to this whole new world of madness, and since then, it has become an integral part of my life, just like Ishika.

"Roh, say something," Ishika struggled to get off my hold.

"What... what do you want me to say?" I let her go and turned toward Arun, who was smirking at me as he was aware of my feelings for Ishika. In fact, half of the college knew about it, even before I befriended Ishika.

For me, love was friendship (Pyaar dosti hai), just like Sharukh Khan said in the famous Bollywood movie 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai'. Maybe, it did not apply to all, but in our case, I believed that a boy like me and a girl like Ishika could never be 'just' friends. How could anyone know her and not fall in love with her? The thought itself was ludicrous.

"Roh, tell him we are just friends. Arun and his group constantly tease me that a girl and a boy can never be friends."

She was about to lunge towards Arun, but I pulled Ishika back to me...again.

"Hey, hey... relax, baby."

"Don't baby me, Roh," Ishika shouted. "It is because of you calling me baby these days that these boys think we are in a relationship. We are not. Tell them."

I schooled my expression and turned to Arun again.

"You heard her? We are not a couple. We are just friends." I tried to sound convincing, but my tone gave me away.

Arun laughed heartily in my face.

*"What the F*ck," Ishika tried to catch hold of him, but he ran away, leaving her fuming... and me in a state of chaos. As I said, everyone in the college knew about my feelings for*

Ishika, and if I delayed in proposing to her, she would get to know it from someone else—which I feared the most.

*“What is his girlfriend’s name? Richa, right?” Ishika inquired, turning toward me. “I am going to tell Richa about him smoking in secret and enjoy seeing her kick his a*s before everyone. How can he even think about us like that? You and me as girlfriend-boyfriend! That’s absurd. Only because he and Richa turned from friends to lovers doesn’t mean we would too.”*

“C’mon, Ishq. Ignore these guys and what they think about us. I have good news for you.”

I gestured for Ishika to look at her sports car and tapped on the bonnet.

“She is ready to vroom vroom tonight.” I mimicked the sound of the engine as I said that.

Ishika jumped in joy, giving me a tight hug.

“We are gonna kill the race tonight.” She murmured.

“We will, baby. We will.” I pulled her tightly against me.

The race was against the ex-students of our college. They were three years our senior and were actively involved in illegal racing on the roads of Delhi at midnight. One of them was a champion, unbeatable till date.

“You ready?” Ishika asked me as I strapped my gloves on.

Despite the midnight hours, there was a huge audience, and I believed they had come here to see the races, especially since the reigning champion was a part of it. Whenever we took part in couple racing, Ishika took the wheel, and I was her navigator, but tonight, I wanted to take the hot seat. Though Ishika was adamant about wanting to drive, she agreed to be my race navigator tonight. The three miles oval track was rough, bumpy and dangerous, considering the construction was stopped in between, but we were confident, wanting to try our best, no matter who our opponent was.

“Ready as ever,” I replied before zipping my black racing suit and wearing my red gloves. Ishika was already ready in

hers, a red suit and black gloves and held our helmets. Yes! We were colour-coordinated, only the other way around. And guess whose idea it was? Right, Ishika!

Finally, we wore our customised suit badges. It was my idea and a surprise for Ishika when we first couple raced. Because we were known as Roshika in college, I made these custom badges for us with #Roshika and the date of the race printed on them. Ishika loved it, and we won that race. Soon we wore them in all the races we participated in and won each of them too. After that, these custom badges became our lucky charm, and we sported them in each race before getting behind the wheel. Even today, Ishika pinned the badge with the current date on mine, and I did the same on hers as we geared up for the race.

Ishika hugged me and patted my cheek.

“Let’s win this.”

“Yep,” I agreed before we got inside her red sports car. Such was the craze for racing that Ishika had modified the engine of this car just so we could participate in races, giving us an edge in the speed and acceleration during takeoff and towards the finish line.

Today, we were racing against five opponents in their respective fancy customised cars. Only the last participant, the Champion as they called him, was yet to arrive. Who cared? If he couldn’t respect time, no one would respect him. Our cars took the position on the grid and waited in line for the race to begin.

“One mile of drag racing, then one and a half miles of steep, bumpy corners and then speed-off to the finish line,” Ishika instructed me, reading the map on the GPS navigator in our car while I started the engine, ensuring everything was okay.

A minute later, a white posh racing car stopped beside our car, its engine roaring to life, trying to scare us off. It had to be the Champion, as the audience made a whooping noise and cheered for him. Ishika chewed her bubblegum and tightened her ponytail before turning to me.

“He seems quite popular,” she stated, turning to me again.

“Paid audience,” I teased, winking at her.

Ishika laughed heartily at my joke.

“Are you sure you want to drive tonight and not let me?”

“You think I can’t win?” I asked.

She smirked at me before patting my arm.

“That’s my man.” She looked at me with pride, and that trust in her eyes made me want to win every race we raced together. Before I could gather myself, Ishika leaned from her seat toward me and gave me a kiss on my cheek. My heart warmed with love for her.

I already ached for more, which was completely wrong, considering Ishika didn’t know I was in love with her. Friendly hugging and forehead or cheek kisses were common between us. When we were mad at each other during an argument or when I teased her, she would often push me to the floor and sit on my back, twisting my arm from behind and making sure I either apologised or agreed with her. It was always entertaining to see her proving her point by hook or crook. Ishika considered and treated me only as a friend, blissfully unaware of my feelings and fantasies about us as lovers. I had plenty of cravings to satiate and desires to fulfil with her...only her, when we would reach that point in our relationship.

The crowd cheered as the commentators started the countdown. Ishika buckled herself while I strapped on my seatbelt. The race was about to begin. I shut my eyes to take a deep breath and mentally attune myself to the racing mode. The moment we heard the word ‘Go’, all the drivers hit their Nitro to get their cars off to a flying start. I zoned out everything, and all I heard was the roar of the engines and the thudding of my heart, along with the adrenaline rush that propelled me to race forward. Drag racing was the easiest part of such races, which turned insane the moment we reached the bumpy curved corners of the track. Blood rushed through my veins as our car charged ahead like a bullet.

“Roh, there’s a steep edge ahead. Stay to the left. Stay left,” Ishika screamed at the top of her voice.

This was the navigator’s role. To guide the route to the other to anticipate and change the speed accordingly, even before we could see the road. Champion’s car crossed past us, almost dashing us from the right.

*“What the F*ck!” I cursed, accelerating the engine.*

The worst part of illegal racing was that there were no rules. You raced at your own risk. There were times we suffered only minor injuries, but a few times we were in a fatal car crash and had to be hospitalised for a week. But that was the thrill of life. Live it to put it at risk!

“He’s speeding,” Ishika screamed again, “Right. Take a right at 200 meters.”

I steered the car accordingly, holding on to the steering wheel. It’s a totally different mindset when you drive the same car on roads and on racing tracks. You have to handle the wheel differently.

Champion was fast as lightning and far ahead of all of us. We were third, according to the GPS navigator. I kept evading the monster vehicles that tried to bump into our car to get us off the track.

“You idiot,” Ishika roared, looking outside the window as a blue car tried to hit ours from the left as we were blocking its way ahead. “Right... right... right...” she shouted again, alerting me to the incoming steep curve ahead. I took a deep right turn, avoiding going off track by a narrow margin, but the driver of the blue car misjudged, skidded off the track and collided with the wall, coming to a sudden halt. One down! One left.

Champion was still quite ahead of us. I manoeuvred my car effortlessly along the track, showing no urgency to overtake him. Of course, in the end, we wanted to zoom ahead, leaving all the other cars behind, but we did it our way. We strategised, making the opponents think they were winning and

hit the gas pedal to its fullest toward the finish line to cross it way before the rest.

It was hard to hear the roar of the audience over the car engine, but I knew they were enjoying the race. Crossing the bumpy edges, we entered the race's third and final leg—speed off towards the finish line. It was time to show Champion who he was racing against. I turned to Ishika, who nodded, reading my mind and entwined our fingers. This was our thing, shifting the gears at the last leg together, holding hands. No matter who was driving. We were each other's lucky charm. As soon as our fingers entwined, I raised our handhold, kissed Ishika's knuckles and shifted the gears together. I pressed the gas pedal all the way to the floor. The car adjusted to the new speed, the engine groaned, the tires skidded, and the burning smell of rubber filled our nostrils.

I wheeled the car towards the Champion's car, and just when he tried to block our way ahead, I swerved sharply to my left, paving our way to the finish line. This sudden move made the Champion lose control momentarily. I could see that.

“Go... Go... Go...” Ishika screamed at the top of her voice as the Champion moved parallel to us. Both the cars sped towards the finish line. It was just a matter of a few seconds for the audience to know who the winner was.

For Ishika and me, racing was never about money, as we already came from influential families. The real victory for me was seeing the absolute joy on her face when we crossed that finish line... first. With that thought fuelling me, I raced my best. Within seconds, the nose of my car surpassed the Champion. The finish line was a mile away when the Champion suddenly tried to hit our car again to push us off the track. Not again! I steered the wheel, hitting his Mustang in return, making him lose control of his car, and he dashed against the adjacent wall while we crossed the finish line.

“Yaayy,” Ishika screamed in victory, giving me a side hug as I eased the clutch, bringing the car to a halt. “We won. We won. We won,” she kept chanting, getting down from the car with me.

The audience, who had gone silent over the Champion's loss, suddenly started cheering for us. This is what we raced for. The cheering and the adulation from the audience. Ishika jumped in joy and hugged me tightly, as she always did at the end of the race, regardless of whether we'd win or lose.

"Congratulations." A sharp voice from behind us intruded on our moment. Ishika pulled away from me as we both turned around and saw the Champion standing next to his car.

Sunny? Sunny Bindra! He was the Champion? Damn hell! How did I not know it? Sunny was a famous Bollywood celebrity's son and an ex-student of our college. I'd heard about his Casanova image and how he impressed women by racing, winning their hearts, only to break them later by dumping them like a piece of trash once he had used them. What was he doing here in Delhi?

Chapter 6

Ishika

Rohan walked out on me again, unwilling to let go of the past. I don't blame him. He has every right to be upset with me for what happened between us. Sunny's entry into my life and the beginning of the rift in our friendship might be a coincidence, but I ruined everything further on. I was so young. And so foolish. If only...

Clearing my head of the past, I put away the pizza boxes and crash on my bed, recalling the biggest mistake of my life – Sunny Bindra!

Sunny Bindra! A tall, dark and handsome guy with a muscular body, a sexy voice and a confident walk. I'd never heard of him before, but when I saw him for the first time that night, he affected me in ways no other guy had. Sunny congratulated Rohan and me for winning the race, but his eyes were riveted on me, checking me out. When Rohan saw Sunny staring at me, he dragged me back to the car and drove us out of the arena. I had even argued with him about his hasty departure as I was basking in Sunny's attention. That was when Rohan told me that Sunny was a player and I should stay away from him. Of course, I believed him as Rohan would never lie to me, but as they say, when you start liking someone and are attracted towards them, you lose all your abilities to think straight.

For the next few weeks, I was completely obsessed with Sunny's thoughts and presence. Originally from Mumbai, Sunny, the son of a famous Bollywood producer, had come to Delhi to shoot his debut web series as the male lead and was going to stay here for a few months. Sunny's extravagant gestures of loitering outside my college and my apartment on his expensive, high-end motorbikes, stalking me and sending me flowers and gifts, had charmed me, and I was tempted to meet him once. I confessed this to Rohan as he was my best friend, and boy... he was furious with me for even thinking about meeting Sunny. I still recall our fight over it when Rohan

came to drop me at my apartment as my car was at the service centre.

“Are you kidding me, Ishq?” He put the car in neutral, turning angrily towards me. “You want to go on a date with Sunny?”

“Roh, it’s not a date. It’s just a casual meeting. That’s all.”

“Casual meeting?” He punched his fist on the steering wheel.

“Roh, careful.” I tugged his arm and pulled it to me to check if his punching had left any bruises.

“You need to be careful, Ishq. I told you what kind of a guy Sunny is.”

“I know.” Tears sprung in my eyes on seeing two angry bruises on Rohan’s knuckles.

“Then why?” he pleaded. “Why do you even want to meet him?”

“To ask him to stop stalking me, Roh. That’s it. I know I can ask you to talk to Sunny, but I am 20, for God’s sake. I can handle my own problems. I don’t need my friend to always intervene and—”

Rohan shrugged his arm from my hold and looked away. I realised my words had hurt him more than the bruises.

“Roh,” I unbuckled myself and leaned closer, trying to cup his face.

“Ishq, don’t.”

“Look at me.”

“No.”

“Yes. Look at me. ‘My promise’.”

It somehow always worked. Whenever I gave Rohan my promise, he always did what I wanted. When he met my eyes, I could read the fear and protectiveness on his face.

“I can handle myself. If I can handle a 5000-cc engine without any problem, I can definitely take care of a player like

Sunny Bindra. Don't worry. I am not going to fall for him or his words."

He wasn't convinced, but when I pulled his head to my forehead, he relaxed. We stayed like that for a long moment with our eyes shut and our foreheads touching each other. The only sound around us was of our laboured breathing until Rohan pulled me in for a tight hug. That's my friend. No matter what, he always supported me. I knew one thing for sure, Rohan Oberoi was my friend for a lifetime. All the others were temporary.

I met Sunny, and my promise to Rohan of not falling for Sunny's charms failed big time. Sunny was that tornado which swept me off my feet and took me for a hell ride. Rohan was aware of my frequent meetings with Sunny, and he wasn't thrilled about it. But I couldn't lie to him. He was my bestie and had the right to know what was happening in my life. Sunny charmed me and also confessed his past affairs and flings to me, saying that they were only to fill a void in his life, and like a fool, I believed that only a guy who was genuinely interested in a woman would do that. My bond with Sunny was very different from what I had with Rohan. I could speak to Rohan about anything and just be myself, but with Sunny, I moulded myself to be the girl he wanted to spend his time with and be seen with. It didn't occur to me that Sunny was slowly changing me and my personality because I was blinded by him. As months passed, we started getting close. Too close.

Slowly, my attraction and interest turned into love. I shared my first kiss and first make-out with Sunny, which invariably made me crave more. Rohan had no clue about this, as it was too personal for me to share such intimate details with him. Moreover, I knew his reaction if he came to know about it. He would try to brainwash me about Sunny's flaws, and I was done hearing those. So what if a person was flawed? Couldn't he change for good? I believed Sunny would change, and I was naïve enough to think that the woman who would bring about that positive change in Sunny's life would be me.

Seven months later, at the end of my second-year exams, Sunny told me he was flying back to Mumbai as his work in

Delhi was over. That sudden news made me lose my mind, and I was willing to do anything to ensure our relationship worked and we were together. Sunny asked me to come to Mumbai with him and finish my last graduation year there. It was a tough decision considering I had to convince my father first and then Rohan. I wanted to be with Sunny and explore my relationship with him further. I believed Sunny loved me as I was madly in love with him. I spoke to Dad first, and after some persuasion, he agreed. Of course, I didn't tell him about Sunny being the reason I wanted to shift to Mumbai. I wanted to spend some time with Sunny and get to know each other before we made it official to our families. Though Dad agreed to my idea of shifting to Mumbai, I knew Rohan would throw a fit when I told him, and the same happened. No matter how much I wanted both Sunny's love and Rohan's friendship, the day came when I had to choose one between the two.

*"What the f*ck, Roh? You can't be serious." I yelled at Rohan the moment he laid his condition before me.*

Rohan wanted me to choose between him and Sunny. I knew he would be angry at me for wanting to leave and continue the final year of my graduation in another city, but what he asked me to do was next to impossible.

"You heard me, Ishq."

His body shook with anger.

"If you want to go to Mumbai with Sunny, you'll have to end your friendship with me." He repeated.

"But why?" I snapped. "Roh, I have a different bond with you and Sunny. Why do I have to choose between you two? You can't make me do that. Stop being dramatic. Our friendship has nothing to do with my feelings for Sunny."

He grabbed my arms and pulled me to him.

"Your feelings for Sunny are more important to you than your feelings for me?" His anger bubbled to the surface again.

"Roh, you are hurting me," I muttered without making any effort to get off his hold because I saw tears in Rohan's eyes, and they pricked my heart.

“We don’t have to do this, Roh,” I pleaded with teary eyes. “You can’t lock me to your friendship like this. We have every right to fall in love with someone else, and as friends, we must respect each other’s choices.”

“Sunny is not the right guy for you, Ishq,” he continued. “He is using you. It wouldn’t take him long to dump you, and I cannot let that happen. You deserve someone better than him. Why do you even want to leave your best friend for a player?”

“Because I love him,” I snapped. “I love Sunny, Roh.”

His grip on my arms loosened. There was pain written all over his face.

“You’ll not understand this emotion yet, Roh, because you haven’t loved anyone yet. The day you do, you’ll understand my decision of wanting to give my love a chance.”

He left me completely, stepping away from me, but his gaze held mine.

“Love,” he struggled to say that word and smiled sarcastically. “You love him?”

I didn’t know if he was asking me or mocking me.

“You love Sunny?” he repeated and laughed hysterically. “You love that player, Sunny?”

“Roh, enough.” I snapped. “It’s not funny. I know you have some misconceptions about Sunny, and you should get over it. He is not what you think. Ever since we are together, Sunny has never looked at another woman.”

“How do you know that?” He barked. “You don’t stay with him 24/7, Ishq. He might be sleeping around, and you wouldn’t even know.”

“Shut up,” I pushed at his chest. “I trust him.”

“And me?” Rohan grabbed my wrists when I tried to push him again. “You don’t trust your best friend? You don’t trust that what I am saying is for your own good?”

I was speechless. Where was this conversation even heading?

“We had risked our lives when we raced together, Ishq. Do you know why? Because we trusted each other. And today, you are telling me you trust Sunny more than me? You are trusting the wrong guy, Ishq. Don’t do this.”

“You don’t do this, Roh,” I urged. “Don’t make me choose between you and him.”

*“I f*cking will, Ishika Bhatia,” he roared. “Because it’s time to know where I stand in your life. I am asking you for the last time. Whom do you want in your life? The player you think you love but is nothing more than a silly crush or your best friend who has always stood by you and would always pick you no matter how many choices he’s been given throughout his life. Now whom will you choose?”*

His words pierced through my heart. He was asking me to do the impossible.

“Roh, please.”

“Tell me, Ishika,” he yelled.

“Roh, don’t,” I pleaded again.

“Say it,” he demanded. “Me or Sunny?”

“Sunny,” I snapped. “Sunny...Sunny...Sunny.”

Everything silenced around us, and all we could hear was each other’s laboured breaths again. He released his hold from my wrists and stepped back, his face filled with anguish. That one look said it all. He was never going to forgive me for this. But I, too, would never let him break our friendship so easily. Though I chose Sunny to give our love a chance, I also promised myself to try to win Rohan’s friendship again. Time was a healer, and I hoped with time, Rohan would realise how wrong he was to force me to choose between friendship and love.

Without another word, Rohan walked away from me. He didn’t turn back even once, nor did I have the courage to stop him. I cried for hours that night over losing my best friend. I tried to meet Rohan the whole week and persuade him to understand me, but he didn’t pay any heed and totally ignored me as though I meant nothing to him. After the exams, meeting

him became nearly impossible as he went missing all of a sudden from my life. I kept messaging him and even tried to call him, but it looked like Rohan had blocked me. He had cut off every link which connected me to him.

With a heavy heart, I flew to Mumbai, waiting to begin my new life with Sunny. I missed Rohan terribly, and I knew he would miss me too. I couldn't wait for the day when Rohan would realise he was wrong to make me pick between Sunny and him. I just prayed to God that day would come soon.

It took me a month to return to normalcy and stop contacting my other friends, like Vansh and Taani, for information about Rohan. Yes, I tried to stay in touch with them to learn more about Rohan, but the two refused to give me any information about him as they, too, were furious with me for hurting him, and Roh had forbidden them to speak to me. I realised Rohan had blocked me out permanently from his life, and none of his friends could reverse that decision.

I spoke to Dad about Rohan and me parting ways as friends, and I also shared a few tidbits about Sunny with him. Dad told me just one thing. To stand by my decisions and never look back. He also warned me not to give my heart to any man unless I was sure that the person I was giving my heart to would cherish me forever. That was sound advice, but at that moment, my young heart rebelled against his wisdom as I was blinded by Sunny's love, and disregarding my father's advice, I publicly declared my love for Sunny.

Sunny stayed with his parents at their penthouse in Bandra, while Dad bought me an apartment in Juhu, like the one I owned in Delhi.

Sunny's father was a famous producer in Bollywood. Being a celebrity's son, he was well-known wherever we went. Soon we made news in the media as the latest Page 3 couple, and the word also reached my college, where Sunny was already a popular figure. I was enjoying it all until the rumours of Sunny dating our college beauty queen and my classmate Manya, who also happened to be his ex-girlfriend, started doing the rounds. I knew it wasn't true because I trusted Sunny, and he wouldn't double-date or cheat on me. In fact, before I could

ask him, Sunny himself told me about Manya and his bitter breakup with her a year ago, which made me respect him more than ever. If he cheated, I would know, right? Only time would answer that question.

Everything was happening at lightning speed in my life. After a few months of making it official with Sunny, things started looking up in our relationship. Though we had our share of fights and arguments, I was head over heels in love with him with each passing day, and he had conquered a major chunk of my heart and mind. On our six-month dating anniversary, I surrendered myself completely to Sunny in every way possible, something I had always refrained from before. Our lovemaking was magical, and it was the most memorable night for me, something I could cherish forever.

But, as time passed, I realised that our bond was only physical for Sunny. He was emotionally detached and didn't want any attachment. I initially ignored it, hoping Sunny would come around, but weeks turned into months, and Sunny began to distance himself from me as though he was no longer affected by my presence in his life. A man for whom I had moved to another city, adopted his lifestyle and broken up with my best friend was taking me and my love for granted.

And then my life took a disastrous turn. Sunny's behaviour changed overnight, diametrically opposite to what he was before. He was either too busy to spend time with me or was always out of town. If I called him, he didn't respond to my call. When I messaged him, he didn't reply to my text. I was still naïve and stupid to believe that Sunny must have been genuinely busy with work until one night, I learned from Sunny's friend that Sunny was back in Mumbai and was with Manya. I was shocked and reluctant to believe it, but his friend showed me Manya's recent Facebook post where she was in a pub, dancing with Sunny a day before. The day Sunny lied to me, stating he was still out of town. Shattered, clueless and curious, I took Manya's address from his friend and drove to her apartment only to find him and Manya in a compromising position in her bedroom.

Heartbroken and crushed, my world came to an end at that very moment. How could I ever believe that a womaniser like Sunny could fall in love... with me? I was so obtuse...so foolish, and so shameful. Rohan was right all this while. He tried his best to warn me about Sunny, and I always refuted him like the fool I was. Rohan's words kept ruminating in my mind, making me hate myself. I should have listened to him, my best friend, who only wanted to keep me safe and away from men like Sunny Bindra, who used girls only for their own pleasure and later dumped them like trash. I lost my best friend because I was obsessed with Sunny. How could I do this?

I screamed at them, shocking the two, and before Sunny could explain what he was doing in Manya's bed, I slapped him hard. Once. Twice. He was furious at my audacity and tried to grab me in anger, but I kicked him where it hurt him the most before storming out of that place.

After a week of shedding tears for Sunny and missing Rohan, whom I knew I'd hurt badly by my reckless decision, I decided to go back to Delhi and meet him. He deserved my apology in person. Though we hadn't contacted each other in the last seven months, I wanted to extend an olive branch because he was never at fault... I was.

I flew back to Delhi that weekend and drove straight to college. I found Rohan at the canteen, quietly drinking coffee at the corner table. He looked different—stoic and cold. He looked lost as his phone was continuously ringing, but Rohan hardly paid any attention to it, mindlessly staring at his coffee, which had probably turned cold. My eyes filled with tears on seeing him so dejected and disheartened. The moment I stepped closer to talk to him, a pretty girl reached him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Rohan, here you are! I was calling you for the past twenty minutes." The girl kissed his cheek, and he didn't seem to mind.

Who was she? I had never seen her before in our college. Maybe she was new.

Rohan shoved her hands off his neck, but she determinedly came and sat next to him. She tried to touch his thigh, but again Rohan didn't let her. Why was this girl being so clingy?

"Why were you calling me?" he asked in a stern voice.

"I was missing the hot guy who warmed my bed last night."

What? Rohan and this girl? Did they...! Damn! Was he dating her? Looked like it. I eavesdropped on them like a pervert, curious about their relationship.

"Roh," the girl touched his cheek lovingly.

"Don't," he instantly snapped at her. "My name is Rohan."

"I know." She shrugged. "But I heard that your best friend used to call you by that nickname, and you loved it."

The moment she said this, Rohan yelled at her. I hid behind the pillar to avoid being seen.

"I don't remember having a best friend ever. And do not call me anything apart from my name."

"Alright, chill," she pouted. "Are we meeting again tonight?"

He sighed.

"I don't think so. Exams are nearing, and we need to focus on our studies."

"I'll miss you," she said.

He didn't say anything back, confusing me even more. I was unable to comprehend what she meant to him. Surely, she had to be his girlfriend, considering they had slept together. I knew the kind of guy Rohan was, and he wouldn't sleep with any girl without having feelings for her.

"Don't be a fool, Shreya. You and I both knew what we were getting into. It's nothing permanent."

Nothing permanent? So this Shreya was his casual fling? Since when did Rohan get into all this?

Shreya winked at him. "I'll always remember that, Rohan. And, I knew what I was getting into last night. You had made it very clear that this was a 'no-strings-attached' arrangement, which suited me just fine, but trust me, I'll still miss you. We can be friends if nothing more, right?"

"Friends?" He laughed hysterically for a long minute.

I was stunned. Why was he behaving like an arrogant prick?

"Shreya," he exhaled. "Breaking News, darling! Rohan Oberoi will never befriend a woman in his life till his last breath." He declared with a vengeance.

I was rooted to the spot in shock, feeling guilty and miserable looking at his state. There was anger and agony in his voice and body language.

Shreya watched him in confusion as he continued.

"The one thing I learnt in my life is to stay away from being friends with women. A guy... and a girl... can never be friends for life. You women are so damn complicated. Every time, you want your friend to run behind you, losing all his sanity, and in the end, what do you do? Leave him for someone else. Someone whom you think is more charming and worthy enough for you to spend your life with." He replied sadly. "But it's okay." Rohan huffed and masked his expression with a fake smile.

My heart skipped a beat as I watched Rohan get up from the chair and exhale audibly.

"I can be yours physically, Shreya, but don't expect any friendship or attachment in whatever we have between us. I can never give it to any woman... Ever."

And with that, he walked away. Rohan was gone! Too far from me than I'd ever imagined. If I chose Sunny in the past, Rohan too chose Shreya, and guess what? We had both picked the wrong ones. I didn't see Sunny's betrayal coming, and Rohan lost faith in friendship and women from then on. How was I supposed to face him? Even if I apologised, would he ever believe me again? I didn't think so. Hence, with lots of

regret and guilt, I gave a final heartfelt look at my best friend Rohan before leaving from there forever. Some relations are so fragile that when they break, nothing in the world can fix them together again. Rohan and my friendship was one such bond that I sullied with my foolish decisions, and Rohan buried his emotions in the deepest corner of his heart, giving it a permanent closure. There was no way we would ever be on the same path again. Never!

Chapter 7

Ishika

Present

It's been three days since that fire incident, but Rohan still continues to ignore me at the office, like I don't exist. Yesterday, I was speaking to one of my colleagues in the lobby, and Rohan strode past us without a single glance, but he smiled at my colleague as though she was the only one present there. *Loser*. What a rude jerk! I understand we are no longer friends, at least that's what he likes to pretend, but can't he acknowledge my presence as part of his company?

And if this wasn't enough, Avantika, the head designer I am supposed to report to with my designs, is giving me a tough time at Ronishq. I have shared with her countless design ideas for the bridal collection, but she outright rejected those citing silly excuses that they wouldn't go well with the brand and the vision of our new collection. To hell with her! The way she is behaving and disproving my each and every effort, it clearly looks like she has some personal vendetta against me. It's not that I can't tackle her on my own, but I don't want to disturb the professional relationship I have with her.

With all these thoughts adding to my frustration, I decided to hit the gym on Friday morning at seven, located on the top floor of my building. And guess who is in the gym? *Rohan* again! Dressed in his gym shorts with his upper body bare, he oozes sensuality. Unlike before, when he used to be very shy, I think he now enjoys the undivided adulation of women. He is working out with weights and is unaware of my presence. My stomach somersaults on seeing him grunt every time his arm flexes while pulling the weights towards him and pushing them away again with grace and elegance. Seeing his intense concentration, he looks like a trained professional. That kind of sexy body doesn't come without dedication and consistency. Beads of sweat drip from Rohan's dark brown hair towards his neck, sliding down his back and disappearing into his black shorts. My mouth salivates on seeing those

muscles sculpted to perfection. With his athletic and powerful body, Rohan is a wet dream for every female on this planet.

Just the thought of that makes me sweat. After Sunny, I had never been with a man. Post my breakup with him, I never really felt like making new friends or dating anyone fearing my poor judgement of people. Racing and designing jewellery was my only pleasure. Of course, time and again, I felt the need to have someone to cuddle to, but I had never met a man who would appreciate and accept me as I am—strong, dominant and a racing freak. I thrived on adventure, and it was important to me that my partner, too, shared a similar passion. I was happy being single, and it had worked well so far until today when I saw my bestie Rohan flashing his hot and sexy body like he is putting on a show just for me. F*ck! What am I thinking? Having these inappropriate thoughts about Rohan and bringing to the fore my unspoken fantasies, which I never had for him before, makes me break out in a sweat.

A few women from our building are busy ogling Rohan, waiting for his attention and guess what? Rohan happily obliges them by showing off his sexy body, and grinning flirtatiously at them. Urgh! He has eyes and time for everyone except me.

The next instant, Rohan's gaze meets mine, and as usual, he ignores me and shifts to the treadmill instead. What the hell! His ignorance is getting on my nerves now. I know Rohan is only pretending to be cool and in control of his feelings, but in reality, he also wishes to rekindle our old friendship. I'm confident that if I try harder to win back his trust, we could be best friends again. So, Roh! Time for a reality check!

Before he can start the treadmill, I climb on the belt, facing Rohan, with my back resting on the LCD display, blocking Rohan from turning it on.

“Hi,” I smile at him.

He looks completely taken aback by my intrusion.

“Now I know why you have such a huge fan following on social media. Bare body workout, huh?” I tease.

He rolls his eyes before crossing his arms.

“What are you doing here, Ishika?”

“What does it look like I am doing? I am trying to get your attention, Roh.”

Rohan looks around and realises that people are staring at us.

“Ishika, get down. Everyone is looking at us.”

“I don’t care.”

“But I do. You can’t barge in on your boss.”

“You are my boss at work. Outside the workplace, you are my best friend.” I pinch his cheek.

“Stop,” he says sharply, shoving my arm aside. “I’m turning on the treadmill. Get down before you fall off.”

“I won’t fall. My best friend would never let me fall. Do you want a demo of it? Wait.”

I quickly push my hand sideways and start the treadmill. Rohan balances himself by placing his hands on the safety handrails, pinning me between his arms as the belt below us comes to life. And as I predicted, Rohan immediately shut it off before it caught speed.

“Are you this crazy every morning, or is today special?” He shouts at me.

“And are you this irritated every morning, or is today special?” I tease him in return, but he groans instead.

“This is not funny.”

“You treating me like a stranger all the time is not funny either.”

Rohan lets out a cuss word, and his expression makes him look adorable.

“What do you want?” He finally asks, exhaling hard.

“I want our friendship back.”

“It’s not possible. It died a long death a decade ago.”

“Then let’s go to heaven and get it back.”

“I don’t have time for that,” he snaps.

“But I have.”

“Are you crazy?”

“A little less than you.”

I pinch the bridge of his nose, and Rohan immediately tries to move away, stumbling in the process and is about to trip when I quickly grip his steely biceps to prevent his fall. His face heats up, whereas my heartbeat accelerates as I feel the muscles of his forearms. He is huge compared to my lean body. Gosh! Why are these thoughts ruminating in my head repeatedly? We were friends, and nothing more was possible between us. On top of that, Rohan doesn’t even acknowledge our friendship anymore. He is already giving me a tough time over it.

“Ishika,” the voice of the gym instructor intrudes on our moment. “Two people are not allowed to run together on the same treadmill. You know the rules.”

Rohan sighs in relief, stepping back, and I unwillingly get down the treadmill.

“We were just talking, Jimmy,” I reply, turning back to Rohan who started walking on the treadmill. He is going at a medium pace, focusing completely on the LCD display in front of him.

Seeing him act like a stranger towards me and ignoring my need to start afresh pains me.

“Give me one chance to make it right, Roh,” I plead.

“Why?” Rohan shrugs. “Why should I give you another chance, Ishika? You always act like a princess and want people to prioritise you above everything. But have you ever realised that when the time comes, you fail miserably to make them your priority? You did the same to me. Why should I repeat that mistake again?”

I stare at him, saying nothing. His words are like a dagger going through my heart.

“Tell me one thing,” he continues looking at me seriously. “Would *you* give me a chance and rekindle your friendship with me again had *I* left you for someone else and suddenly returned to claim that same friendship again?”

The answer is on the tip of my tongue, and I bite back my tears. The truth of his words shocks me to the core.

“See!” he sighs. “It’s hard, isn’t it? Then how can you expect me to give in again, Ishika? I can’t forget the past.”

He keeps hitting some buttons on the LCD monitor while increasing his speed on the belt.

“I know why you are treating me like this, Roh.” I continue. “I never apologised properly, did I?” I ask nervously. “How stupid of me. I am trying to win you back without telling you how guilty I am for my past decisions. The last time I said sorry, you walked out on our conversation without any reaction.”

Rohan keeps on running. I take a deep breath and focus on saying these three words to my friend, the ones he deserved to hear from me long ago.

“I’m sorry, Roh. I am really sorry for not trusting you in the past. I took your friendship and protectiveness towards me for granted and thought you were imposing your opinions on me, whereas all you were doing was saving me from heartbreak. I wish I’d heard you then and taken your advice seriously. I am really sorry, Roh. Please forgive me.”

I expected Rohan to slow down, if not completely turn off the treadmill, and look at me. But he did neither. Instead, he kept murmuring something while continuing his run. I moved closer to see his reaction, only to see the AirPods in his ears. The LCD monitor displayed some music, and Rohan was lip-syncing to it. Damn! It meant he didn’t hear my apology at all. It took me so much courage to apologise to him after all these years, and he didn’t even hear it. It screws my mood, and I walk out of the gym, skipping my workout for the day..

We had a team-building activity trip planned for two days and were asked to pack clothes and essentials accordingly as the entire team was heading to a surprise location for the weekend getaway. The move from being employees of RC Group to Ronishq was crucial, and it was high time we all gelled together to be more productive and work as a team. I was never fond of such activities, but my interest was piqued because I knew Rohan would be part of it.

The company had hired luxury buses for the getaway. It was a thrill in itself to travel the unknown without knowing the destination. I occupy the aisle seat in the last row wanting to be by myself. Avantika was sitting alone in the first seat. Today everyone was dressed casually. I sported my favourite blue-washed bootcut jeans and a white halter-neck top.

Everyone had arrived except Rohan. Avantika was fidgeting in her seat, anxiously waiting for Rohan to join us. I wonder if Rohan knew how desperate she was for him. Maybe yes, that's why he gave her enough attention. Does he like her? I really hope not. She is not his type. Avantika is too bossy and won't be able to handle his tantrums. My Rohan deserves someone who will love him unconditionally like a mother, flirt with him and pamper him like his girlfriend and be with him forever, trusting him and supporting him as a true partner would. Avantika doesn't fit in either of those categories.

“Good Morning, Boss,” the entire team greets Rohan as he steps onto the bus.

I crane my head to look at him. Dressed in a pair of dark blue jeans and a black T-shirt, he looked dapper and outdoorsy. From the looks of him, he's cut his hair short, giving him a youthful persona.

“Sir, you can sit here.” Avantika moves to the window seat, leaving the aisle seat empty for him. The bus is fully occupied apart from the two seats, one beside Avantika and the other beside me.

Rohan looks up and scans the bus as though searching for someone. Me. I hope. His gaze meets mine, and he is about to

sit beside Avantika when Rohan's secretary Mrs. Aarti Roy gets inside the bus.

"Oh, the bus looks full. I'll take the other one," she says and is about to get down when Rohan stops her.

"We have two seats left. One for each of us. You take the one next to Avantika, and I'll sit in the last row."

Really? He wants to sit beside me. My heart dances a happy dance at the thought.

"No, Sir," Mrs. Roy disagrees. "I'll take the last row."

"Oh, c'mon, Mrs Roy. I'm not going to let you sit behind."

"But, Sir, how can I let you sit in the last row?"

"Don't worry." He makes her sit next to Avantika and gives me a look before replying to her. "I was a backbencher in college. I'm used to it."

Winking at her, Rohan makes his way towards me as the engine of the bus roars to life. I hold my grin. Did he just remember about us being the last benchers? Suddenly all the memories of our college picnic where we always occupied the last row on the bus to enjoy the fullest flashed before my eyes. Those were the days. Our golden era.

"Move," he says, reaching me.

I pull my legs up to allow him to get inside and occupy the window seat. I know Rohan hates aisle seats. I always let him sit by the window in the past since it also gave me the liberty to move, dance and play games with my friends during the ride. I didn't have to disturb Rohan and his precious sleep whenever we travelled on the bus during such trips.

"You can take the window seat as usual," I say, waiting for him to get inside.

A look of surprise crosses his features before Rohan occupies the window seat.

"Feels like old times," I whisper, leaning closer to him.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he answers before taking his eye mask from his pocket and putting it on.

“Seriously, Roh? You are going to sleep?”

“Why do you think I chose the last row? This is the only place where I can catch up on my sleep and avoid the silly games the staff will be playing in a while. I am not interested.”

“But you are the boss,” I argue. “How can you not participate?”

“Because *I am* the Boss, and I can do whatever I want. Got it? Now please excuse me.”

Pulling his eye mask to cover his eyes, Rohan leans back on his seat and goes to sleep.

*As*hole!*

“I heard that,” he mutters.

He did? Of course, he did. I always called him that whenever he pissed me off.

After fifteen minutes of waiting for him to talk, I finally lose my patience and give him a nudge.

“You know where are we going?” I try to initiate the conversation.

“Ask the HR. The woman in the blue top. Row three,” he murmurs.

I clench my jaw. So he has his eye on everyone, what they are wearing and where they are sitting. Typical Roh! Even if he knew the destination, he wouldn't tell me. Rohan and his stupid company protocols. As if I am going to tell anyone if he lets me in on the secret destination.

I put on my AirPods and play my usual playlist. But nothing interests me. I know Rohan is not asleep because he isn't snoring. Rohan is a snorer. In the past, whenever he slept in class, I always recorded the sound of his snores and teased him, just like he would click my pictures whenever I dozed off with my mouth open. A smile crosses my lips as I recall those memories and I again turn to Rohan to check on him.

“Have you slept?” I whisper, leaning closer to him, but he doesn't reply.

I push his eye mask up to check.

“Ishika, don’t.” He shoves my arm and pulls the mask back on while I hit his chest softly for his rude behaviour.

“Only because the cat has closed his eyes while drinking milk, doesn’t mean no one is watching,” I mock.

“I don’t know what that means,” he mutters dryly.

“It means that stop thinking I’ll believe that you are sleeping. I know that you are just pretending to sleep. Don’t forget, I know you very well, Roh. You are not even sleepy right now.”

Rohan pushes his mask up and stares back at me.

“If you know me so well, you must also know that I am not interested in talking to you. So, please let me sleep. One more time you take off my mask; I swear I will change my seat, Ishika.”

He is capable of doing that! I curl my fist angrily when he resumes his sleeping position, pulling the eye mask again. Fine! I won’t disturb him. I continue listening to the songs when Rohan’s favourite song starts playing. It’s sung by ‘Shaan’ from the Bollywood movie ‘*Pyar Mein Kabhi Kabhi.*’

*Woh pehli baar jab ham mile,
Hathon mein haath jab ham chale
Hogaya yeh dil deewana,
Hota hai pyar kya kisne jaana
Teri aankhon mein jannat basa ke chala,
Teri zulfo ki chauv mein chalta chala
Tere naino mein chain, tere lab pe khushi,
Tujhko hee main mohobbat bana ke chala
Woh pehli baar jab ham mile,
Ho gaye suru ye silsile
Hogaya yeh dil deewana,
Hota hai pyar kya kisne jaana*

I immediately remove the AirPods and put it in Rohan's ear for him to enjoy the song. He is about to take it out when I press his hand.

“You love this song, Roh.”

The moment he hears the song, Rohan relaxes, crosses his arms over his chest, and continues to enjoy listening to the song. There's a small smile on his lips as he listens to the song, making me wonder if he remembers how much he bugged me singing this song...only for me. That was my best friend... *my Roh*. And despite him being next to me, I miss him so damn much.

Chapter 8

Rohan

This song which Ishika just made me listen to, describes the journey of my love for her—from the moment we met... to the moment I realised I was falling in love with her. This song captured the essence of my feelings for Ishika. I recall the times I spent with her as the song continued to play.

We roaming on the streets, holding hands till the wee hours.

We bunking the class for racing.

Our first pillow fight after she lost while playing Jenga because of me.

Ishika completing my college assignments while I prepped her car, readying it for the next race.

Me doing the pushups with Ishika lying on my back reading a novel.

Ishika parading skimpy outfits for me at the dressing area of the mall while I keep rejecting every one of those.

Me forcing Ishika to wear my jacket around her waist to cover her legs from other boys ogling her in the pub.

We drinking alcohol for the first time, and she throwing up in the end, and me soothing her back, pulling her hair behind, as she pukes.

We trying our first puff of the cigarette and ending in a coughing bout together, promising never to smoke again in life.

Me carrying Ishika on my back and running the 100-meter race with my other friends...and winning.

Ishika removing the thorn from my feet at the beach, vacationing in Goa while teasing me for whining like a kid and finally giving me a tight hug.

Ishika trusting me to do her makeup for the first time and screaming in horror on seeing herself in the mirror.

Ishika applying dollops of gel to my hair and styling it into spikes, which I hated.

Ishika waxing my chest with the wax strips, and me howling in pain every time she pulls the strip and she blowing air on my chest to soothe my pain.

We dancing together on the deserted road in the rain.

Ishika freezing in the cold despite sitting before the bonfire and me wrapping a blanket around us, pulling her in my embrace.

All these memories and many more keep playing in the back of my head as the song plays in a loop. I had buried these sweet memories deep in my heart, but Ishika's return had unlocked them again, catching me unaware. Yesterday at the gym, she apologised to me for her past decision. Though I had my AirPods on, the moment she spoke, I paused the song and heard each and every word of her apology. I wanted to pull her into my embrace before everyone and forgive her, but I controlled myself because I no longer trusted her to stick to her words. When Ishika could break our friendship for Sunny, she could do it again for someone else. I'm not prepared for another heartbreak. It took me ages to get over her, and I still have trust issues with women and relationships. So, despite hearing her apology, I pretended to be lost in the music, and Ishika thought I didn't hear her. Neither her apology is going to make any difference, nor will her efforts to rekindle our friendship. I'm happy to maintain a professional relationship with her this time because it will keep my life uncomplicated.

Not feeling any movement beside me, I remove my eye mask and find the seat next to me empty. Ishika is in the middle of the bus, dancing with some of the staff, and I am lost again—in her dreamy eyes, her innocent smile, her tender facial expressions as she lip-syncs the song, the way her hips sways with the music, and most importantly, the way she squeals in excitement as she notices me watching her. Every single move of Ishika Bhatia is enough to make my heart beat a thousand times faster than its normal rate.

I see her coming towards me with every intention of pulling me into the group for the dance. I don't want to, but I am done ignoring Ishika and hurting her every time. I have to act fast, and I have to act right. I am about to get up on my own to sit elsewhere when the bus swerves sharply, making Ishika lose her balance, and she topples on my lap. I hold her securely as she fidgets on my lap, clutching my shoulder. Our foreheads bump in the process, but that's not what bothers me. It's the closeness of our bodies again which scares me the most.

It's been ages since we have been this close, yet it feels like yesterday when I held her in my arms. Ishika's eyes flicker over my face as if trying to figure out what just happened. I'm equally dazed, but none of us makes any move to change our positions. My heart protests to end this torture, but my actions speak otherwise. I curl my arms around Ishika's waist to hold her closer, my fingers skimming over her midriff, and she doesn't move. She keeps looking at me as though she is under a spell. I'd never seen this look on her face before. The way she's staring is not a friendly stare...it's different. It's something more...much more. That expression on her face conveys feelings that are far too intense to be considered as friendship. It's evident she too can read the way our bodies are reacting to our closeness. I squeeze her tighter, pulling her to me. She doesn't mind that either. It's only when I tickle the baby soft skin of her midriff with my hot fingers that Ishika parts her lips with a gasp. My heart stops beating for a second, realising that if I don't change our position, Ishika will sense my growing arousal as she is sitting on my lap, and I cannot let that happen. So, the next instant, I help her to get up, and with an embarrassed look, she moves aside, giving me space to walk away.

I keep moving ahead, and the staff gives me space to walk as I purposely put this distance between us. Avantika is also busy dancing, leaving her seat vacant in the front row, and I immediately sit beside Mrs. Roy.

"You okay?" Mrs. Roy asks me with concern.

"No... Yes. I am. I am fine. The music is too loud behind." I lie.

“I agree.” She smiles in understanding.

I look outside the window, trying to get my breath again, but I can't switch from wanting Ishika to ignoring her just like that. To have her entire focus on my face and body a few minutes ago has rattled me. Thankfully, I handled the situation; otherwise, it would have been embarrassing for me to face Ishika again. She still considers me only a friend, and for her to know I can get aroused just by her proximity will kill everything that we still have between us. I can never let that happen.

Finally, we reach our destination, the Retreat Resort at Igatpuri, around 112 km from Mumbai, the venue for the team building activities this weekend. It takes around an hour for everyone to check into their rooms, leaving the afternoon free so we can rest after the long journey. We were to meet again after the high tea for the outdoor activities. This gives me enough time to compose myself and switch off my growing desire for Ishika again.

I take a shower, wear the hotel bathrobe and unzip my bag on the bed to grab some clothes, but what the heck! The moment I open the bag, I see woman's dresses, sexy lingerie, accessories and cosmetics. What the f*ck happened? I double-check the bag from the outside. It's the same brand and colour as mine, then why is it filled with women's clothes? I rummage through the bag, tossing a handful of the clothes onto my bed. I remember packing my bag myself. Then how did this happen? Whose bag is this? Where is my bag? I am pondering these thoughts when the doorbell rings. Irritated, I open the door only to find Ishika standing before me. Not again! One look at her, and my heart is dancing...again.

“Un-f*cking-believable,” she mutters with a sigh. “You see the sign, Roh?”

Which sign? What is she even talking about?

“God is conspiring against us to meet again and again. It's not just me; even he is trying to get us back together.”

What is she blabbering? Nothing makes sense to me. I hold my horses for now because I have another important thing to take care of. My missing bag!!

“And why are you always in a state of undress whenever we meet?” Ishika continues to inquire.

Am I? Oh yes. I tighten the knot of my robe again.

“That’s because *you* always enter at the wrong time,” I reply.

“If I hadn’t pressed your doorbell, you would have to attend the team building activities in this bathrobe, Roh. So you better not comment on *my* timing.”

“What?” I don’t understand until I look down and see my bag. Is that my bag?

“Our bags got exchanged,” she shrugs. “I can’t believe our choices are still the same.”

Now I understand what she was trying to say about God conspiring a while ago. Our bags must have been exchanged while completing the check-in formalities as they are the same brand, colour and size. But there’s a special name tag on the bottom of my bag which she would have seen and realised it was mine; hence she came to return it.

“Take your bag and give me mine.”

“Gladly,” I snatch my bag from her.

Ishika’s gaze falls on my bed, and her eyes widen in shock.

“What the hell, Roh. You opened my bag?”

She pushes me aside and rushes to my bed. Shit! I shouldn’t have scattered all her stuff on my bed like that. But I didn’t do anything on purpose. I was just trying to figure out how it happened.

“You moron,” she shouts again while grabbing her inners and dumping them in her bag. “How dare you touch my bag?”

“I didn’t know it’s not my bag to not touch it?”

She understands my point but still argues.

“But when you saw it has woman’s clothes, you should have closed it instead of removing everything and making a mess. That’s basic manners, Roh. I’d ironed all my clothes, and look at what you have done?” She screams.

Okay... she is not bothered that I saw her lingerie. All she cares about are her crumpled clothes. Now I remember she hates ironing her clothes. But so what? She can give it for ironing at the hotel.

“As if you didn’t check the contents of my bag,” I mock in return.

“I didn’t,” she screams again, leaning over my bed to collect her stuff, and no matter how much I refrain from not ogling her, I still do. The memory of her soft body landing on my lap makes my lower body twitch.

“Liar,” I snap out of those amorous thoughts to focus back on her. “Without opening the bag, you would never know it’s not yours.”

Ishika rolls her eyes and keeps packing her stuff.

“Should I help?” I ask, reaching for her perfume bottle, but she hits my arm.

“Don’t pretend, Roh. If you really want to help me, iron my damn clothes again.”

“In your dreams, Ishika. Why will I iron them?”

“Because you ruined them.”

“You can’t order your Boss to do your personal stuff.”

Ishika finally has all her stuff in the bag and zips it.

“I can when my Boss is not bothered to respect the privacy of others.”

“Oh, c’mon. Grow up, Ishika.” I tease, riling her up because she looks gorgeous whenever she argues, and I love it. Her nose and cheeks turn red, and she keeps blowing off her hair from her forehead, which blocks her vision.

Suddenly as though she recalls something, Ishika chuckles. “I... I need to grow up?” She laughs again.

Why is she laughing?

“You still wear underwear with red and white stars on it, and I need to grow up? Huh! Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.” With these parting words, she walks to the door.

Wait. What? How... how the hell did she know that? Did she check my bag? Damn!

“You dug into my bag?” I scream, following her.

Ishika stops at the door and turns around.

“You did the same with mine. We are equal now. And be warned, Roh, you will be ironing my shirt for tomorrow if you don’t want me to advertise to your staff what kind of underwear you wear. And no burning it. It’s my favourite.”

She unzips her bag, takes out a baby pink shirt and throws it at me. I instinctively catch it before it lands on my face while she walks out.

What the hell!

“Ishika, take this back. I am not ironing your shirt.” I yell at her from the door, but she doesn’t care. She waves at me before getting into the elevator and waits for the doors to shut. Ishika’s room is one floor above mine. I can’t even go behind her and shout as I am in my bathrobe, and the staff staying on this floor would hear everything. So, I fist her shirt into a ball in anger before banging the door shut, flopping down on my bed, and burying my face in the pillows.

How the hell will I face Ishika now that she knows I still wear that star-print underwear? I have loved them ever since my college days, and who says grown-up men can’t wear them anymore? Whatever! But I won’t iron her shirt, that’s for sure. No matter what.

Chapter 9

Ishika

I burst out in fits of laughter as I entered my hotel room again with my bag, which had got exchanged with Rohan's. I'd realised it when I opened the bag earlier, thinking it was mine, and the first thing I saw was a solid black men's underwear with white and red stars printed on it. The moment I saw that innerwear, I knew it had to be Rohan's. How can I forget his love for these kinds of knickers? Once during our college days, I'd been to Rohan's home for studies and had barged into his bedroom unexpectedly. The scene that greeted me was something which would always remain with me. Rohan was wearing the same printed brief, dancing without a care in the world to his favourite music. Though he tried to hide from me, my hysterical laughter at seeing his underwear somehow relaxed him. Though a bit childish, Rohan looked cute in those. But I didn't know his love for those printed briefs continued even now. I wish I could tease him some more, but never mind.

But what's ruminating in my mind since a few hours is what happened between us on the bus when I accidentally fell on him. I'm unable to comprehend the rush of excitement that cropped up between us. We had previously cuddled, hugged and even plunged over each other while teasing and fighting, but this...this was different. Having Rohan this close to me after a decade didn't reignite our friendship. Instead, it kindled a strange emotion, a fluttery feeling in my heart for him that I had never experienced before. Even though I was in only one serious relationship, it wasn't difficult for me to name that feeling. It was pure attraction—carnal desire. Where did that come from? Could I be attracted to my best friend? Isn't it morally wrong? Yes, it was totally wrong. Rohan is my friend and having such desirous thoughts about your friend is sinful. As I was sitting in Rohan's lap, I realised the feeling of attraction was mutual, but Rohan was the first one to snap out of it and shift to the front seat while I was left to complete the rest of the journey from Mumbai to Igatpuri...alone.

A message on my phone brings me out of my thoughts. It's from a friend, Darcy, checking with me if I am participating in the rally car racing in the coming weeks. She's competing and hence is flying to India soon. I shut my eyes, thinking about how to respond. Yes, I also want to participate in this private race, but I need a partner. In the last decade, after Rohan and I broke our friendship, I stopped participating in rally car races which needed a co-driver to navigate the driver on the closed public roads. Instead, I participated in drag racing and other forms of the championship where I could race solo. It's not that I don't have friends who wouldn't want to become my driving partner or navigator. There are plenty of them, but I don't want them next to me. Rohan was the only one who had that privilege. I could never give his place to anyone else in my racing journey. Rohan *was* and *is* irreplaceable. Would he participate with me? I doubt! If he is not ready to befriend me again, he will never be my co-driver in this rally car racing. I sigh, responding to Darcy that I have yet to decide on it, and I get into the shower.

Few Hours Later

Today, the outdoor team engaging activities have worn me out. We played charades, domino challenge, volleyball and treasure hunt; cool, power-packed activities with a dash of creativity, craziness and teamwork. This was much needed for the teams to open up and be comfortable and familiar with the people they would work with going forward. Though these recreational games relieved the stress of our daily life, they were surely tiring. Rohan was a part of it too, but he was in Avantika's team and was trying his best to avoid me. Post the games, we had a buffet dinner. I was sitting opposite Rohan, and Avantika beside him, trying to impose her food choices on him. She was clearly flirting, and Rohan was also playful around her. One thing I observed was he was friendly with all his staff. He didn't show an ounce of ego or attitude when conversing with them. Rohan behaved like he was a part of the team, and they were his family. That was the secret to why his employees respected him immensely, and his company's attrition rate was far less than that of others. And not to

mention, he had the cutest smile in the world, a people magnet smile which emphasised his innocence and the child within him, which was still very much alive. Rohan was always a gem with a heart of gold, and he still is. I hate that he isn't letting me be a part of his family again, unlike before. But I know we will get there.

At 11:05 pm, the doorbell of my hotel room rings. I open the door with a yawn, feeling dead tired. It's the housekeeping with a small bag in their hand.

"Ma'am, Room number 206 has sent you this."

Room 206? *Rohan*? I collect the bag and close the door. Rohan has ironed the pink shirt that I plan to wear tomorrow for the rest of the activities. I smell the shirt, and surprisingly, it smells of him. When it comes to cars, Rohan is very adventurous, but he still hasn't changed his brand of perfume which has been the same since our college days. Perfume is one thing he keeps applying every few hours. Rohan can survive without clothes but not without his perfume. No wonder he always smells so good. He's the one who has ironed my shirt and not given it to the laundry. That's why I can still smell his perfume on it as if he has cuddled it once before packing it and having it delivered to my room. My sweet Roh! He wants me back in his life, but he is just scared to admit it. I promise I'll win his heart and his friendship again in no time.

The following morning, I heard a sharp knock at my door. *Umm*. I don't want to wake up. I toss on the bed, ignoring the sound and try to sleep when the knocking gets louder. Damn hell! I get down from the bed with sleepy eyes and open the door.

"I can't believe this," Rohan sighs, leaning against the doorframe. "I knew you would be sleeping."

"Roh?" I yawn, stretching my arms. "What are you doing here at the crack of dawn?"

"Crack of dawn?" He rolls his eyes. "News Flash, Ishika Bhatia." He snaps his fingers before my face. "We are in Igatpuri for the company's team-building activities. Everyone

has already assembled downstairs except you. It's half past ten now."

"What?" I close my mouth with my palm in horror. Half past ten? "Shit, Roh, and you are telling me this now?"

I turn around and rush into my bathroom, thinking about what I could do to get ready quickly. I was wide awake and couldn't sleep till the wee hours. This happened every time I was at a new place. But I'd set my alarms for 08:00 am to wake me up on time for the activities. It looks like I put it off in my sleep.

"It's not even my responsibility to wake you up," he argues, entering my room and standing by the bathroom door, watching me brush my teeth.

"Then why are you here?" I ask, pausing my brushing.

His gaze caresses my face, going down my body, and back up. There's an unreadable expression on his face seeing me in my tiny shorts and lacy camisole. It was as though he wanted to... *No*. I am not even going to utter that word. We are friends... Oops...were friends.

"I don't want my HR to fire you."

"Wh...a...t? Why will they fire such a resourceful employee?"

Rohan grins.

"For a no-show during the team building activity," he cocks his eyebrows. "My company is very strict with the rules, Ishika. We are here for work, not a vacation for you to wake up at your convenience."

I rinse my mouth and grab a towel to wipe my face.

"You came all the way here to lecture me about your HR policies?"

"Nope. I came here to tell you that if you don't come down in the next 30 minutes, *I'll* be the one to fire you, not them."

What? Is he serious? Rohan taps his wristwatch.

"And the countdown begins now. 30 minutes."

He turns around to walk away. I run behind him towards the bathroom door.

“Roh, that’s too less. I need to take a bath and—”

“29 minutes,” he says, reaching the room door.

“Roh, c’mon...”

“28...”

“F*ck you...” I scream before shutting the bathroom door to start getting ready. It’s difficult to say if Rohan is serious about the time limit. If yes, I better not give him a chance to throw me out of his office. I am Ishika Bhatia. No one fires me but me!

Today, we were asked to assemble at the indoor auditorium of the resort. I reach there just in time, wearing the pink shirt Rohan ironed for me. The HR is splitting the teams for the game ‘*Corporate Masterchef*’. Rohan is busy talking to a group to notice me, but when he does, he looks at me in appreciation as though happy that I wore the shirt he so lovingly ironed for me. Soon he schools his expressions and, like a typical Boss, eyes his wristwatch to see if I arrived on time or not.

The announcement from HR diverts our attention, and we focus on the rules for the activity. Each team is given the ingredients to cook a special dish. We have to be innovative and creative in deciding what to cook and then plan and implement it within two hours. Cooking was never my cup of tea, but I had to participate. Rohan looked totally engrossed in the activity with his team of four, and once again, he was paired with Avantika. I wondered how he and Avantika were always in the same team. I think Avantika must have bribed HR to put her and Rohan together in all the activities.

Rohan is struggling to tie the knot of his apron at the back, which Avantika happily does for him. His eyes meet mine from a distance, and for the first time since we met again, I completely ignore him. I don’t like to see him with Avantika. According to me, they don’t look good together.

Soon the rich aroma spreads in the auditorium as each team puts up their best dishes for the judge to come and taste. Undoubtedly, Rohan's team wins. They have made scrumptious grilled paneer kababs, one of my favourites. I am tempted to taste them, knowing Rohan has grilled those from start to finish, but when I see Avantika relishing those kababs and complimenting Rohan, it kills my mood. What the hell is wrong with her? Why is she so glued to him all the time?

I take off my apron and walk out of the auditorium to breathe some fresh air. Thankfully, this was the only activity of the day, and we were all travelling back to Mumbai around 5:00 in the evening, which is two hours from now. This change, away from the humdrum of city life, and mingling between the employees through the activities, has helped us all build a good rapport with each other and rejuvenate our minds, but I am not satisfied. Rohan and Avantika? Like seriously?

I take a walk in the empty garden area at the backside of the resort. It's much quieter here and so peaceful, but my mind is disturbed by the images of Roh and Avantika together. The day I met her, something about her put me off. She might be great at her job, but she has blatantly refused to give my designs any credit and has made me rework them multiple times that I am done with her bossing me around. And she is the same with most of the team members. She acts as though she is the one who runs the show at Ronishq. Huh! I wonder how Rohan lets her get away with such behaviour. Has he never noticed it? Or maybe he has, but knowing how generous he is towards everyone, I think he is ignoring it for now. Keeping professional things apart, how can Rohan not see that she is flirting with him every single second?

Behind me, I hear the faint voice of Rohan, halting me in my steps, and I turn around. He is nearby, speaking on the phone to someone.

"You don't need an invitation, and you know it." I hear him saying, with the warmest smile on his lips. "Alright. The treat is on me, then. Once I reach Delhi, I'll make sure you lick your fingers."

Licking fingers? In what context? Is he speaking to a woman? God! I don't mean to eavesdrop, but with Rohan, I can't help but be concerned as he's a nice guy, and I want him to get the best. Now I can understand Rohan's protectiveness when I fought with him for Sunny. He, too, wished the best for me, and the irony was that I picked the worst going against him. Well! Recalling all those memories of the past again sours my mood. I turn around to leave, giving Rohan the privacy to continue his phone conversation, when he screams from behind me.

“Where is your team spirit?”

I stop again. Rohan reaches me in a few strides and stands before me, looking at my face. “Not interested in congratulating the winning team?”

“Oh, I wanted to. But only if Avantika had left you alone for a bit. She's always stuck to you like a magnet.” I snap.

Rohan gives me a confused look.

“What is your scene with Avantika, Roh?” I cross my arms, deciding to clear all my doubts upfront.

“She is the best designer in my company. You know that already.”

“Well, if you see it from my angle, she is also preparing herself to co-own your company someday.”

“What?” He gives a perplexed look.

“Don't tell me you never noticed, Roh. She looks at you like you are grilled meat, topped with her favourite sauces she can't wait to lick.”

“She's a vegetarian.” He replies coolly.

I punch his chest.

“I meant hypothetically, you idiot.”

“I'm your Boss here, Ishika. Don't call me anything apart from my name.”

“I will. What will you do?” I poke a finger at his chest.

“Ishika, don’t.” He warns.

“What... Will... You... Do?” I repeat, holding the collar of his shirt.

The next minute, Rohan leans across my face, over my ear and whispers.

“Remember. You asked for it, Ishq,” he whispers.

Ask for what? And wait, did he just call me *Ishq*? Like he did before? I feel excited and deliriously happy, but before I can share this happiness, Rohan begins to tickle my stomach.

I laugh hysterically. “Roh...don’t...”

I try to run away, but he keeps pulling me into his arms and continues to tickle me.

“You call me an idiot again, Ishq, and this is how it is going to end.”

Ishq! He called me by that name again. Damn! My body is on fire just hearing that name from his lips. Rohan doesn’t stop tickling me, and soon, I do the same to his body.

We both lose our balance and fall down on the grass, rolling over each other, taking each other’s weight while laughing and continuing the tickling assault on each other’s bodies. This is so much fun, just like old times. That’s how we were. Roh and Ishq!

After endless moments, we finally stop, feeling breathless. Rohan is straddling me, with his legs bent, knees on the ground, and his body leaning over me with his hands pinning my wrists to the grass. We both breathe heavily, trying to understand what just happened. How come we never realised how our argument turned into a laughter challenge? And then suddenly, it happens. Our laughter subsides as our eyes speak the language it has never spoken before. Rohan’s grip loosens from my wrists, and as if my body knows what he wants, I lace my fingers with his. *Tight*. Rohan’s gaze bores into me, and though the consequences terrify me somewhere deep in my heart, I don’t leave his hand, nor do I shove him off my body. His gaze lowers to my lips and lingers there for a few seconds before leaning closer and closer to my face. Like a

moth drawn to the flame, entirely consumed by this moment, my lips part for his touch, and my eyes shut on their own to live this moment. This doesn't feel sinful. On the contrary, I shiver, anticipating our next move. I wait and wait, my eyes shut with bated breath for Roh to ease this heat between our bodies, but nothing happens.

Suddenly, I feel him move, not towards me, but loosening his grip on our laced fingers. I open my eyes and see Rohan confused and mad at himself and us for getting into this precarious situation and for almost blurring the line of friendship. He pulls away completely, getting back on his feet quickly like he hated my touch, and without a word, Rohan marches towards the resort again, leaving me alone and in tears.

Tears? Why the hell am I crying? I should be glad that we didn't kiss, or else it would have been a lot more awkward between Roh and me. Yet, no matter how much I stifle my cries, my tears don't stop. Did I lose the last hope of connecting with Rohan again by whatever happened or could have happened today between us? Damn! Why is life so unfair at times?

Chapter 10

Rohan

What in the world was wrong with me? I had straddled Ishika in the open garden of the resort last evening where all my staff was present, and anyone could have seen us? To add to that, I was even going to kiss her. What was I thinking? *No*. I wasn't thinking. I was just... so much into the moment that all my rational thoughts were fried by those amorous thoughts that I still carried for Ishika deep in my heart. I really wanted to kiss her. At that time, it seemed the right thing to do, but now I realise I was so wrong. But thank God, nothing happened, and I withdrew from her on time. Yet, whatever boundaries I'd tried to establish with Ishika were broken and overrun, and I was the one to be blamed.

We started back for Mumbai soon after our '*almost-kiss*.' I hired a car to return home. I did it to avoid Ishika as much as possible, and she travelled by bus with the team. I wonder what she must have thought of me after I parted from her like that. I hope she didn't read my feelings for her at that moment because if she did, we were over before we even started anything.

I may refuse to befriend Ishika and deny that I still love her, but deep down, I know. I don't want her to leave me again. It's such a complex situation. I'm happy that she is back in my life, but I don't know what to do now. Getting involved with Ishika in any way can break me if she walks out on me in the future. I can't live in perpetual fear of losing her. That's one of the reasons I am still keeping my distance from her and maintaining that nothing is possible between us again, not even friendship. But I can't stop caring about her, *can I?*

In the past, I have done every single thing for Ishika without her asking me to do it. And nothing has changed now. Rohan Oberoi, who never even pressed his own clothes, ironed her shirt during our stay in Igatpuri because my heart wanted to. I could have easily given it to the laundry and got it ironed, but I didn't. I could have also ignored my team discussing Ishika's

delay in arriving for the indoor activities, but I didn't want my staff to bad mouth her and give her a warning for not being punctual. No one has the right to say anything about my Ishika because seeing her hurt... pains me. So, I rushed to help her. I knew Ishika always had trouble sleeping in new places. So I guessed she must have slept only in the wee hours of the morning. That's why I had personally gone to her room to call her downstairs, and as expected, she woke up on hearing my doorbell. Thankfully she didn't get any warning from HR, which was a relief. During the entire Corporate MasterChef activity, Ishika had her eyes on me as I'd chosen to grill her favourite Paneer Kebabs, hoping she might get to taste them, but she never came to me. Instead, seeing me with Avantika angered her, and she walked out of there. I'd noticed she hated seeing me with Avantika, but I kept her in my team for every activity to ward off Ishika. But when she walked out of the auditorium, I had to check on her.

Vidhi called just that moment, and I went to the garden to talk to her. She constantly kept a tab on me since she learned that Ishika and I were working together. And though she tried her best to make me talk about my feelings, I never revealed anything to her. My feelings were my own. No one needed to know about the grief I was masking all these years, and after Ishika's return, those deep-rooted feelings for her had begun to resurface.

Sitting in my office, I smile, recalling how Ishika cornered me in the garden, wanting to know the scene between Avantika and me. She called me an idiot, just like she used to call me during our college days whenever we argued. This instigated me to show her my superiority. It made me forget everything, and I blurred the line I'd drawn between us and began to tickle her even though I knew she was very sensitive to it. I called her '*Ishq*' as I did in the past, which made her squeal and squirm in delight, and I was instantly aroused and wanted... her. One thing led to the other, and we ended up rolling on the ground, straddling, panting, laughing and then... we were about to kiss. F*ck! Even the thought of it makes me hard and twitch in anticipation. It's completely unbecoming, considering I am at the office and trying *hard* to shift my focus

back to work. *Again hard?* What the heck is *hard*... I mean... wrong with me? I shift in my chair in frustration, pushing the laptop away and picking up the papers before me.

The point is, Ishika really hated Avantika. I could read it on her face and her expressions every time she talked about her, which was fair considering Avantika was giving her a tough time by rejecting all her designs. I thought Ishika's designs were beautiful. They had a soul, and every piece of jewellery spoke to you. This was exactly what I was looking for in our designs, something that made my brand, Ronishq, stand out. Just like this sketch of a ring I am admiring, the one that Ishika designed for the new bridal collection in crystal. It's a 14K Rose Gold, 2 Carat Oval Vintage ring with a pink Sapphire stone at the centre. The sketch is breathtakingly beautiful, and I'm surprised that Avantika rejected it. This is a matter of concern if Avantika is making the wrong decisions for the company based on personal rivalry. I think it's time I intervene and...

The door opens with a bang, and Ishika barges inside with fury written all over her face. My secretary, Mrs. Roy, is right behind her.

"Ishika, you are not allowed to be here. Sir is busy," Mrs. Roy says, giving me an apologetic look at not being able to stop Ishika. I give her a reassuring nod and glance at Ishika. Looking at her, I know she will not leave the cabin until she speaks to me.

Why is she so pissed? Oh damn! Is it about our almost kiss? I hope not. I don't want to discuss it ever, especially in the office.

"With all due respect, Mr. Oberoi, we need to talk."

I can tell from Ishika's tone that her patience has worn out. Ignoring her now will only complicate things, and I don't want her to blurt out our personal moments before my secretary.

"It's okay, Mrs. Roy. I'll handle this. You may leave."

Mrs. Roy sighs and walks out of my cabin, leaving Ishika and me alone. Ishika looked displeased and mad enough to

chew me out. I think I should speak up first and clarify that I didn't mean to almost kiss her. It's a blatant lie, but it is better than letting her in on the truth.

"Look, Ishika. I—" I begin.

"Don't say a damn word, Roh," she snaps, walking behind my desk and turning my chair to make me face her. With Ishika pinning me with her hands on the handrest of my chair, I couldn't help but swallow nervously. Only she had the audacity to barge into my cabin and cage me like this, making me feel scared and nervous.

"What the hell does she think of herself?" she snarls.

She? Who she? And... wait. This isn't about me... but someone else?

Ishika leans on my chair angrily, coming face-to-face with me. God save me!

"I'm giving her my best designs, reworking her silly suggestion every time, yet she's not convinced? Each time, she spouts a slew of excuses. At times she says my designs are not up to the standards set by Ronishq, and other times she says they are too simplistic. And when these excuses fail, she says they are too flashy. Like seriously? When I try to reason with her, she snootily reminds me that her decision is final because *you*..." Ishika presses her finger against my chest, leaning even closer. I seriously need some help here because if she keeps getting closer, I'm going to end up zipping her lips with mine. Where in the world is God? "...*you*, Rohan Oberoi, has bestowed that power upon her. Which is fine. Absolutely fine. But why in the world is she misusing those rights? My designs are bloody fantastic, and any other jewellery firm would be lucky to have them. But Avantika... She is questioning my capability, experience and intelligence. What is wrong with her?"

She says all this in one breath and pauses, glaring at me, waiting for my response. *Okay. Breathe, Rohan. Breathe.* I blow out my breath as she stands in front of me.

"Are you PMSing?" I ask, adjusting my tie.

Ishika opens her mouth to say something, then shuts it and leans back. “What?” she scoffs.

She definitely is! I clear my throat before repeating my question.

“Are you on your period, Ishika, as that’s the only time of the month when your mood metre goes from 0 to 100 in a fraction of a second for every little thing that comes your way?”

She folds her arms stubbornly.

“This has nothing to do with my PMSing. This is not a little thing, Roh. It’s a serious issue which you will have to resolve right now. You either need to look into the designs yourself or fire Avantika for misusing her power.”

“Or...” I get up from my revolving chair and straighten the lapels of my suit. “I should fire you for barging into your Boss’s cabin without his permission and bulldozing him as if he is your best friend.”

“Ughh,” Ishika screams. “You...” she fists her fingers, and I know she won’t hesitate to hit me if I mess up anymore. “You know what, Roh?” she continues. “To hell with you and your Avantika. I’ve a fourth option; to resign from this stupid role where my work is not even considered and valued. So, Roh, I’m quitting.”

Oh, oh! Looks like she’s taken my words seriously. Ishika turns around to leave, but I grab her wrists and pull her back to me.

“Listen.”

“Leave me, Roh. I’m in no mood to argue anymore.”

“Okay, just hear me out.”

“No, I am done.” She struggles to free herself, but I keep holding her to me, and she finally gives up. “You know, despite the tiresome journey back to Mumbai yesterday, I spent half the night reworking and designing the jewellery based on her inputs. When I showed them to Avantika this morning, she didn’t even blink and outright rejected them all

over again. I am done, Roh. I am so done. This is not what I signed up for. Moreover, I am starving. I've got the mother of all cramps and am exhausted. The last thing I want to hear is your Avantika's tantrums."

"This is the second time you are implying Avantika as *mine*. Which she is clearly not." I snap.

That relaxes her for now. Ishika looks at me, and I make her sit on the couch, but stubborn as she is, she stands up again to leave.

"I better get going."

"Sit," I shout. I never did that before, but today, I have to raise my voice to get her to listen to me.

I walk back to my desk and dial someone.

"Come into my cabin right now." I bark before I bang the phone on the receiver and loosen my tie. It's high time I take these matters into my own hands.

Ishika is still staring at me as I pick up the water bottle and pass it to her.

"Drink."

"I feel bloated as it is to have more water. So, no, thanks."

I roll my eyes and put the water bottle away. There's a knock on the door, and Avantika steps in. She gives me a broad smile, but the moment she sees Ishika in the room, her smile turns sour.

"You called me Rohan?" Avantika asks, getting inside.

"What is this?" I show her the sample sketches that Ishika was talking about, which Avantika rejected.

"These?" She takes them from my hands and shrugs. "I rejected them."

"Why?"

"Why?" she asks with sarcasm. "Because they are not good, Rohan. They have no substance and add no value to our brand."

“Oh really, Avantika?” I argue. “If this is what you have rejected today, I suggest you visit an Optometrist. Your vision and our brand’s vision are no longer in sync.”

Her face hardens as I say this, and she turns to Ishika.

“It’s not even two weeks since you joined, and you’ve already started complaining about me?”

“Huh,” Ishika grimaced, taking a step towards Avantika. “I’m here to work, not to talk ill about anyone, but your stupid ego is not letting me do my job. I don’t know why you are doing this, Avantika. Maybe everyone else is fine with your style of working, but I am not. If you don’t bother to look at my work and reject them without giving a valid reason, I have no other option but to flag this with the real boss, and that’s Mr. Oberoi.”

Avantika is about to argue when I interrupt.

“It’s not just Ishika. Many others have given me the same feedback about you, Avantika. I have ignored it so far, but not anymore. I have personally looked over Ishika’s designs, and they are great. I approve of them. Next time you reject any design, I want a detailed report on why you did so. Is that clear?”

Avantika grits her teeth, clearly unhappy with the turn of events, but nods in agreement.

“Yes.”

“And one more thing. From now on, Ishika will lead the Bridal collection. You both will have to work together as the lead designers and ensure that we get the best crystal jewellery collection out in the market, which none of our competitors has even thought of.”

Ishika is startled by my decision, and Avantika is clearly unhappy. But who cares?

“We have to launch the Bridal collection in the next quarter. So not wasting any more time, let’s get the designs ready for manufacturing. I need the 3D rendering of Ishika’s designs by tomorrow.”

Ishika's face lights up, whereas Avantika is still trying to process that she will have to work with Ishika from hereon.

“Now, you may leave.”

Avantika is the first to leave my cabin, but Ishika stays back. I wonder why?

“Anything else, Miss Bhatia?”

“Miss Bhatia, huh?” Ishika teases. “But yesterday you called me Ishq,” she reminds me, and my body heats up again at the mention of our ‘*almost kiss*.’

“That's because you called me an idiot.”

“You acted like one.” She grins. “Not anymore, though. I thought you and Avantika had something going between you two. But looks like it's just one-sided.”

One-sided? That one word had my whole life wrapped around it. My love for Ishika had always been one-sided. And she never realised. She never saw. She never felt... Just like the present, where she is oblivious to my fear of getting attached to her again, only because of my one-sided foolish love.

“I've work to do, Ishika. Please leave.” I pretend to read some papers on my desk.

“Alright, Boss. Please tell my friend, Roh, I'll be waiting for him at the parking lot sharp at 06:00 pm today.”

I put the papers down and look at her, huffing in annoyance.

“I don't think I know your friend. I am sorry, but I can't pass on your message to him.”

She gives me a weak smile.

“He is in there, Mr. Oberoi.” She points to my heart. “And I know he's already got my message. So, whether you like it or not, I know he will come.”

“Keep waiting; he won't,” I murmur, challenging her half-heartedly.

She smiles and leaves my cabin.

Why do I have a feeling she has already won this challenge? Why does love always make me lose? I've lost everything that I loved and cared about in my life. To begin with, my mom, my passion for starting an automobile company, manufacturing the best racing cars in the world and then... Ishika. The only woman I'd trusted as a friend, the only woman I wanted as my soulmate, the only woman I dared to love.

Gosh! I hate this whiny and sulky Roh! I want to be the Rohan Oberoi who likes to have fun, makes others laugh and lives his life like there is no tomorrow. But ever since Ishika has returned, that *full-of-life* Rohan has gone into hibernation, and this broken-hearted, sullen Roh has taken his place. God help me!

Chapter 11

Ishika

Rohan will come. I know he will. My Roh can never make me wait for long. Leaning against my swanky car, I check my watch for the umpteenth time. It is half past six. I'd told Roh I would be waiting for him, and he knows how I hated him being late. Whenever we planned to watch a movie in the theatre and missed the beginning of the movie because of Rohan's delay, I wouldn't talk to him for hours, nor would I share my popcorn with him until he apologised and promised to buy me my favourite stilettos. I loved wearing high heels and had a closet full of my favourite babies from the most famous brands across the world. If he liked pushing me to my limit, I, too, played hard to get. It was fun. *We... together... were fun.* I had missed him so much in the past decade. Did Rohan miss me equally? I don't think he did. He's been a busy man, managing his father's business, maintaining his friendship with Vansh and Taani, and now, with their better halves. I'm positive Rohan would have had a chain of girlfriends in the last decade to satisfy him as well, and why not? He deserved to enjoy every bit of his life. But even then, I find something amiss. It's like he is pretending to everyone that his life is perfect, but it's not. Is it true? Or is it just a figment of my imagination?

I check my watch again. It's 06:45 pm now.

"Rohan is always late," I mutter to myself as I pace in the parking lot. "This is something that hasn't changed in a decade. If I had been waiting for God for so long, even he would have emerged by now, knowing how much I wanted to meet him. Is Rohan ignoring me? What if he doesn't come? He knows very well that I am waiting for him here. What if things are never the same between us again? What if...? I know I'm overthinking the possibilities. Why would he give his precious time to me when I was the one to break off our friendship in the past? *Because he still cares for me?* Damn! These thoughts are making me crazy, and I am pondering how long do I wait here before heading back home. Forget the wait;

the curiosity to know if he would come to meet me is killing me, which is worse than my stomach cramps. Ideally, I should have been at home, relaxing on my bed and watching my favourite Fast and Furious series with a tub of chocolate ice cream and pizzas for dinner. Instead, here I am... at the parking lot, waiting for my best friend to show up so I can spend some time with him.

Maybe Rohan *is* busy. I didn't think about it before asking him to meet me here. But I was always his first priority, so it never occurred to me. *You were his priority...in the past, Ishika; not now.* My subconscious mind reminds me. Why would he prioritise me now? He had said so himself a few days back. He is unwilling to even acknowledge our friendship, so the thought of me taking precedence over anything and everything is out of the question.

Honestly speaking, I shouldn't have asked him to meet me, considering what happened between us in Igatpuri or what could have happened between us there, but thankfully it didn't because of Rohan's timely withdrawal. I should maintain my distance from him after that incident, but I don't want to. Rohan and I were having so much fun, like old times at the resort, that we were almost going to blur the lines of our friendship by kissing each other. The flashes of that scene kept zooming in my head every now and then, but I ignored it just like Rohan did. That's the best for now. We have enough issues to sort between us to add another complicated one to the list.

"I can't believe I'm still waiting for him. I've put my self-esteem on the line several times since we met and am pursuing Rohan to let bygones be bygones, but that's it. If he doesn't show up now, all bets are off, and I'll never beg him to be my friend again. What does he think of himself? This is so not me." I curb my mounting frustration. And then... he appears, and all my rage dissipates the moment I see him.

Rohan saunters towards me in his stylish white buttoned-down shirt and navy-blue suit. His impressive physique and confident walk steal my breath away. Rohan was always good-looking, but this current version is super sexy and extremely

easy on the eyes. I've never been this happy seeing him as I'm now. But my happiness is short-lived as Rohan turns towards his parked car, and his driver opens the backseat door for him. He sees me but doesn't acknowledge me. My temper soars, but I don't go behind him this time, begging him to spend time with me. If he doesn't want to go out with me, I'll have to accept that. Rohan keeps his laptop bag in the car, and when I think he is going to sit inside, he shuts his car door and talks to his driver. My heartbeat quickens. He is coming with me. I just know it. I pump my hands in the air and do a happy dance. Rohan walks up to me and meets my eyes, and his unwavering gaze brings back the warm fuzzy feeling that I always felt when we were together.

"Three things before you do your victory dance," Roh says on seeing me dance. "One, I'm coming along with you tonight as a token of gratitude for your mind-blowing designs for our new collection."

Liar. But I nod in acceptance.

"Two, don't be under the impression that we are friends again. Not yet. And three..." He glances behind me, and a sinister smile appears on his face. "*I'll drive that kicka** baby of yours.*"

He wants to drive my car? Seriously! I am more than willing to let him.

"Keys," he demands, leaving me speechless again because this is really happening.

Roh and I are going out together. Like old times. I hand over the keys to him and Rohan remotely auto-starts the engine.

"Now get inside before I change my mind," he says, reaching for the driver's seat. I still see, not so much of a gentleman to open the passenger door for his woman, but never mind. I don't want him to behave gentlemanly with me. I am his best friend. I've seen his highs and lows, have seen him clothed and in his printed briefs, have seen him laughing like a hyena and crying like a baby, and have heard him rant and felt his silence too. We have been through everything. But

that was all in the past. Now, I promise to create more new memories with the irreplaceable guy in my life. My Roh!

As I get in and strap myself, Rohan checks out the cool features of my car, looking impressed and waiting to speed off.

“Where to?” he asks, sliding his palms over the steering wheel, and starting our drive.

“Infiniti Mall.”

“What?” He hits the brakes, bringing the car to a screeching halt. “Mall? You want to go shopping?”

I laugh at his expected ballistic reaction.

“I have a few things to pick up.”

“Sorry, no shopping tonight. I’m not going to be your spot boy again if that’s what you have invited me for.”

“Roh, c’mon,” I hit his arm. “I promise I won’t take much of your time. And after that, we are hitting the pub to let loose. Like old times. What say?”

He rolls his eyes, grips the steering wheel and drives again. Yeah! I think he likes the idea. My Rohan is back. I want to scream in joy, but before that, I quickly take out my phone, lean closer to him and open the camera to take a selfie. Rohan looks into the camera and sticks out his tongue as if disinterested in the picture. Seeing him do that, I also stick out my tongue, posing like him and click the picture. I look at it, and it has come out good. Really good.

“What’s this for? To capture my mood metre before and after shopping with you?” he asks.

I giggle after saving the picture and sending it to his number.

“That’s going to be my wallpaper for now, and you can also change your boring wallpaper.”

“No, thanks. I don’t need a constant reminder of you whenever I unlock my phone screen.”

Ouch! That hurt. As Rohan realises his slip, he slows down the car, rolls his eyes and smiles goofily at me, making me

laugh.

“Stop being a drama queen.” He waggles his eyebrows, and I laugh.

How I missed this. Feeling liberated. Being with him. Being so happy once again!

Rohan

The moment I reached the parking lot of my office, I knew I was risking my heart again by agreeing to spend the evening with Ishika. I was never impulsive and reckless with my decisions, but when it came to Ishika, I always thought with my heart rather than my head. How could I turn down the offer to be with her? Thankfully, we both shied away from discussing the elephant in the room – *our thoughts about that almost kiss*. Hoping this matter would never come up in the future, I decided to spend the evening with Ishika, just like old times. Ishika's laughter roared more than the revving engine of her swanky car as we drove to the mall. She said she wanted to buy a few things, which meant she had a ready list, and I would soon go insane.

The mall is packed even on a Monday. Ishika and I first walk into the supermarket, where she rushes to the pharmacy section to grab a few over-the-counter painkillers for her stomach cramps. I wish I could do something to relieve her pain as I used to in the past, like helping her relax on the bed or couch, bringing a hot water bag to ease her cramps and giving her a foot massage. I recall how much she loves this kind of pampering during those days of the month. But now, all I do is keep staring at her as she chooses the sanitary pads from a wide range on display, which all look the same to me. As far as I know, she's a woman who loves trying new stuff, and I won't be surprised if she tries a different brand every month just to get a feel of it.

Our next stop is the chocolate section, where she picks a handful of dark chocolate bars. Again, something she craves and likes to devour at this time of the month. I remember every little thing about her, making me realise that I never really let her go from my life. She was always there in my heart, in the form of happy memories. I silently follow Ishika everywhere, letting her shop until she tries to buy a few ready-to-eat meal packets.

“Whoa. You are not taking those.” I stop her.

“Why? They’re my meals, Roh. What will I eat if not these?”

“You eat *this* to survive?” I scrunch my brows.

“Most of the time, yes. Why?”

“Why?” I laugh in sarcasm. “Ishika, these foods have preservatives, which harm your health at some point.”

“I’ve been surviving on these for years. Do I look unhealthy to you? Look at me, Roh.”

She spins around, flaunting her slim body. “What do you think?”

“Nope. Starving is better than eating this junk.”

I hold her hand and drag her away from that section.

“But what will I eat then?”

“Why don’t you keep a cook who can prepare healthy meals for you?”

“I tried, but don’t get along with them for long.”

“Then learn to cook a few basic recipes that can fill your stomach.”

“You are talking like my father now. He always tells me to learn cooking so my future husband will not have to starve.”

“He has a point.”

I push the trolley toward the billing counter, patiently waiting for our turn.

“What point, Roh? Why do only women have to learn cooking? Can’t a man cook for his wife too?”

“Then marry a chef. That way, he won’t starve, and you won’t have to learn cooking.”

She grins at me and pats my back.

“Now that’s great advice. Do you have a handsome young chef in your social circle?”

“None. And even if I had one, I would never suggest him to marry you.”

“Why?” she gasps.

Because you are mine. I wish I could say that aloud. I huff before meeting her curious eyes.

“Roh, tell me. Why wouldn’t you allow him to propose to me?”

“Because he’ll be interested in food sex and food play, and I know you don’t like either of those.”

Her cheeks go fiery red as though she’s visualising the scenario. I am too, but with *me* doing those things to Ishika. I know her preferences quite well. We used to discuss anything and everything when we were together in college. And during one such debate, Ishika had openly voiced her dislike towards the idea of food foreplay.

“Well remembered, Roh.” Ishika smiles impressively. “But since you have opened up this topic, I have to ask, have you ever tried it? Food sex or food foreplay?”

I go blank for a second.

“I’m not discussing my sex life with you.”

She frowns.

We are next. Before I take out my wallet, Ishika scans the QR code and pays the bill.

“Grow up, Roh. We are living in the UPI age now. No more cash or cards.” Ishika teases.

We collect the bags from the counter and walk out. And, of course, it’s me holding all her shopping bags. A gentleman would always do that.

“Oh, please,” I say as we step out. “I don’t go shopping as frequently as you do.”

“Right, you only do car shopping and sign cheques to buy them. No UPI payment there, obviously.”

She is right. Fancy cars lure me into buying them. They always did.

Ishika drags me to the food court as we both are hungry. We order burgers, a milkshake and a coke for Ishika and occupy the empty seat near the floor-to-ceiling glass window with a panoramic view of Mumbai city.

“How’s your dad?” I ask.

“Good. Ageing. And yours?”

“Too good. Not ageing. Touchwood.”

Ishika laughs.

“I think it runs in the family genes. You still look the same to me, Roh, just like you did a decade ago. And being like this with you makes me feel like nothing has ever changed between us. We are still the same.”

I don’t reply and keep stirring my chocolate milkshake when a message beeps on my phone. I check it quickly and reply back with a grin. I put the phone away and look up to find Ishika staring at me curiously.

“Girlfriend?”

“Not again,” I roll my eyes. “Why are you so obsessed with knowing about the women in my life?”

“Just curious,” she shrugs. “And did you say women as in plural, and not ‘woman’. What does that mean?” She asks with a frown.

She will keep on hounding me until she knows about my relationship status. So, I give her my honest reply.

“I’m single, and the message right now was Vidhi’s, Vansh’s wife. She is like my baby sister.”

Ishika’s smile comes back.

“It’s hard to believe you are single.” She replies with visible relief on her face, which I don’t understand.

“What about you?”

“Single. Not ready enough to mingle.” She mutters, sipping her coke.

Her statement relaxes me, though the ‘not interested in mingling’ part makes me uncomfortable.

“Why? Still stuck on Sunny?”

“Oh, please. He wasn’t worth my time, and that too for a decade? No way. I’m happy being single and in control of myself. I don’t think relationships are my cup of tea. I am fine by myself.”

“Like me,” I reply almost instantly.

She raises her coke and makes me raise the milkshake glass to toast.

“For singlehood.”

I swallow as she clinks our glasses, but do I have a choice other than to repeat what she just said?

“For singlehood,” I repeat, gulping the entire glass of milkshake at one go.

If only she knew I wasn’t exactly single. In my head, I had been dating her for a decade. She ruled my kingdom like a queen in my heart, and we already had a dozen kids in my dreams. I wish I could tell her!

Chapter 12

Rohan

We cancelled our plans of pubbing tonight as my secretary reminded me of a call with a dealer in Brazil from whom we imported pale blue Topaz gemstone. There was a slight delay in the delivery, which could impact the upcoming collection that Ronishq had planned for this year. After a long chase, the call was scheduled for today, and I couldn't take the risk of rescheduling it. So, we drove back home after shopping. Contrary to what I thought, it was an evening well spent.

I drop her bags in her apartment and turn to leave when Ishika stops me.

“Hey, I forgot to tell you this. There's a rally car race in Nashik in two weeks. It's on the weekend, and I... I am planning to participate.” Her excitement was palpable.

Rally car races? I know she is still very much into racing, but wouldn't she need a navigator for these kinds of races? Before I can ask her about it, she shocks me with her next question.

“Would you be my co-driver, Roh?”

Did she just ask me that? Ishika holds my hand.

“I don't trust anyone else to be my co-driver except you. All these years, I raced solo, but this one is special. I've waited for this kind of thrill, this rally racing for years and since it's in Nashik, I don't want to miss it. And you are the only one I trust to navigate me and help me win this race, Roh. Just think about it. It will be fun. You know... just like old times? What say?”

I am speechless, and suddenly my mind is filled with negative thoughts. All her attempts to befriend me again were for this? For this race? No. I... I don't know. The way it's all unfolding now makes me suspicious. But my heart says she is just trying her luck by convincing me to participate with her. This has nothing to do with she rekindling our old friendship.

But what if I am wrong? What if Ishika wants to hit two birds with one stone? What if she wants to win both her friend and her chance to participate in that rally racing? Now, all her attempts to convince me makes sense. Damn! How did I not think about this before? I may be judging her unfairly, but knowing she can be selfish when it comes to her racing obsession, I need to be wiser in dealing with this version 2.0 of Ishika Bhatia.

“Roh, say something,” she tugs my arm, and I immediately shove her hand.

“Good night, Ishika.”

She frowns at me on hearing my terse reply.

“Still, Ishika? I thought now you’ll call me ‘*Ishq*’ like before, at least when we are alone.”

I give her a half smile.

“Nothing has changed between us. I made that clear before I agreed to spend the evening with you.”

She clenches her jaw.

“Don’t give me that bullsh*t excuse about being grateful for my designs, Roh. I know you wanted to spend time with me as much as I did with you.”

“Think whatever you like. No one is stopping you.”

I try to leave, but she blocks my way.

“You care for me. You can’t see me hurt. It’s on your face, Roh. Whom are you fooling?”

Is that all she can see on my face? Can’t she see my *love*?

“Look, I know I hurt you in the past, and I apologise for that. I even told you sorry the other day when we were at the gym, but you were busy listening to music on your AirPods when I apologised. What else do you want me to do, Roh?”

“Nothing,” I shrug. “I want you to do nothing, Ishika. And regarding your racing interest, I don’t share the same anymore. You can find another navigator who can help you win the race. I am not interested in it anymore.”

Saying that, I walk out of the door feeling much more dejected than before. Did she try to be friendly with me only for this upcoming race? I don't want to believe it and I hope that's not true.

After the call with the dealer, I ponder over the past. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with Ishika today, except when she persuaded me to be her co-driver for the upcoming race, making her appear quite self-centred.

I know Ishika is not a selfish person, but her total disregard for someone, her nonchalant attitude and her behaviour towards certain situations make her appear arrogant and self-absorbed, and she is often misjudged by people. I was also one of those people. But after getting to know her, I knew differently. It wasn't her fault, as Ishika had been raised that way. Her need to compete and win has been ingrained in her ever since her childhood. Raised by a single parent, her father was always travelling for his business, and Ishika never got maternal love and stability. She was deprived of the soft and gentle upbringing that a mother gave to a child and became brash, boyish and competitive in everything she did. At the age of making friends and learning to share, Ishika enrolled herself in learning the basics of racing and the spirit to win every challenge life threw at her became Ishika's only motto. She became a sore loser and could not stand to be on the losing side ever. Even though she had her dad, whom she loved very much, she grew up on her own, studying in different cities and never made any long-term friends.

I think she's still the same. She finds it difficult to connect to people and make friends. Even with her coworkers, Ishika has always avoided disclosing too much about her personal life. She doesn't flaunt her richness, nor does she belittle others, but her strong personality and manipulative ways of tweaking things to her liking, often get her in the wrong books of people, and they judge her harshly. When we first met in college, she came off as a rich, pampered brat who was full of herself. But somehow, with me, she could connect with her true self, something I think she herself wasn't aware of. But I

understood her. I always knew once she gets attached to and gives her heart to someone, she would be loyal and would go to any lengths to stick to that person throughout her life. But at that age, mistakes happened, and she fell for someone who was only using her, thereby severing every tie with me. Forever!

As I lie on my bed, I scroll through the unread messages on my phone and see our selfie, which Ishika clicked in the car with our tongues sticking out. I remember Ishika setting this picture as her phone wallpaper right then. I do it now but again change it to the previous one because I am scared. It's not only about the race she suddenly wanted me to navigate, but I'm also sceptical if she will ever see me more than a friend. Ishika is single, which gives me some hope, but she also said she wasn't ready for a relationship again. Until I am sure she at least has some feelings of love for me, I am not going to allow my heart to have false hopes. I envelop my phone to my heart before shutting my eyes. I wish it was Ishika in my arms and not her picture. Will that day ever come?

The next morning, when I reach the parking lot of my residence to drive to work, Ishika is already standing near my car. She looks calm, but the smile on her face warns me of something else.

“Hi,” she blocks my way as I try to get to the driver's seat.

I was going to drive today as my driver was on leave due to a family emergency.

“Hello,” I reply casually, not looking into her mischievous eyes. She's definitely up to something. “Move. I'm getting late for work.”

“I am heading for the office too. We can go together.”

“No, thanks. I can drive on my own.”

“I knew it.” She sighs. “Great then. Go ahead.”

She steps away and folds her arms at the front, waiting for me to drive away. Alright! That's new. Is she letting me go? Without any argument? Something is definitely fishy, but I

curb my curiosity for now and get into the driver's seat. The moment I start the engine, I know what the problem is. Ishika grins at me from afar, and it doubles my curiosity. I get down from the car and realise both the back tyres of my car are punctured. What the heck! Ishika laughs behind me.

“What have you done to my car, Ishq?” I scream at her in anger.

“What else was I supposed to do?” She shrugs. “I knew you would come up with a thousand excuses and not drive with me to work.”

“Of course, I won't go with you,” I yell back. “We work together now. We have a professional code, and you can't break it.”

“Who is denying that? All I am saying is we can travel together. Let's carpool. Why waste fuel, pollute the environment and jam the traffic by driving separately when our destination is the same?”

“Ishq—” I groan in frustration, but she just winks at me, gets her fancy car and parks it at my feet.

“Get inside, Roh. You don't have a choice. Your meeting is in half an hour. There's no time to wait for a cab.”

Curbing my anger, I think for a few seconds. She is right. I can't ask Mrs. Roy to reschedule this meeting. Reaching the office is my top priority, but I must confess it's very flattering to see the extent Ishika is willing to go to give me attention and spend time with me. She's a daredevil who knows how to turn things in her favour, even if she has to use her wicked ways, and I effing love her for that. I school my expression and pretend to be annoyed by her actions, but nevertheless, I get inside the passenger seat of her car.

“You want to drive this baby?” she teases, sliding her palms over the steering wheel.

“Shut up and drive. If I'm delayed for the meeting even by one second, I am going to—”

“If I get you there ten minutes before the meeting, what will you give me?” she challenges.

“Impossible. The traffic will be worse at this hour, Ishika. You better drive now.”

“What will you give me, Roh?” she eyes me confidently.

I can give you my heart. I already have. But I don't say that aloud.

“Will you take me to the pub tonight?” she demands.

“No.”

She raises her hands in the air. “Fine then. I am not driving you for free.”

“What do you mean not driving me for free? You punctured my car.”

“Did you see me puncturing it? Where's the proof?”

She is getting on my nerves now. I check my watch. I'm so damn late that I cannot even think of booking another cab.

“Fine. I'll take you to the pub tonight. Happy? Just drive now.”

Her satisfied smile rejoices my heart.

“Mr. Rohan Oberoi, keep your eyes open and watch me drive.” She winks at me before wearing her black cat-eye sunglasses and starts the engine.

I'm glued to my seat for the next 18 minutes, watching Ishika take the shortest route, from the dingy markets to the busiest lanes, paving the way for us. As a resident of Mumbai, she is well-versed with the city's roads and drives so smoothly that I can't help but smile.

Ishika smirks in victory as she parks the car in the basement of our office building. Seeing her in her element makes me want to unstrap us, pull her on my lap and kiss her fervently to appreciate her bada*s driving skills. The woman is an enigma. I am so enamoured with everything Ishika does that it is becoming difficult for me to not let her in my heart... again.

“We reached 11 minutes before your meeting. I won.” She does a happy dance on her seat, something I always loved to see whenever she was excited.

“Thanks for the drive.” I unbuckle myself and get down. Ishika also gets down and follows me.

“So, what time are we going to the pub?”

“Pub?” I pretend to be oblivious. She instantly scurries before me and blocks my way.

“It was decided that if I get you here on time, you will take me pubbing tonight.”

I grin, giving her no signs of agreeing to it.

Her jaw drops.

“Roh, you promised.”

“Did I? Where’s the proof?” I repeat the same words that she used with me a while ago. Ishika punches my chest softly, holds the lapels of my suit and pulls me to her.

“Don’t act smart with me. We are going pubbing tonight, and that’s final.”

“I can’t.” I grab her wrists and free them from me. “I have a date tonight. And I’ll not miss it for anything. Not even you.”

“Date?” She looks displeased. “But you said you are single, Roh.”

“I am single! But who said I don’t indulge in casual flings? I do have needs, you know.”

Ishika clenches her jaw.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“You don’t believe me?” I huff. “Fine. Sky Lounge pub at 09:00 pm sharp. That’s where I am meeting my date tonight. You can come and see us. And please, don’t even think of sabotaging my date because no matter what, I’m going to enjoy it to my fullest.”

Ishika stares at me, disappointed.

“Your date is more important to you than your best friend?” she tries to convince me one last time. It’s on her face that she wants me to spend time with her and no one else.

I wish that too. But I have to put some distance between us until I'm sure of her intentions and she is clear about her feelings for me.

“C'mon, Ishika. You can't lock me to your friendship like this. We have every right to fall in love with someone else, and as friends, we must respect each other's choices. That's what you said to me once, remember? The day you chose Sunny over me?”

Ishika grits her teeth but doesn't say a word.

“It's time for my meeting. Excuse me.”

And I leave. I hate to do this, but I have to protect myself from heartbreak again or give it what it always yearned for... my Ishika. *My Ishq!*

I take out my phone and dial my father, Rakesh Oberoi. He has been in Abu Dhabi for the past two months, drawing contracts with our new crystal dealers for expansion.

“How are you, Dad?” I speak as I enter the elevator.

“Rohan? Is it really you or your doppelganger?” He teases, knowing I was ignoring his calls recently.

“It's your son, Dad, not his duplicate. And if you need proof, check your right thigh; you have a birthmark there, and I'm still unsure if it's an actual birthmark or mom's love mark before she left.”

“You rascal,” Dad exclaims. “Only my son would tease me so openly.”

I laugh with him.

“What's up? All okay with Ronishq?” He asks.

“Yeah. Everything is in control. Hmm...Dad... I was thinking that maybe I should meet Pooja.”

Pooja was dad's friend's daughter. Two years younger than me, Pooja was a socialite, and Dad wanted me to meet her and see if we clicked together. He was anxiously waiting to see me married as my best friends, Vansh and Taani, had also settled down in life. He tried his best to set me up with his friend's

daughters, but I always escaped meeting them alone except at the parties that I attended with Dad and had no way to escape. I have already met Pooja at a party, and she is good. Good enough to keep Ishika on the edge if I want to test her true feelings for me. I know it's wrong to give Pooja false hopes of anything happening between us in future, so I'm going to tell her beforehand that we'll be meeting only as friends and nothing more. Marriage is not on my cards; even if it is, it will only be with Ishika. So why bother playing with other woman's feelings?

“Rohan?” Dad's voice breaks my trance. “Do you seriously want to meet Pooja?”

“Yes, just as a friend, Dad. Don't expect anything out of it. Give me her number. I will call her up and meet her for dinner tonight.”

Dad sounds happy, and we chat about work. I get Pooja's number from him, mentally making a note to call her and speak to her about meeting me tonight. I know Ishika will come to the pub to watch Pooja and me together. Ishika has never seen me with other women. It was always us when we were friends. And the kind of time we spent together didn't leave any space and time for anyone else to come between us. Sunny was an exception Ishika fell for, but she never saw me falling for any woman. I need to know how Ishika reacts when she sees me giving the same kind of attention I once gave her to someone else. If she reacts negatively, showing her jealous side, I can hope that she would realise her feelings for me as more than that of a friend.

Even after a decade, my expectation of Ishika falling in love with me was zero. But in Igatpuri, when I had straddled her in our fun filled-moment, and the way she had looked into my eyes, panting and squirming underneath me, entwining her fingers with mine, shutting her eyes, silently giving me permission to kiss her, had changed my mind about her. If I couldn't make her fall in love with me before, I could always do it now. But if she doesn't display any string of jealousy tonight, I will let that thought subside and treat her only as my

friend. So basically, tonight is a litmus test of Ishika's feelings for me, and I am keeping my fingers crossed.

Sky Lounge

"This way, Sir." The manager leads Pooja and me to the corner table I'd reserved for us in the morning.

I look around, but there is no sign of Ishika anywhere. She will come. *I know.*

I pull out the chair for Pooja at the four-seater round table, which is the only table vacant right now.

"This place is always packed." Pooja breaks the silence as I take the chair opposite her.

"Is it?" I smile. "Do you come here frequently?"

Pooja nods.

"With different suitors that my father wants me to meet."

I laugh at her remark.

"I am serious, Rohan. I've come here so often with different men that I know almost every server around here."

This time, I laugh even harder, and that's when I see her. *Ishika.*

Blood rushes to my shaft as I see her entering the lounge in a red satin off-shoulder dress, her black hair on either side of her shoulders, in contrast to her milky white skin. The dress hugs her like a glove, highlighting her luscious curves, the length barely covering her knees. My fingers itch to peel that dress off her body, feeling her soft, velvety skin, and grip her waist to grind her lower body against mine. I'm not sorry for having these erotic thoughts about her. She might treat me as a friend, but I don't. For me, she's my everything.

Ishika enters the lounge speaking to the manager, who is probably informing her that all the tables are booked, and she might have to wait. Composing myself, I focus on my real motive for this entire 'date-thing' with Pooja. It was only to test Ishika's feelings for me. By coming here, she just proved

that she had feelings for me too. I am about to smile, ecstatic that things are going my way, when my heart drops on seeing who she is here with. The biggest playboy of Delhi – *Vicky*.

Chapter 13

Ishika

On entering the Sky Lounge, Vicky slides his hand around my waist as I speak to the manager, asking for a table for two. I can see Rohan sitting at a table of four with his date. She's pretty and is dressed more discreetly than I am. She's wearing a semi-sleeved shimmery black dress, long enough to cover her legs. She's scanning the menu while Rohan is busy checking me out. Judging by the murderous look on his face when he sees me with Vicky, I know his protective side is back. *Good for me.* Rohan had warned me not to disturb him on his date, but that is precisely what I am about to do. Vicky is just going to be collateral damage. He has no idea that I invited him only to stage this act in front of Rohan and outsmart him at his own game.

"Ishika, the place is packed. I think we should go elsewhere," Vicky mentions, his fingers lingering on my back. I want to shove his hand away, but Rohan is watching us intently, so I ignore that thought and pretend to smile.

"But I love this place, Vicky, and—" I pause on purpose. "Oh, wait. Is that Rohan?"

I quickly drag Vicky towards Rohan's table. As soon as we reach, I flash him a cheeky grin, pretending to be oblivious to his presence.

"What a coincidence, Roh. I never expected you to be here tonight."

Rohan's date looks confused seeing us, whereas Rohan is busy throwing daggers at me.

He doesn't reply to me; instead glances at Vicky.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Ishika and I are on a date." Vicky tugs me closer, and Rohan clenches his jaw. "I have been staying in Mumbai for a few months now. Ishika called me today to ask if I was

available for dinner. How could I deny such a beautiful offer?" He winks at Rohan, making him scowl.

"Won't you introduce us to your sister, Roh?" I interrupt the boys, looking at the woman with Rohan.

She looks shocked at first but then laughs aloud.

"I'm Pooja, Rohan's friend, not his sister."

"Oh, is it? I am so sorry, Pooja. But, seriously, you two look like siblings to me." I grin again, looking at Rohan, who glowers at my silly remark. *Who cares.* I turn back to her. "I know Rohan is an only child, so I took you as his cousin. Anyway, nice meeting you, dear. She's so pretty, Roh." I glance at Rohan before giving an air kiss on Pooja's cheeks.

"Ma'am, Sir," the manager returns. "It will take at least 30 minutes for a table to be vacant."

"Oh no, I am famished." I sigh.

"It's okay, baby. Let's go to some other place," Vicky suggests.

Rohan coughs, hearing the term '*baby*', and from the corner of my eyes, I can see his fingers have fisted too, meaning he can punch Vicky if he calls me by that name again. This is so much fun.

"Why don't we just join Rohan and Pooja? I mean, only if they don't mind. Do you mind, Rohan?" Rohan is on the verge of losing it while I continue feigning ignorance to his anger. When he doesn't respond, I declare it myself.

"How silly of me. Of course, Rohan wouldn't mind." I turn to Pooja. "You know Pooja, I am Rohan's best friend from college, and Vicky is our batch mate. Right, Vicky?"

"Yep," Vicky looks admiringly at Pooja, and I roll my eyes. He is one dumb guy who would never stop being with one woman. Rohan knows Vicky is a playboy, which is why I brought him here. Vicky had been pestering me to meet him, but I had ignored his invitation until this morning when I decided to spoil Rohan's so-called date. I'm positive he has planned this date just to annoy me.

“Oh, then you are most invited. Please join us,” Pooja replies, and though Rohan is miffed to see us here, he still shifts next to Pooja, allowing me and Vicky to occupy the seat opposite them.

I can see Vicky’s confusion as to why I insisted on joining Rohan and Pooja when I should have been alone with him, but I completely ignore his silent query and wink at Rohan instead for winning this first round of challenge between us. He grabs his phone and types something below the table. A few seconds later, my phone beeps.

‘Vicky? Like Seriously? Isn’t your taste in men deteriorating? First Sunny, now Vicky.’

I hold my smile, and since Vicky and Pooja are engrossed in selecting the wine, I use this opportunity to reply back.

‘He is far better than you, who at least has time for old friends.’

Rohan’s phone is on silent mode, so no one comes to know when he receives the message and replies back.

‘You are making a colossal mistake, Ishika. Vicky is not the right guy for you... even for a dinner date.’

I know. I reply back instantly.

‘Right guy or wrong guy, I don’t give a damn, Roh. You promised me a pub night and backtracked on your word, which is so unfair. You still have the opportunity to keep your promise or be ready to face the consequences. You know I can do anything to have you all to myself.’

Rohan reads the message, but since Pooja is talking to him, he doesn’t reply. Seeing him at his charming best, bestowing Pooja with his killer smile and applauding her choice of wine forces me to send him one more message. He casually reads the message.

‘Last chance. Let’s ditch the two and get out of here.’

Rohan still doesn’t reply; instead, he scowls at me before turning to Pooja again and burying his head into the menu card with her. Enough is enough!

“Baby, have I told you how gorgeous you look in red?” Vicky says suddenly, sliding his arms around my shoulder. I am about to shove his arm, but I let it be because Rohan is glaring at us.

“Not as adorable as Pooja in her black dress. She is fab,” Rohan replies, smiling adoringly at Pooja, who grins back.

I fist my hands at his blatant attempt to flirt with Pooja and deliberately divert their attention by discussing what to order. My plan backfires as Rohan again shifts closer to Pooja to take her order first, and I feel like spanking his a*s. *His sexy a*s*. Yep. I don't mind acknowledging that now. Ever since our almost kiss in Igatpuri, I have started seeing Rohan in a new light. I have started appreciating Rohan's physique quite brazenly in my head now, and I am not embarrassed in doing so. This guy has grown into a fine specimen of manhood. Today, he's dressed in tapered black jeans and a white shirt with a stylish aqua-coloured jacket, making him look like the heart-throb he is. A few of his shirt buttons are left open, exposing the sprinkling of his chest hair, which makes my body warm and fuzzy from within. This could be hormonal, but c'mon, is it really wrong to be physically attracted to a man who was once your best friend? The one who is hell-bent on ignoring me and doesn't want me again in his life?

I wonder how many women Roh has dated and charmed by his exuberant personality. I thought women fell for guys who were sophisticated, broody, and reticent. But Rohan is none of that. Even then, I am sure he is a chick magnet. I can easily say that no woman would be able to resist his mischievous demeanour and his seductive body, a result of his everyday workouts. No matter what he wears, Rohan outshines everyone and stands apart in a crowd like the prince he is.

Pooja turns to Rohan and shows him her new ring. Rohan utilises the opportunity to hold her hand and stroke her fingers. Ugh. God! Roh is so predictable, and flirting like this is so cliché. But he doesn't know that I am the queen of clichés myself. I'm so jealous now that I don't mind flirting with Vicky and putting on a fake show.

“You look so handsome with your mussy hair,” I whisper seductively in Vicky’s ears, and Rohan’s eyes turn to me again.

“I have been told that,” Vicky says smugly, his fingers stroking the strands of hair away from my face.

“Should we order?” Rohan clears his throat.

“Yes, please. I’ll eat whatever Vicky orders for me tonight,” I declare.

Vicky quickly jumps to take the menu card as though the whole restaurant’s menu responsibility now lies on his shoulders. He browses through the menu selection and orders for us.

Rohan shoots me a deadly glare before being distracted by Pooja, who whispers something to him. He laughs as if it’s the joke of the millennium, making me more furious. It’s not Pooja’s flirting that’s affecting me, but Rohan’s reactions to them. How am I supposed to get us out of this place if he has no intention of isolating himself from Pooja?

The server comes, and we quickly place the order. Vicky and Pooja are busy chatting, which gives me ample time to communicate with Rohan. I gesture to him with my eyes to ditch this double date and go somewhere together, just the two of us. Rohan blatantly ignores my gestures and sips his wine while I rub my shivering arms. The AC is too high, and I am freezing. Rohan notices my discomfort, and despite our cold war, he is about to take off his jacket when Vicky, too, sees me shivering and starts rubbing my shoulders, pulling me closer for warmth.

Rohan is furious about Vicky getting touchy-feely with me, but isn’t he doing the same with Pooja?

The food is served. I shove Vicky’s hand away when Rohan isn’t looking and continue to eat my meal.

“You are coming for the college reunion next month, aren’t you?” Vicky asks Rohan, who sees another opportunity to rile me.

“Only if I can convince Pooja to come along as my partner. Vansh and Taani are getting their respective spouses, and Pooja is the only friend I can think of who can come with me.”

Why does he need another partner when *I* am here? Isn't it obvious to take me? I stuff my mouth with food while glaring at Rohan. I have never attended any reunion till date as I was ashamed to face Rohan again. But now that we've met, I would love to reminisce about our old memories of friendship there. It will be so much fun.

“Ishika and I will pair up,” Vicky says confidently, giving me another side hug.

Urgh! Why can't he keep his hands off me? I just pretended to flirt with Vicky knowing Rohan disliked him back in the college and would deter me from getting close to him, but here, it's the other way around. I know he is mad, but he's silent. On the contrary, he's making me jealous by giving Pooja undue attention.

“I wish I could join you for your college reunion, Rohan, but next month, I'll be in Canada for a family wedding,” Pooja replies, feeling disheartened.

Thank God she backed off. As it is, I would never go with Vicky for our college reunion, not even if I am alone.

Rohan strokes her arm again over the table.

“That's okay. I'll find someone else. Did you try these chicken starters? They are amazing.”

He picks one from his fork and brings it to Pooja's mouth. Flustered, she looks at him in confusion before letting him feed her.

That's it. I can only take so much. The closeness of their bodies, their stroking each other, and their sweet whisperings as though they both are going to jump to bed immediately afterwards infuriates me. So I get up on the pretext of going to the washroom and purposely spill the wine from my glass onto Rohan's shirt. He shifts from his position, rising up from his seat in anger.

“What the—” he scowls.

“Oops. I am feeling a bit tipsy, I guess,” I shrug, smiling impishly at him.

Muttering under his breath, Rohan goes straight to the men’s washroom. Since I’d already got up, intending to go to the restroom, I follow him, ready to unleash my wrath on him. The moment I open the door of the men’s washroom and get inside, Rohan shouts at me.

“Are you for real? You ruined my damn shirt, Ishika? And wait, what the hell are you doing in a men’s washroom?”

We are alone here, so leaving the propriety aside, I yell back at him.

“Thank your stars that I didn’t spill wine on your pants, Roh. Because trust me, if you anger me further, it will be my next target.”

Turning a deaf ear, he grabs some tissues and continues to wipe the stains of the red wine from his white shirt, but I know it’s useless.

“What’s happening, guys? And Ishika, what are you doing here in the men’s room?” Vicky enters, looking utterly confused.

“Vicky, get out. It’s between Roh and me.”

“You are asking me to get out? *Me*, Ishika?” Vicky is stunned by my behaviour, and why not? He still hasn’t realised that I played him into coming with me.

“Yes, I am asking *you* to leave. Roh and I are in the middle of an important conversation,” I snap at him.

“No, we are not,” Rohan scowls back. “And after this...” He points at the stains on his shirt, “... you better leave for home right away, Ishika.”

“I am not going anywhere without you.”

“Without *him*?” Vicky rakes his fingers through his hair in confusion. “You came here with me, Ishika, so why do you want to go with him?”

“Vicky, shut up for one second, please,” I shout again.

“No, why should he shut up?” Rohan argues. “You can’t just bring any Tom, D*ck, and Harry to make me jealous and then behave like a brat.”

I walk up to him, snatch the tissues from his hand, and rub off the stains from his shirt.

“Bringing Pooja was also not the right move, duffer,” I point out.

“At least I didn’t lead her on as you did with Vicky.”

“She led me on?” Vicky looks like he is going to faint.

His constant nagging angers me. Why can’t he leave us alone? Who asked him to follow us here?

“Look, Vicky.” I turn around. “I am sorry. I have nothing against you. But tonight, I needed someone to accompany me to sabotage Rohan’s date. That’s all. Now please, could you leave us alone like a good friend and wait with Pooja while Roh and I decide what to do next?”

Rohan laughs derisively.

“Stop being so manipulative like you own us, Ishika. We all know what we need to do,” Rohan sneers.

I’m fed up with this bickering. Vicky, who is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, stares at us blankly, but I don’t care and focus on Rohan instead.

“I am doing nothing of that sort, Roh. And don’t put this on me. You made me do it. If you hadn’t behaved like a jerk and had kept your promise to go pubbing with me, all this wouldn’t have happened. What you are doing is not helping us.”

“I am not here to please anyone, Ishika. And if it bothers you so much, then as I suggested before, head back home.” He takes the tissues from my hand, throws them in the dustbin and marches to Vicky.

“And *you*... Keep your effing hands off Ishika. If I ever see you touching her again, I will chop your hands, Vicky. I am not joking. I am dead serious about this.”

“Are you threatening me?” Vicky challenges.

“Nope. Just warning you beforehand. You can have any woman on this planet, but not those I care about. Thank your stars that Vansh didn’t punch you when you had flirted with Vidhi. But I am not Vansh. If you touch Ishika again, I’ll kick you where it hurts the most.”

Vicky had flirted with Vidhi? Vansh’s wife? When? I wish I had been there to see how Vansh and Rohan reacted then. Vicky stares at Rohan who leaves the washroom.

“Why do women always use me to make their guy jealous?” Vicky mutters to himself.

I sigh, reaching him and patting his arm.

“Because you are the only fool they know who is always available.”

“Fool?” He mutters angrily, and I know he has every right to be miffed.

“Look, Vicky. I’m trying hard to befriend Rohan again, and I used you tonight to get my way, for which I am again sorry. Okay? Friends?”

Vicky rolls his eyes. I can see he is still annoyed.

“C’mon, Vicky. There are so many women out there. I’m not the only one who has dazzled you, am I? So what if you don’t get the best? Even second best is good, you know.” I wink at him, and he finally lets out a laugh.

“You and your sassy dialogues, Ishika,” he sighs. “Go handle your cranky friend. I am out of here.”

“You leaving?”

“Who said I’m leaving? Didn’t you tell me to settle with the second best?”

Is he talking about Pooja?

“Don’t you dare flirt with Pooja. She’s a nice girl.”

“I can handle nice,” he winks at me in the same way I did and leaves the washroom. God! What is happening? I think it’s

time to wind this up. I look at myself in the mirror, fluff my hair a bit, and follow Vicky back to the table, pretending the last ten minutes of Rohan-Me-Vicky arguing in the washroom never happened.

Chapter 14

Rohan

Amused, Pooja stares at me as I return to our table.

“Stains like these won’t disappear easily, Rohan. At times, you have to stop worrying about them, accept them as a part of your life and wear them proudly. Trust me, all will be well.”

I know in which context she’s telling me this. When I called her in the morning to meet me for dinner, I’d given her a heads-up to expect my old friend barging in on our dinner date. Though I didn’t tell her about my equation with Ishika, she would have guessed by now what Ishika meant to me and vice versa.

“I am sorry,” I whisper to her. “I unnecessarily dragged you into all this.”

“Don’t be. I enjoyed your company, and flirting with you was so much fun. And your player friend, Vicky, though clingy, is quite interesting.”

“Be careful of him. His reputation precedes him, and he’s known to break hearts.” I warn her, to which she winks mischievously. “I know how to protect my heart from such players... and playing a player is my secret hobby.”

I laugh heartily at her words. I needed it. Pooja has a great sense of humour. She’s a great girl and fun to be with, but sadly, she is not my type. No one can be. My type is the crazy, bold, brash, and often misjudged imp of a girl who deliberately spilled wine on my favourite shirt. *My Ishika*. I can’t believe she brought Vicky here to make me jealous. This has to mean something, right? It gives me a renewed hope that she, too, has hidden feelings for me, which I think, she herself is not aware of yet. It’s time for me to take charge and make her see what she doesn’t want to.

“They are back,” Pooja whispers into my ear and purposely holds my hand, laughing and looking at me as if we had shared

a secret joke. Vicky reaches our table first, and Ishika follows, acting pale.

“Sorry guys... I... I’m not feeling good.”

Liar. I can read her fib on her face, and she knows it too.

“What happened?” Vicky tries to hold her, but she pushes him away.

“It’s all because of you...your choice of starters. Having fish fingers has upset my stomach, and I’m feeling nauseous and dizzy. I... I want to go home.”

Drama Queen! I know what she is going to do next, and before she pretends to faint and fall on Vicky, I step in between them and make Ishika lean on me instead.

“Pooja, I’ll take Ishika home. She’s also my neighbour, so I can take care of her.”

“Sure,” Pooja and Vicky speak at the same time. I can understand Pooja’s reply as she knows about my feelings for Ishika, but Vicky? It looks like he has finally seen the light and is on to newer pastures, but I don’t want him to target Pooja, either.

“H...O...M...E. Take me home,” Ishika murmurs, tugging me closer and clutching my shirt. What perfect acting!

“Yeah, Ishika, we are going home. Hold on.” I stroke her head in comfort, going along with the charade that she is sick, before turning and pointing to Vicky. “You... listen. Pooja is also my friend. Remember my warning a while ago? That applies to her too.”

“Your inner circle is increasing by the day. You stick to one woman, man,” he rolls his eyes and mutters in my ears, grinning. “And don’t worry. I don’t pounce on every woman I meet.”

“Rohan,” Pooja giggles. “You should take Ishika back home. I’ll be fine with Vicky.”

“Sure?”

“Positive. Vicky and I are going to have a great time, and he will be a perfect gentleman. Right, Vicky?”

Vicky looks ecstatic that at least one of us trusted him. So, knowing they are fine and assuring myself that Pooja is in safe hands, I help Ishika out of the door. She is leaning heavily on me, and it’s difficult for me to walk, so I lean down and carry her in my arms instead. It’s been years since I carried her, and she still feels the same in my arms. Delicate, soft and mine. She wraps her arms around my neck and leans her head on my shoulder till the valet brings my car. I then help her sit in the passenger seat.

“H...o...m...e,” she murmurs again, continuing her act.

I roll my eyes and pat her face twice.

“Enough of your drama. Open your eyes and act normal. You are not competing for the Oscars tonight, are you?”

Ishika bites her lip before opening one eye first, and when she realises it’s just the two of us, she opens her other eye and grins.

“You knew I was acting?”

“Any fool would have guessed that. It was so bad.”

“That means you agree you are a fool?” she teases.

“Shut up and put on your seatbelt. I’m taking you home.”

“Home? No... You promised to go pubbing with me,” she argues as I get into the driver’s seat and start the car.

I gape at her audacity. Ishika has always been the dominating one among us, but her trickiness and manipulative trait have doubled in a decade. She always wants things to go her way, and though I also want to spend time with her, I don’t give in yet.

“You just ruined my date, and now you want me to take you pubbing? You have the nerve, Ishika.”

Ishika pouts, dismissing my hidden jibe.

“If that’s bothering you, I can apologise to Pooja for stealing you away from her, which is not true because *you are mine*.”

But still, if you want me to apologise, I can do it.”

My heart stops beating for a moment. Did she just claim me as hers? Even if it was a subconscious admission, it makes my heart pound with renewed hope that she’ll eventually admit it with a conscious mind one day.

“Pooja easily agreed to let you drop me home. In fact, she was glad to be left alone with Vicky,” Ishika says, drawing my attention back to her. “And it was nice of you to warn Vicky to be careful with Pooja, but I know he is not going to be for long. Pooja looks sensible to me and will not fall for his charms. Please give me her mobile number. I’ll text her a sorry. She deserves that.”

Now she is the caring Ishika I know.

“Yes, she deserves your apology, Ishika. In fact, not just her; you need to apologise to Vicky also. I can’t believe you manipulated him into going out with you for your own selfish reasons... so that you could ruin my date.”

Ishika is about to argue when I zip her lips by putting my finger on them.

“I haven’t finished yet. Speak when I am done,” I say sternly.

Her eyes widen in surprise as she shoves my finger off her lips.

“You are scolding me, Roh?”

“No. I am drilling some sense into my friend, who hasn’t grown up an iota in the last decade. Ishika, have you realised that in the process of winning back my friendship, you are hurting people around us...around you?”

She stares at me in defiance.

“That’s not how it works, Ishika. The world doesn’t revolve around you and your whims and wishes. How would you have reacted if you had been in Pooja’s position today and someone else had barged in and created a ruckus on your date? Would you not feel offended?”

She bites her lower lip, and her expression mellows down.

“You can’t be this selfish and inconsiderate to people when you can’t handle the same behaviour from them.”

Ishika exhales and nods in understanding.

“I...” she tries to explain, but words fail her, and she shuts her mouth. She then gently takes my arm and pulls it to her heart. Damn! It’s beating so fast that I can count each of her heartbeats.

“You are right. I didn’t realise I was behaving like a selfish, spoilt brat with people. I didn’t do anything intentionally to hurt them. But yes, I have hurt them in an attempt to get close to you again. I don’t want to be like this; mean, self-centred and bitchy. I am not like this. I’m sorry, Roh. I still wouldn’t have realised if someone else had pointed this out to me. Only you...” she presses our hands firmly. “Only you have and can show me the true mirror and bring out the better version of me. No one else, Roh. Just you.”

It’s on her face and in her quivering voice that she has realised her mistakes. I know she is not perfect, but I still love her because somewhere deep down in my heart, I know she just needs someone to show and guide her where she is going wrong. And just like she said, I’ll happily be the one to bring out the better version of my Ishika.

I continue staring at her as she speaks further.

“I had said sorry to Vicky in the washroom after you left. It’s sorted between us, but I’ll speak to Pooja right now and apologise. Vicky is very forgiving when it comes to a woman’s apology, but do you think Pooja will understand and forgive me that easily?”

I sigh and gently pat her forehead, pulling my arm from hers.

“If an apology is asked sincerely and you reassure the other that the same mistake will never be repeated, only then can you hope to be forgiven easily. Not otherwise.”

“I suck at apologising to people,” she pouts. “But I’ll try. Give me Pooja’s number.”

Instead of accepting her request, I press the gas pedal and drive on.

“Text her tomorrow. As it is, you are sick tonight and have fainted. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” she agrees. “So, which pub are we heading to?”

“Home.” I lie.

“Roh, c’mon, don’t be a spoilsport.” She hits my arm and quickly puts a location on the GPS. “Drive us to this place without any questions. It’s my favourite. Trust me, you’ll love it there.” She jumps in glee.

I zip my mouth and drive according to the instructions on my GPS. The night is finally looking up. Ishika is in the front seat of my car for the first time after a decade, and she immediately starts exploring all its features, and I also know what she will do next. Ishika has always been like this when she’s beside me in my car. Sliding the sunroof, she plays her favourite song and stands up on the seat with her head out and her arms outstretched, enjoying the cool breeze. Her hair flows with the wind as she shuts her eyes and inhales deeply with a sublime smile on her beautiful face. I slow down the car, letting Ishika enjoy the moment. Seeing her happy pleases my heart too. She hums the song while grooving to the music but stumbles forward while dancing, and I quickly hold her arm. She laughs merrily as she knows that whatever happens, with me around, she’s always safe.

The nightclub is packed, but we manage to get a table for two. I sit down and realise why Ishika had told me I would love it here. There are women artists wearing form-fitting dresses, and they are all dancing around the pole with so much grace and elegance. Pole dance is always looked down upon and is associated with strippers and objectifies women, but having travelled the world, I know it to be an extensive and rigorous exercise regimen that’s physically and emotionally healing, and I respect these women who perform this act with incredible skill and finesse.

“I told you, you would love it here,” Ishika says, getting our drinks.

“You made my night,” I wink at her, watching the artists dance around the pole while enjoying our drinks. Sensing someone’s eyes on me, I look around to find Ishika staring at me. Her gaze caresses every inch of my face before returning to my eyes, and she reddens when I catch her staring at me. The way she looks at me gives me an inkling that our bodies are slowly starting to burn for one another whenever we are in close proximity.

“How did I survive without you all these years, Roh?” she wonders out loud. “Generally, we realise the value of a relationship when we lose them, but I realised what I lost after meeting you again, Roh.”

Ishika palms my cheek. “Roh... If I could go back in time and change one thing, it would be my decision to split with you, to lose a friend like you, and above all, not trusting a guy who meant so much to me... who still means so much to me.”

I don’t remember when our foreheads touch, and I close my eyes, letting ourselves soak into each other’s warmth. Soon, she wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me. I immediately hug her back, just like I wanted to since I met her again.

“I’m so glad we met again,” she adds, tugging me even closer to her body. I don’t know if it’s the drink that’s making her loosen up and speak her heart out, but for now, it’s enough. I don’t want her to cry or feel guilty about the things that happened in the past.

I pull away and wipe the tears from her eyes.

“Let’s make new memories,” I say, and she nods her head.

I grab my glass, she grabs hers, and we clink them together.

“Cheers for new memories.”

She toasts with a happy smile, and we end up gulping our drinks in one go and order another round of drinks.

After two drinks, I decide to stop, but Ishika has no such plans. She is drunk, and her speech is already slurred. She cracks a joke, and I laugh heartily without understanding a word. Just being with her, enjoying her company and her

laughter makes me feel at peace. She tries to make me drink from her glass, but I stop her from doing so.

“I have to drive us home, Ishq. No more drinks for me.”

“Say that again,” she moves closer.

“I have to drive—”

Ishika shuts my mouth with her palm.

“My name... call me *Ishq* again.”

“Ishq,” I whisper.

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.

“Again...” she pleads.

“Ishq...Ishq...Ishq...” I pull her face to mine and kiss her on the forehead. Ishika grabs my wrist and holds me, refusing to let go. I would never let her go. I believe it’s her inebriated state that’s making her act so differently. I kiss her forehead again before pulling away. She leans her head on my shoulder.

“We can take a cab,” she argues and giggles alone.

She has a point. Why even risk driving tonight when we can book a cab and get home safely? I snatch her glass from her hand.

“Cheers to cabs,” I say before gulping down the drink. Ishika cheers and passes me a flying kiss for agreeing with her.

She pouts, bringing my attention to her lips, and I lose my ability to think. Sensing the shift in the mood, Ishika turns my head towards the stage, gesturing to me to enjoy the pole dance. Please, can someone tell her that I don’t want to see these other women as I have mine in my arms? Nevertheless, I look at the dance performance with enjoyment. Suddenly the thought of Ishika performing such a dance, especially for me, fills my head. I visualise her as one of the women dancing on the stage.

Holding the pole with her arms and supporting her entire weight on it, she jumps to grab the pole with both her knees. Holding onto the pole with her hands and knees, she then begins to lean away from it as she spins around it in an erotic

dance and lands on the ground again. Repeating the same step while swaying her hips, this time, she balances herself on the pole, stretching both her legs outwards as if beckoning to me.

That pose alone makes me want to reach out and touch her, take her in my arms and make her dance on my lap instead. I shift in my seat as my blood rushes down south, making me hard when I feel someone poking my arm. I look to my left, see Ishika and realise that I was imagining her dancing exclusively for me on the pole. I come out of my thoughts, and suddenly Ishika throws a napkin between my legs to hide my massive erection jutting out of my jeans and laughs aloud. She's too tipsy to realise that I was hard for her, not the women on the dance floor. But I can't tell her that, can I? So, to diffuse the situation, I lie to make her jealous, which I know she'll instantly be.

“What an erotic and seductive dance performance that was.”

I join in her laughter, drawing her closer.

“Not fair, Roh,” she exclaims between her laughs. “I'm a better dancer than they are.”

See! *She is jealous.*

“Are you?” I'm not challenging her; I am genuinely interested to know about it. But it looks like Ishika has taken my words to her heart.

“You want to see?”

She grabs my hand for support to get up from the couch and tries to get on the table.

“Ishq, what are you... doing?” I stand beside her, feeling dizzy as well. I should not have consumed so much alcohol. When I can't control myself, how can I possibly control her?

“Sshh... Hold on. Just wait, okay.”

She continues to lean on my arm for support and climbs onto the table. When I try to drag her down, she pushes me back on the chair, and I flop onto it, losing my balance.

“Rohhhhhh...” she proclaims loudly, drawing the attention of a few tables around us. “This is for you.” She gives me

another air kiss, and without any inhibition, Ishika sways her hips sexily, dancing to the hypnotic music. Is this really happening? I can't believe that the woman I love is dancing for me in front of such a large audience. My heartbeat accelerates, and I enjoy what she is doing for me. In her red off-shoulder dress, she looks like a Valentine's Day gift I can't wait to unwrap and devour. Her lustrous hair bounces on her shoulders as she manoeuvres to the dance steps and sings the song in her drunken haze. Damn, she's hot! I wish I was sober to enjoy this superb dance performance better, as I am finding it hard to keep my eyes open for a long time. The sudden hoots and whistles from around me startle me out of my daze. Almost everyone around us is now enjoying Ishika's dance, which I utterly despise.

"Ishq... come down. That's enough," I whisper and get up from the couch. Fortunately, I do not stumble this time. I'm still capable of standing on my own.

"No... First, admit that I dance better than everyone else around here."

I crack up. She constantly craves appreciation, and I can spend my entire life doing just that. I don't mind!

"You are the best, Ishq. Whatever you do, be it sing, dance, talk, hug, kiss... you are the best. Okay? The absolute best. Now come down."

I try to reach her, but she escapes my grasp. Finally, realising we're causing enough of a commotion to be thrown out, I pull Ishika onto my shoulders and march to the exit. People continue to cheer and clap for us, and I know she is thanking them with a flying kiss as I drag my feet out with her over my shoulders.

We are definitely taking a cab back home.

Ishika and I spent the entire cab ride blabbering and laughing about things we didn't even remember as we got into the elevator.

“Finally,” I chuckle. “We are here,” I say as we enter inside. The alcohol has completely taken over our senses.

I am about to press the button of our floor when Ishika stops me.

“Umm... let me. Let me show you magic,” she murmurs as she leans against the elevator wall and presses every single button on that board instead of the one that leads to our floor. What the hell?

It should have irritated me, but instead, we both laugh hysterically as we realise the elevator will now stop at every floor.

“This isn’t magic... it is super magic.” I pull her closer to me, still laughing at her antics.

The elevator starts its course and comes to a halt on some floor. It’s not ours, so we keep quiet. The elevator doors open, and a young man is standing outside. But he probably wants to go down, and because our elevator is going up, he doesn’t get in. Ishika whistles and gives him a flying kiss the moment she sees him. The guy blushes adorably and doesn’t mind because she’s drunk.

“Hey, you.” I bring her back to me. “No kissing other men. You are mine.”

Ishika giggles.

“I am yours?” she curiously asks. “When did that happen?”

I laugh again, unsure of what to say. The elevator doors close and reopen on the next floor.

“Shit. No one here to tease.” Ishika giggles, leaning against me.

“I don’t share, Ishq.”

That draws her attention, and she scoops my face between her palms.

“Good. Because I don’t share either, Roh.”

I am relieved to hear that.

“But...” she interrupts. “What are we *not* sharing, by the way?”

I’m at a loss for words, and so is she. So we both laugh once again. Gosh! I haven’t laughed as hard or as frequently in a decade. Seeing her blissfully happy and content in our own bubble makes me shut up. Seeing me quiet, she goes silent too. The attraction between us is so palpable that when the elevator doors open again, I draw her to me to kiss her. A small boy, around 8-10 years old, is waiting to get in. I have no idea what he is doing here at this hour.

“Kiddo alert,” Ishika whispers, pushing me away, and smiles at the boy. But he doesn’t enter as his mother hollers from the other end, and he scurries back to her.

“Smart woman,” I chuckle, hauling Ishika back to me again. She hugs me, and we stay that way, not knowing what the hell we are doing.

When the elevator door opens on the next floor, we find an elderly couple back from their late-night walk in the vicinity of the building, and they are bickering over who has the keys to the door.

“Hello, Grandpa,” Ishika says, drawing their attention to us. Grandpa blows her a flying kiss, which Ishika returns in her own unique way.

“She’s such a sweetie,” Grandpa says, pleased.

“And the boy is so sexy,” Grandma says coyly, flushing deeply.

Gosh! They are openly flirting with us. The next thing I know, Ishika pulls me closer to her, and we both say together, looking at the elderly couple.

“She’s mine.”

“He’s mine.”

As Ishika continues to say ‘*Bye Bye,*’ the duo laughs and waves at us. At this rate, she is going to wake up the entire building tonight.

Finally, our floor arrives.

I drag her out, both of us supporting each other as we walk through the lobby.

“I’m dropping you at your doorstep,” I tell her.

“Nope,” Ishika halts. “I’m dropping you first. You are *my* guest.”

“Guest?” I scrunch my nose. “I am not your guest. I am your... I am your...”

What am I to her?

“Friend?” Ishika murmurs, but her words lack confidence. I stroke her cheeks, smiling at her innocence. She has no clue how much I love her.

“More than a friend,” I say quietly, kissing her on the nose. “And so, I am dropping you first. Next time, you can come and drop me at my home. How about that?”

She pauses for a few moments and thinks it over.

“Okay. Deal.”

“Deal.” I grin as I lead Ishika to her apartment door. After a lot of effort, she finds the key to the door and swipes it open, letting us both in. It’s dark, and only because we have held hands, we don’t trip over the objects that come our way to her bedroom. She gets rid of her heels, and I take off my shoes. The bedside lamp is on, and I can see her cosy bedroom, which is exactly how I envisioned it. This place has a distinctive vibe. But what surprises me is the photo frame on her bedside table. It’s the picture of Ishika and me winning our first trophy for our first race. Seeing this picture makes me nostalgic. I never imagined she’d frame our treasured memory and cherish it so close to her heart. I reach out to hug her and accidentally tip her onto the bed. We both fall on it with a thud, laughing yet again at losing our footing.

“We are never... never drinking together again,” I declare.

“Right, we shouldn’t. Together, we are madness personified,” Ishika adds before turning around and peeking at my face. Sleeping sideways, facing each other, we look into each other’s eyes for no idea how long, my fingers playing

with her hair while hers caressing my face. She finally presses herself into me, and I pull her into a hug, wrapping my arms around her and basking in her uniquely sexy scent. She lets me hold her, buries her face into my chest, just where the stains of the wine have dried long back, and tightens her arms around my waist. This is like coming home. Our home. And with that last thought in mind, I fall into a deep slumber.

Chapter 15

Ishika

I wake up groggily with a massive hangover. I open my eyes to find Rohan next to me on *my* bed. Shock envelops me, and I don't know how to react. My head is pounding like hell, and I reek of alcohol. No... I and Rohan both reek of alcohol. His arms are wrapped around me, holding me close to his body like I am his favourite toy that he likes to cuddle every night – *in my bed*. I know nothing happened between us, and I'm glad for it, yet I had never imagined myself sleeping in Rohan's arms all through the night.

The memories of yesterday's events, right from me barging in on Rohan's dinner date with Pooja, throwing tantrums and faking being sick so we can ditch Pooja and Vicky, enjoying ourselves in the pub, Rohan getting turned on by the pole dancer, me performing a dance for him instead to bring his attention on me and only me, he throwing me over his shoulder and getting us out of the club, our funny elevator ride, to finally, we flopping on the bed in my room and falling asleep, make me smile. These were beautiful memories that I'm going to cherish forever. I just hope he doesn't wake up and act like a grouch again like he still doesn't want me as his best friend. But is this 'just' friendship even now?

I gaze at his handsome face. Even when asleep, there is a sweet smile on his lips, making my fingers itch to trace the outline of his alluring lips. Absurd! How can a friend have this kind of pull towards the other? If they do, it would mean something more powerful is at play here, right? But c'mon. This is Roh we are talking about. My best friend. I don't want to lose him in my obsession to find out why my heartbeats quicken when I am close to him, why my body invariably gets drawn to his charisma, why I feel jealous seeing him with other women and why I want him to spend his every waking minute with me. Why? I've met him again after so many years, and finally, I see a ray of hope in our friendship, and I can't risk it for anything. After Sunny's betrayal, I never wanted or needed a man again in my life... even for pleasure.

The boyfriends I had in the past turned out to be duds, and none lasted more than a few weeks, nor did I feel this kind of pull towards them that I feel for Rohan. Why Rohan? And why now? Am I overthinking? I turn my gaze away from him, ignoring these muddled thoughts, wondering what will be Rohan's reaction when he wakes up.

A funny idea pops into my head. I gently get off the bed, ensuring he doesn't wake up and rush to the dressing table. It would be hilarious to know how Roh handles this when he wakes up. Hahaha!

Rohan

I hate when the beam of morning sunlight from the window pierces my eyes, waking me up. That is why I always draw my curtains before getting to bed. How did I forget to do it last night? I toss on the bed, trying to hide my face in the pillow as demons were trying to smash my head with a hammer. I could feel the blood rushing to my head like I was run over by a bus. A hangover like this is new to me. The moment I hide my face under the pillow, I smell Ishika's perfume. Am I dreaming? I take a whiff of it before cuddling it to my chest, and just like that, the images of Ishika and me getting into her apartment and flopping on her bed, with my fingers touching her face and hers caressing my skin, flash in my head. I get up with a jerk and rub my eyes to look around. Shit! This is not my bedroom. It's hers. Why the hell am I still here? I sigh in relief, not finding Ishika on the same bed as me, but my heart drops when I see my reflection in the mirror. The white stained shirt I'm still wearing is unbuttoned till the end and is haphazardly out of my waistband, sitting low on my hips. Damn hell! When did this happen? The sheets are rumpled and I can see a couple of cushions lying on the floor. Did we? Did we just do it last night? No. No. I would have remembered had it happened.

And Ishika? Where is she? If we slept together, she would know what happened last night. I get down from the bed, and though I have this strong urge to pee, I have to see her first. Her red dress from yesterday is lying on the floor in a puddle next to the bed. My eyes widen as I see her red lacy bra a few feet away from the dress. F*ck! Why is it there? Did I... Shit. Why the hell can't I remember anything?

"Ishq..." I shout, buttoning my shirt, pulling my jeans and sprinting to the living room, only to find Ishika in a turquoise silk lounge robe.

She turns around as soon as she hears me and gives me a death glare.

"Why?" she snaps, striding towards me. "Why did you do this, Roh?"

I did? I did what? Is she serious? Means it happened? Shit. How did I mess up so badly?

“You took advantage of my drunken state.” She gently punches my chest.

“*I took advantage?*” I snap. She can’t put the entire blame on me. “Ishq, even I was drunk last night. And I would never think of doing something like this to you, that too without your consent.”

“Didn’t you see the condition of the bed and my clothes lying in a puddle on the floor?”

“I saw, but that... that doesn’t mean we... we did IT,” I argue.

“Of course, we did IT. I can still feel your sexy lips worshipping all of my last night, and you are saying it never happened?”

Sexy lips? Did she just call my lips sexy? I immediately visualise myself claiming her body and devouring her to my heart’s content, creating havoc in my head. Ishika, it seems, is not done yet. She continues to rant.

“I wish I was in my senses to know what we were doing, Roh.”

Shit! This looks serious. I had too many drinks last night. The drinks and my deep-rooted feelings for Ishika must have overflowed last night, resulting in what had happened. I should have known better than to get carried away by my desires. I fist my fingers, wanting to hit myself for being such a jerk and taking advantage of Ishika like that. I can never forgive myself.

“That’s why I didn’t want to drink too much last night,” I blurt out. “You forced me to do so. Otherwise, this wouldn’t have happened. In fact, I am still confused if it really happened. It’s not... possible, Ishq.”

God! What was I saying? Instead of comforting her, I am putting this entire blame on her. My head is spinning. Even in my dreams, I can’t do this to Ishika without her consent.

“Really? You are putting this on me now, Roh?”

“Ishq, for the love of god, I’m trying to tell you that I didn’t do any of this on purpose. We are in this situation right now because of our stupid decision to get drunk, and I hate myself for that. Please believe me,” I plead.

My heart begins to thud as Ishika turns around and sobs, hiding her face.

“Ishq...” I try to touch her shoulder, but she shrugs and takes a step forward, putting distance between us.

This is so not her. Ishika never cries like this. That too hiding her face...Never. She rarely lets her emotions out, and when she does, it is always out in the open. She will get angry, fight and argue but will never cry like the world is coming to an end. Seeing her state makes me feel like a jerk. I want Ishika to know that whatever happened between us cannot be called a mistake. It doesn’t matter who initiated it. All I know is that my love for Ishika overflowed last night; otherwise, Rohan Oberoi would never take advantage of any woman — even in his worst state.

I stand behind her, slide my arms around her waist and pull her gently to my chest.

“Ishq. Please stop crying. Before you form an opinion of last night and what it meant to me...” I pause to swallow. “... what I mean is... that if you think it meant nothing to me, then you are...”

Before I can complete my sentence, I hear her giggle. She turns around and meets my eyes. Her eyes had no tears, meaning she wasn’t crying. Which is good. I don’t like her crying. But why is she laughing? Did she lose it completely because of what happened last night?

“Roh, you are so... so damn innocent,” she says between her laughter.

I wouldn’t have done what I did last night if I had been innocent. Shit. I grab her shoulders.

“Sshh... Relax, Ishika. You are not in the right mindset at the moment. Instead of hitting me, you are laughing.”

Hearing this, she laughs even harder and gives me a hug.

“I am absolutely fine, Roh. You are such an idiot.” She punches my chest again. “A woman claims you slept with her last night, and you believed her? So easily? Only by fake tears? Thank god it was me, or else anyone could have played this prank on you, and you would have signed off your entire property to her or even married her to save her precious dignity.”

Wait... what did she say? Prank? My heart skips a beat.

“Was...was this a prank? You mean, nothing happened?”

“No, idiot. Nothing happened. We just slept together on the same bed.”

I exhale in relief. It feels like someone has just taken a huge boulder off my chest.

“Damn you, Ishq...” I yell, feeling annoyed. “You just took years off my life with your stupid drama. Damn hell. I am not... I am not talking to you ever. I... shit, man.”

I turn around, swipe my hand through my hair and rub my face, which is wet with perspiration. A minute ago, I was about to confess to her that I loved her, and here she was, telling me that nothing had happened between us last night. Though I'm happy nothing happened, my mind is still befuddled to process anything at this moment.

“Roh... I am sorry. I was just pulling your leg.” She hugs me from behind. “You know me, right? Seeing you sleeping so adorably on my bed gave me this brilliant idea to tease you.”

I turn around and listen to her, yet it doesn't curb my anger.

“I deliberately arranged my last night's dress and bra on the floor in a puddle to make you suspicious.” She bites her lip and continues. “I wanted to see how you would react. That's all. I'm sorry I scared you, Roh.”

She went overboard this time. But only Ishika can do this to me... make me insane with her crazy ideas and pranks.

“We slept like logs. That’s what happened. You weren’t even in the position to lift your finger last night, and you think your teeny weeny would have been capable of that kind of action?” she laughs again.

“You called my...” I pause, flaring my nose. “You called it a teeny-weeny again.” I lean forward, pretending to be offended, but she can read the laughter in my eyes.

“Umm... Yea. I love that name... teeny weeny,” she chants that stupid term before biting her lips to contain her laughter and runs toward the bedroom. *Not this time, Ishq.* I chase her, but Ishika throws the couch pillows at me to slow me down.

“I won’t leave you this time, Ishq,” I mutter as I duck to avoid being hit by the pillow. Once they are all on the floor and Ishika has nothing left to stop me, she runs inside the bedroom. She’s playing hard to get, isn’t she? I enter the bedroom to see her on the bed. She throws a few more pillows at me, but they’re too soft to deter me.

“Roh, stop right there.” She chortles.

“Now you are scared, huh?”

“Scared and me?” she giggles. “In your dreams.”

I know she is aiming for the bathroom, and if she goes in there, I lose. So, when she tries to jump from the bed, I grab her wrist and pull her to me. Once again, we both topple on her bed, with Ishika on top of me. I hold her by the waist, and though she tries to roll off, I don’t let her get away. We laugh together, savouring this moment until she stops fighting me anymore. Encircling her slender body in my arms, I roll Ishika on the bed to face each other again as we both continue to pant for breath. She looks at me with an unreadable expression as though she’s memorising my face and loving it. For me, every moment with her meant the world to me. If only she knew that! But today, seeing these similar emotions on her face confuses me... again. That kind of look is detrimental for us if friendship is all she wants.

Ishika looks into my eyes and slides her palm over my morning stubble, trying to get a feel of it. What the hell is she

doing? I want her to stop, but I even want her to continue her ministrations. Our legs have tangled and her silk robe has ridden up, revealing her satiny skin. My fingers itch to touch them and feel it's smoothness. As soon as our breathing returns to normal, Ishika leans closer to me and, to my utter surprise, kisses me tenderly on my cheeks, her lips lingering there for a few seconds. Then she moves her nose to my jawline, inhaling my scent, before pulling away. The feel of her lips on my tingling skin makes me shudder with longing. Ishika had never kissed me like that before. Yes, she'd kissed me on my cheek, but never was the kiss so exploratory and sensual, that too so close to my lips. I open my mouth to ask her, but Ishika shuts it with her fingers.

“Don't ask me why I did that, Roh, because I don't know either. I just... I just felt like doing it.”

God! She doesn't know why she did that? Yet she wanted to? What is that supposed to mean? My brain is muddled with questions I don't have an answer to. But this simple gesture between us gives me hope that we might have a future together. Ishika breathes heavily and stares at my face once again as though wanting to imprint it in her mind. She then turns away, puts distance between us and gets down from the bed. I want to go after her, ask her what is happening, and talk to me, but before I can decide, she locks herself in the bathroom.

Chapter 16

Rohan

Ronishq Office

After the morning incident, I am wondering what my next action should be. I didn't meet Ishika since morning, not even at the office. I've heard she is neck-deep in work, designing the new 3D crystal necklace and giving it a vintage touch, which is her forte. I can't wait to see the end product because I know she is the best in the business. My Ishq! She has to be the best. I keep pacing my cabin, trying to clear my head from the memories of Ishika and me together, but I fail miserably. Pubbing with Ishika was fun. It reminded me of old times when we used to do the same. In those days, we wandered the streets until sunrise and gorged on the best street food in Noida. Last night was similar, yet different, as we slept together...on the same bed for the first time. The mere thought of it gives me goosebumps. And today morning, Ishika's playful prank, our pillow fight and tickling culminated in her kissing me sensually on my cheek and sniffing my nape. F*ck, that was so erotic. I want her to do it again...and again. These wicked thoughts make me desperate for her. I need to magically find a way to expedite this process of Ishika realising her true feelings for me. And I need help, and I immediately think of someone who can give ideas. Without delay, I dial Vidhi, Vansh's wife.

“Hey, Rohan. You finally found time to call me?”

“Yeah, just like you find time to call me amidst your boring romantic interludes with Vansh.”

“My moments with Vanshy are anything but boring. Stop being jealous.”

“Jealous,” I laugh. “And me? Huh!”

Vidhi switches the voice call to video, and I accept it immediately, waiting to see her adorable face, but I scream in shock the moment I see her.

“What the heck is that thing on your face?”

She laughs before peeling the face mask slowly.

“That’s my D-Tan peel-off mask.”

“It looked scary.” I mock. “In fact, no... you look scarier without it.”

“Rohan,” she snaps, peeling it completely off her face, and I finally get to see her. My little friend-sister is really a cutie pie. “Why did you call me?”

“Oh, yeah,” I clear my throat. “I need some ideas.”

“Ideas? You need ideas?” She looks at me suspiciously. “Since when did *the* Rohan Oberoi need ideas and hold on? What kind of ideas?”

“Umm,” I rub the back of my neck, thinking about how to tell her this.

“Rohan? What are you hiding from me?”

“Nothing. It’s just that I... I need to understand a woman’s psychology.”

Vidhi continues to give me a suspicious stare.

“Oh my god! This looks serious. Who is the unfortunate woman you are going to try this idea on?”

“Did you just say unfortunate? You know how women are dying to be with me?”

“How would I know? You hardly tell us about your casual flings.”

Damn! Where is this conversation going? I don’t want to think of any flings right now. It’s only *Ishika*.

“Look, Vidhi, I called you for something serious, okay? And I’m not giving you a choice here. I’ve given you numerous amazing ideas for seducing my friend Vansh. Can’t you give me at least one when I need it?”

She throws her hands up in the air before exhaling.

“Alright, alright. Shoot. I promise to give you my honest opinion.”

“Great.” I sit on the chair and place the phone on my desk at an angle where we can see each other. “Imagine that a woman might have some feelings for me. But I want her to open up to me about them. Can you tell me how I can speed up that process?”

Vidhi grins.

“Why do you want her to profess her feelings to you? Unless... you are equally interested in that woman. Are you interested in her?”

I don’t say a word. Of course, I am interested. But I am a bit scared that she might break my heart again. Or maybe not. Ishika and I can be forever. We can have our happily ever after.

“Hold on!” Vidhi shrieks in delight, drawing my attention to her. Did she read my feelings on my face? “The woman you are talking about is Ishika Bhatia, right?”

“Sshh,” I gesture to her to lower her voice. “I’ll tell you later who she is. First, answer my question.”

“No effing way am I answering that until I know my guess is right.”

Damn her! I shouldn’t have called her about this. Now she would want to know everything, and I have no choice but to tell her. Well, at some point in time, I will have to. But only if I am sure of a future with Ishika. Otherwise, giving my friends hope that Ishika and I could be together would only hurt them if she had no intention of falling in love with me.

“Rohan, I’m giving you three seconds to give me her name or else no ideas from me.”

I roll my eyes. She is such a drama queen!

“Fine. Yes. It’s Ishika we are talking about. Happy?”

Vidhi grins from ear to ear, making me blush.

“I never thought she would harbour feelings for you, Rohan. I mean, it’s really great if she does, and...”

“Hold your horses. I am not sure of it yet. I’ve got an inkling that maybe she feels more for me. And I want to know if I am right. My mind is not working, Vidhi. Really. I am so lost that I can’t think straight anymore. That’s why I wanted a second opinion.”

“Aww...” she sighs. “I can’t wait to tell this to Vansh and Taani.”

“Not yet,” I interrupt. “What if I am wrong about this? What if it’s just my imagination that I see something more in Ishika’s eyes...for me?”

Vidhi sighs again.

“Rohan, I don’t know much about your past friendship with Ishika, but in the years that I have known you, I’ve always felt something amiss in your smile. It looked incomplete. As though you were happy and enjoying your life, but superficially. And trust me, the joy on your face today, your smile, your nervousness, your confusion, it all tells me only one thing. It’s time for you to sew those broken pieces of your heart back together forever. I’ve a keen intuition this time. I haven’t met Ishika apart from that event, but the way you two looked at each other that night, was enough to tell me she is *the one* who can complete you.”

I feel on top of the world after hearing this from Vidhi. I know she would never say anything just to please me. We have always been upfront with each other. We don’t lie or fake things. If I do something she doesn’t like, Vidhi tells me that on my face, and vice versa. Anyway, since we are discussing ways I can get Ishika to open up about her feelings for me, I give Vidhi some titbits of what exactly happened in the last few days between Ishika and me in Mumbai. The moment I tell her about last night’s events, Vidhi’s cheeks turn red like a tomato.

“That reminds me of the first night Vansh and I slept together when he was intoxicated.” She blushes prettily.

I recall that incident. Vansh was upset with her and got drunk that night, and poor Vidhi had to call me to pick them up from the club. We all spent the night in Vansh’s penthouse

and not the Kapoor mansion. Vidhi was thrilled to share the same room with him for the first time. They had been hiding their marriage from the rest of the family, so it was technically their first night on the same bed, and guess what? They did nothing more than sleep in each other's arms, which was obvious considering Vansh, too, couldn't move his finger that night, forget making use of his teeny-weeny! I laugh for using the silly term that Ishika has given my... Whatever!! I know my package is anything but teeny weeny, and if things go as planned between Ishika and me, she would know that too.

“Alright,” I say, putting my thoughts aside and focusing on the subject. “Should I take her out again tonight?”

“No. Never. Don't make that mistake,” Vidhi yells. “In fact, you should avoid her.”

“What?” I flop back on my swivelling chair. “Are you kidding me? Why will I avoid Ishika? I'm done ignoring her all this while.”

“Dumbo, you don't know how we women are wired to feel sexually and emotionally attracted to those who ignore us. When Vanshy ignored me, I couldn't resist chasing him.”

“Ishika has chased me enough since we came to Mumbai. I don't want to make her do that again. C'mon, Vidhi. Give me a simple idea that will work.”

“This will work, Rohan. Trust me. So far, Ishika has chased you for friendship. Now let her chase you to win your love.”

I am unsure if I should go with that idea.

“Trust me, Rohan. Don't do anything. Let her think that you are over her, that you never think about her. Let her try to win you back. And as soon as she does, she'll know your true worth.”

“Dammit,” I groan. “Do you really expect me to do that?”

“I don't expect anything. But that's what you need to do if you really want her.”

“This is dumb,” I say, getting up and pushing the chair aside. “Are you sure you are not trying to break our

friendship?”

“I am not, Rohan. Now, no ifs and buts. Just do as I say. Ignore her for a few days and see how she reacts. If she feels something more than friendship for you, you’ll read it from her behaviour and her desperation to speak to you. Got it?”

However absurd it all sounded, if the end result is in my favour, I’m ready to go with Vidhi’s idea.

“Alright,” I say resignedly. “I’ll do as you said.”

For three days, I tried to keep myself away from Ishika. It’s not easy to ignore someone you want desperately in your life. But I am trying to do just that.

The first day, I didn’t talk to her when she came to my cabin with Avantika to show the completed designs of the vintage crystal necklace. It was a rich lustrous necklace with an intricate diamond pattern, curling and twisting into two strands that merged into a heart-shaped big emerald stone pendant embedded in a gold setting. I loved the design when I saw it and appreciated it in crisp words. She sensed my cold behaviour but would have thought I was just being professional in Avantika’s presence, so she ignored it. On the second day, I pretended to be busy. I had my lunch at the cafeteria and left when she came to have hers. I know that was rude, but I had to. *Damn you, Vidhi.* She better be right about this ignoring thing. The third day, I refused to have lunch with Ishika when she texted me. I gave her a one-line excuse that I was busy with important calls, and when she kept persuading me on the chat, I turned my phone to silent mode. This was so not me.

I’m not the kind of a guy who puts distance between the people I like. I share a close bond with the people dear to me. So this is new to me. I just need to have faith and go with Vidhi’s idea for some time, and everything will be fine.

On the fourth day, a Friday, I see Ishika right before me as I park my car in the office parking lot. We both reach the office

at the same time, but when she sees me, she completely ignores me and marches to the elevator. Huh! What the hell was that? This was not what Vidhi told me. Did I go too far by ignoring her? What if her feelings for me have dissipated, thinking I am no longer interested? F*ck!

I follow her inside the elevator, and she behaves as if I'm a stranger. I have never seen her act so cold and indifferent to me. I want to talk to her, giving up my resolve. But just then, the elevator stops at her floor. She glares at me, indicating I'm the one messing up everything. I think I really goofed up. My hot and cold behaviour might have confused and irked her, but what if she decided to break things between us forever? No way. Before I can open my mouth to make amends, she turns around again and leaves while I keep staring at her as the elevator doors close.

After lunch, unable to work, I return to her floor to get a glimpse of Ishika again. As always, she is engrossed in her computer screen. She is wearing a white dress shirt with dark navy blue pants. She looks stunning with bangs on her face, her flawless skin glowing with good health and her lips a dark red colour. The way she licks her lips in the middle of her work makes her look adorable. I want to go to her, grab her and kiss her lips to make her notice me. I wish I could! I take a deep breath to calm myself and return to my floor. I think it's time to talk to Ishika again and end this phase of confusion that has erupted in our friendship after that morning she kissed me.

I reach my cabin again to find Vidhi calling me on my phone. Throughout the week, she was regularly in touch with me to know how her idea was faring and was happy to know that all was going as per her plan. We thought that Ishika would finally barge into my cabin or apartment and vent her anger at my ignorance, and then, I would ask her why it mattered to her, to which she would acknowledge her feelings for me. It sounded cliché, but Vidhi said it was the most tried and tested method to make someone realise their feelings. But after what I saw today, I'm no longer interested in following Vidhi's silly idea. I pick up her call.

“Hey, Rohan. How is it going?”

“Things have gone from bad to worse, and don’t even ask why,” I say and shut the door behind me.

“What?” She asks in a squeaky voice.

“Yes,” I shut my eyes in frustration as I let myself flop on the chair. “I ignored her for four days, and now, Ishika is doing the same. I think I have tested her patience for long. Now I want to talk to her, and she is totally snubbing me. She thinks I don’t like her, Vidhi. All thanks to you. I am not going to follow your silly idea anymore.”

“Dumbo, it’s not my fault that your Ishika is confusing.”

“She is not confusing; she’s just...a bit different, okay? She’s unlike any other woman on this planet.”

“More like an alien, you mean?” Vidhi curbs her laughter, but not for long. Did she just call my Ishika an alien?

“That’s not funny, Vidhi.” I rebuke.

“I am sorry.” She means it. “Chill. Let’s think of something better.”

“No thanks. I’m done with your silly ideas. I should have called Vansh instead of you that day. Only men can give sane advice on how to deal with a woman.”

“What the hell,” she screams. “I was just helping you, Rohan. You don’t have to be rude.”

“I’ve badly f*cked up with Ishika. I will meet her and talk to her in my way.”

“Whatever,” she sighs. “Let me know how it works for you.”

“Okay, I’ll call you later. Bye.”

When I look for Ishika after a few hours, I see her empty chair. I think she must have left for home. But why did she leave early? I head out again to go home and patch up with her. I know she’ll ask me why I was suddenly ignoring her, and I don’t know what I would reply. But for now, all I want is

to be with her. Be with my Ishika. And since it's a weekend, I'm sure we can plan an outing together like last time.

I ring the doorbell of Ishika's apartment, and when she doesn't open the door, I knock on her door.

"Ishq," I call out to her. "I know you are inside. Your car is parked down, so stop pretending you are not at home."

She still doesn't open the door.

"Ishq, c'mon. Let me in. I will tell you why I was acting like a jerk for the past few days? Just open the door, Ishq."

I knock again, and I get worried when she doesn't open it. I give her a call, but her phone is switched off. What the! Where is Ishika?

Chapter 17

Ishika

I drove to Nashik yesterday night for the Super Racing Championship 2022, sponsored by ‘Tytans’. They were a rich, private elite group of racing exhibitionists who have hosted all forms of car racing worldwide in recent years. Today’s race is special as it’s a mixed bag of all the races I have been competing in till now. We are fifteen drivers racing against each other on the tarmac roads winding around the Western Ghats in Maharashtra. We’ll be racing on these bumpy roads of the ghat sections with our co-driver/navigator, who will help us read out the route book and directions to drive to the endpoint, which is nearly 12 miles south from the starting point of the race. The road is closed to the public, thanks to the ‘Tytans’, who had good relations with the Ministry of Sports association. We can’t risk public vehicles around this area during the race, which could result in fatal casualties. I’ve always wanted to participate in mixed off-road sports car racing outside the circuit tracks and hence here I am.

Rohan and I always preferred participating in these races when we were together. After we’d parted ways, I stopped and only raced solo, as I couldn’t trust anyone other than Rohan to help me navigate and win the race. But call it a coincidence that I reconnected with Rohan at the same time this championship was to be held in India. I’d asked Rohan to be a part of it with me, but he didn’t seem interested. And the way he had blatantly ignored me this whole week at the office proves he still has not accepted that friendship we once had. I can never think about us racing together ever again if he continues to snub me. At times, I don’t understand what I should do to make him believe I genuinely want him back in my life? His hot and cold behaviour towards me confuses me. On one hand, he treats me like his best buddy; on the other, he ignores me like I don’t exist. But that’s exactly how Rohan was in the past; unpredictable. Usually, I dislike people with such yo-yo behaviour, but I can’t dislike my Roh. I know he is scared. Scared of me breaking his trust and friendship again.

“Sorry, Miss Bhatia, but I can’t allow you to race today.”

My heart skips a beat as I come out of my thoughts and look at the on-field doctor.

Apart from the vehicle fitness testing, all the primary drivers must undergo and clear a fitness test, without which they won’t be allowed to race. These tests check the driver’s alertness, visual skills, aerobic fitness, body composition and strength. I’ve adhered to a strict workout regime, diet and cardio for years to clear these tests.

The race is about to begin in a few hours, and I get to hear this?

“What?” I jump to my feet, turning to look at my friend cum competitor Darcy, who is as shocked as I am on hearing this.

Darcy had forced me to be a part of this championship today and had even arranged for her best pal, John, who was experienced enough, to be my navigator.

“But why?” I query back to the doctor, who sighs.

“You had complained about a backache below your left wing this morning, hadn’t you?”

I nod. Today morning, while doing the warm-up exercises, specifically the core strengthening one called the plank, I felt a muscle twitch below my left wing and immediately reported it to the medical team.

“The tests show a minor sprain, and—”

“Minor,” I repeat. “Which is perfectly alright now. I don’t even feel it anymore.”

“That’s because of the painkillers, Ishika. We can’t let you race until we know you’ve healed from it.”

“What?” I glare at the doctor, but I know he is helpless. These races are very stringent with their rules, especially those regarding vehicle testing and the driver’s medical fitness.

“Doctor, what if Ishika only navigates? And John drives?” Darcy intervenes.

“No,” I snap. “This is my race. I’m not letting anyone else race my car and snatch that thrill from me.”

“Not even if *I* am the one racing your car?”

I don’t need to turn around to know who said these words, as his voice is imprinted in my heart. Rohan! He is here. Wait. He... is... *here*? I turn around to see for myself if what I heard is true. And there he is. Rohan. He’s dressed in rugged blue jeans and a black T-shirt, looking very handsome and sexy as he takes off his dark blue aviators, smiling at me.

“Who is he?” Darcy queries. The doctor receives a call, and he leaves. But wait, what is Rohan doing here?

Rohan saunters over to me without breaking our eye contact. I suddenly feel the same spark I did the morning I played that prank on him when we spent the night sleeping together on the same bed. I’m no longer immune to Rohan’s closeness, unlike earlier when there was zero attraction despite spending the entire day with him. But now, it’s the opposite. Whenever we are close, I can feel my heartbeats increase. My heart races even faster when he smiles at me in his lazy, sexy way, and it beats the fastest when he scoops my face between his palms, as he does now, and looks intensely into my eyes.

“You okay?” he asks softly, with so much concern that I lose my ability to speak for a few seconds.

But hold on! What is he doing here? I quickly shove his hands off my face and step behind.

“Darcy,” I turn to her. “Can I have a word with him alone?”

“Sure,” she looks between us and then walks out in confusion.

The moment she is gone, Rohan asks me. “What happened to your back?”

I cross my arms and try to look stern, wanting Rohan to know I am angry at him.

“Roh, you ignored me the entire week after that morning at my apartment, and now you pretend like you care?”

“Of course, I care, Ishq. I was worried for you when you suddenly left without telling me anything. I’d come yesterday night to check on you, but your apartment was locked. Then I recalled you talking about this race.”

“And that’s why you came here? To look for me?” I ask.

“Well,” he scratches his forehead. “I came here because you’d asked me to join you as your co-driver in this race.”

Oh! I don’t give him time to talk more and continue to vent my frustration.

“And you thought my invitation was still open?” I snap. “No, Mr. Rohan Oberoi. It’s not. John is going to be my co-driver.”

“No, he is not,” Roh challenges. “You can’t race today. Steering the wheel can aggravate your back pain, and I know you will never let John replace you. The only man you trust to be on that hot seat behind the wheels is me, Ishq. Accept that.”

Yes, I accept that. But it doesn’t matter now. It’s too late.

“You should have decided this earlier, Roh. For your information, these races have rules. No one will entertain you here at the last minute.”

“Says who?” he clenches his jaw, taking a step forward. “Only because I didn’t race professionally in the last decade doesn’t mean I never kept a tab on these things.”

He did? Interesting! I like that he did.

“I know the Tytans group from before you even dreamed of joining them for this race.”

He knows the Tytans? How? I can’t believe I forgot Rohan’s social reach. He was always an avid follower of successful businesses worldwide, and because of his social status, he knew many business tycoons around the world. Of course, he would have contacts with racing exhibitionists like the Tytans, which are famous worldwide.

“And I’ve already got my racing license.”

He did? My jaw drops.

“So?” he shrugs. “I will give you two choices. Either you drop the plan to race today and go back to Mumbai, or I’ll speak to the group to allow you to be my co-driver and navigate me through the race.”

Of course, I will take the second option, but I don’t want Rohan to take all the credit.

“What will I get if I accept your second option?”

Rohan gives me a sly smile before grazing his knuckles ever so softly over my cheeks. He’s never done that so sensuously before. What is wrong with him? Or is something wrong with me? Nowadays, all it takes is one touch from Rohan, and my body is on fire.

“You are getting an A1 driver who will win you the trophy tonight, Ishq. What else do you want?”

He is very cocky and confident. I know racing comes naturally to Rohan, even though he hasn’t been on track in a decade. Will we be able to pull this off? This is a high-profile race between professional racers, who expect the same professionalism from the drivers and co-drivers. Would they let Rohan drive and allow me to be his navigator?

“Don’t overthink. I’ll handle it. I already have.” He winks and looks behind me. “What about my reports, Doctor?”

The doctor is back in the tent. And wait, Rohan has even done his medical tests? Where the hell was I to not know this?

“You are completely fit for the race, Mr. Oberoi. You have a go-ahead from us,” the doctor replies calmly. “And Ishika, according to the rules, you can’t be a navigator in this race, but because Mr. Oberoi has already spoken to the management, they have agreed to his request. Also, I know how much you desire to be a part of this race, so I am granting you permission. All the best to both of you.”

“I appreciate it,” Rohan replies as I am still reeling in the knowledge that we are going to steer the race together after a decade, and this was real.

Rohan entwines his fingers with mine.

“Let’s check our vehicle. I can’t wait to see what I am driving today.”

I once again read the ‘pace notes’, the route I will have to guide Rohan as a co-driver when we begin the race. I’m ready, wearing a racing suit, gloves, boots and with a helmet in hand. I’m listening to the final instructions from the organisers. Darcy gives me a thumbs up from far off as she also gears up for the race. It’s fun to race with familiar people. But we all have to be extremely cautious. Racing is one of the most dangerous sports, even if played by the rules. I apologised to John, her pal with whom I was supposed to race today but couldn’t. He didn’t mind that I was racing with Rohan instead and wished us luck.

The car we are racing today has been tested and stripped off with unnecessary weight like the spare tyre, jack and rear seat because lighter cars accelerate faster. Rohan checks the braking system, clutch and the car’s suspension even though the race organisers have tested it all beforehand as they take the driver’s safety very seriously. He is always one step ahead in ensuring our safety and does not depend on the organisers. Rohan is also dressed in his full racing suit and looks fit, alert and determined to win us the trophy.

“Ready?” Rohan checks with me before getting inside the car.

I get in to sit beside him and put on my helmet.

“Just as ready as you are.”

He chuckles at my reply while I continue feeling this strong pull towards him again as he speaks to the coordinator outside. I recall how we always had a racing tradition whenever we raced during old times. We’d wear our personalised jackets with badges mentioning the racing dates on them. It all sounded very childish and cliché now. And as I was supposed to race without Rohan, I didn’t think about getting the customised jackets. I’m not sure if this is the only race we will be racing together or if there will be more, but all these memories will always be imbibed in my heart.

The moment Rohan turns to me, I grab his gloved hand.

“How does it feel to be back on track?” I ask.

He gives me an adorable smile, and I can’t help but smile back.

“Just as exhilarating as it was to welcome you back in my life, Ishq.”

Welcome me back? Does that mean he is going to stop ignoring me henceforth? This one sentence gives me hope and a feeling of contentment that I cannot express in words.

“So you mean to say *#Roshika* is back again?” I ask hopefully.

Rohan taps my helmet, indicating I take it off for a moment.

He is yet to wear his, and we have time, so I take it off. Rohan pulls out his phone, which he hasn’t yet handed over to the coordinator, and opens the camera. He leans towards me, wanting to take a selfie. Sliding my arm around his neck and pulling him closer, we both smile confidently at the camera as he clicks one of the best photos of us and posts it on his social media feed, tagging me.

Back on the track...racing :)

#roshika #friendsforever #myheartisracingon

All our friends will see this post, and I know we will soon be bombarded with messages. But I’m glad Rohan came back to me on his own this time. No more distance, no more separation. I’m racing with my Roh. That’s all I care about.

The knock on the window by the coordinator alerts us. I inform him that I had already submitted my phone. Rohan hands over his phone and, revving the engine, drives us to the starting line. Wearing our helmets, we fist-bump each other and wait for the signal to turn green. The race is about to start any minute now. Sitting beside him, I admire him closely again, the one person who brings out the best in me, no matter what we do together. I feel overwhelmed with emotion for the person sitting next to me, with whom I am going to race again. This is not the first time we are racing together, but somehow,

it feels different. For the first time in my life, my focus is more on the man sitting next to me than the determination to win this race.

Rohan taps his foot nervously like he always did when we raced in the past. That is his way of curbing the thrill that is about to commence. We wait for the red lights to go off, and when it does, Rohan taps the gas pedal, accelerating our vehicle and marking the beginning of the race.

At the start, the road is a mix of dirt and tarmac. A few cars have swooped ahead, hitting insane speeds as we drive at full throttle.

Rohan speeds up, and I guide him, reading the pace notes for him.

“Keep going straight. Now, slow down and turn left. Go straight till the end of this strip... now slow down and turn left again...”

I look at the GPS tracking device, and it shows us in the 5th position. We have four cars ahead of us. Overtaking is not an option as the road is narrow at the moment. Rohan and I went through the pace notes a while ago to understand the route. There are a few tight bends and bumpy spots ahead, which we have to be careful of. Then the tarmac becomes wider, making it easy to overtake, and we wouldn't miss that chance.

“Speed, Roh. We are still at 120 km/hr,” I say, looking at the speedometer. Our helmets have integrated noise-cancelling headphones and microphones for easy communication between the driver and the navigator, and they also prevent the outside racing noise.

“If we push too hard, we can end up destroying our tyres, Ishq. I know what I'm doing.”

I go by his judgement, reading out the notes for him as the ghat section is about to begin in 10 miles.

“I am at 160 km/hr. How's that?” he asks, steering the wheel as we take a sharp turn. The car veers from left to right, and I grip the handles of the door.

“Well, I’m only your navigator, you know? But I can’t complain. I’m loving this.”

“I know you are, baby. Because... we are flying.”

I stifle my laugh. This is so much fun. I sense Rohan is enjoying this as much as I am. Racing together has always given us a different thrill. We are racing against the clock, and unlike Formula 1, the speed at which we rally race is not too high, but nevertheless, the excitement of being a part of this dream event is enough to get my adrenaline going. I clench my fists with excitement, the adrenaline rush so strong that I feel liberated. This is why racing is my kink. It gives me what nothing and no one else can. *Except for Rohan.* Wait! Did I just say that?

“Guide me, Ishq. I cannot see the tarmac ahead,” Rohan’s voice makes me focus again. I have never been this reckless in a race before.

“Push hard, Roh. Tarmac road is ahead. Then take a sharp left turn.” I continue navigating him.

The ghat section begins. This is going to be a terrifying ride down. The car shakes as we speed down. The road is a mix of tarmac and uneven patches of dirt.

“Slow down. You are speeding in a sharp turn.”

“On it,” he replies, hitting on the brakes.

I am in awe of Rohan and the way he commands the vehicle. We are not taking any unnecessary risks and are driving with perfect control of the clutch and brakes. Rohan is racing through the curves and turns like a pro on the ghat. Then the track opens up to a straight road with some broken tarmac in between. It was getting interesting as we tried to overtake the car ahead of us.

“I want to overtake this car and get the lead.”

I don’t reply. The other racer is leading us by a fair margin.

We wait a bit before the road clears, giving us an opportunity to overtake the car in front of us.

“Okay, on my mark, push the full throttle and overtake,” I say, ready to instruct and guide him through the track.

“Full throttle. On my mark, now!”

Rohan accelerates hard and overtakes the car ahead of us, and we slowly get ahead, taking the lead. He continues accelerating.

“I’m at 168 km/hr, Ishq!”

“That’s crazy fast. I am proud of you,” I reply, smiling.

The GPS shows we’re at number 4. Rohan accelerates again, and we overtake another car in front of us. The GPS now shows us at number 3. The road ahead of us now is a straight line with fewer turns. Rohan speeds up, hitting the gas pedal.

“We are almost at number 2,” Rohan yells happily. “I see him in the distance. Are you ready?”

I nod in excitement.

“On it,” I reply.

Miles zoom by, and the race continues. It’s so much fun. I find myself laughing, and I am sure Rohan is too. As soon as we are in the plains where the dirt road widens, Rohan overtakes the car ahead of us. The other car comes to a screeching halt, unable to find the track to continue due to the thick dust smoke, one of Rohan’s tactics to blind the drivers.

“We are at number 2, in the lead. Let’s take a turn smoothly, then speed up,” I add. “The GPS tracking shows we still have a 3-5 km lead to overcome.”

One more car to go. This is it. The moment of truth. We are so close to winning now. I don’t expect Rohan to take any unnecessary risk, given that we are so close. When Rohan sees the only car ahead of us blocking our way to the finish line, he pushes the pedal to the floor, and we shoot forward. The speedometer touches 180 km/hr, then 200 km/hr, and we are still going strong.

“I’m at 200 km/hr, Ishq!”

“That’s crazy fast!” I yell in excitement.

“It is,” he agrees, making me laugh with him. My heart flutters at his words, and I reminisce about the first time we talked about my kink for racing. He knows I love speed. He knows I love this with a passion; the thrill, the excitement, the adrenaline rush of doing something so risky. And I also know he is doing this all for me. *Just me.*

I hear him laugh beyond the noise-cancelling speakers as though he can sense my thoughts. Does he? I wish I could read his mind. There is a pause, and suddenly he screams loudly.

“You are beautiful, Ishq. And so damn sexy. You have a kink for racing... and my kink is you.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I am not someone who blushes, but recently, my cheeks have been permanently red whenever I am near Rohan. Nobody in the entire world can make me blush other than him. I feel like a teenager who gets off on racing with the guy she considers her best friend. Or is he more? I am so confused. He has to be. I have never felt this way before. How did I not see or realise that ever? But why did he say I am his kink? Is that supposed to mean something, or were they just words coming out of his mouth from the adrenaline rush?

“I got him,” Roh adds, diverting my attention from these thoughts to the race again.

There are a few sharp turns ahead that slow us down, but Rohan accelerates hard, and we finally race towards the finish line at our highest speed, overtaking the only car ahead of us. I can barely stay in my seat as I can sense our victory. Our only goal now is to cross that finish line.

“Three miles,” I shout crazily.

Rohan’s eyes are glued to the wheel and the road. We can smell the burning of tyres. We are close. So close to ending the race.

“Two miles, Roh.”

Rohan grips the steering wheel, knowing the last car we overtook is very close. He pedals the gas once again.

“One mile. We are going to win this race, Roh!”

“On it,” he agrees.

“I’m at 204 km/hr, Ishq!”

His voice sounds different. Too excited. Too loud. Too full of emotion.

“Wow. That’s fast. I’m so proud of you,” I yell in excitement, knowing the finish line is about to appear.

The screeching tires are deafening as we race closer to the finish line.

“Hold on, baby,” Rohan says as he accelerates even harder, my body flying backwards with the force of the speed.

“Slow down gradually once you touch the finish line,” I command, watching the speedometer as it touches 210 km/hr. “The finish line is ahead.”

“So f*cking close, Ishq,” he yells back to me.

“I know, Roh! Just a few more metres,” I shout, bursting with joy.

Rohan grabs my hand, and I know why. He lifts it to his heart and presses it above his racing suit, then moves our handhold on the gear stick together to shift the final gear. I’m ecstatic he didn’t forget our long-standing practice of changing gears together as we raced towards the finish line. And the way he pressed it to his heart has only heightened my feelings towards him.

We change the gears together as Rohan accelerates and shoots straight towards the finish line. I can see the bright green finishing line approaching us.

“Go! Go! Go!” I scream, mesmerised by what is about to happen.

Our car zooms across the finish line a second earlier than the car behind us.

“We did it, Ishq!” Rohan screams in joy, his words echoing in my ears. “We did it, baby! We f*cking did it.”

I release all my emotions as we go past the finish line and win this race. I am in awe. In awe of Rohan. In awe of this gift. In awe of this extremely rare sight. Rohan's face is beaming with happiness as he hits the brakes, and our car comes to a halt. This is what winning feels like. I am freezing, and my head is throbbing with a horrible headache, all thanks to the speed and thrills we both have gone through while racing.

“We won!” Rohan pulls me out of my reverie before getting out of the car and is at my door to help me. Even though I can get out of the car on my own, I take his hand and hold it tight. I am happy. So happy. I feel a sense of pride and satisfaction at being here with Rohan and winning this race together...again.

“We did it, Roh” I finally jump and gush over in joy. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. This is a memory I will treasure forever,” I say passionately, taking off our helmets and putting them on the bonnet of the car.

Rohan's eyes glaze as I stare right into his eyes. The smile on his face slowly continues to widen as he looks at me. We both are in our own bubble as though the world has ceased to exist. Rohan laughs and lifts me in his arms, carrying me easily and hugging me tightly. Seeing him this close, knowing we won the race and all that thrill and excitement we went through together, zones me out so much that when Rohan puts me back on my feet, I scoop his face in my hands and, without a thought, press my lips to his.

Though he takes a few seconds to understand what just happened, he immediately recovers and happily complies. Rohan kisses me possessively like he wants, as though I am his. I feel this sudden zing of excitement coursing through me, and I kiss him back, my hands gripping his hair at the back. Our kiss is long, our lips never leaving the other. Not only does Rohan kiss me back, but he does more. His mouth is demanding and greedy for more. All I do is wrap my arms around his neck and enjoy being kissed by him. I moan quietly as he pulls me closer, and I can feel the bulge through his pants. I burn up thinking about what he will do to me if he gets all of me. I want to freeze this moment. I want us to live in it

forever. His lips are soft, his touch gentle. Since Rohan is not asking me to stop or control myself, I assume he wants this just as much as I do. I feel him hardening, pressing against my pelvis as he devours my lips. My hands move from the back to his chest, caressing his abs, appreciating every inch of his taut body. His touch is electrifying. This is what I have been missing all along. This feeling of being one with another person, mentally, physically and emotionally.

Is this love? If it is, then this is what I have always wanted. Someone who is mine. Someone who understands me. Someone who loves me. Someone who loves my kinks. Someone who loves my passion for racing. I have never ever felt as confident, sexy, respected and loved as I do this very moment. His hands cup my face in gentle possession as my heart pounds faster than the race we just won. Faster than the speed we touched today. I don't know what to do as my thoughts are in a whirlwind. I am unsure. One thing I do know is that I want to feel him and be with him. I want to be his forever. He couldn't be my first, but I want him to be my last. I want him to be the only man in my life.

Rohan breaks the kiss, but I don't let him go. I pull him tightly as I brush my lips back with his. I don't want to move from here. From this position. Being here with him is the only thing I want.

"Ishq... Baby," Rohan groans, breaking away from the kiss. "F*ck, this is crazy," he says as his forehead touches mine.

The deafening noise of the crowd pulls me back to reality, and I look around slowly, taking in the euphoria of the crowd who are living this winning moment with us. And my senses return. Did I just...kiss...Rohan? I freeze, knowing the mess I've landed us into. *A confused mess*. I'm not even sure what to say to him. This was the first time we kissed, and it was the best kiss of my life. But now I need to move. Or walk away. I don't want to, though. I want to stay here... forever. The scent of his cologne envelops me, reminding me again how I can't get enough of him. The desire. The need. It's in my blood now. But ignoring all of that, I look down, unable to meet his eyes and turning around, I walk away. I don't know where I am

going, but I make my way out amidst all the cheers and hoots from the spectators of not just our race to the finish line but also of our intimate kiss. Shit! I have screwed up big time!

Chapter 18

Rohan

I don't know what the f*ck just happened. A few seconds ago, we were in the midst of this wild race, my adrenaline levels at their highest, with Ishq shrieking and laughing beside me. We were in seventh heaven when we crossed that finish line and won the race. And then, out of nowhere, we kissed each other. I was yet to determine who between us initiated it. I think it was her because I would never take that leap without knowing her feelings for me. But that wasn't the point. The point was that now we were back to square one. Ishika fled from the spot as though the kiss shouldn't have happened, leaving me to believe she either kissed me in the spur of the moment as we won the race or regretted kissing a man she only wanted as a friend and nothing more. It felt like I'd been punched in the gut again. Why was she so difficult to understand? If, by any chance, she sensed her feelings for me were beyond friendship, then what was wrong with it? It wasn't written anywhere that friends cannot turn into lovers. They can, and if you ask me, it is the best kind of commitment a couple can get into, as they already know and trust each other in and out. Why was it so difficult for Ishika to accept that?

Kissing Ishika was a dream come true. I'd always wanted to feel her lips, taste them and suck them to my heart's content, but even after doing all of that, I didn't get the desired reaction from her. If she hadn't walked away, I would have confessed to how much that kiss meant to me, how much she meant to me and how many years I'd been waiting for this moment to come in our lives when we would both give in to this flare of attraction and confess to being in love with each other. But even though the kiss was perfect, the situation was apt, and the moment was absolutely mesmerising; Ishika once again shattered my heart into pieces by walking out on us.

I'd come here today hoping to end that silly ignorance game I'd been playing with her and help her win the race. But the only thing I felt like doing now was to leave for Mumbai

and give Ishika her space. But I couldn't leave without accepting our winning trophy after the race. That one hour between the kiss and seeing Ishika on the make-shift stage, accepting the trophy with me, was the most crucial, yet I pretended to be calm and unaffected by our intimate moment. And Ishika was behaving the same. We smiled for the cameras and spoke to the media and the other competitors, who congratulated us. Though she kept stealing glances at me, that wouldn't help. She would have to tell me what she felt for me. If she regretted kissing me, I didn't want to hear it and bruise my heart further. So, while Ishika was still busy with the media after receiving the trophy, I left for Mumbai without informing her, hoping the next time she came after me, she would be clear about what her heart desired.

MUMBAI

The next morning, I open the door of my apartment and find my friend, Vansh Kapoor's wife, Vidhi, grinning at me.

"Hey, Sis," I say, leaving the door open for her to come inside.

"Such an uninterested reaction?" She snaps from behind me. "Aren't you surprised to find me here?"

I stop midway towards the living room and wave my phone at her.

"Your husband doesn't leave a chance for you to surprise me. He messaged me this morning that you are here in Mumbai and will visit me."

Vidhi rolls her eyes, stamping her foot on the floor in annoyance.

"I'd told Vansh not to inform you."

"He doesn't hide anything from his friend," I wink at her, turning around and heading for the couch. "By the way, I won't mind a cup of coffee if you are making one for yourself. You already know where the kitchen is." I stifle my laughter, knowing what Vidhi's expressions will be for ordering her like this.

As expected, before I can sit on the couch, she holds my arm and drags me to the kitchen.

“Don’t act smart, Rohan. I’m your guest. You should make coffee for me and not vice versa.”

I obviously have to oblige. Once we reach the kitchen, she sits on the marble platform and picks a fruit from the basket to eat while I begin brewing fresh coffee for us.

“So? How was it racing again with your best friend, Ishika, yesterday?”

At the mention of Ishika’s name, I freeze. Especially recalling how we kissed after the race. I assume Vidhi must have read the social media post and the photo I had put up of Ishika and me in a racing suit yesterday.

“It’s a long story,” I sigh.

She pauses her eating midway, a hint of confusion on her face.

“Did something happen between you two?” she asks, intrigued.

“It’s more than that,” I say, pouring the coffee into two mugs and handing one to Vidhi.

“Stop being so secretive. Tell me what happened, Rohan.”

“She kissed me.”

Vidhi almost chokes on the coffee.

I help her set the mug aside until she composes herself and takes it again.

“That’s hot.”

“Of course, it will be hot. I just brewed it before you, dumbo.” I hit her head playfully.

“I’m not talking about the coffee but your kiss with Ishika, you duffer. Even knowing she kissed you is making me hot here.”

I lean against the opposite counter while sipping my coffee to hide my blush. I couldn’t sleep last night after returning to

Mumbai. Thoughts of Ishika knocking at my door and confronting me about the kiss kept me on edge, but so far, nothing had happened. I don't even know if she has come back from Nashik.

“Don't get your hopes high. I won't be surprised if she comes and tells me that she kissed me in the spur of the moment. She walked out on me after the kiss, Vidhi.”

Vidhi chuckles.

“I am serious. She didn't say a word.”

“That's how any woman will react in such a situation,” Vidhi smiles. “I am a prime example of that. Ask Vansh. He will tell you how I ran away after our first kiss during the Holi celebration.”

I smile, remembering that event because I was the one she had bumped into while attempting to run away after that unexpected kiss with Vansh. I'd dropped Vidhi home in my car that day.

“See! Women always run away, but you still blame us, men, that we are confused. We, guys, are always sure of what we want, when and why. Why can't women be more sensitive towards us?”

Vidhi picks an apple and throws it at me, but I catch it before it can hit me.

“Don't turn this argument into a gender fight. You'll lose, Rohan. All I can say is give Ishika some time to think about it. You men are always so impatient for the results and always forget that the best things in life take time.”

“Now, who is initiating a gender fight here?”

“Women are exceptions and have the right to initiate all fights.”

I chuckle at her remark, finishing the rest of my coffee in one go.

“How does Vansh tolerate you?” I ask, teasing her.

“Just like how he tolerates my dumb brother.”

We laugh together and make our way to the living room. Vidhi tells me how Vansh is busy with his new project in Delhi, which is why he couldn't accompany her to Mumbai. She was here to sign a few business related documents on behalf of Gupta Industries, which she ran together with her elder sister, Taani. She is flying back to Delhi in the evening after signing the papers. So, we don't have time to spend together or go out. We chat some more until she realises she is getting late for the meeting she is here for. I go down to drop her off. We step into the parking lot, and I show her my car. She loves the giant SUV, especially its luxurious interior and the artic grey colour.

"I wish you'd stayed back in Mumbai today. You could meet Ishika too," I say as she turns to me after checking out my car.

Ishika already knows Vansh and Taani but has never met their spouses personally.

"Oh please, Rohan. You think about your next face-off with her. I'll meet her some other time. In fact, I suggest you stick to your ignorance plan."

"No, thanks. I've already faced the repercussions of your silly ideas. Not anymore. I'm not ignoring Ishika now."

"She...*she* told you to ignore me, and you did, Roh?" Ishika's loud voice startles us both, and we turn around to find her charging towards us in anger. I think she's just returned from Nashik. She has that 'exhausted-by-road-travel' look as she locks her car with the remote keys while marching straight to us. Ishika is dressed in white cotton shorts and a pink tank top, making me look her up and down. For the first time since we kissed, I don't feel hesitant or guilty to openly ogle her as I know in my heart that she won't be offended if I do. Ishika has feelings for me too. It's just a matter of time before she realises and accepts them... *accepts me*.

She shoots me a look of disgust before turning to Vidhi.

"How dare you give him such foolish advice?" Ishika snaps at Vidhi, who immediately clenches her jaw.

“I was protecting his heart from breaking again because of you. You can’t just step in and out of his life whenever and however you want.”

Vidhi is right. She just wants me to be happy. I don’t know why but I am enjoying their catfight. It’s very flattering to see two women argue over you.

Ishika points the finger at her.

“He is mature enough to make his own decisions. Who are you to judge what’s happening between us, and what should be his next plan of action?”

“I am his sister.” Vidhi grabs my left arm.

“And I am his best friend,” Ishika grabs my right.

They both try to pull me to their side like we are playing tug of war here.

“Best friend, my foot! You met him again by a stroke of luck, so you can’t claim to be his friend again. Friends are not selfish and mean like you.”

Alright. I don’t like Vidhi attacking Ishika like this, but I know she is just helping me by trying to open up Ishika’s eyes to her wrongdoings. But Vidhi doesn’t know that Ishika and I have already talked about the past, and we’ve decided to let bygones be bygones and start afresh.

“Vidhi, I—” I try to speak, but Ishika interrupts me.

“Roh—” Ishika pulls my arm to draw me closer to her. “You better tell this woman to back off. She can’t decide what we had in the past or what we can be to each other in the future.”

“Ishq, listen—”

“Rohan,” Vidhi pulls my chin, forcing me to turn to her. “Look at the way she is dominating you. Just continue ignoring her for your own peace of mind.”

“He is peaceful when he is with *me*,” Ishika argues. “I’ll dominate him... claim him... do anything I want with him because he is mine... he is *my* Roh.”

Ishika shoves Vidhi's hand from my chin, clutches the collar of my shirt, and forces me to face her. "What kind of people have you befriended in my absence, Roh? She is clearly bossing over you in the name of being your so-called sister."

"I am bossing him?" Vidhi growls. "Rohan, this is too much. You are not saying a word while your Ishika is continuously accusing me... your sweet little sister."

Huh! *I* am not saying a word? Will they ever let me speak? Whenever I open my mouth, they shut me up again. God! This argument is going off on a different tangent now and is no longer flattering and funny. I understand Vidhi's possessiveness toward me, as she wants me to be happy. But her possessiveness cannot beat Ishika's because I know my Ishq doesn't like to share. Even in friendship, Ishq needs exclusivity and can't tolerate anyone else coming between us. Though she had clearly contradicted her terms in the past by letting Sunny come in between us and fool her in his love, she ultimately chose him and left me like I meant nothing to her. But that's all in the past now.

Vidhi's driver parks the car before us, and I know she's getting late and has an evening flight to catch. I didn't expect to see her off like this in the middle of her fight with Ishika.

"You know what, Rohan?" Vidhi chides. "She has blinded you. And if you are going to keep on taking her side, then I better leave. Bye." She kicks my car with her high heels like she always does whenever she is angry with me. Damn! My cars always have to bear Vidhi's wrath whenever she's miffed. She loves damaging my cars. I'm about to react when Ishika interrupts.

"Yea, you better leave because your ideas are toxic for your brother." Ishika, too, kicks my car, mimicking Vidhi. I gape at them in horror. Why is she imitating Vidhi? I already hate it when people don't respect my cars.

"Enough," I finally roar. "I'm warning you both to f*cking stay away from my cars henceforth. No one insults or screws my babies."

Vidhi rolls her eyes and turns to leave, whereas Ishika glares at me and heads towards the elevator. Shit! What is happening here? I want to go after Ishika as her behaviour toward Vidhi was uncalled for, and we also had to sort out other things looming between us since yesterday. But right now, I focus on Vidhi.

“What the hell was that?” I ask her, calming my anger. Vidhi opens the car door and is ready to get inside.

“She’s fiery. You sure you want her back in your life?”

I give her a smouldering stare.

“Alright,” she raises her hands in defeat. “All the best. Madam is pissed off. Let me know if you manage to convince her, or else I’ll speak to your father myself and ensure he gets you married off to the most peace-loving woman on this planet, not a cranky woman like Ishika Bhatia.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I pinch her cheeks, knowing she is making fun of me. Vidhi would never do that. She knows how I am rooting for Ishika and me to be a couple in the near future.

She pulls me for a hug, and I hug her back.

“I didn’t want you two to meet like this. I hope you’ll be cordial to her the next time we are together.”

“Give her the same warning,” she punches my chest with a smile. “Now, handle her while I finish my work and catch the flight. My Vanshy wants me back home tonight.”

I laugh at the way she uses the endearing term ‘*Vanshy*’ for her husband. Wishing her a safe journey, I watch her drive away. One woman gone. It’s time to focus on the other, who I know is waiting to unleash her anger on me.

CHAPTER 19

Ishika

The nerve of that man! I kick open my apartment door and get inside, throwing my car keys on the couch. I can't believe Rohan did that. He ignored me for almost a week because someone else gave him that idea. Idiot. I will smack his face if he tries that act with me again. He still hasn't grown up, has he? What was he even thinking while following the idea of his so-called sister?

I stumble at the edge of the couch while taking off my shoes. Damn! Nothing has been going right in my life for the past few days. And it's all because of Roh. At times he cares for me, and on the other, he ignores me, following others' advice. Then again, he shows his concern by helping me win the race, which I desperately desired, and then he kisses me like he can't survive without me in his life. And while I put some space between us to analyse my feelings, he goes back into his shell again as if I don't matter. Damn hell! Is Rohan aware of the havoc he is creating in my life? It's like I am always on a rollercoaster ride with him, with ups, downs, twists and turns, each of them taking me to a different place with different feelings for Rohan. Feelings so warm that I can't describe them in words, but at times it brings me to an imaginary place from where there is no return.

"May I come in?" Rohan's voice breaks my chain of thoughts. I get up and turn around with anger seeping through my pores. He is already inside and is looking calm and collected, as though nothing has happened between us.

"Did you ask my permission before ignoring me over someone's foolish idea?" I yell at him.

"What is the point in ignoring you if I have to seek your permission beforehand?" He rolls his eyes as though my question is totally stupid.

I grab a pillow and aim at him. It misses its mark, though.

“What the f*ck, Ishq. I’m here to talk. Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m gearing for war, Rohan Oberoi. You don’t deserve to be talked to anymore.”

“Ishq, c’mon.”

“Yea, c’mon.”

This time I grab a photo frame from the side table, and I’m about to aim at him when he ducks backwards and yells.

“That’s Uncle’s photo, dammit. You can’t break it.”

My Dad’s photo? I check the frame in my hand and clench my jaw, turning back to him. It’s a photo of me with my gym instructor, who is almost my father’s age. I like framing memories with people close to my heart.

“He is not my father, Roh. How can you not recognise my Dad?” I’m more annoyed that he couldn’t identify my father’s face. I keep the frame back in its place, but before I can find something else to throw at him, Rohan reaches me and hauls me to his body.

“I know it’s not Uncle’s photo. I just wanted to distract you, so I could reach you and make you stop this madness.”

I grit my teeth in frustration.

“Madness? What you did with me last week wasn’t madness? How could you allow your so-called sister to come between us?” I punch his chest.

“Vidhi,” Rohan corrects me. “That’s her name. She is Vansh’s wife and Taani’s younger sister.”

Taani’s sister? When did Taani have a sister? That, however, is not my point. I focus on Roh.

“I don’t care whose sister or wife she is.”

“Well, I care,” he exclaims. “And I genuinely care about her.”

Now I go quiet. She means that much to him? When and how did that happen?

“Vansh, Vidhi, Taani and her husband Sameer are now my close buddies, Ishika. I will not tolerate if anyone, including you, speaks disdainfully about them. As you know, Vansh and Taani have always been my pillars of strength. They were with me before you came into my life and even after you left. And Vidhi,” he pauses, his face breaking into a smile. “She’s the sister I never had and always wanted. We have a very different bond. So, whether you like it or not, I’ve given her the right to interfere in my life, and I know she only wants to see me happy. You didn’t have to treat her that way. Advising me was her right, whereas accepting it or not was my choice. And I did what she suggested as I thought that was the right thing to do. So, if anyone is to be blamed for that situation, it is me, not Vidhi.”

I can see Rohan’s love and adoration for Vidhi and the rest of his friends in his eyes, and I have no intention of coming in their way or disregarding them. He is right to say that accepting and following Vidhi’s advice was his choice. I now realise that I shouldn’t have treated Vidhi so disparagingly today. In fact, I am grateful that his friends supported him and had been such an important part of his life in my absence. Such friendships are rare. If my former friendship with Rohan was extraordinary, I have to acknowledge that his bond with his other friends is even stronger. If I hadn’t walked away from him, I might have been a part of them too. If only. Anyway, now I know how much they all mean to him, and I’ll remember not to ever mistreat or be disrespectful to them. Friends who have supported Roh over the years are my angels too.

“I’ll be mindful next time,” I reply with all my heart. I want him to know I’ve no grudge against them anymore.

Rohan sighs in relief at my assurance, and his eyes shine with mischief.

“Good. Now let’s address the elephant in the room. Why did you kiss me yesterday?” He suddenly asks, and my heart skips a beat.

Silence looms between us as we both stare into each other’s eyes. I didn’t expect Roh to shoot me that question so casually.

Of course, we had to talk about it, but not when I was in the middle of another argument with him. Suddenly, his hold on my arms tightens, and Rohan walks behind me, trapping me between him and the wall.

“Why did you kiss me, Ishq?” he repeats that question, but this time whispering each word slowly, taking his own time.

My palms sweat at the thought of answering him. It’s a question whose answer I haven’t been able to figure out yet. So, for the time being, I try to avoid having this conversation and divert him to the previous subject.

“If I knew you were ignoring me because someone told you to, I wouldn’t have kissed you at all,” I snap.

He exhales slowly, knowing I’m diverting the topic. So, before he points that out, I twist it some more by asking him the same question.

“And why did *you* kiss me back, Roh?”

His gaze lingers on my lips hungrily.

“I…” he pauses for a second. “I liked the minty taste of your kiss,” he jokes.

Now he is aggravating me again. How can someone kiss back only because he likes the taste of it? Rohan is definitely making this up.

“You are lying,” I snort.

“Not at all.”

I push him back with my palms, and he lets me go. His arms, which were previously wrapped around me, slowly untangle. I breathe in and walk away from Rohan, still trying to decipher my own feelings. And then, a ridiculous idea pops into my mind.

“Someone really needs kissing lessons, though. Because you sucked in kissing, Roh. You were that bad.”

“Is that so?” Rohan taunts me, grinning as he puts his hand over his heart, pretending to be hurt. “With all due respect, Ishq, I’ll happily pick a tutor to give me those lessons so I can

become one of the best kissers in the world. Not that you would ever experience it again.”

I glare at him as jealousy hits straight into my heart.

“What?” He arches an eyebrow. “Didn’t you like the idea?”

“I loved it,” I lie. I don’t know what kind of game Rohan is playing with me, but I don’t want him to win this conversation for sure. So, I continue answering him in my way. “Have you heard that saying, Roh? A woman needs to kiss a lot of frogs before she finds her Prince. Yesterday, you were one of those frogs in my hunt for a real Prince.”

Rohan exhales.

“Done playing tit for tat?” he mutters seriously. I go quiet.

Rohan reaches me and stands a few feet away, looking straight into my eyes.

“I have a few doubts that only you can clarify because they are giving me misleading signals about us.”

I swallow. What doubts? What signals?

“You have framed our picture and kept it right beside your bed. You can’t see me going on dates with any other woman. You want my undivided attention all the time. You hate when I ignore you and are overjoyed when I spend time with you. You kissed my cheek sensuously that day and asked me not to question you about why you did it. And then a few days later, you kissed me again, this time passionately, with feelings. Why, Ishika?”

My heart skips a beat. He really has done his homework well, but so have I.

“Despite telling me repeatedly that we are not friends anymore, you still remember every little thing about me. You were equally jealous seeing me with Vicky during your dinner date with Pooja. You stopped racing a decade ago, yet followed me all the way to Nashik and helped me win the race. And during the race, you called me beautiful and sexy and said that if racing was *my* kink, *your* kink was *me*. And when I kissed you after we won, it didn’t take you a second to kiss me

back, as though you had been waiting for this moment for years. Why, Rohan?”

I cross my arms in front, waiting for him to reply. I know he is as confused as I am at the moment. We can never answer this, can we?

“What are we now to each other, Ishq?” he continues to probe.

“You’re my boss, Roh, and I’m hoping we’re back together as friends after yesterday’s race, aren’t we?” I ask.

Yes, we are friends again. He can’t deny it anymore. Rohan himself had posted a picture of us on social media before the race with the hashtag ‘#Roshika’ and ‘#friendsforever.’

He thrusts his hands into his pockets.

“But the lines between employer and employee have been blurred, and if I recall correctly, you aren’t in favour of best friends turning lovers. Ishq, friends don’t kiss like that. Not the way we kissed the day before.”

He has a point. I swallow.

“That day was a one-off,” I conclude with a careless shrug.

“Was it?” Rohan looks hurt, and I hate to admit, I am a big, fat liar. It was far from a one-off. Ever since I have kissed Roh, I can still feel the touch of his lips on mine, I can still taste him, I can still feel his breath fanning my face, his fingers squeezing my waist and his throbbing manhood rubbing against my stomach, which I now know is anything but *teeny-weeny*. I shouldn’t recall the kiss so intimately if it was just a one-off from my side. But that’s the only way to end this conversation and be done with it until I gauge my feelings and make sense of this inner turmoil.

“You don’t believe it was a one-off?” I purposely ask, trying to bring out his feelings to the fore.

“Maybe it was,” Rohan finally smiles like he always does when things are normal.

Did he really believe my reply that the kiss was a one-off and happened at the spur of the moment?

“I understand, Ishq. Your control slipped momentarily, and why not? Women can’t resist me for long.” He winks.

I push his chest.

“Stop flattering yourself. I wasn’t the only one whose control slipped. You also took full advantage of the moment and immersed yourself in kissing the most beautiful woman you’ve ever met in your life.”

Rohan rolls his eyes but does not contradict my comment. I blush as I realise the meaning behind his silence. He thinks I am beautiful and sexy. *And his kink*. F*ck! I don’t want to get into that thought again.

“Phew,” I relax. “See, we can talk it out and sort things between us. You don’t have to take stupid advice from others anymore. Promise me, Roh. If we have a problem, we will fix it ourselves. No third party ever.”

I stretch my palm wanting him to give me that promise. Rohan looks at it before putting his palm over mine.

“I promise,” he replies, pressing our hands together. “But, Ishq—”

“Hmm?”

He pulls me closer and slides his arm around my shoulder.

“What if we lose our control again and kiss each other in the near future?”

I suppress the involuntary shiver that spreads across my body, knowing he is observing me keenly. I never thought he would bring this up again. Not wanting to extend this conversation, I shove his arm away and look into his eyes.

“It will never happen again from my end. I can assure you that.”

Heck! Why don’t I sound confident? Rohan’s sly smile is back as if he wants to challenge me on this.

“Yeah.” His acceptance lacks confidence, just like mine.

The next instant, his phone rings.

“Dad,” he mouths before answering the phone. “Hey, Dad.”

Rohan walks away to speak to his father. Even though the call is not on speaker mode, Rohan’s father is so loud that I can hear exactly what he is saying. He had found out about our race yesterday and sounded displeased that Rohan indulged in racing again. Just like my father, Rohan’s dad is also very protective of his son and doesn’t want him to risk his life unnecessarily.

“Dad, chill. I am absolutely fine, without any scratches or burns on my body. I won, Dad. You didn’t even congratulate me.”

I grin, hearing them converse. Rohan has a way with his father and being the only child, he knows how to butter him and make him see his point.

“Not again, Dad. I’m done meeting your friend’s daughters,” Rohan chides.

There is a long pause. I think his father is speaking on the other side.

“Alright, I’ll meet her. Happy? Text me her number. We’ll plan to meet this weekend. Bye.”

When Rohan turns around, I try hard to hide my curiosity.

“I wish Dad stops serving me on the menu to his friend’s daughters. He always wants me to meet someone or the other,” he complains while putting his phone in his back pocket.

“What does he want?” I ask.

“My marriage. He wants me to settle down because all my friends have. I can’t understand that logic.”

Marriage? I cannot even think about Rohan getting married someday. The image of him being with someone else, putting a ring on her finger, tying the marriage knot and getting intimate with her for life gives me the chills. And now that we have kissed, the feeling is intensified. I can’t see him with any other woman. Why? I don’t know. But definitely not because of friendship.

Rohan snaps his fingers before my eyes to get my attention. Did he realise I was daydreaming? Shit!

“I hope this time you don’t plan to barge in again to ruin my dinner date with whoever the lucky woman is,” he smiles brightly.

I don’t know what to say. Taking cue from what happened before, I would never do anything that could jeopardise his plans with others; even if he is going on a dinner date with another woman. But will I be able to stick to my resolve? Rohan leans closer to my ears.

“There’s no exclusivity in friendship, Ishq. We are free to pick our own partners and still be best friends, right?” He whispers.

I freeze. Yes. That’s the way it should be, then why do I dislike this feeling? Did Rohan feel the same way when I left with Sunny, breaking my friendship with him? If I could choose my partner in the past, Rohan also has every right to date whoever he wants now and move on with his life.

“Or do I need my best friend’s permission to date?” He whispers. His nose brushes against my ear, and I squeeze my eyes shut as a shudder passes through my body at his merest touch. Maybe I should tell him that I don’t like the prospect of him seeing another woman, even though I have no right to stop him. But if I tell him that, and he asks me the reason, what would I reply? Before my resolve falters, I open my eyes and step back.

“Of course not. You are free to date whomever you want. And also marry them. I will be the happiest person after your father if you find your happily ever after just like your other friends did, Roh.”

He looks at me as though he has read between the lines of what I really feel. My expression screams that I don’t want Rohan to date anyone else. We have just met again and haven’t even gotten the chance to reconnect like in the past. If he starts dating someone else, he will give all his time to her, not me. *Never me*. It will mean someone else will shop for him, not me. It will mean he will share drinks, dance and have all those

funny moments with her, not me. It will mean he will kiss someone else. Not me.

“Ishq?” Rohan shakes me to get my attention.

“Yea. Sorry.” I swallow nervously, averting my eyes. “I just remembered that I’ve to complete a few pending designs before I resume office tomorrow.”

“Umm.” He agrees. “You sketch the designs while I plan how and where to meet this woman that Dad wants me to see this weekend. Do suggest me a good place if you have any in mind.”

No way I am doing that. Rohan pulls me in for a hug. A tight one this time, and I love the feel of it. Just when I am about to wrap my arms around him, he pulls away and kisses my forehead.

“Rest for a while before you start working. You look exhausted. See you tomorrow at the office. Bye.”

“Bye,” I fake a smile and watch him leave my apartment.

What the hell is wrong with me? Why am I bubbling with jealousy at the thought of him seeing other women? It’s his personal life. I cannot lock him in my friendship forever. I am grateful that he has agreed to be friends again. I don’t want to lose that. But I also don’t want to lose him. Damn hell! Looks like I am in for another rollercoaster ride.

Next Day.

I stand in front of the full-length mirror as I grab my phone and look at my reflection.

“You can do this, Ishika,” I speak to myself. “Nothing is impossible for you. Just do it!”

I take a deep breath before dialling Vidhi’s number. Yep, I am going to call Vidhi and apologise to her for yesterday’s fight. After Rohan left yesterday, all I did was self-analyse my recent behaviour in an attempt to win Rohan’s friendship again. I hadn’t realised it earlier, but when Rohan opened my eyes by pointing out how I am unknowingly hurting people in

my madness to win him back, manipulating them, being rude to them and even going overboard with my scheming to keep Rohan by my side, has shamed me. I feel so guilty. Even though I apologised to Vicky and Pooja last week, I again lost my cool yesterday when I heard Vidhi was the one who provoked Rohan to ignore me. I couldn't stand the thought of a third person intruding on our friendship, so I unleashed all my frustration on her. Not that she didn't give it back to me with the same might. But knowing the deep bond Rohan shares with her, it's time for me to rest my case and make peace with Vidhi too. Calling up Vidhi and apologising to her is my first step towards it. Though I feel a bit jealous that Rohan is protective of someone other than me, it's fine now, considering he treats Vidhi like his younger sister. Of course, I didn't have Vidhi's number, but it wasn't hard to get as Vidhi was very active on social media, and all I had to do was send her a direct message on her Instagram, asking her if we could talk. She immediately responded to my message, and we decided to speak at night. Now, I can't go back on my word, no matter how nervous I'm at the moment.

"Hello, Vidhi," I say the instant she answers the phone.

"Hey, Ishika."

"Umm. Hope I am not intruding anything?"

"Even if you were, I wouldn't have minded. Stop being so formal."

That's sweet of her. I sigh in relief, glad she's not harbouring a grudge over yesterday's argument between us in Mumbai.

"Thanks, and sorry." I squeeze my eyes shut, relieved I said what I had to.

Vidhi laughs.

"What did you say? Come again!" she replies, and God knows I want to disconnect the call.

"You are enjoying this, aren't you?" I flop on the sofa.

"No. Not at all. I'm just making sure I heard you right. Did you just say sorry to me?" Vidhi repeats.

“I did.”

“Wow,” she chuckles. “Did Rohan ask you to do so?”

“He didn’t,” I shrug. “He doesn’t even know I contacted you and have your number to apologise. But yes, he did shed some light on how you are not exactly to be blamed. He takes you as his family, Vidhi; hence, you have every right to ensure no one hurts him ever.”

“Ishika, you are forgiven, and to be honest, I should apologise to you too. I was equally rude.”

“That you were. You called me selfish, mean and dominating.” I frown.

“Did I? Why don’t I remember this?” Vidhi teases, and we both laugh aloud. She’s fun to talk to. Now I see why Rohan loves her so much.

“You were right, though,” I add. “Where Rohan is concerned, I am selfish, mean and dominating. I just want him back. Call me anything, but this time, I am not letting him go from my life ever. I don’t know how much he has told you about me, but let me confess, I was really selfish to leave him like that in the past.”

“Hold on, girl,” Vidhi interrupts. “You were not selfish. I know a bit about your past through both Vansh and Rohan, and if you ask me, I would say Rohan was at fault too. He shouldn’t have made you choose between him and Sunny. You never wanted to break your friendship. He made you do so.”

I hold back my surprise. This is the first time someone else is taking my side, thinking from my angle. No one ever did before. Maybe because I never shared it with anyone.

“Thanks for taking my side, but... it’s all in the past now, Vidhi. I picked the wrong guy, messed up my friendship with Roh and learnt a bitter lesson. After a decade, call it coincidence or destiny, I’ve got a chance to reconnect with Rohan again, and I don’t want to lose this opportunity and... him.”

“You won’t lose him this time. I’m confident about it.” She assures me.

I love her positivity. Soon, I ask her about Vansh and how I was never aware of Vidhi being Taani's sister. That's when she shares a bit of her backstory of how she and Taani are half-sisters. Vidhi is Taani's father's second wife's daughter. We don't get into the details, but what intrigues me is when she tells me about her hidden marriage with Vansh and how Rohan was a part of hiding that secret marriage from Vansh's family for almost five years. Now they have happily reconciled, are madly in love and cannot stay without each other. Vidhi also tells me how Rohan hated her at first and how she always felt that Rohan had major trust issues when it came to women, which is why she never saw him dating anyone seriously. Later, when Vansh told Vidhi about Rohan and my friendship and what happened thereafter, she understood the reason behind Rohan's trust issues. Since then, she became protective of him just like Rohan was towards her.

I like our little conversation, and on the note that we will stay in touch, we disconnect the call. I can't wait to meet her again during our college reunion, where Vansh, Vidhi, Taani and her spouse Sameer will also be there with Rohan and me. It will be so much fun.

CHAPTER 20

Rohan

Vidhi told me about Ishika calling her up and apologising, which came to me as a shock. I know how difficult it would have been for Ishika to do so, but they both decided to let go of the past argument and had a great time chatting. Both were looking forward to meeting each other during the college reunion in Delhi in a few days. Ishika was slowly realising that her behaviour pattern needed to change, which proved she thought over my words and valued my opinion.

When I stressed my point to Ishika that we were not exclusive and could have different partners, without it affecting our friendship had shaken her and was working like magic. Since five days, she has been behaving differently with me. Ishika admired me openly now, as though letting me know there were chances for us beyond friendship, as we had already breached that thin line last weekend by kissing each other passionately. But I blatantly ignored her subtle hints, as I wanted Ishika to thoroughly assess her feelings for me before deciding and extending our relationship from friends to lovers.

It was a hectic week at Ronishq for both of us, but it was worth it. The casting for Ishika's designs for the new Bridal collection was complete and was passed for the final fabrication, where the production team were now making aesthetic adjustments to the refined metal. After that, these beautiful jewellery pieces were readied for the stone setting. Once the gemstone, crystal and diamond settings are done this week, it will take a week more to complete the final polishing, finishing and quality assurance process before we release the collection into both online and offline markets. Since this was Ishika's first project with Ronishq, we were both excited to see the consumers' response.

On Friday night, we finally found time to spend together. So, Ishika and I visited one of the oldest pubs in Mumbai, an Irish pub with an open dance floor, rustic and cosy ambience,

stellar brews, good food and great music to keep us entertained throughout.

I am looking at the menu when Ishika grabs my arm.

“Roh, do you remember what we used to do when we came to the pub in the past?” She inquires eagerly. I think for a few seconds to figure out why she asked me this, and when she smiles slyly at me, I remember.

I go back a decade and reminisce about the college days when Ishika and I visited the best pub in town on her birthday to try alcohol for the first time. We were those hormonally driven mischief-makers who wanted to try those risqué named cocktails that were freaking new for us.

Since it was Ishika’s birthday, how could I refuse her wish of trying her first cocktail with me, her best friend? We sat at the barstool, checking out the menu with wide eyes.

“Are these for real?” Ishika gapes in excitement. “Have you decided what to start with?” She patted my arm.

“Umm... I am thinking. It will be so embarrassing to order these drinks. I hope they are worth it.”

Ishika laughed.

“C’mon, Roh. Be a man! Like that handsome bartender who is mixing the drinks.”

Did she call the bartender handsome? While she continued to scan the menu, I grabbed her shoulder and spun her to face me.

“The country’s most eligible bachelor is sitting next to you, and you are eyeing others?”

She fluttered her lashes sweetly.

“Good evening, Sir, Ma’am. This is Tony at your service. What would you like to order tonight?”

Tony smiled playfully at Ishika, which annoyed me. Before she could say anything, I decided what to order, no matter how embarrassing it would look. We had no idea that hearing these

risqué names would be a common occurrence for these bartenders, and they wouldn't judge us for ordering them.

*"One hot S*x on the Beach," I ordered, winking at the bartender, hoping he didn't see me blushing. Yep! Sex on the beach gave me visuals of Ishika and me spending a day on a private beach doing just that.*

*"And a Screaming Org*sm for me," Ishika added, shutting the menu card confidently.*

Just as expected, Tony didn't bat an eyelid. In fact, his expressions hinted he liked our choice of drinks.

*"And a Dirty Quickie on repeat, after my Screaming Org*sm."*

My eyes widened. Here we weren't even sure we would like the first drink that was about to be served, and she had plans of trying more? That too on repeat?

"And for you, Roh?" Ishika nudged me with her elbow.

I was speechless for a moment, but since she had made her second choice, I, too, picked my next.

"A Booty Cocktail for me," I add naughtily.

Our faces turned red with embarrassment as Tony winked at the two of us.

"Your girl is in a mood tonight, mate," Tony teased, thinking Ishika and I were a couple.

I immediately faced Ishika, who was looking at me with a confused expression. Did we look like we were in a relationship? My arms encircled Ishika's waist, and she was gazing at me with unbridled affection. Obviously, yes. Any onlooker looking at us right now would surely think we were a couple.

"Tony, we are just friends. Best friends," Ishika replied proudly, holding my hand.

"Every future couple always says that, my friend. That they are 'just friends'. But you never know," Tony winked at us and continued to make our drinks while Ishika laughed

heartily, telling him over and over again that it was never happening. That me and her, no matter what, will always remain friends.

“What would you like to order, Sir?”

The voice of the server breaks my trance and I’m back to the present. I keep staring at Ishika, who looks away from me and orders a French 75 for me and a Sunrise Mimosa for herself. I definitely need something stronger than that to curb the desire brewing inside me to kiss her again. She has worn a short chocolate-coloured sequin sleeveless bodycon dress, showing off her mile-long legs. Those full lips I’d kissed to my heart’s content a few days ago are painted in a nude gloss, and her thick silky tresses, which she ties into a ponytail at work, are now hanging loose on her shoulders. And let me not go to her brown stilettos. I just effing love it whenever she wears these heels. It’s been my fantasy to slip them off her feet one day, worshipping her feet with my kisses. F*ck! I’m hard just visualising that scene.

The server leaves us alone after taking our order. Ishika is the first one to break our silence.

“So, what are your plans for tomorrow?” she asks.

I know why she is asking me that.

“I have a dinner date with Amrita,” I reply with a casual smile. “Dad is all praises about her.”

Ishika clenches her jaw until she realises I am observing her closely.

“Don’t you get bored?” she queries. “How many women have you met for your Dad’s sake?”

“Quite a handful,” I shrug. “But not everyone is boring. Some are really sexy and entertaining too.”

Ishika rolls her eyes as she picks up the drink the server places by her side.

“Don’t worry. When I decide on my special someone, I’ll introduce you to her before giving my approval to Dad.”

“Oh, please,” she puts the glass down. “Don’t drag me into this match-making. I’m least interested.”

I didn’t intend to make her jealous. I’ve already sensed that she can’t see me with any other woman. Until now, she was the one who always played with my head and heart. I am just returning the favour to make her realise what it feels like. I don’t have any dinner plans tomorrow. Even though I had agreed to meet a woman for dinner in Ishika’s presence that day, I’d spoken to Dad again after reaching home and refused him, stressing that I was not interested in meeting anyone. He was confused by my sudden change of plan, but I promised to explain to him soon. Until I know where Ishika and I stand in each other’s lives, I cannot tell Dad that the only woman I see a future with is Ishika Bhatia. There can never be anyone else.

We drink quietly for some time. Ishika is lost in deep thoughts and is no longer her chirpy self. When the DJ plays one of our favourite songs from our college days, I drag her to the dance floor. She stays still for a few seconds, but seeing me dance, she, too, starts moving to the beats. Soon her giggles are back. I take the lead and sway her back and forth in my arms. Ishika’s body fits perfectly into mine. As we dance together, two drunk women come and barge into our dance, giving me flirtatious looks. One of them gives me a flying kiss while the other eye me hungrily. Ishika glares at them before pulling me to her possessively. The women frown at her and move away. We ignore them and continue to dance. Ishika doesn’t take her eyes off me lest someone else tries to bump into me. The music changes into another romantic number. I pull her into my arms to dance slowly, pulling her close with my arms circling her waist and hers wrapped around my neck. Our faces are inches apart. Who knew we could be this romantic?

I don’t recollect how long we dance like that on the floor without taking our eyes off each other. The music is soft and romantic, and so is the ambience around us, tempting me to kiss her, touch her and mark her as mine. Her body melts into mine as we come closer, and I am on the brink of losing it. I want to create a space in her head wherein her every waking thought is about me. I want Ishika to desire me physically and

emotionally. If kissing her in this pub is what it takes to make my intentions clear, so be it! Because my control is hanging by a thread. I'm craving Ishika more than ever, and I'm sure she is equally affected by me.

My hands slowly move down to her hips and squeeze them possessively. Her fingers are playing with my hair above the nape, sending sparks of electricity across my skin. I don't care if the DJ chooses the moment to play another popular track. I don't care when everyone starts dancing wildly. I don't care if it is the right time or not to kiss her. I don't care if I am making a fool of myself in front of the world. Because I can't deny my feelings anymore. I've waited too long already.

"If you keep looking at me like that, we might end up kissing again, Ishq." I finally warn her in a whisper.

Instead of backing away, Ishika's lips part in invitation as she eyes my lips for a few seconds as if weighing the possibility of what I just told her. If she doesn't stop looking at me so wantonly, I swear I'll fulfil my promise and kiss her right away. I am losing my sanity with every passing second, making it hard to keep my lips off her skin.

The DJ changes the music again, and much to my dismay, it's no longer the romantic number like before. Ishika pats my chest with a smile as though coming out of her trance and turns around in the circle of my arms, continuing to groove to the music. I pull her to me, wanting our bodies to mesh while I dance with her. The lover boy in me takes the lead, and without caring for the consequences, I lean down and place a kiss on Ishika's exposed neck, just below her jawline, while sliding my arm tightly around her waist and keeping her back glued to my chest. She lets out a surprised gasp before squeezing into me and tilting her neck, giving me further access to her body. I keep my lips on her neck, inhaling her unique scent, a blend of lavender and vanilla. I'm completely lost in my actions, and none of us wants it to stop. Ishika shifts her hand automatically to my neck and strokes it while her other hand rests above mine over her waist. Damn hell! I am in another world. We are in another world. I dare her to tell me if this was just a one-off for her again.

Ishika's breathing becomes uneven, and she stops moving in my arms. With her back still glued to my chest, her fingers playing seductively with my hair, her eyes closed in serenity and lips parted in anticipation, Ishika is a sight to behold. Is she waiting for me to continue? I know I am this close to giving in to my desires and taking this to another level. I've been sex-starved for a long time, and ever since we kissed, I have been struggling to do the right thing. I can't afford to go further with Ishika until I know we are on the same page. I pull myself together and withdraw my lips off her skin.

I move away from Ishika on the pretext of checking my phone. She turns around and keeps looking at me, hurt that I purposely broke the moment.

"It's too late. We should go." I tell her.

She gives a weak nod. Holding hands, we leave for home.

None of us speaks during the drive. I'm driving her car, and she is avoiding me and is gazing blankly out the window. By now, Ishika knows we both are willing to mutually blur this distance between us. I want her to think along those lines soon and come to a conclusion. We can't stay like this for long. If she still needs more time to ponder, I'm okay with it, but I have to nudge her in the right direction. That can happen only when I propose to her and tell her about my feelings for her.

I apply the brakes at the signal. It's 01:00 am, and the traffic is less. Even then, I follow the signal and wait for the light to turn green. As we were waiting, a red SUV zooms from behind us with the same two women flirting with me on the dance floor. They are howling in excitement as they break the signal, giving us a thumbs down for following the traffic rules and screaming 'boo' as they drive ahead at full speed.

"What the hell!" Ishika glares at the passing car. "They are the women from the pub, aren't they?"

I nod.

"Just drive, Roh. Follow them. They think these roads belong to them. They think they can beat us in driving. Let's

show them who we are. I spared them at the dance floor, not this time. Drive.”

I look at her calmly and stay put in my seat.

“Roh, c’mon. What are you waiting for? Drive. They wouldn’t have gone too far.”

“So?” I shrug. “Why should we chase them?”

“Have you forgotten how they hit on you on the dance floor? And now they just teased us and sped off. They are challenging us, Roh, and I won’t let them win.”

“Ishika, enough,” I snap. “Grow up. Life is not always about thrills, taking risks and accepting silly challenges to prove who is more deserving. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to live my life just to prove to others that I am superior to them. I want to live life with a purpose, with a vision, and do what I love, not play pointless challenges and pick up juvenile catfights. If you still want to chase that car, I’ll happily get down and take a cab from here while you proceed.”

Ishika turns around in her seat and looks at me straight in the eye. Her eyes speak for her. She is confused and taken aback by my reaction and is at a loss for words.

Together, we stare at the red light, waiting for it to turn green. Neither of us seems to be keen to speak again. When it turns green, I accelerate and drive ahead with determination to not look back or chase the SUV, silently letting Ishika know I’ve had enough of her challenge games and stubborn competitiveness.

CHAPTER 21

Ishika

My mind was completely drained. Last night, after Rohan and I got back to our respective apartments, I couldn't sleep until early morning and woke up again by brunch hour. For the first time in my life, I hated a day off as I knew I wouldn't be driving with Rohan to the office today and wouldn't get to spend the day with him; that today he had plans to go on a dinner date with someone else. His going out shouldn't bother me, as he had correctly pointed out the other day that we could not be exclusive in friendship. Yet, I couldn't help sulking over it since he gave me the news. It was complicated and confusing for me as I was physically attracted to Rohan. I regarded him as my friend, but there was so much more I was letting him do to me and vice versa. I desperately wanted to understand this pull I had started to feel towards him and how his wisdom and maturity towards life and relationships touched my heart. Since we met again, Rohan unfailingly showed me the mirror; of the mistakes I'd always failed to realise and analyse, even though my dad tried his best to guide or correct me over the years.

Rohan is messing with my head, heart and body to the extent that my every waking thought is Rohan, and he is all I think about when my day ends. I'm not new to this feeling as I've faced a similar emotion before when I had a crush on Sunny a decade ago. But that was different. What I feel for Rohan is more intense and completely out of my control. I'd tried to live my adult life avoiding these kinds of serious connections or relationships, but after meeting Rohan again, I was getting deeper and deeper into the pit of wanting him as more than just a friend.

Our kiss after the race, which I scoffed as a '*one-off*', was already creating havoc on my body whenever I reminisced about it, and now the way I'd let Rohan kiss my neck in the pub last night, letting him touch me while I kept stroking him was definitely not what 'just-friends' did. Didn't Rohan feel anything? I'm sure he did, but still, he didn't cancel his plans

for today. In the evening, around 07:00 pm, I saw Rohan from my balcony, leaving the building, looking smoking hot for his dinner date with Amrita, the woman his father wanted him to meet and see if they clicked together. The mere thought of it makes me sick in the stomach.

I have lost my appetite, yet I try to eat the cheese pasta I ordered for dinner while staring blankly at the television screen. What would Rohan be doing now with Amrita? Where had they gone for dinner? Did he feel that connection with her? Did they hold hands? No! I pull a rein to my thoughts, but they keep flooding my head. What if he likes Amrita? Will he marry her? Then why the hell did he kiss me in the pub? I keep the leftover pasta on the coffee table beside the couch and turn off the television. I was devastated when Sunny cheated on me, but Rohan meeting other women to please his father and agreeing to marry them if they connected is making me feel like a loser. I don't want to lose Rohan. Ever!

What is this feeling? Am I overreacting? I pace the living room, my eyes glued to my phone. Should I message him and ask how his dinner with Amrita is going? No! That will make him suspicious. Should I text him that I'm not feeling well? Will he return to me? Damn! What is wrong with me? I can't be this possessive for a man, can I? But it's Roh we are talking about. My Roh! Nope. I can't be selfish anymore and intrude on his plans. Maybe when we meet after he returns home, I'll ask him how his dinner was. Until then, I needed to talk to someone to feel better. I needed to divert my mind. I get back to the couch, grab my phone and dial Dad. He is always my go-to person whenever I'm emotionally weak. Dad answers my call on the second ring.

"Ishika?" He exclaims in surprise.

"Dad, hi!" I reply, smiling at his reassuring voice. "I am sorry to call you so late."

"It's okay, sweetheart. I am delighted you called. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Dad." I rub my face, trying to understand the questions in my head and my sudden urge to talk to him.

“How are you? I’m sorry I couldn’t call you last week as I was busy with the upcoming launch of my designs. I hope you are taking your BP medicines regularly and are not missing your morning walk.”

“I’m hale and hearty, baby. But why do you sound so low? All okay there?”

He always catches my mood by my tone.

“Dad, I was wondering if I could come and meet you.”

“Of course?” Dad smiles. I can hear it in his voice. “Now, I am certain you are not okay. You never come to meet me, sweetheart. You demand me to come and meet you.”

Yeah, I demand.

“Since the past few days, I have sensed you are upset over something. I was just waiting for you to call me and talk about it. I can fly to Mumbai tomorrow and see you.”

“No, Dad, please don’t. I know your schedule is hectic.”

“Everything else can wait, Ishika. My daughter is my top priority.”

I know that, and I feel loved and cherished to hear those words from him again.

“Anyways, tell me, what happened? What has upset my daughter, or rather who has upset my girl?”

Where should I begin? Though Dad knows I work for Ronishq, I haven’t told him about Rohan, that he is my Boss, and we met again. I’m not sure how he’ll react, but I know he liked Rohan in the past and trusted him. Dad, too, wasn’t happy with my decision to shift to Mumbai for Sunny and knew how Rohan had asked me to choose between him and my feelings for Sunny.

I clear my throat and continue, “I met Rohan again, Dad. He is my boss now.”

“I know that already.”

“You do?” I am shocked.

“Yes, sweetheart. When RC Group of Company’s jewellery subsidiary was taken over by Ronishq, I knew since then that Rohan was going to be your new boss.”

He did? And he never told me?

“In fact, I’d congratulated Rohan on his new venture when he called me to give this news last year.”

Congratulated?

“Dad, hold on. Rohan called you last year?”

Dad is silent. I sense he is hiding something.

“Dad, speak up. Why didn’t you tell me Rohan had called you last year? That you spoke to him?”

“Ishika,” he sighs. “Forgive me for what I am about to tell you. You know I don’t hide anything from you. But this is one thing I hid from you for all these years. Rohan always stayed in touch with me via phone calls throughout the last decade, sweetheart.”

My heart thumps against my ribcage. Rohan was in contact with my father?

“He was your true friend, Ishika. No matter what happened to your friendship, he called me every few months to check up on me, my health and work. He often asked for my advice on expanding his business, and his suggestions have helped our company retain valuable clients. That boy is a gem. He always was.”

I am speechless. Rohan and my father were in touch, and none of them told me about it? I feel betrayed, but more than that, I feel elated that Rohan was kind enough to look after my father’s well-being.

“Rohan didn’t want me to tell you that we spoke often, and believe me, apart from inquiring about your welfare, he never asked anything else about you. I, too, never gave him any details, respecting your privacy. Our conversations were restricted to general and business-related topics.”

God! How should I process this news?

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, I had to hide this from you. When you started working for Ronishq, I knew you had met Rohan again. Is everything okay between you two now? Are you back as friends?” He asks.

I don’t know what to say. Yes, we are back together, but this time, it’s more than friendship that’s bothering me and the sole reason why I wanted to speak to Dad and feel better. But knowing Dad and Rohan were in touch, and Rohan never showed any curiosity about my personal life during his interactions with Dad, annoys me even more.

I hear the sound of Rohan’s apartment door opening. Is he back from his dinner date?

“Dad, I’ll speak to you later.”

“Ishika? Why? What happened? Are you upset with me now?”

“No, Dad. I am not. We’ll speak about this. Give me some time.”

Dad agrees and disconnects the call while I hurry out to meet Rohan. I ring his doorbell, holding on to my curiosity. Rohan opens the door and is surprised to find me there.

“May I come in?” I ask politely, even though I want to bash him for not telling me that he kept in touch with my father.

“Sure.”

He lets me inside and strides back to his bedroom, leaving the door open, which I take as a cue to follow.

“How was your dinner?” I reach his bedroom door and ask.

Rohan slides his jacket off his shoulder and puts it away.

“The dinner was amazing.”

“And Amrita?” I boldly ask, not caring if I sound jealous or if Rohan becomes suspicious.

He stops fiddling with his shirt buttons and looks at me. Rohan is dressed in a black shirt and blue jeans, looking dapper. He always looked sexy in casual outfits like this, but

the jacket he wore today accentuated his appeal even more. Ideal for a first date with a woman.

“What do you think?” He queries back, trying to read my expressions.

“I think she must be great too.”

“Yes, she was,” he nods with a cheeky smile.

My blood boils when he turns back to the mirror and continues to unbutton his shirt.

“Did you two dance together?”

“Yes,” he smiles, ignoring my inquisitiveness and continues to unfasten his shirt buttons.

“Just like we danced yesterday?” I dig further.

Rohan pauses and looks at me through the reflection in the mirror, and I suddenly realise I am talking nonsense and am probably overreacting, but I can't help it.

“Why are you asking me that?” he shrugs. “Was there anything special in the way we danced yesterday night?” he adds, still looking at me in the mirror, but I know he is watching and gauging my reactions.

Is he that oblivious to the chemistry that oozed between us last night?

“You know what?” I snap. “If you want to question me for a question, we better not have this conversation.”

I turn to leave, but his fingers grasp my wrist and haul me hard to his chest. I wriggle to escape, but his arms encircle my waist tightly, leaving me no choice but to stay put.

“You have changed, Ishq.”

I ignore his deep voice and focus on what he is saying instead.

“I have changed? I, Roh?” I argue. “Ever since we met again, I've been the one chasing you for everything. You are either ignoring me or taking me for granted. You are even

hiding things from me, Roh. So how dare you tell me that I have changed?"

"You still don't get it, do you?" he pushes the strands of my hair away from my face, looking at me intently. "My old Ishika could easily spot my lie."

Lie? What is he talking about?

"Now you even started lying to me?" I shout. "What did you lie to me about, Roh?"

Rohan smiles lazily, keeping his eyes on me.

"That I had a dinner date with Amrita tonight," he answers. "I lied."

What? He didn't go out with Amrita today? Relief courses through every pore in my body.

"I'd refused Dad that I would not meet Amrita the very night I agreed to it."

All my anger evaporates that very instant.

"Why?" I whisper, gripping his upper arms. Rohan holds my gaze but remains silent, prompting me to continue my rant. "Is it because you do not want permanent relationships, or is it because you don't trust women anymore, even as friends? And I know that's all because of me. You think we women are complicated. That we want our friend to run behind us, losing all his sanity, and in the end, we leave him for someone else. Someone whom we think is more charming and worthy enough for us to spend our life with. I broke you, Rohan. Didn't I?"

Rohan is startled that I said the exact same lines which he had once said to Shreya, a girl from our college in Delhi.

"How... how do you know all this?"

Now it's my turn to be shocked. In my anger, I didn't realise I was opening up a major chapter of our lives.

"You came back?" he asks, with hope in his eyes. "You came back to me in Delhi after Sunny's fiasco?"

Tears blur my vision. The desperation to know the truth is so raw that Rohan himself doesn't realise he is on the verge of breaking down.

“Yes. I... I had come back to you, Roh. I'd come back to apologise to you. To tell you that I was wrong and you were right the whole time. That I made a wrong choice and that I shouldn't have abandoned you and our friendship. I had come back, Roh. I had come back to say sorry to you... to my best friend.”

Tears choke the back of my throat.

“I saw you with Shreya and heard you lamenting over your broken trust in women and their friendship.”

“F*ck!” he groans, stepping back and rubbing the back of his neck in utter dismay as I continue.

“How could I face you when I was the reason behind your agony, Roh? Your pain broke me. Your hidden tears that day stabbed my heart, and it took away my courage to face you again. Ever.”

Rohan strides back to me and cups my cheeks.

“Ishq, I swear I'd felt your presence that day. But I ignored it, thinking you would never return. I was so damn wrong. Do you even realise we didn't have to be separated for a decade? How stupid of us, Ishika. How stupid of you to hide this from me all these years?”

“If I'm stupid, so are you.” I hit his chest playfully. “You stayed in touch with my father throughout, but not me? Really, Roh? Was your ego that bruised? You asked about his well-being, but you never showed an iota of curiosity to know how I was doing. Where was I? With whom? You asked nothing about me.” I hit him again.

Rohan is shocked that I got to know his little secret.

“If Dad hadn't confessed this secret today, I would never know how kind and compassionate my idiotic friend is to care about my father so much,” I add.

Before I can continue to nag, Rohan pulls me into his arms and kisses my forehead.

“Sorry, baby. I’m so sorry to keep that decade-old grudge on you all this time.”

I hug him back and calmly listen to him.

“I am guilty of making you choose between Sunny and me. I shouldn’t have done that, Ishq. As a true friend, I should have supported you and shown you Sunny’s true face. I shouldn’t have let you go, Ishq. You wouldn’t have suffered so much had I done that. I am sorry. I realise now that I wasn’t there for you when you needed a friend. When you returned to apologise, you had to hear my venomous tirade. We both had to live without each other for a decade. I am sorry, Ishq. Forgive me.”

“Sshh...” I pull away and meet his teary eyes. “You weren’t at fault, Roh. It was my mistake too. I shouldn’t have left without reassuring you that no matter what, you were and would always be my best friend. No one has, and no one will ever replace you in my heart. I’m sorry too. I should have gathered a little courage and faced you that day; we could have avoided ten painful years of our lives. I am really sorry.”

My guilt is eating me from the inside out, but so is his. He accepted that he had erred by making me choose between friendship and Sunny.

“I don’t care about what happened in the past, Ishq. I have you... now and forever,” he chokes, pulling me tight to his chest again.

Rohan holds me tightly as though he will never let me go. I do the same and hug him back with the same desperation.

“I’m never letting you go. Never...” he sobs in between each heated kiss that he plants on my forehead. I wipe my tears and kiss his cheek.

I’m overwhelmed to know how much he cared for me, how much he missed me, how much he loved me, and most importantly, how much he meant to me and vice versa. Today

we have cleared the biggest elephant in the room - our past.
Finally, we can look forward to our future...together. I hope.

CHAPTER 22

Rohan

The beauty of friendship is that it resumes from where you'd left it, irrespective of time and distance. Ishika and I had a lot to catch up on, and we did that in a matter of a week. I told her how I decided to change my career path from starting an automobile company to joining Dad's Oberoi Group of Companies because he needed a helping hand, then starting 'Ronishq' as one of its subsidiaries. Without Ishika, none of the dreams and plans that we had thought of together mattered. And I don't regret it anymore. Ronishq has my heart and soul; it is my baby, and nothing can take that away from me.

Ishika told me that after her breakup with Sunny, she focused on being financially independent, despite being an heiress to an empire. Her best memory was seeing her mother look contented and blissfully happy, designing beautiful pieces of jewellery. So she decided to follow in her mother's footsteps and excel at it and became a jewellery designer. Racing was still a major part of her life, but she pursued it only as a passion. She took up a job with the RC Group of Companies, and with her excellent skills and novel, creative ideas in jewellery making, she soon bagged the role of their lead designer and continued to grow in that role. Apart from our professional lives, we also discussed our personal ties. While I didn't mind sharing about my affairs in the past decade, when she began telling hers, I couldn't bear to listen. I had no interest in knowing the kind of men she had gone on a date with. We may have had affairs and casual relationships, but none of them matched the kind of bonding we had between us. The only person Ishq could connect mentally and emotionally with was me, and if there was anyone who could make me feel at home again, it was her.

The coming weekend, we would be flying to Delhi for this year's college reunion and would be staying there for two days. I can't wait to meet my friends Vansh, Vidhi, Taani and

Sameer, who are also going to be a part of this reunion. But more than that, I am excited about something else. I've decided to propose to Ishika during that event. I want to do what I couldn't a decade ago. I have a strong intuition she would rant and rave at first, then break into tears before sealing my proposal with a kiss. Or she might ask for some time to think over it, which I was okay with. But it was time she knew about my love for her since years and how I had given up that hope until she returned and bridged the gap between us. We had cleared our past misunderstandings and apologised to each other for a few wrong decisions made at the time. With that, my hope was revived, and so was my courage to finally take this step.

I sneeze again and switch off the fan and the air conditioner. I had a cold and body ache since morning and was feverish by the time I returned home from the office.

The doorbell rings. It must be the medicine guy, as I had ordered a few meds. I open the door to find Ishika leaning against my doorframe, holding a tub of ice cream and popcorn, and smiling at me. The moment I see her, I shut the door in her face.

“What the! Roh.” She bangs the door hard. “What is this nonsense? Why are you shutting me out again?”

“For your own benefit, Ishq. Go back to your apartment.”

“But why?” she shouts from the outside. “You promised we'll watch a movie tonight.”

“Plans have changed,” I reply with a heavy heart.

“But why?” she groans.

“I'm sick, Ishq.”

“What?! You are sick of me?” She bangs the door hard this time.

Gosh! This woman. Why will I be sick of her?

“I'm not feeling well, Ishq. Feverish, to be precise. And I don't want you to fall ill because of me. Give me a few hours, and I'll be fine.”

“Fever?” she shouts again from the outside. “Oh God, Roh. Is that why you left early from work? Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I am telling you now, baby.” I gently touch the inside of the door, knowing she is worried about me. I wish I could open the door and seek comfort in her.

“Roh, open the door. I’m coming inside.”

Is she serious?

“Ishq, I just told you I can’t let you fall ill.”

“That’s not something you get to decide. You are not feeling well, and you want me to go home and rest? Not happening. Open the damn door before I break in.”

I know she can’t just break in like that, but I’m afraid she won’t go away until I allow her in. So, before she continues to rant from outside and wakes up the entire building, I unlock the door. The moment she sees me, Ishika touches my forehead and neck with the back of her palm.

“Why are you even out of bed? You should be resting.”

“That’s what I was going to do until you rang the bell and started arguing with me.”

She rolls her eyes and drags me inside the bedroom.

“Did you eat?” she asks, leaving my hand as she adjusts the pillows on the bed for me.

“Yes, a little.”

“And medicines?”

“I have ordered them.”

She glares at me and exhales in disbelief.

“One should always have over-the-counter medicines for emergencies, Roh. How can you not keep some? Anyway, I’ll get them for you. But before that, we need to check your temperature. If it’s alarming, we are calling a doctor.”

“Doctor? No effing way. I’ll be fine tomorrow morning.”

She helps me lie down comfortably on the bed and covers me with a blanket.

“Still scared of syringes, I see,” Ishika teases.

Yes. I am damn scared of anything poking me from my childhood.

“Excuse me! I am not scared of needles. It’s just that...that I am not comfortable with them.” I manage a light chuckle.

“That’s what I thought.” She winks at me. “I’ll get the thermometer and the medicines.”

“Please, Ishika, I am fine,” I tell her again.

“I am not going to let you fall sick, Roh. So just relax and let me handle this.”

She leaves but returns in a couple of minutes with a medicine box. She pulls out a big glass thermometer and reaches me.

I snatch the thermometer from her.

“I can check it myself.”

“I don’t think so.” She grabs the thermometer back and comes closer.

“No, Ishq.” I hold her hand to stop her from coming closer. “I can do it.”

She’s my everything, and I don’t want her to fall sick by coming close to me, but Ishika is too stubborn to obey.

Ishika pushes my head back to rest on the pillow, places the tip of the thermometer inside my mouth and holds my hand in hers. “Don’t move.”

I flash her a smile and keep my eyes locked with hers as she waits for the reading. A few seconds later, she pulls it out of my mouth and reads it.

“100 degrees.” Worry laces her tone. She passes me paracetamol and a glass of water.

“Can you break it into half?” I tease.

“I want you recovered fully, not by a half measure. So, stop fussing and take medicine quickly.”

I reluctantly comply with her wishes. It’s funny how the years between us hadn’t extinguished the spark of bossiness in her.

“Are you feeling cold, baby?”

“I’m not a baby,” I remind, pulling the blanket up, feeling cold.

Ishika smirks at my action, realising I’m cold but pretending otherwise.

“I know how much of a baby you are when you get sick, Roh. You can’t fool me. Stay there. I’ll warm you.”

She’ll warm me? That one line makes me warm already. Ishika hurries to the closet, takes out an extra comforter and reaches me again. She arranges it over me and is about to turn off the lights when I hold her wrist.

“We can watch a movie. I’m not really sleepy.”

She turns back to me and puts on the lights.

“You are not sleepy, but you need rest. And you are not supposed to watch TV. It strains your eyes when you have a fever.”

“My fever is not going to worsen if I watch a movie. Since you’re already here and we had made plans, let’s just watch something; unless you plan to leave.”

She looks at me with a grin, knowing I’m not going to relent.

“You think I will leave you all alone in this condition? No way. Now lie down.”

She switches off the lights, and I lie down on the bed, resting my back on the bed rest. Ishika turns on the TV and comes over to me. She plops beside me and scoots closer. I wrap my arms around her and enjoy this closeness with her. She’s so comfortable. I’m sure she can hear my heart beating loudly for her. We watch the ever-popular sitcom, ‘Friends’,

one of our favourites, and despite the years, it never gets boring. Once the series is on, she puts her head on my shoulder and starts rubbing my arms to warm me up.

I close my eyes and sigh, sitting in silence, feeling the warmth of her body, the rhythm of her breathing and the smell of her hair. I've missed her so much. God, I want to do so much more than just hold her. But I don't want her to get sick because of me.

"Are you feeling warm now?" she asks.

"Hmm," I answer. "Are you?"

"I am fine," Ishika replies.

"Me too."

"Good." She smiles and gives me a quick peck on my cheek. Her lips are so soft and gentle. My Ishq is the most beautiful woman in the world. I'm fighting an internal battle within myself to not give in and kiss her.

Ishika is not letting me move away from her, even for a bit. She's holding me as she knows I crave this closeness and affection when I am not feeling well. A part of me is anxious, but the other part is enjoying this moment of companionship, camaraderie and intimacy. I'm with Ishika, the love of my life. The one I've been pining and yearning for since years.

Ishika

Rohan is sick, and I'm not leaving this place until he completely recovers. It was thoughtful and awfully sweet of him to think about my well-being and not allow me near him when I rang his doorbell. Thankfully, he caved in and allowed me to take care of him. But this time, it feels different. I looked after him when he was ill, even earlier during our college days, but today, when we are again back together, all I want to do is cuddle him and never let him go. Though we resolved our past bitterness, sleep eluded me. For the past few days, I had this feeling of incompleteness; a feeling that something was missing in my life. Despite getting back my friendship with Rohan and being closer than ever, there's something more that I need from him. It took me a few sleepless nights to realise that feeling is companionship. Had anyone told me a decade ago that I would develop feelings for Rohan beyond friendship, I would have laughed at them. But now, this very thought makes me happy and gives me hope that we two would make a lovely pair. We understand each other so well. There is absolutely no room for any third person to come between us and claim our hearts, which I know we have already given each other. I don't know about him, but I want to profess my feelings for him soon.

I can't help but smile at the thought of us being a couple. I want us to hold hands on the streets, go on holidays together, kiss each other, do everything together and be loved by each other's families.

"Why are you smiling all alone?" Rohan asks, looking up at me. He raises his hand and strokes my cheeks with his thumb.

"I was thinking about the college reunion," I lie. But it's not really a lie. I think that's when I can profess my feelings to him. Before all of our friends!

"I can't wait for that day," he grins. His tone is soft, sending shivers down my spine. I'm seriously going ahead and proposing Rohan. My cheeks burn at the possibility of this happening in the coming days.

“Me neither,” I add, confident of what I have to do.

I can't bear to see Rohan with anyone else, and I think he, too, doesn't like to see me with another man. We need to talk about our feelings toward each other soon.

“Ishika, you need to go back home.” He tells me after a few minutes of silence. I smile and lean against his chest, feeling comfortable in his arms again.

“Get well soon first. Then I will go home,” I reply.

Rohan acquiesces, and we continue watching the TV. I don't know about him, but my entire focus is on the way he is stroking my back as I cuddle into him. We are lying on the bed next to each other, huddled under the blanket. In a few minutes, I hear Rohan snoring. He's fast asleep. I can't help but gaze at him intently, running my thumb over his lips.

“Few more days, Roh and I'm claiming you as mine,” I whisper to him before turning off the TV and leaning against his chest. We have slept together before, the night we were heavily drunk, but tonight, I'm sharing his bed consciously because this is where I belong. Next to him. With him. With my Roh. Forever! I close my eyes, cuddle him, and finally fall asleep.

CHAPTER 23

Rohan

When did I get so lucky to wake up with Ishika in my arms? I smile as I open my eyes, feeling the warmth of her body, the unique scent of her hair and the comforting rhythm of her breathing. She's fast asleep and looks like an angel. I don't remember much about the previous night except for telling her to go home. Then I fell asleep, and now, when I woke up, she was huddled beside me.

"Ishika?" I call her.

Ishika doesn't budge. I look at her face and realise she's in a deep sleep. I stroke her hair softly, enjoying my interrupted moment of admiration, unwilling to wake her up or leave her. I want to stay with her on the bed, and God knows how I'm curbing my temptation to kiss her plump lips. But I can't. Not until I tell her about my feelings, and she reciprocates the same. Eventually, I know that day is not too far when Ishika is soon going to be the first thing I touch every morning and the last thing I taste every night.

With that hope, I try to slowly move away from her, trying not to wake her up, but she wriggles in her sleep and scoots closer to me, unwilling to break the contact of our bodies. Is she feeling cold? I recall having a fever last night, but now I am fine. But what about her? I quickly press the back of my palm over her neck and forehead and find her body temperature normal. Relieved that my fever didn't affect her, I softly untangle her arms from me and get out of bed.

Taking a quick shower. I come out, putting on a fresh pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, to find Ishika wide awake on the bed, yawning and stretching her delectable body. Seeing her on my bed as though she belongs there sets my heart aglow with desire. I'm desperate to feel her body pressed against mine and to have Ishika at my mercy. I can almost taste the sweetness of her surrender on my lips and feel the fierce heat scorching every inch of my skin. I'm so tempted to go to her and pin her beneath me.

“Good morning, Roh. How’s your fever now?”

“Gone,” I reply instantly, watching her remove her hair tie, bounce her hair around and tie it again into a ponytail.

This simple gesture excites and arouses me. I can’t distract myself from the thoughts plaguing my head. How would a morning like this pan out between us if we were dating and living together?

“You know we are not teenagers anymore to sleep like that on a bed together?” I remind Ishika as she watches me keenly.

“I know. But when you fell asleep last night, I couldn’t help but cuddle you and sleep,” she says, giving me a sly smile. “Someone had to be there to keep you warm, Roh. Whether you like it or not, I really care about you. What if your teeny-weeny friend had shivered with cold at night?” she adds, holding her laughter.

F*ck! She again made fun of my manhood with that silly name. I am not going to leave her today. I stalk towards her with determination and pin her to the bed in one swift move, my arms holding hers securely above her head. She stares at me with wide eyes, a mix of fear and excitement flooding her face.

“Again, teeny-weeny, huh? Do you really think you can tease me and get away with it?” I whisper, my mouth hovering just above hers. She gazes at my lips, and hers curve into a devilish smile. I realise she likes messing with me, and the feeling is mutual. I tickle her stomach to punish Ishika, and though she tries to shove me away and roll off the bed, nothing works.

“Roh... Stop...” She giggles hysterically.

“Say sorry first,” I demand, continuing to tickle her.

“To whom?” She laughs harder this time, “To your teeny-weeny?”

Damn hell! I tickle her some more.

“Alright. I am sorry. I am sorry. Stop. Please stop,” she gasps.

As soon as my grip on her wrists slackens, Ishika lunges forward with all her might, throwing us onto the bed and pinning me underneath her as she begins to mercilessly tickle me. We keep flipping each other over, whooping with laughter and cuddling close, tickling the other in ways that send shivers of joy through my body. I am fully enveloped by the moment until my phone rings and shatters our bliss. I curse at the interruption and reluctantly grab my phone to check who dared to disturb our playful moment. It's Vansh Kapoor!

"Sssh. It's Vansh." I tell Ishika before answering the call. "Hey," I pant.

"Rohan? Why are you panting like that? All well?"

Ishika hears his query and is about to laugh when I shut her mouth with my palm, warning her with my eyes not to utter a word.

"I... I am on the treadmill. I mean... was... I was running on the treadmill." I lie.

"Oh, okay. It didn't sound like you were on the treadmill. Anyway, I..."

"Roh..." Ishika seductively calls out my name, pushing my palm away from her mouth, "...can you make the bed while I brew coffee for us?"

F*ck! She whispers it loud enough for Vansh to hear and scurries off, giving me a flying kiss. Ishika sprints to my bathroom, laughing at my awkward state, leaving me alone to face Vansh's barrage of questions about what we were doing together.

"Was that Ishika?" Vansh asks.

"Umm... no. That was... Yes. I..."

"I thought so. You are never in the gym at this hour, Rohan. You are at home, right? And wait, why was Ishika talking about your bed? What is she doing in your bedroom so early? Did you two..."

"Stop. Hold your horses, Vansh. It's not what you are thinking."

Vansh switches the call to video, but I decline it.

“I... I can't do a video call, buddy. Not now. Later.”

“That means Ishika is in your bedroom. Damn you, Rohan. When did this happen, and why didn't you tell me? Just two days ago, you told us about your plan to propose to her during the reunion, and you are sharing a room already?”

I quickly go to the living room, so Ishika doesn't hear our conversation.

“Vansh, relax. Nothing has changed. I'm proposing to her during the reunion. Last night, I had a fever, and she happened to look after me. We stayed together. That's it. You know how it is.”

Vansh hears me out patiently before responding.

“Yeah,” he exhales. “I know how it is. It's hard to harden your teeny-weeny when it is sick,” he teases.

What the! Again teeny-weeny?

“Not you too, Brutus!” I yell back.

“What do you mean?” Vansh inquires and suddenly screams in excitement as though he has unravelled the mystery of what a woman REALLY wants. “Oh no. Don't tell me Ishika also teases you with that name?”

I roll my eyes while Vansh laughs hysterically.

“Oh, man! She is perfect for you. Seriously. Only she can come up with such names for your member.” He continues to laugh.

“You sound so much like Vidhi when you tease me like that. She's taught you quite well as she's a pro in below-the-belt humour.”

“She's taught me a lot more than just being humorous *below the belt*,” he counters, and we both laugh together. “So? What's your plan for proposing to Ishika during the reunion? Let me know if you need any help.”

I grin at his thoughtful offer before glancing at the bedroom door, which is still shut; it means Ishika is still in there.

“There are no plans, Vansh. This proposal has been pending since a decade. It’s time for action now.”

“Still looks like a plan to me,” he laughs. “I’m happy for you, Rohan.”

I’m happy for me too.

“I better get going,” I say, seeing Ishika head to the kitchen. “I have so much to do before I fly to Delhi for the reunion.”

“Okay. I’ll call you later. See you soon, buddy.”

“Yep. See you soon in Delhi. Bye.”

I disconnect the call and walk to the kitchen to prepare our coffee. Ishika is already there, leaning over the counter, surveying my kitchen. She is rotating her neck side-by-side to loosen her stiff muscles, confirming she had cuddled me the entire night. Watching her like this, all I can think about is dragging her to my bed again and making her writhe in desire as I make slow, tender love to her and increase the tempo, taking her to an earth-shattering climax.

The visuals of this explicit scenario make me hard as a rock.

“Take a seat. Coffee will be ready in a minute.” I say before she can notice my embarrassing state.

Ishika looks at me and pushes me back before I can make the coffee.

“I might not be a good cook, but I do know how to make good coffee.”

I stare at her retreating back, watching her remove the mugs from the shelf and keep it on the counter. She then switches on the coffee maker and brews fresh coffee for us. She looks cute when she takes care of me. Though inept in culinary skills, Ishika is well-versed in making coffee. She keeps talking to me while I have no effing clue what she is speaking about as I am lost in admiring her move so effortlessly in my kitchen. I have to restrain myself from taking her in my arms, pushing her against the counter and kissing her until we both are breathless.

Ishq hands me a steaming cup of coffee. I take a sip, sighing in approval.

“Not bad.”

She raises her brow in disbelief, and I can't help but smirk.

“Thank you for looking out for me last night, Ishq.”

“You would do the same for me, Roh. And to be honest, I wasn't taking care of you. I was taking care of what belonged to me. *You are mine,*” she says, her voice fierce and possessive. The intensity in her words takes me by surprise, and my eyes widen as the reality of what she's saying sinks in.

Ishika suddenly checks the clock.

“Gosh, I'll be late to the office if I don't start getting ready now. I can't believe we are finally launching the Bridal collection of our crystal jewellery tomorrow.”

She finishes the hot coffee in two gulps and puts the mug away to leave when I pin her to the marble counter with my arms on either side of her body.

“What did you just say?” I whisper. “I am yours?” I repeat it for her and lean closer.

Ishika's eyes widen in surprise, realising I caught her slip of the tongue.

“You want me to be exclusively yours, Ishq? Is that what you meant?”

She stares at her fingers running over my chest. It looks like she wants to say something.

“What?” I urge.

Ishika raises her gaze and looks into my eyes.

“I'm thinking along those lines,” she replies with a mischievous smile. “But let's not get into the details now, please. Tomorrow is an important day for Ronishq and for our new collection. We should focus on that. We have enough time to discuss the rest when we fly to Delhi at the weekend.”

I'm impatient to know what she had in mind while Ishika wants me to wait. I know being the lead designer, her mind must be occupied with tomorrow's launch, and I know she will be busy all day with her team, discussing and preparing for the launch. I've no option but to wait. I smile at her, agreeing to her demand, before kissing her forehead. She pouts her lips, hoping for a kiss on the lips. And believe me, I want to, but I can't. Not until she decides whether this is going to be a one-time thing or if it's going to be a long-term, serious commitment.

"Looks like we have a lot of catching up to do during the college reunion," I reply before letting her go.

"You have no idea," she winks, pushing me away. "Now I better leave and get ready. See you later. And Rohan..."

"Hmm."

"Are we carpooling today?"

"Of course we are," I grin. "I'm driving your car. It's been long since I touched her."

Ishika rolls her eyes.

"She's all yours."

Why do I feel she is not talking about the car but herself?

"Yep. She's all mine!" I answer naughtily before she turns around and leaves my apartment. Thank God! Our relationship is finally taking a turn in the direction I always wanted.

Ishika

The launch of my vintage crystal bridal jewellery exceeded the projected expectations. After the official launch, there was a long photo session with the local newspaper, fashion magazines and a few celebrities and influencers who were invited for the launch. The media interviewed Rohan and me to widely cover and advertise our launch. We were at the venue for almost six hours, and the feedback from the press was phenomenal. Ronishq Jewels was an overnight sensation, and my creation was lauded because of its unique vintage-style jewellery collection, specially designed for modern Indian brides. We were going to be featured on the cover of every popular fashion magazine by next week, with famous celebrities endorsing and vying for our designs. Brides-to-be were already snapping up our collection online. The frenzy was unbelievable.

All the effort and hard work I'd put into my vintage collection were paying off. Ronishq Jewels was garnering instant popularity within 3-4 days of the launch. I remembered Dad telling me once, '*Work hard. Your limitation is only your imagination.*' He was right. Though I'd garnered success and fame even while working with my former company, I got twice the success this time around. I hadn't expected this hurricane of fame and popularity in such a short span. I and Rohan's company, 'Ronishq', have a long way to go now. We had started discussing the next season's collection with my team and the management on Friday, but that same night, Rohan and I had a flight to catch for Delhi. So the discussions were postponed to next week until we returned.

DELHI

Unlike Mumbai, Rohan and my house were at a distance in Delhi. So, after landing, we took two different cabs to our respective homes, with Rohan promising to pick me up tomorrow evening at 07:00 pm for the reunion party at the Hilton Hotel. I still hadn't shopped for a new dress for the party, which I planned to do tomorrow. Though I wanted

Rohan to accompany me shopping, I realised he might have his own plans, and I had to give him that space. I still couldn't believe I was finally going to propose to Rohan. I wonder what his reply to my proposal would be.

The next day, I bought a strappy-sleeved, black, embellished split cocktail dress for the party. The open-neck, thigh-high slit and matching stilettos complete my overall look for tonight's party. I can imagine Rohan's reaction to this outfit. I know he doesn't like me attracting unnecessary attention from the guys. But he doesn't know that I chose this outfit for a reason. Being ever popular in college, there will be a bevy of beautiful women trying to flirt and hook up with him tonight, and by choosing this seductive and sexy dress, I know I will have his undivided attention.

I apply subtle makeup, highlighting my eyes and cheeks, brush my hair, curling a few loose strands at the ends and apply my favourite lipstick colour, a deep plum, before giving myself a quick glance in the mirror. I hope Rohan likes what he sees. I have a vague idea of what I need to do to propose to him tonight. If he reciprocates my feelings, I am going to take him away to be alone with him once the party ends. I want Rohan to only think about me tonight. His friends can have his time and attention during the party and tomorrow if need be, but tonight, I'm going to be selfish by keeping my man glued to me.

A message beeps on my phone, breaking my chain of thoughts. It's Rohan asking me to come down as he is here and waiting for me. I take a deep breath before grabbing my silver clutch, which has my mobile, lip gloss and keys to my apartment, and make a beeline for the elevator.

Dressed in well-fitting ash black jeans, a slim-fit button-down white shirt, and a classic grey jacket, Rohan is impatiently waiting for me. If only looks could kill, I would have touched heaven the moment I laid my eyes on him. But what caught my attention were the classic oxford leather shoes and eagle brown leather belt, which gave him a sophisticated and stylish vibe.

He is standing beside his newest baby, a brand new red luxury car, busy tapping his fingers over the bonnet while checking his watch. Are we late? I don't care as long as I have my Roh with me. As I near him, Rohan raises his head, and we see each other. He inhales sharply as he looks me up from top to bottom before meeting my eyes again. There's a glint of desire in his eyes which tells me he loves what he sees. I smile in satisfaction knowing I affect him as deeply as he affects me.

"Hey," I stop before him. "How many hearts are you planning to break tonight, Roh?" I punch his chest.

"Well, that's debatable." He jokes, holding my hand. "Since you are dressed to burn the goddamn dance floor tonight, I won't have time to focus on any other woman considering I would be chasing away the men who would want to get close to you, Ishq."

He finds my dress sexy? That elevates my mood. Rohan kisses the back of my hand like a perfect gentleman. He has no idea I might demand more from him by the end of the party if he accepts my proposal.

"Let's stick to each other then," I suggest.

"I don't mind." His eyes are raw with emotion, and my heart somersaults. Forget other women; if he keeps looking at me like that, I might drag him away even before the party begins.

His lips twitch for a second as he entwines my fingers with his and guides me towards the car door.

"We're going to be late for the party. We must leave."

Rohan helps me get into the passenger seat, and when I'm settled inside and strapped, he gets to his side and takes the wheel. I already have a feeling that tonight is going to change our future. For Good!

CHAPTER 24

Rohan

I can feel my heart somersaulting in my chest as I resist the temptation to haul Ishika in my arms and propose to her right away. She looks breathtaking in that dress tonight, enticing me to get rid of it and have my way with her. And those stilettos... I've always wanted to help her take them off in my own sweet time and appreciate how sexy they looked on her feet.

"I can't wait to meet everyone," Ishika says, interrupting my naughty plans.

"Me too," I reply, accelerating the car.

Though I'm excited to meet my friends at the party, I can't wait to get Ishika alone to profess my love. The way she has been claiming me as hers these days, I'm hoping she knows this is where we are heading to.

Ishika holds my arm as we get down at the venue and make our way to the party hall. The party's already in full swing at the huge open lawn at the back of the hotel. We show our respective passes before walking in.

"Is that Arun?" She asks, pointing to the man in a navy-blue jacket.

"Yes, that's him."

"He looks suave now, unlike in the past. Is he still dating Richa?"

I chuckle.

"He has been happily married to her for five years."

"Married?" Her eyes shine bright. "I never thought they would reach this far."

"I thought the same. Anyway, the good part is they are together."

Ishika clings to my arm, smiling at me.

“You remember how much it annoyed me whenever Arun kept teasing me that a boy and a girl can never be just friends?”

I stiffen.

“Do you still think the same?” I inquire, keeping my fingers crossed. If she still believes that, all my plans for tonight are going to backfire.

“Yes.” She takes a few seconds to answer. “A boy and a girl can be just friends throughout their lives, Roh. I’m sure there are so many examples to prove this theory.”

My heart is in my mouth as she finishes. Is she serious?

“But...” Ishika continues, poking her finger into my chest again. “There can be exceptions.”

Huh! I sigh in relief. But wait, is she hinting at something here? We keep gazing at each other for God knows how long until I finally hear the familiar voices of my friends.

“Rohan...” Vansh is the first one to call me and break our trance.

Ishika and I both turn around to see Vansh, Vidhi, Taani and Sameer coming towards us. She leaves my arm as she sees Vansh coming and hugging me. I hug him back.

“Good to see you too, buddy,” I say, patting his back and shifting my attention towards Sameer and Taani. I hug them too.

“So *#Roshika* is back, huh?” Taani asks, grinning at me and Ishika, who is speaking to Vidhi.

“Yes. After you and Vansh got busy with your spouses, I needed a friend who had some time for me.”

I instantly slide my arm around Ishika’s waist, drawing her closer.

“And who better than my one-time bestie, to fit into that role again. So, yes, *#Roshika* is back.”

Ishika rolls her eyes and hits my arm gently.

“Don’t take all the credit here, Roh. For your information, if I hadn’t taken the initiative of chasing you and rekindling our long-lost friendship, #Roshika wouldn’t be trending again.”

Before I can reply to that, she hugs Taani.

“Nice to meet you two again, and this is your husband, Sameer, right? I couldn’t meet him properly the last time.” She shakes hands with Sameer. “You know Sameer, Taani had a thing for guys who kept French Beard in college.” She winks at him.

“Haha, Ishika, you can’t make Sameer jealous,” Taani replies, curling her arm around Sameer’s. “He knows if there is anything that can distract me from my hottie husband, it’s my work. There’s no room for another man.”

“Absolutely,” Sameer kisses the top of Taani’s head, and they smile at each other with so much love.

Sameer has a French Beard, but that’s not the only reason Taani fell in love with him. Even if you dissect his heart, you won’t find a single flaw in this guy. He is such a kind and blessed soul.

“Aww, you guys look adorable,” Ishika compliments.

“And what about us?” Vansh asks, diverting our attention to him and Vidhi again.

Ishika chuckles.

“Don’t make me go on, Vansh. I always thought you were the sanest among us. I seriously never pegged you to be the one who would marry a woman for an heirloom ring.”

Wait. How does Ishika know this? I have never told her anything about Vansh’s hidden marriage. Did I miss something?

“Don’t be hard on my Vanshy,” Vidhi argues playfully, hugging Vansh from the side. “Heirloom ring was just an excuse. He had madly fallen in love with me at first sight, right baby?”

“Of course, baby.” He slides his arm around Vidhi’s shoulder and kisses her cheek. “That’s why despite Rohan

provoking me to not get into the mess of marrying you, I still took the vows,” he adds.

Vidhi frowns at me playfully, and we all laugh. We all have come so far. Each of us had gone through ups and downs in our personal lives and finally found solace with our perfect partners. Though I was yet to officially propose to Ishika, she is still my peace of mind. She’ll always be!

“By the way, I didn’t know you two were on talking terms,” I ask Vidhi and Ishika curiously because if I didn’t tell Ishika about Vansh’s marriage connected to the heirloom ring, then it has to be Vidhi.

“We are friends now,” Vidhi and Ishika reply together, giving a high five.

“We speak every alternate day,” Ishika adds.

Woah! Good for me. Though I know Ishika had apologised to Vidhi for being rude the other day, I never knew they were in touch through phone calls. It’s good to have Ishika back in my friend circle. Each of them here has welcomed her with open arms, and I can see how much she adores them back and respects our friendship.

“Ishika, welcome back to the gang, darling,” Taani continues. “It’s so good to meet you after a decade. And congrats to both of you for the successful Bridal vintage collection launch at Ronishq.”

“Thank you,” I smile at them proudly before looking at Ishika again. “Her designs have a magic touch. Do you have a magic wand, Ishq? You hog the limelight wherever you go.”

Ishika rolls her eyes, but I can see the pride on her face. The conversation continues, and we meet a few more friends from our batch. It’s so good to connect with each of them again. Since I regularly attended these reunion parties, the spotlight was on Ishika, as now everyone wants to speak to her and know how we reconnected after that bitter separation.

“I must compliment you on your dress,” Taani says, checking out Ishika’s outfit. “And these stilettos are from Louboutin, Paris, right?”

“Yep. They never go out of fashion, do they?” Ishika replies.

“You must check Vidhi’s handbag collection,” Taani adds.

“And Taani’s cosmetics.”

I stare at Vansh and Sameer, who are gaping at their girls just as I am.

“Oh God. And here we thought our women were different from the rest.” Sameer whispers to Vansh and me as our partners are busy discussing their apparel and cosmetic brands.

“Hush, Sameer,” Vansh speaks in a tone even softer than Sameer’s. “If they listen, we will have to spend the night on the couch.”

I laugh at their helplessness. Being husbands, they have faced a lot from their spouses. Marriage changes men. I can’t wait to experience that with Ishika. All in good time! For now, I’m thankful none of our friends or batch mates hinted to her that I loved her and wanted to propose to her back then, which reminds me I’ve to do that now. But it’s impossible to get Ishika alone. She is surrounded by many friends and is dancing with Vidhi and Taani to upbeat music. She’s thoroughly enjoying her time at this reunion, and our plans to stick together tonight, as we promised, are not really working. I don’t blame her, though. Vidhi and Taani dragged her to the dance floor, away from me. But every few seconds, Ishika makes it a point to glance at me. *Yeah, baby. I am watching you. You are the only one I have my eyes on.*

“You look besotted with Ishika, buddy,” Vansh says as he and Sameer join me again with the drinks.

“I’m sure Ishika can see that too,” Sameer adds. “Women are sharper than men in these things. It’s impossible for them not to notice.”

“Especially when we look at them like hungry foxes, waiting to pounce on their prey to satiate their hunger,” Vansh laughs.

I laugh, too, sipping my drink.

“You can’t say the same about Ishika,” I say. “She is brilliant at everything except reading my true feelings for her. She was blind to my love for her even then and always put me into the ‘friend zone’ and nothing more.”

Vansh nods, patting my back to show his support.

“What are you waiting for then? Go ahead and propose to her, Rohan. It’s high time. Don’t think we are not noticing the way she is constantly looking at you with desire laced on her face,” Vansh says, “Who knows, she might be waiting for you to make a move.”

I’ll make a move. I have to. High time. I finish the drink in one go and put the glass away.

“Wish me luck, guys,” I demand.

Sameer laughs it out.

“You are not going to fight a war, Rohan. You are proposing to the woman you love.”

Vansh laughs with him.

“Huh? It’s now funny for you two, huh? Don’t you remember how you both have chased your partners to bring them into your lives?”

“You are right,” Vansh agrees. “Vidhi and Taani were still an easy catch, but Ishika...” he holds his laughter. “She is going to put up a fight and maybe even kick your balls if she dislikes your proposal, Rohan. You better stay a foot away from her while proposing to her to save your balls.”

Gosh! Sameer and Vansh laugh heartily.

“You guys are so mean. If your words turn true, I’m going to kick your balls too and ensure none of you gets to use your teeny-weeny with your wives for the next few days.” I challenge.

They laugh hysterically, enjoying my helplessness while I march to the dance floor to get to my Ishika. I’m taking her aside. That’s it. But if she disagrees and wants to dance some more, she will dance with me. And I’ll have my lips on her skin like I had the last time. No matter what Sameer and Vansh

think, I strongly feel that Ishika wants me as much as I desire her. We are already on the same page. It's just a matter of confessing our love that's pending between us... something I intend to give closure to tonight.

I reach the dance floor and wrap my arms around Ishika's waist from behind. She turns her head and smiles, knowing it's me. The next second, we groove together, with her back rubbing against my chest, our lower bodies glued like they are made for each other, her hands stretching behind to caress my nape while my fingers stroke her waist over her dress. None of these gestures indicates we are just friends. We crossed that line long back. When the heat between us explodes, I lean down and place my lips on the nape of her neck. Ishika tilts her head, shuts her eyes, tugs my hair and gives me the access I need to keep doing that. F*ck! My proposal is on my lips, those beautiful words playing hard to come out. I rub my nose on her shoulder, taking my own sweet time to coat my senses with her fragrance, which is a mix of vanilla and jasmine today. Ishika gasps before turning around and looking into my eyes. Our bodies continue to dance in a slow rhythm, our eyes locked, our lips quivering with need. She beams at me, and I gaze at her, my heart beating faster.

“Ishq...” I swallow, pulling her closer by her waist. “I...”

Before I can profess my love, Ishika playfully pushes me away and steps back. No! Why is she putting distance between us? Where is she going? Though she has a smile on her face, she keeps going away from me. I want to follow her, but she heads straight to the DJ and says something in his ears. He gives her a thumbs up before turning off the music and hands over the mike to her.

“Hello, friends,” Ishika speaks, tapping the mike once to ensure it's working.

Everyone at the event turns around and has her attention now, including me. I'm confused. What is she up to? I look at my friends, who are equally baffled.

“Sorry for turning off the music, guys, but I've something more important to say,” Ishika continues.

Really? She had something to tell everyone just when I was about to profess my love for her? I'm confused and annoyed, but at the same time, I'm also very excited to know what she is going to speak. A few of them boos the DJ to turn on the music again, but Ishika is adamant about making things go her way.

"C'mon, guys. It's the first time I'm attending the reunion in ten years, so bear with me tonight, please." She laughs while holding the mike, silencing everyone. "AMU College has given me so much. So so much. But the best thing that happened to me here is Rohan Oberoi." She points at me, and now the spotlight is on me.

"My Roh, my best friend," she adds. "The boy whom I trusted with my life when we raced together, the boy whose smile made me smile, whose tears made me cry, and the only boy who calmly tolerated all my tantrums and mood swings without complaining or giving up on me. The boy who knew the real Ishika Bhatia and not the one I am for the rest of the world. Our friendship had set an example here, as most of you know."

The people who know us, including our friends Vansh and Taani, all hoot acknowledging her words, giving Ishika the boost she needs to continue this speech.

"Arun, hi," she waves her hand at Arun, standing at the corner with his wife, Richa, and the second spotlight falls on them. He waves at her, too, as Ishika continues. "Arun always teased us that a girl and a boy can never be 'just friends' and it made me mad. So mad that I would go and bit*h about him to Richa, his girlfriend then, and now, his wife."

Everyone laughs, and so do I.

"I was too fixated to even consider that maybe... Arun was right. The first step to love was friendship, and I already had a great one with Rohan. I finally understood that without being in love, you can't be friends, and without being best friends, you can't love."

My heart skips a beat. What did she just say? Ishika looks at me, and her smile is so sweet, so pure and so full of love that I

want to reach her and pull her into my arms. Her voice is thick with emotion, yet nothing stops her from continuing her speech.

“Rohan and I had everything in common: our love for music, our passion for cars and our commitment to one another as friends. We would talk about anything and everything under the sun: our parents, our future careers, and how we would spend the summer together racing before college started again.” She lets out a half chuckle. “We were like two peas in a pod! Inseparable back then, but still drifted apart and went down different paths in life.”

Ishika is far from me, but I can still see the tears shining in her eyes. What the hell is she up to? Where is this speech going? Tonight is the night to celebrate our togetherness, not to get emotional and shed tears. But I know if she is still there on the stage, speaking her heart out, there has to be something important that she wants to share with everyone here. So, I patiently wait for her to finish.

“But life is all about chances,” Ishika wipes the corner of her eye. “We met each other after a decade, and life gave us a chance to reconnect. We’ve been through so much together in the past—but now, more than ever, I’ve realised that our friendship has evolved into something even stronger... *Love!*”

My heart just stopped beating. Did I hear correctly? I freeze on the spot as Ishika looks at me again, this time with fierce determination.

“I don’t know how it happened so fast, but it did happen. I always thought it was impossible to fall in love with your best friend. But now I know it’s not! Because Love is Friendship turned upside down! They say the best kind of love is the kind that makes your heart skip a beat when you see them across the room. That’s exactly what I’ve been feeling for you, Roh.”

My heart thuds against my chest.

“I love you, Rohan Oberoi. No one else on this planet could ever replace you in my life. It’s just not possible!”

As I stand here, watching and listening to Ishika professing her love, I am filled with so many emotions. The most prominent one is excitement—excitement knowing she loves me back. I have lived in sadness and regret for so long that they have been an integral part of me. But now that Ishika has openly confessed her love for me, they have to go. Forever!

“I want exclusivity with you, Roh,” Ishika’s voice breaks into a sob, and I’m already on my way towards her as she speaks further. “I want us to share all our deepest secrets to our most embarrassing moments with each other for the rest of our lives. You are the only one who never judged me or my actions and always pointed out my mistakes, making me a better human. It’s always been you, Roh. I love you.”

We’ve been friends for so long that it feels like we’ve known each other forever. Then came the decade-long separation, a span long enough to make us realise what was missing from our lives...*each other*. Tonight, we are marking an end to that by beginning a new phase of our lives.

CHAPTER 25

Ishika

There's pin-drop silence in the auditorium as I profess my love to Rohan. Finally, I did it. I'd planned to give Rohan a grand proposal, and what better way to do it than amidst all our friends who were a part of our journey in the past. Ever since we came to this party, I have been waiting for the right moment to do this, and Rohan himself gave me the push I needed by dancing seductively with me again a while ago. Like the last time, even today, he kissed me on my neck during the dance. It was a kiss of possession, the kind a man gave to the woman he wanted to claim. He could not resist kissing me whenever we danced, but unlike last time, he was sure of what he was doing and why. So, before the dance could turn more intimate, I took this opportunity to profess my love to him, so we could both relieve our hearts by signing them off to each other.

I watch Rohan stride towards me without breaking eye contact. He might not know this, but I saw the tears glistening in his eyes, too, and the look on his face told me this was the happiest moment of his life. *Our lives*. I put the mike away and turn towards him as he reaches me at the music deck where the DJ and the rest of the crowd are waiting with bated breath to know how this proposal pans out. The moment Rohan reaches me, he scoops my face in his hands and kisses me. I guess that's his way of replying to my proposal. *It's a Yes!* I wrap my hands around his neck and kiss him back. His hand sweeps down my body and presses my lower back, so our bodies mesh together. Suddenly, the entire place is filled with the sounds of hoots and whistles from all our friends and the rest of the batch mates, and though I hate PDA, I can't help but kiss Rohan back with a ferocity matching his. His lips are soft and in control. Just when I deepen the kiss, he pulls an inch away to sweep his gaze all over my face.

"I was going to propose to you," he says before kissing me again.

I smile in between the kiss, pausing to reply.

“I know—”

“A decade ago, Ishq,” he cuts me off. “I planned to propose to you a decade ago when you regarded me as just a friend.” He kisses me harder, his confession making me shudder.

What? Rohan pulls his mouth away before wiping off the wetness of our kiss from my lips.

“I’ve been in love with you since the very beginning, Ishq. It’s the most painful fact, considering you never realised it.”

I stare at him, my mouth agape. Rohan loved me for that long?

“Roh, I... how... I mean... why didn’t you...”

He pecks my lips, wanting to taste me again before composing himself and entwining our fingers together.

“Let’s get away from here.”

Yes. We should go somewhere where we can have this conversation... uninterrupted. Rohan leads me down the deck towards the exit while all our batch mates and friends keep congratulating Rohan.

‘Finally, Rohan. You got your girl, man.’

‘Rohan, didn’t I tell you the fruits of patience are the sweetest? Have a great life, you two.’

‘Congrats, Rohan. It’s so good to see you two finally in love.’

Rohan smiles at everyone before leading me out. Thankfully, his close circle of friends don’t stop us, nor do they ask us where we are going. They just give us a thumbs up, understanding our need to be alone. I can see their faces glow in happiness on seeing Rohan and me together. They seem to have been aware of Rohan’s feelings for me since ages. I’m thankful for the privacy they are giving us tonight because I’m overwhelmed with too many emotions. Rohan had been in love with me since our college days? How did I never realise that?

Rohan drives us to a random deserted lane, where we finally park the car and get out. I've so many questions for him, and thankfully, even before I ask them, he answers.

"I have loved you for years, Ishq. Right from the time we met, vying for the same parking space. For me, it was love at first sight to see a woman like you, crazy about cars, like me. A woman who was bold enough to voice her opinions, cold to the world, but so warm and caring towards me that it made me want her for myself. And then every moment we spent together, I fell in love a bit more with you."

I'm sitting on his car bonnet while Rohan is standing before me, looking intensely into my eyes.

"I can't tell you how much I've loved and wanted you or how hard it was to keep my hands off you."

I clutch the lapels of his jacket.

"You idiot! If you were in love with me, why didn't you tell me that time, Roh?" I argue.

"Because I was afraid you would reject me as you had friend-zoned me that time. I didn't want to lose you or your friendship by professing my love for you."

He is right. If he had proposed to me then, I would never have gone ahead. But I wouldn't have broken our friendship.

"And when I made up my mind to propose to you, Sunny entered our lives, snatching you away from me."

He exhales sharply in dismay. I shift my hands from his jacket to his upper arms, rubbing them gently to make him feel better.

"It felt like nothing was left in the world without you next to me; everything had been taken from me, leaving me alone and stranded. I was lost and heartbroken for days and wanted to get over this grief, Ishika. I wanted to forget you forever, thinking when you didn't choose me, why should I waste my life over you? I had sleepless nights knowing you were in Sunny's arms. The casual flings I had were my way of coping with my grief and pain of missing you. And I am not very proud of it. I stopped trusting women and lost faith in

friendship. In short, I took the wrong way out to forget you, but I could never get over you, Ishq.”

He looks sad and regretful as he confesses his past agony. I feel awful to make him go through so much pain, though it was unintentional.

“But then you came back into my life, and though I didn’t want to get my hopes up again, I failed miserably and gave in as you kept chasing me.”

He strokes away my hair, falling over my forehead.

“You re-ignited that love, Ishq, and I realised how much better I’m when we are together—happier, stronger and more alive than ever before. I wanted this to be our forever, especially when I sensed those same feelings brewing inside you recently.”

I smile at him, stroking my thumb over his groomed beard.

“So basically, everyone in our class or maybe college knew you loved me, except me?” I ask, feeling like a fool.

Rohan grins at my expression.

That’s exactly how I wanted to see him. Happy and back to his jovial self. Enough of these tears and sentiments.

“But how were you so sure that I had feelings for you now?” I ask.

“Your body language, Ishq.” He rubs his nose against mine. “These days, your actions, expressions and body language scream your changed feelings for me.”

I smooth my hands over his chest. His heart is beating as fast as mine.

“I couldn’t resist your charm this time,” I say before kissing him passionately on the lips. Rohan immediately responds by kissing me back, groaning and pulling me closer as his tongue meets mine, fierce and needy. Our tongues dance together in a sensual tango as our bodies meld together. He holds me tight and caresses my hair lovingly, whispering sweet nothings into my ear.

“Rohan and Ishika were always meant to be together. #Rohiska had to be immortalised forever.”

I move closer to his body as he continues.

“Your lips... your laughter... your smile... your face... your eyes... your hair... your body... everything about you is so beautiful that I can't resist you, Ishq.”

This man is seducing me with his eloquent words. Rohan envelopes me in a tight hug, not letting me go. I hold on to him, feeling his warmth and presence engulf me. He is my safe haven. The place where I feel loved and happy.

A moan of pleasure escapes my lips, feeling his hot breath against my skin as he kisses my face and moves to my neck, tasting every inch, finally sliding his tongue up along my jawline and biting my earlobe.

“I love you, Ishq. More than I could ever tell, more than I could ever show.” Rohan pulls away, extracting his mouth from my skin, but the taste of the kiss still lingers.

“I love you, too.” I barely whisper.

“I was scared before,” Rohan admits. “My only fear was that you would leave me one day. I was afraid I would lose you again like the last time.”

“I won't ever leave you, Rohan. I promise.” I cup his cheeks.

He turns his head to kiss the inside of my palm before replying.

“I know, baby. And neither will I let you... ever.”

Rohan lifts me in his arms off the bonnet of the car. I wrap my legs around his waist while he kisses me again, deep and raw, making me desperate for more. More of everything that we are doing now. I smooth my palm over his jaw again, wanting to feel his stubble all over my skin. Soon!

“Take me home,” I urge, wrapping my arms around his neck. Rohan puts me down on the floor.

“So soon?” he asks, a bit disappointed.

I look at him with a seductive smile before whispering in his ears.

“There’s no f*cking chance I’m spending the night without you in my arms, Rohan Oberoi. Now you decide whether we are going to my place or yours.”

Rohan

My blood rushes down south the moment Ishika finishes her statement. I still can't believe it. It all feels like a dream come true. I was the one who planned to propose to Ishika tonight, but she beat me to it and surprised me by professing her love first. I can't wait to know how this night will end because having her in my arms tonight is the only way I can believe that this is the new start of our relationship.

“Don't get any ideas,” Ishika hits my chest softly. “We might just sleep together.”

I kiss her for the umpteenth time, chuckling against her lips as I come up for air.

“Whatever you say, ma'am. And my place.”

Ishika huffs at me and pushes me away.

“Then *I'm* driving your car.”

I am about to refuse, but she rolls my car keys on her finger. What? How did she get those? She might have flicked them from my pocket when I was too immersed in kissing her.

“You've no choice but to lead the way, Roh.”

She quickly gets inside the car, and I take the passenger seat. It's always good to see her driving my car. Ishika's fondness for sporty vehicles is never going to get old. She starts the engine, and we zoom on the dark streets, taking care not to over speed. I put the location on the GPS to help her navigate to my home here in Delhi.

“Lutyens Bungalow Zone?” Ishika gasps. “You stay in that posh heritage zone of Central Delhi?”

I chuckle, seeing her excitement.

“Yes. I recently bought one of the sprawling residences in the Lutyens Bungalow Zone. You know I need more space for my cars, and owning a bungalow was better than just having a penthouse in the city with limited parking space.”

Ishika nods in agreement. Lutyens area in Delhi catered to the most influential people of the country. Spread over 26 square kilometres, most of it is still in the hands of the government. Rarely does a Lutyen property come to the market for sale, but when I got to know of one, I bought it quickly without negotiating the price. As Ishika drives us, I brush my fingers over her arm, gripping the steering wheel. She's sensitive to my touch but adept at masking it.

"Roh, behave. I am driving," she shoves my hand away.

That makes me want to do that again. I touch her ear this time, moving my finger slowly to her neck, and sliding the sexy strap of her dress down her shoulder.

"Roh, stop it!" she laughs, firmly pulling it up again.

"You can't sleep in this dress, can you?" I ask flirtatiously.

She gives me a sly glance.

"I'll wear your t-shirt."

The image of Ishika wearing my clothes and sleeping on my bed and in my arms makes me eager to reach home faster.

"Hit that damn gas pedal, Ishq," I say aloud in desperation.

She laughs heartily, doing as told.

"Patience, lover boy. Even I can't wait to see you bare-bodied and in red and white star-printed briefs," she mocks.

That does it. In a flash, I lean over and kiss her neck deeply before sucking and nibbling it. Ishika doesn't bat an eyelid and keeps control of the wheel despite my actions.

"You're out of your mind tonight," she pushes me away again, rubbing the spot on her neck where I've left a hickey. "I was just kidding. I will not let you take a piece of clothing off your body tonight."

"Why?" I grin. "Can't control yourself if I do?"

She bites her lip, holding her smile, and keeping her eyes glued to the road.

“C’mon, Ishq!” I play with her hair. “I’m in no hurry either. An astrologer had told me I shouldn’t involve myself with any woman for the next few months; therefore, I’ve taken a vow to listen to his advice.”

It’s a lie, and I know Ishika will spot it, but she continues to act like she believes it.

“If that’s so, I would love to bring you to your breaking point. You just provoked the wrong person,” she winks and giggles again.

The glint of mischief and challenge in her eyes gives me visuals of Ishika seducing me in the coming days to break my vow.

“On a serious note,” she continues. “Did that astrologer tell you what would happen if you break your vow?”

“That woman would be my future wife.” I stroke her cheek with my knuckles. She takes a few seconds to process my words before shying away.

“I’m impatient, Ishq,” I sulk. “You have no damn clue how many years I’ve waited for us to be like this. Happy in love.”

She entwines her fingers with mine, approving of what I just said. We don’t leave our handhold, and each time she has to change the gear, we do it together. That’s what we had always done in the past when we raced. I keep ogling Ishika driving my car while kissing the back of her palm and waiting desperately to get home, hoping to finally make love to her.

CHAPTER 26

Ishika

I was so excited to see Rohan's home for the first time, and as we reached there, I was completely overwhelmed by the size of his bungalow. It had dim lights at its entrance, which led us to a small pathway, which again led us to a huge main door. The bungalow looked stunning in all its grandeur in the moonlight. There was a garden with a fountain at the centre, and all of Rohan's luxury cars were parked in a row at the left and right perimeter of the mansion.

"Beautiful," I murmur as he leads me towards the entrance.

"Not as beautiful as you," Rohan replies, tugging me closer. I chuckle at his compliment.

"Aren't you tired of praising me ever since we professed our love?"

We halt at the closed door.

"I like showering praise on my date for the evening; it makes the night even hotter."

I punch his arm.

"I'm not just your random date."

He looks at me and holds my gaze to say something when I put my finger on his lips to shut him up.

"I'm your kink, Roh. That's what you admitted during the rally racing, remember?"

His eyebrows lift together, recalling that moment. Just when I think he is going to kiss me again, Rohan turns me around to the door and stands behind me, taking out the keys and putting them in my palm.

"You want me to open the door of your home?" I query, in a serious tone, turning my head to the side. "Is this one of the many traditions you follow when you bring your date home?"

He exhales audibly behind me.

“You are my kink!!” he corrects me. “And this tradition of opening the door of my home, heart and body is only for my kink, and that’s you, baby. And just for your information, I have never got any of my date home, nor have I dated randomly, as you might think.”

“Uh-huh,” I bite my inner cheek to curb my surprise. “So, I’m the only kink who would be breaking all the barriers of your home, heart and body?” I tease back.

“Ishq!” His patience is running out. “Stop reminding me how obsessed I’m with you, alright? Enough with the teasing.”

I turn around and meet his hungry gaze.

“If that’s so, unleash your obsession and your kink for me, Rohan Oberoi. Let me see what you’ve got,” I challenge.

Rohan clenches his jaw.

“Think again.” His voice turns hoarse with need and desire. “You are playing the wrong game if you plan to just sleep tonight.”

I know. I don’t say that loud, though.

“Scared?” I mock as I know that’s the only way to get him to do what I want. I might be playing with fire tonight by making Rohan treat me as his obsession, his kink. As my friend, I have always known him to be protective, caring and kind. Tonight, I want to see and experience how it would be to own this man who is all mine. I want to be his addiction and play with the desires that he has held onto for me for years.

When he doesn’t respond, I shrug.

“Alright, maybe some other time.”

I have no idea why I’m teasing Rohan like this. But he’s so much fun to tease, and I like seeing his eyes glaze with desire knowing I want him as much as he has wanted me all along. I hold my smile and turn around to open the door when Rohan pushes his body to my back and whispers in my ear.

“Don’t test my obsession for you, Ishq. We have already kissed. So, you know what happens next?”

His one arm wraps around my waist, while the other skims through the front slit of my cocktail dress.

“Roh...” I try not to gasp but fail. His touch is electric—fierce and all-consuming. He isn’t stroking my leg, yet his warmth over the flesh of my thigh is enough to give me jitters.

Rohan pushes our bodies closer before whispering again.

“Open the damn door before I begin to undress you right here at the doorstep.”

F*ck! Ishika Bhatia fears no threat, but the one coming from Rohan makes my legs weak. I take his warning seriously and, with shivering hands, slide the key in the keyhole and push open the huge doors of his mansion-like home.

The moment we are inside, Rohan pins me to the wall, and his lips crash on mine. The kiss is spontaneous, passionate and unsatiable. We barely stop touching each other. I’m surprised by the way my body is responding to his touch. His fingers skim over my thigh through the slit of my dress again and gives it a squeeze, gently grabbing my thigh and gesturing to lift my leg so I can slide it around his waist. The moment I do, I can feel his rock-hard arousal poking against my stomach. I roll us and push him to the wall without breaking the kiss, only to hear the sharp sound of something falling down beside us.

Rohan groans angrily before pulling away and unwillingly turning on the lights in the living room. A vase on the shoe rack fell down by our sudden shift in position at the wall.

The moment the room illuminates, I’m awestruck. His house is palatial, a three-storied structure painted a classy cream with contemporary style and elegant furniture. This place is everything I’d ever dreamed of in a home; huge rooms with high ceilings and, I assume, lots of natural light during the daytime, all thanks to the floor-to-ceiling windows. The statement piece of the room is the huge crystal chandelier hanging at the centre and a big, beautiful statue of Lord Buddha at the entrance.

Rohan curls his arms around my waist from behind as I admire his home. It’s the best house I’ve seen so far. I also

own beautiful homes in various cities and countries, but none of them could match Rohan's home. It's classy and exudes high-end luxury, just like Rohan and his fancy cars do.

Rohan then gives me a tour of his house, knowing how much I am enthralled by it and curious to see it all. While the ground floor comprises an opulent living room, a small office for Rohan and the kitchen, the first floor has three guest bedrooms and a fully equipped gym. Rohan's bedroom is on the second floor and is the only room occupying the entire floor. He likes to live like a king here, I am sure. The third floor has an infinity pool and an open terrace with a barbeque set up and is large and cosy to host a private party or a family event. I ask him where his household help is, who takes care of and maintains this lavish house, and he tells me that they never stay back at night. They have quarters behind the bungalow where they live and resume their duties every morning till late at night if need be.

"I like to keep my nights private," he adds cheekily as we enter his master bedroom.

"Right," I nod. "No one should get to see your star-printed red and white briefs, which you sleep in every night."

Before I can run away from there to escape his reactions to my funny remark, Rohan grabs my arms and hauls me to him.

"I knew you were a fan of my briefs. But I never thought you fantasised about me sleeping in them, Ishq. I could change into them tonight if you like." He offers with a wink.

I smirk back. "What kind of girl would I be if I asked for a peek at your undies?"

"Kinky, baby. You are definitely my kink." He teases me back, and I give him a mock gasp.

Rohan chuckles loudly, making me smile. His impish expression and the twinkling in his eyes tell me he plans to wear them tonight. I would like that too, but I also wouldn't mind if he wears nothing to bed tonight. These days I fantasised about how his Adonis-like body would look in its full glory. I try not to blush at my naughty thoughts but get

distracted again when I see his impressive chest. His slim-fit white shirt is unbuttoned to the third button, leaving his chest bare and exposed. He looks gorgeous, and I'm sure Rohan himself doesn't know how hot and irresistible he is for any woman. *Including me.* Each part of his body is built to perfection. The handsome CEO of Ronishq, known for his jovial expressions and charismatic personality, has a star athlete physique hidden under those sexy business suits.

Slowly, I shift my attention from him to his bedroom, where I'm going to spend the night. I've no idea, no expectations and no agenda of how we would end up tonight, but I feel like this is where I always belonged. With my Roh! He has a huge four-poster bed with a grey and white plush and cushy mattress, making me want to bounce on it. When I turn around to see Rohan, he is busy opening the remaining buttons of his shirt and peeling it off his body. My heart stops the moment my eyes land on his impressive chest again, and my legs turn to jelly. He is muscular, but not in a beefy way, and his chest is sprinkled with light hair, making me itch to move my hands over them. I look up at his face. His eyes are locked with mine. My breath hitches as Rohan walks towards me at a leisurely pace. His eyes are molten, full of passion and arousal.

He stands in front of me and takes my face in his hands. His gaze intensifies as he whispers. "You are too tempting to resist, Ishq."

I should be saying the same thing to him. He is too sexy to resist for even a second longer. My heart pounds faster, and before I can say anything, he leans his head towards me and captures my lips with a hungry kiss. His hands move away from my face to the curves of my body. His touch electrifies my nerves, and I can't help but surrender to his sweet caresses. His tongue explores my mouth again, and I feel myself melting in Rohan's arms. Just when I step back to take a breath, I tumble, and together we flop on the three-seater sofa with Rohan on top of me. What the hell!

"Never saw that coming," I giggle.

"Me neither." Rohan laughs with me before getting up, and his eyes rake over my sleeping form on his couch, especially

to my feet. He looks so lovingly at me that my giggles die down. My dress has hitched up, revealing a lot more skin to his hungry eyes, all thanks to the long slit that made me feel so confident and sexy earlier. Seeing Rohan admire every inch of my exposed skin with his hooded eyes melts me into a puddle. He gently grabs my ankle and carefully raises my feet to take off the black stilettos.

“I’ve always had a fetish for your stilettos and wanted to take them off like this one day,” he says in a husky voice, a faint smile playing on his lips as he takes out one and shifts to my other leg, leaving feathery kisses all over my feet and ankles.

I feel my heartbeat quicken with his words. His tenderness and care towards me make me feel special, loved and desired all at the same time. Rohan looks deep into my eyes, and I can feel his love for me in every fibre of his being. Once the stilettos come off, he kisses my toes, and I have to practically pull him to me.

He leans in, and his lips meet mine again. Our kiss is wild and sensual. My body melts against him as I let his hands roam all over me. We kiss fiercely, exploring each other with our lips and tongue as if we haven’t seen each other in days. His hungry and passionate kisses set my soul on fire, making me feel alive.

A few minutes later, Rohan lifts me up and carries me to the bed. The kiss breaks, and I look at him with deep longing. He looks back at me with desire laced in his husky voice. “You are mine, Ishq. For tonight and until I take my last breath, you are all mine.”

He makes me sit on the bed and leans over me to unzip my dress. Instead of shying away, I pull my hair to one side, giving him the access he needs. Rohan tries hard to pull the zip down, but no matter how hard he tries, the zip doesn’t budge.

“F*ck! Where the hell did you buy this dress from?” He curses, using both his hands now to unfasten my dress, but even that doesn’t work, and I laugh hysterically, realising once again that our romantic moment has turned into a comical one.

“Ishq, here I am struggling to get you off this dress, and you are...” he yells back, making me burst into peals of laughter again. I have no clue why the zip is not working in his favour tonight. That expression of helplessness on Rohan’s face is enough to keep me going and laughing like a crazy woman. I lie down on his bed, with him still standing at the edge of it and watching me intently.

“I... I don’t think... I don’t think the god of love is in our favour tonight, Roh,” I say, laughing some more.

Rohan smiles and shakes his head in disbelief.

“I don’t need the god of love, Ishq. I just need you.”

My laughs turn into soft moans when Rohan sneakily slides his hands over my legs, under my dress and begins to inch it up slowly until he reaches the end of my slit, just a few inches away from where I had started aching for him. Before I can understand what he is about to do, Rohan uses his strength to tear off the fabric from my slit, freeing me from the dress in one shot. I am now lying on his bed in my black, racy lingerie, feeling like the most beautiful woman on earth, seeing Rohan wet his lips, looking at my body with hunger and possession. I don’t feel like hiding myself from him even for a second. *This is all his. I’m his.*

He climbs on me, and his lips graze my neck, licking my pulse. My heart races as I’m engulfed with the warmth of his skin. He gently trails sweet kisses down my neck, savouring every soft inch of my body. I groan in need when the tips of his fingers brush against my swollen breasts. I need him to do more. The next instant, I hold his wrist and push his hand at my back, urging him to unclasp the fabric obstructing his direct touch. Rohan bites my neck again while unclasp it and shoves it away before latching his mouth on my breast while kneading the other. My head rolls back in ecstasy as he sucks and nips them like they are the sweetest thing he has ever tasted. Every touch of Rohan sends shivers down my spine as I close my eyes, giving in to the pleasure he is offering me. Our bodies move together in perfect harmony as we explore each other’s souls with our mouths and fingers. Rohan kisses like a pro. He’s a master at driving me crazy as

though he knows where my erogenous zones are and how to pleasure me and make me lose control. Whilst he keeps his mouth latched on my tender breasts, my palms dig into his taut butt, urging him to continue. His skin is warm and inviting, wanting me to touch all of him, and have that same pleasure and freedom he has with my body. I wantonly rub myself against him, needing this friction of our lower bodies.

We continue to kiss and caress each other for what seems like an eternity. I forget everything around me, and the only thing that matters now is Rohan and the love I feel for him with each passing second.

Rohan

“Roh,” Ishika squeals underneath me as my mouth travels down her body. I take a moment to look at her beautiful form, illuminated by the soft bedside lamp, and I swear I have never seen anyone more perfect. I stare in awe at her flushed face, full lips and swollen breasts aching for me. Only me. My breath catches in my throat as she murmurs my name with need while pushing me to move further down her body. Her body quivers with anticipation, and I know her pleasure is my elixir. I have longed for Ishika since years and this is where our relationship would take a new turn.

Just when I thread my fingers to take off the last piece of lace from her body, my phone rings in the back pocket of my jeans. I ignore it and continue to plant wet kisses all over her smooth stomach when the vibrations of the phone call intensify, intruding on our moment.

Ishika groans in disappointment as I shift my body weight on my arm to take out my mobile phone and turn it off. It's Vidhi's call, and I hate to decline, lest there is an emergency. Seeing Ishika's flushed face and body beneath me, I'm going to do just that, so I hit the button and put the phone away on the bed, thinking I had just rejected the call.

The moment I lean to kiss Ishika again, we both hear Vidhi's voice.

“Rohan? Hello, Rohan?”

What the f*ck! I jump from Ishika to look around and check where the voice came from?

“Phone,” Ishika gestures, pointing at my mobile from where Vidhi's voice is coming. Didn't I just reject the call? Shit! Looks like I pressed the wrong button.

Ishika lets me get off her and take the call. I lie down beside her to answer Vidhi's call.

“He... llllo...” I pant.

“Rohan?” Vidhi speaks.

“Vidhi... this is not the right time to talk.” I try to catch my breath. Ishika giggles beside me, clutching the sheets over her body to cover herself.

“Fine. But why are you panting?” Vidhi continues to inquire. “Is everything alright between you and Ishika? The way you both left the party worried us.”

“We... we are fine.” I take Ishika’s hand in mine before planting a tender kiss on her palm.

“Don’t lie to me. You don’t sound so good. Your voice sounds like you have run a marathon.”

And the next instant, she requests a video call. F*ck! And guess what! Even this time, I impatiently hit the accept button instead of rejecting her request for the video call.

“Shit...” I yell the moment Vidhi sees me shirtless on the bed, but it’s too late. She’s already seen me now.

Ishika laughs maniacally beside me at my helplessness. She enjoys me in this state, doesn’t she? I’ll deal with her in a while, but right now, I turn my attention to Vidhi again, who is with Vansh, and the two of them are laughing hysterically, knowing what Ishika and I were up to. Or rather, were just starting to.

“Now you understand why I said it’s not the right time to talk?” I shout at the two.

Vansh shrugs, giving me a mischievous grin.

“Yeah. Well!” Vidhi bites her lip and cranes her neck to look beside me, which obviously she cannot see as I’m hiding Ishika from the camera.

“Is that Ishika laughing?” Vidhi enquires curiously. “Is she okay?”

I roll my eyes at her remark.

“Guys...” I clench my jaw. “If you don’t want to see me naked, drop the call and let me focus on the one woman I have been dying to spend this night with.”

“Who asked you to accept my call if you were in the middle of something that important?” Vidhi argues naughtily.

Before I can respond to that, Ishika gets into the mood to trouble me. She purposely palms my cheek seductively, angling her fingers at an angle so Vansh and Vidhi could see her doing this to me. Vidhi instantly shuts Vansh’s eyes.

“Gosh! Your lovemaking is contagious, guys. It’s giving me ideas to drag my Vanshy back home from the party.”

“Then who is stopping you?” I ask, holding Ishika’s wrist to pause her ministrations. “Just do whatever you want to do to your Vanshy and spare us for the night, alright? Now bye. Talk to you both tomorrow.”

“Happy lovemaking.” Vidhi teases again before I disconnect the call and focus on Ishika, who is grinning in mischief.

“You’re so bad!” I exclaim.

“I know.” Ishika grins, her eyes twinkling merrily. Her usual playful self makes me forget all about the call. She then nestles closer to me and places a sweet kiss on my lips. She smells of jasmine and vanilla, my favourite fragrance.

“Let’s continue where we left off, shall we?” She purrs mischievously.

I instantly break into peals of laughter and cup her face in my hands.

“Oh, how can I ever deny such a tempting offer?” I whisper, brushing her lips with mine. “Besides, you have no idea how I’ve been controlling myself from not exploding inside you.”

“Your teeny weeny explodes?” Ishika teases, stroking my lower back and now my butt. “How am I supposed to believe you?”

I pull away from her face, determined to show her the reality of my member. Without any delay, I grab Ishika’s hand and place it on my hardened erection, making her touch me and feel me.

“See what you do to me, Ishq,” I bite her neck, pressing her palm against my aching length more firmly.

She gasps at the first touch, and when I think she is going to withdraw her hand, she starts stroking it gently and rhythmically. F*ck! If she keeps doing this, I seriously won't last for long.

“Wow. That's definitely not a teeny weeny,” she exclaims in surprise, stroking me harder.

I am in heaven and hell, both. My breath hitches as she repeats her actions in perfect sync, knowing exactly how to pleasure me. But I stop her soon, push her on her back and peel off the last fabric shielding her from me. Our foreplay had too many intrusions tonight, but not anymore. I slowly reach down her pulsating centre and push her legs apart before feasting my mouth on her silken treasure, revelling in her warmth and wetness. Ishika whimpers and moans as I work my magic on her with my mouth and fingers, worshipping her body like I always dreamt of. She thrashes her body from side to side, and I can tell she is close to the edge. As she pushes her hips against me, I raise one of my hands to massage her breasts while continuing my exploration downwards. My fingers are inside her, stroking and slicing in and out of her inner walls making her wild in pleasure. Finally, with one final flick of my tongue, she goes over the edge and cries out in pleasure, gripping my shoulders for support as waves of pleasure course through her body.

With Ishika still trembling from the aftereffects of our foreplay, I quickly shed the rest of my clothes and join her back on the bed to finish what we had started. I've imagined us making love for years, but now that it's happening for real, I want to imprint her every expression, her moans, her sobs and those garbled words when she is at the brink of losing herself to my ministrations to her body.

“I love you, Ishq,” I whisper against her ear before kissing her softly.

“I love you too,” she replies, giving me a gentle push before wrapping her legs around my waist.

And that's all I need to take her with me on a wild ride of pleasure. I lean over the bedside table and pull out the drawer

to grab protection. I tear the foil and roll the latex over my straining shaft before gripping her hips and plunging deep inside her in one single thrust, making her gasp in pleasure. We move together, our bodies becoming one in perfect unison, and before long, she is screaming my name aloud. With long, deep strokes, I make love to her, making sure to keep our bodies glued together the entire time. Every thrust takes us closer to our brink, and it's not long before we both reach the peak of our pleasure. *Together.*

And at that moment, I realised that the wait was worth it. I push away the strands of her hair sticking to her forehead before kissing her and rolling off on the bed, taking her along with me. As we lay there in each other's arms, the only thing I could think of was that I never wanted to let her go. And the good part was that she, too, had no such plans. This is the onset of a new relationship between us. A relationship which will last a lifetime.

CHAPTER 27

Ishika

One Month Later

A dull ache spreads through my body as I wake up to the sound of the alarm clock. Last night, Rohan hardly let me sleep and vice versa. A regular night, binge-watching a series on Netflix with my favourite chocolate ice cream turned out to be the most romantic night of my life. The chocolate was more on our bodies than in the bowls, and it never tasted so perfect. I have hated the idea of food sex from the start. Using food as foreplay never appealed to me, but having tried it with Rohan yesterday, it felt damn good, and I wouldn't mind indulging in it again. I still smell like chocolate even though we'd taken a shower together last night to wash away the remains of chocolate from our bodies. The bed is still warm, meaning Rohan got up just a while ago. He is always the first one to wake up between us and make breakfast. That man sure can cook, and I like to see him bustling around in the kitchen with his sexy bare upper body on display, humming his favourite songs. It's the best view of my mornings.

After the college reunion in Delhi, Rohan and I returned to Mumbai in two days, but we still enjoyed ourselves with our friends that weekend. Reconnecting with Vansh, Taani and their respective spouses, who only had good wishes to give us, doubled our joy of getting into a relationship.

Work at Ronishq was going great, and though Rohan and I were busy in our respective roles, having no time to see each other at the office, we ensured to compensate for that after coming home. Though our apartments were on the same floor, I'd made Rohan practically move in with me. We would eat, drink, work out, drive to the office and return home together to nestle into each other's warmth. Every night we would be in each other's arms, making mad, passionate love, and in the morning, he would wake me up with his wet, sloppy kisses and feathery touches all over my body, and again we would end up making love.

Love. I never knew this feeling would make such a remarkable comeback in my life. Who knew my friendship with Rohan would take such a beautiful turn? My life is finally complete, and I have never been so happy. I'm grateful for Rohan in my life and can't imagine a life without him now. The best thing about dating Rohan is I know exactly how he thinks, behaves, speaks, and though he is unpredictable when it comes to romancing me, I can blindly trust him with anything and everything. He occasionally comes up with unique ideas to pleasure me and, in turn, draw pleasure out of me. We have not fallen in love, we are growing in love, and that's the best feeling, especially when you know each other so well.

I hear the shower turn off, and Rohan comes out wearing a white Turkish bathrobe. He looks hot whenever he wears that bathrobe. I'm sure he is wearing one of his sexy printed briefs underneath, and I wouldn't mind a peek at it.

"Good morning," he says, leaning in for a kiss and planting a quick peck on my lips.

He smells heavenly fresh out of the shower. His musky fragrance is so intoxicating that I want to drag him onto the bed with me again.

"Did your father call or message you?" he suddenly asks.

"My Dad?" I query back in confusion. "Why? Was he supposed to call me or text me?"

Rohan shrugs.

"I think so. Because my dad messaged me today and informed me about his plan to dine with us tonight."

My jaw drops.

"Us?" I repeat. "But he doesn't know about us, Roh. You told your dad about us?" I ask, a bit nervous.

"I didn't. Not yet. Did you tell your dad about us?"

"No. If I had, I would have told you."

"Well then. It must be a regular dinner between us four."

“Four?” I query back. “Who is the fourth person?”

“Your father, Ishq. Who else?” Rohan replies, pinching my nose.

What?

“Wait. Wait. Let me understand this. You mean your dad and my dad have invited us to have dinner with them tonight?”

“Yep, baby. They will text us the time and place. It seems they are landing in Mumbai today evening and would like to meet us directly for dinner. Dad has a meeting in Delhi tomorrow, so he won’t be staying back. Mrs. Roy has already booked him on the late-night flight to Delhi. I don’t know if your father plans to stay with you for a few days. Whatever it is, we have to tell them about us. They should know we are dating and also about our live-in arrangement.”

He is right about that, but I am still shocked. How is this possible? Our fathers haven’t met each other for years. Though my dad knows about Rohan and me reconnecting and being neighbours, I don’t think he would have made dinner plans with us without informing me first. I quickly grab my phone from the bedside table and check my messages. I see a few notifications from someone I’ve been ignoring for the past few days, and amongst that is the message from Dad this morning. He had texted me about his short visit to Mumbai today and informed me about his plans to fly back to Hyderabad again for work. And just like Rohan said, Dad has asked me to keep myself free for dinner with him, Rohan and Rohan’s father.

Rohan sits beside me, stroking my cheeks with his soft hands.

“We’ll handle this. Don’t fret so much.”

“I am not fretting.”

“Good. Then, I need my t-shirt,” he says with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“Fetch one in your closet and wear it, Roh.”

He slides his fingers at the hem of my t-shirt, which I now realise is his. I liked sleeping in Rohan’s tees. After last night’s

shower, I wore his black t-shirt before getting under the sheets with him again.

“I need this one in particular,” he whispers, coming closer. These days, even his voice is enough to make me calm, wet and, at times, both.

Before I can stop him, Rohan pushes it up, revealing my bare upper body to his hungry eyes. “So full...” he cups my breasts, giving them a gentle squeeze before pushing me onto the mattress and hovering over my body to devour me again.

His manhood strains against his briefs, twitching in anticipation when I run my nails against the fabric. A little more stroking, and I know he will be inside me, and this little playful moment will turn into a wild, passionate sex frenzy. Usually, I love these spontaneous morning make-outs, but knowing we are meeting our fathers tonight, the anxiety of what would happen doesn't let me focus. When I try to pull my hands away from his briefs, Rohan holds my wrist, pressing my palm against his erection, not allowing me to pull away.

“Do you love me enough to claim me before our fathers, Ishq?” he asks, licking the pulse on my neck.

The thought of meeting his dad and mine is making me anxious. But I also know I can face anything with Rohan by my side.

“You know I do,” I reply, sliding my hand inside his briefs and wrapping my arms around his girth, proving to him how serious I am about this.

“Good,” he groans when I stroke him harder.

“You better make it good,” I murmur back when his fingers plunge deep inside me in no time to take this further. And with that, every other thought, feeling and anxiousness disappear as we satiate the needs of our bodies.

We have waited for too long and crossed many hurdles in our life to come this far, so meeting our fathers and telling them about our relationship should be the least of our worries.

“Hey, Dad.” I hug my father tightly as we all meet for dinner.

We were at a cosy restaurant, sitting in the secluded corner, so we got ample time and privacy to speak to each other. Both our fathers have checked in at this hotel where we are dining today despite wanting them to stay with us at our homes. Their reason was valid, though. They wanted to stay close to the airport to catch their respective flights a few hours from now, and commuting to and fro from the airport to our apartments would be hectic and time-consuming.

“You have grown thin,” I tell Dad as I pull away.

“So have you. But my doll is looking more gorgeous than ever,” he says, cupping my cheeks and giving me a forehead kiss.

My cheeks flush, realising the reason behind that; Rohan’s love and our ‘oh-so-frequent’ lovemaking.

“My son is the same, handsome and dazzling,” Rohan’s father teases as he hugs Rohan and pats his cheek.

Rohan smirks at his dad and shakes hands with my father.

“Hello, uncle. Nice to meet you after so long.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Rohan. And it’s so good to see you two back as friends.”

I cough. *Friends?* We are more than that now. I am desperate to share this news with dad, but I am waiting for the right time.

“Ishika,” Rohan’s father pulls me to him. “You have grown into a beautiful woman, darling. Is your passion for racing still the same?”

“Thanks, uncle. I haven’t raced in a while, not after the last rally racing with Rohan,” I tell honestly. “But I am planning to participate in one which will be held in Hong Kong in a few weeks.”

“*We* are participating,” Rohan stresses on the word ‘We’.

Yeah. We are both going to Hong Kong for drag racing. This time we are going to compete against each other, along with the rest of the participants. Rohan and I have already bet on that. If he wins, I'm going to give him a lap dance, and if I win, he is going to give me a sensual, erotic, full-body massage. Whichever way the race goes, we are going to end up winning. So it's a win-win situation.

"Oh, Ishika. You have once again dragged the poor boy into racing," Dad exclaims, but thankfully Rakesh uncle is the one who takes my side.

"No, Dhiraj. Rohan is equally responsible here. He'd refrained from racing all these years, but now that his best friend, Ishika, is back, he has again given wings to that passion. Let the kids do what they love doing."

I love Rohan's dad for this.

"Whatever you say, Rakesh. But kids, just don't get hurt. We can't bear anything happening to you both at this age," Dad finally replies, giving up.

We are all seated at the table of four. I am sitting next to Dad with Rohan and his father opposite us. We order a delicious three-course meal and chat again.

"So, dad, how come you both suddenly planned this dinner?" I ask the question that has been haunting me since morning.

"Well, when I came to know you work for Ronishq, I contacted Rakesh to catch up with each other, and then recently when he reverted, saying he was flying to Delhi via Mumbai and planning to meet you two, I thought of joining him. That way, we both could see our children and spend some time with them. Right, Rakesh?"

Uncle nods in agreement. I gesture to Roh to initiate the topic about us, and he gives me a gentle nod.

"I must say, Ishika," Rakesh uncle interrupts. "Your vintage designs are exceptional, and ever since you got those revamped into the crystal jewellery of Ronishq, the sales are shooting the skies."

I thank him. I can see the pride in my father's eyes on me getting recognition and accolade from my employers. Technically, Rohan is handling Ronishq, but his father still helms the Oberoi chain of jewellery in the country with Rohan's help. Dad praises Rohan for all his input which proved beneficial and helped him expand his business. Seeing Rohan treat my Dad with high regard and reverence warms my heart. I always wanted a man who would respect and love my Dad as much as I do. Rohan is exceeding my expectations in almost everything he does. I quietly slip off one of my ballerinas and push my foot to massage Rohan's ankle softly. The moment our feet come in contact below the table, Rohan's eyes meet mine. He grips the glass of wine on the table as I slowly inch my foot over his leg. Rohan coughs to curb his urge to respond back.

"Are you okay, Roh?" I ask, holding my grin.

"Uh-huh! I am... I am fine. Are you?"

His eyes convey to me that he is going to make me pay for being naughty, and I don't mind...at all.

"I'm perfectly fine. You were about to say something to your father, I guess?" I remind.

"Yeah, well. Dad, actually, I... I mean we..." he initiates the topic, but wait... what's the fun if I let him do it so easily.

In a bid to tease Rohan a bit more, I lightly run my foot up to his calf muscle and move back down his feet again. Rohan pauses, completely disorientated, forgetting what he was about to speak and picks up the wine glass, gulping the entire wine in one go.

"Slow down, boy," his father warns, bemused by his reaction.

"Sorry!" Rohan keeps the wine glass back on the table, looking daggers at me. "I'm thirsty."

That he is! I pull back my feet and wear my ballerinas again, and he lets out a sigh of relief as I withdraw.

"So, Dad, I was saying—" he continues, but uncle stops him.

“Wait, I have more important things to talk about.”

Rohan pauses.

“Recently, I met Amrita Chawla at a party and spoke to her. She would love to meet you next weekend. In fact, she said if you are busy on the weekend, she won’t mind coming to your office to meet you. Maybe you two can have lunch together. That way, she can also see your office and how hard you work. It will leave a good impression. Women like to see their man at work.”

Now it’s my turn to glare at him. Rohan and I look at each other before he turns to his father.

“Dad, actually...hmm... that’s what I was going to talk to you about.”

“Amrita?” This time my Dad interrupts him. “Rakesh, do you mean Prateek Chawla’s daughter, Amrita?”

“Yes,” Uncle smiles back. “You know them?”

“Of course I do. And Amrita is such a great girl. Exactly the kind of woman you are looking for as Rohan’s wife.”

Wait, what? Why is Dad praising her?

“Dad, let Rohan say what he has to, then maybe you both can continue with this Amrita thing. Right, Rohan?”

Now Rohan decides to tease me. His eyes tell me it’s payback time. He gives me a mischievous smile and shrugs.

“No, that’s okay. What I have to say is not as important as knowing how good Amrita is as my life partner.”

What? I clench my jaw.

“Uncle, what were you saying about Amrita?” Rohan asks Dad, who is happily willing to share Amrita’s recent accomplishments. Rohan’s father is equally impressed, and if I am not wrong, he must have already started dreaming about Rohan and Amrita’s marriage. My Dad is clueless about the fact that he is digging a grave for his own daughter. When I cannot tolerate this any further, I stamp my foot on Rohan’s feet.

“F*ck,” Rohan yells loudly, then quickly calms down. “I... I am sorry, I think something bit my feet.”

“Really?” I mock angrily.

“Yeah.” He clenches his jaw. “I think it is a naughty ladybug wanting to suck my blood.”

I frown. Did he compare me to a bug?

Dad laughs.

“There can’t be bugs here, Rohan. This is such a nice place.”

“You have no idea, uncle,” he continues. “Nowadays, these ladybugs are everywhere. They ruin people’s dates too.”

Rohan’s taunting reply angers me, and I once again hit his leg with my feet. He doesn’t show any reaction, though. I wonder why. Maybe he has learnt to mask his pain. But Rohan’s father coughs before sipping some water.

“Looks like the ladybug has targeted me now,” he says, putting the glass down.

Rohan and I stare at each other and then at his father. Shit!

“You okay, Dad?” Rohan asks him in worry before turning back to me. “Are you mad? How can you hit my father?”

“I didn’t hit him. I was hitting you, stupid. How much more time do you need to tell them about us?”

“Ohh, I was about to tell them. But you kept distracting me by playing footsie,” he snaps.

“You, too, teased me by showing an interest in Amrita.”

“Hold on... hold on.” Dad stops us from squabbling. “Ishika, so you are that ladybug they are talking about?” he adds.

I am speechless. What am I supposed to say? Suddenly, Rohan’s father and my Dad burst into laughter on seeing my reaction and Rohan’s silence.

“You two are still the same,” Dad says between his laugh. “I thought being in a relationship would have made you mature.

You would have finally grown up, but nope, I was wrong. You still bicker and fight like before when you were friends. I wonder how you find the time to love between your silly squabbles?”

My jaw drops. I turn to Rohan, who mimics my expression.

“You both... knew?” He asks. “That we are in love?”

“Of course, we guessed it long back when you met again,” Dad answers.

Rohan’s father pats Rohan on his back.

“Ishika’s father guessed it since you two were friends in college. But I came to know when you started your own jewellery subsidiary and named it ‘Ronishq’, as in Rohan and Ishika’s names combined together. This is not something that ‘just a friend’ will do for the other, especially when their friendship ended years ago. This was a sign of a man honouring his woman. Only a man with a deep love for his woman can do this.”

Rohan smiles affectionately, giving a side hug to his father, whereas I am still in shock. ‘*Ronishq*’?

“It never crossed my mind that you named your company after our names, Roh,” I murmur, feeling like a fool but a happy one. My Roh never forgot me. He made us eternal through his company’s name. I am overwhelmed with emotion.

Rohan grips my hand over the table, looking intensely at me.

“Ronishq is much more than a combination of our names, Ishq. It’s a testimony to the kind of love we share. A love that is strong enough to survive all odds. I still remember the day we had promised each other that no matter what, we’ll stay together forever. That day, I decided to start a business with our names to let everyone know we are connected by something more than friendship.”

My heart skips a beat, and I look at him with eyes full of love. I can feel the depth of his feelings in those words, making me fall in love with him all over again. There is no

need for us to say anything else. All the answers are in that single word, 'Ronishq'.

I take his hand in mine and smile.

"I always wanted to be with you, Ishika. It was the only way I could express my feelings," he adds.

I want to grab him tightly in a hug.

"Well... well... well." Rohan's father gets up from his seat, pulls me out of mine, takes my hand and makes me reach his side of the table where Rohan is sitting.

"Now you two can play as much footsies as you want. We don't mind," he teases and sits at my former place next to my dad.

I feel shy and awkward at that remark, but before I can think of anything else, Rohan pulls me by his side.

"Should I take off my shoes too, baby, if they are hindering your touch?" he naughtily asks.

I hit his arm, telling him to stop teasing me while all three men howl in laughter at my awkwardness. What started as a silly fight between us before our fathers had ended on a romantic and happy note. I guess it's the effect of being in love.

CHAPTER 28

Ishika

A month later

We returned from Hong Kong last week after participating in drag racing, where two or more drivers compete in a straight line over a set distance. The two cars usually race side by side, and the one reaching the finish line first is declared the winner. This competition was held in pairs. Rohan and I were racing against each other, just like dozens of other pairs who took part in this racing. And guess what! I won. And as per the bet, Rohan gave me the most sensual body massage. My body is still humming from his ministrations. But that's not it. After returning to Mumbai, I fulfilled his fantasy too and surprised him with a lap dance. I went to YouTube, learnt a few ropes about giving a lap dance and performed it on Rohan, making him very happy and satisfied. In short, our dating life was full of cute and naughty surprises we often gave each other.

At Ronishq, Rohan and I officially announced our relationship to his secretary, Mrs. Roy first, as Rohan was close to her and considered her family. She was extremely happy for us, as were the rest of the staff, who had already guessed our relationship status. The best moment was when Avantika learned that my friendship with Rohan had grown into something more. I knew she must be bubbling with jealousy, but I didn't give it much thought since I was happy that I'd claimed my Roh before the world, making him unavailable for every other woman on this planet.

Tonight, Rohan was taking me out for dinner. This was our last week in Mumbai. We were permanently shifting to Delhi and would be working from Ronishq's headquarters from now. Rohan was excited to return to Delhi as that's where his friends were. Vansh, Vidhi, Sameer and Taani were equally eager to meet us again. Though we were in touch through phone calls, we were waiting to meet them in person, as we

couldn't spend much time with them during the college reunion.

Though I had my own apartment in Delhi, Rohan didn't want us to live separately. After a lot of consideration, I agreed to stay with him in his mansion at Lutyens. This time, we had already informed our fathers about our decision to live together in Delhi. Rohan's father welcomed our decision, and my Dad trusted Rohan more than me, so he also didn't mind us living together. Their acceptance of this new phase in our lives boosted us to keep going ahead without worrying about anything.

As tonight would be our last dinner in Mumbai, I had carefully chosen a gorgeous red bodycon dress with matching red stilettoes, which I knew were his favourites, to make it even more special. He had told me to dress my best, and I had, in Rohan's favourite colour, red. My heart raced with love and longing as I imagined what lay ahead of us because Rohan was never so specific in what I wore. He liked me in everything I wore, or rather, he loved me more when I wore nothing. This reminded me of the times I'd striptease for him when he returned home from work. These little things spiced our dating life, making it fun and exciting. Everything we did together in the last couple of months ended in love and laughter, making me nostalgic.

I dress up quickly, knowing Rohan would reach home any moment. He had a last-minute meeting that delayed him, and I had to drive home alone from the office. I take one final look in the mirror, pleased with the way I look. I am excited about our dinner date, especially the surprise that Rohan wants to give me tonight. What can it be, I wonder? Earlier, when we were just friends, it was easy to guess what he would gift me and how he planned to surprise me, but now that we are also lovers, I often fail to decipher his plans, which are often kinky in their own ways. Anyway, the night is still young and filled with promise, and I'm determined to make it the one to remember. I love being in love with Rohan and can't wait to spend the night in his arms.

I wear my new stud earrings, which make me look and feel more desirable as I'm the one who designed them for Ronishq and Rohan bought it for me. Tonight is the first time I am wearing these, knowing Rohan wouldn't be able to take his eyes off me. The ringing of the doorbell breaks my reverie. He is here. I rush to the living room and open the door, eager to begin my romantic dinner date with my beloved, only to be shocked to see Sunny at my doorstep instead.

I didn't expect Sunny Bindra, my ex, to come here to meet me. Ever since our breakup a decade ago, we have never stayed in touch. I didn't interfere in his life, nor did he in mine. We had blocked each other's numbers and unfollowed each other on our social media profiles. I had never looked back since then, but recently Sunny started messaging me again ever since I professed my love for Rohan during the college reunion. How could I forget he, too, was an ex-student of that same college, and though he wasn't present at the reunion, his friends must have given him the news of my grand proposal to Rohan that night.

"Hi, Ishika..." Sunny smiles at me.

I take a step back. "What are you doing here?" I ask him in a firm voice, not letting my eyes off him as he steps closer.

"I wanted to talk to you," he says gravely.

"But I don't want to talk to you or even have you around me, Sunny. That's why I have avoided your daily messages, begging me to meet you once." I say sternly.

"Ishi, please."

Ishi. Yes, he called me that when we were dating. Earlier I liked that name, but now it only brings back the unpleasant memories of the times I spent with Sunny. He was my first in every sense, and maybe we could have a beautiful future, but he cheated on me, and that's the biggest reason for me to never look back again.

I hold the door.

"Get out, Sunny. Just leave." I try to shut the door when he stops me. "Ishi, please. Give me one chance to speak to you.

Just listen to me once. I beg you.”

Beg! Huh! Sunny Bindra never used such words before. Why now? He was a player who believed he could have any woman he desired. His smart looks and cool attitude fooled me then, but not now.

“Please, Ishi.”

“Stop calling me Ishi if you want me to let you in and listen to you,” I snap.

He exhales, nodding in agreement. I turn around and march into my house, and Sunny follows behind. I don’t know why I am even doing this. Why even hear him out when I know it’s not going to affect me, no matter what he says? After my breakup with Sunny, I had even shifted from my old apartment and bought this new one instead, where there were no memories of him. I wondered how he got my number when he began texting me, but now that he knew my address, it was confirmed that he got them from our common friends.

“Speak,” I say, turning back to look at him as we reach the living room. I don’t even want him to sit on my couch and leave his memory here.

“How are you?” He asks softly.

I roll my eyes.

“Really, Sunny? You thought of asking me this question now, after more than a decade? Now suddenly, you care? Please stop spamming my inbox daily with your messages.”

He remains silent.

“But since you want to know, and I want you to leave as soon as possible, listen. I am doing exceptionally well. I’m happy and living my life to the fullest.”

“I know.” He smiles again. “I have kept track of your racing history. You won the drag racing recently in Hong Kong against Rohan, didn’t you? Congrats.”

I clench my jaw. He was definitely stalking me.

“And you still look amazing,” he adds, taking out a red rose from his suit jacket and handing it to me. I hold his gaze, not touching that rose.

“I just want to spend some time with you, Ishi. I mean... Ishika. Just like old times. We had a lot of fun together. I miss all that...”

I cross my arms in front, hearing him out.

“I know it’s too late for us now, but I wanted to let you know that ever since we broke up, I have never stopped loving you. I was wrong; young and stupid back then, but now I want to rectify my past mistakes and be with you again. I’m not asking for your love immediately, but if you would just give me a chance to prove myself, I won’t disappoint you.”

As Sunny finishes his speech, I hear the door hitting hard against the wall and see Rohan striding inside, anger written all over his face. The moment he reaches us, Rohan punches Sunny hard in the face. Sunny reels under the blow and falls down on the couch, but Rohan doesn’t stop. He leans down, grabs Sunny’s jacket and pulls him again, forcing him to stand.

“Roh,” I take a step forward to stop him, but Rohan’s next words to Sunny halts my steps.

“You have the guts to come here and show your face to my Ishika?” Rohan shouts. “First, you snatched her from me, and then, you ditched her. And now you claim to have loved her throughout?”

I can’t help but smile at Rohan’s protective nature towards me. He is not fighting with Sunny as my lover but as my best friend, which he always was and always will be. I stay quiet, watching them, trying to understand what’s going on. There is palpable tension in the room, with intense emotions at play.

Rohan

I can't believe Sunny is at Ishika's house. All these years, I have hated him for snatching her away from me without even knowing whether they were together or not. And when Ishika told me how he cheated on her, I wanted to hurt him in a place where he wouldn't be in a state to cheat on any woman again. But I never imagined he would have the audacity to return to Ishika and show his remorse for losing her in the past. I'd just stepped out of the elevator to pick up Ishika for the dinner date I'd planned tonight, but when I saw Sunny at her apartment door and Ishika asking him to come in, my heart sank. I have complete faith in my Ishika, so I knew if she was entertaining Sunny again, it had to be for a reason. I eavesdropped on their conversation, not wanting to intrude until it was necessary. I stood at the door and heard everything. It was only when he showed an interest in wanting Ishika back in his life that I couldn't hold myself from getting inside and venting my anger on Sunny and punching his face.

Sunny calmly meets my gaze despite me hitting him. "I realise how I have wronged Ishika, and I want to make up for it," he says.

I push him angrily.

"Make up for it? Really Sunny? Do you think she's some kind of toy you can use and throw away when you are done playing with it? And then, suddenly, one day, when you change your mood, you want it back?"

Sunny exhales, dusting his jacket.

"Look, I have nothing against you, Rohan Oberoi. And I'm here to know Ishika's decision, not yours."

I'm about to punch him again when Ishika blocks my way.

"Roh, enough."

"Don't," I growl in anger. "Don't you dare tell me what to do when you didn't think it necessary to tell me that Sunny was constantly messaging you for the past few days?"

Ishika goes blank, wondering how did I know about it.

“Why, Ishq? I thought we knew everything about each other. Why didn’t you tell me?” I demanded.

“This is exactly why I didn’t tell you, Roh. Just look at you. You are hitting him. I knew you would behave like this if I had told you about his messages. I didn’t want all that mess between us again. So, I kept ignoring Sunny, hoping he would stop texting me eventually.”

“Your ignorance has led him to our doorstep, don’t you see it?” I snap.

Ishika clenches her jaw and nods.

“Yes, I can see that. He is here to break us up.”

“Ishika, no,” Sunny interrupts. “I swear I want you back because I have changed. I know you never had a serious relationship after me, and whatever feelings you have for Rohan now cannot match up to what we had in the past.”

He grabs Ishika’s arms, and I want to cut off his hands for touching my Ishq. But since Ishika is coolly handling this, I don’t interrupt.

“Rohan is just your friend, Ishika. You might have proposed to and started dating him, but it’s only because you two coincidentally met again. Since you never dated anyone after our breakup, when you came closer to Rohan, you mistook your friendship as love. It’s not true, Ishika. You and Rohan can never have what we had. He was the one who made you choose between him and me, and have you forgotten that you chose me? Because I was your first love, and you can never forget your first love.”

Sunny is trying hard to convince her, and no matter how much I trust Ishika and our love for each other, my heart is beating frantically, waiting to know her decision.

“I can do anything to win your trust, Ishika. I will prove to you that I am more worthy than Rohan.” He takes a deep breath before tightening his grip on Ishika’s arms. “You know what? Let’s end where it all started. Let’s leave it to the race.”

I stare at him confused, but Ishika looks composed and unaffected. How can she be so calm?

“Let’s leave it to destiny once again,” he exclaims. “Rohan and I will compete in racing for you, and whoever wins, destiny has chosen him for you, Ishika. What say?”

Ishika rolls her eyes, whereas I’m bubbling with anger. She better shut him up; otherwise, I am going to do it my way. Sunny knows about Ishika’s obsession and weakness for racing. That’s why he is putting up a challenge like this. Even if Ishika agrees, I’ll fight tooth and nail for her. I’m not losing my Ishika this time; come what may. Not to Sunny, not even to Destiny. She was mine then, she is mine now and she will be mine forever.

“C’mon, Ishika. What are you thinking?” Sunny coaxes. “Racing is your passion. Let your heart then decide whom you should choose, whom you truly deserve,” he further adds.

Looking coolly at him, Ishika shrugs his hands off her body, steps behind and claps hard.

“Wow. What a performance, Sunny. Fabulous. I wonder why your acting career flopped? You are such a pro at acting. Your father still produces films, right? You should really try your luck again because that’s what you are good at.”

Now I’m confused. I stare back at Ishika who looks unruffled as she speaks.

“The upcoming stage rally racing championship in Mexico,” Ishika says, clenching her jaw. “That’s what has brought you to my door, hasn’t it, Sunny?”

Sunny looks stunned as she questions him.

“Ishi, no. I—”

“Don’t lie to me, Sunny. You are a terrible liar, and unfortunately for you, I’ve become adept at catching your lies.”

I wait for the drama to unfold. This stage rally racing which Ishika is talking about, I recall her telling me that she has won that championship thrice in the last decade. But what does that have to do with Sunny coming here?

“You have participated in that race this year, and you need someone like me, a three-time winner, to navigate you in that extremely competitive championship and help you win it.”

Oh! I lose my temper on knowing the real reason behind Sunny chasing Ishika again.

“Ishika, I...” Sunny is fumbling with words. “That’s not true. You are mistaken.”

“Oh, c’mon, Sunny Bindra. I have done my research this time. We have many common racer friends who can confirm this because you have been speaking to them about me for quite some time. You have been badgering them with questions about my whereabouts, haven’t you?”

Damn hell! I always knew Sunny was an evil fox, cunning enough to manipulate and use people for his own benefit.

Ishika takes a step ahead, looking angrily into Sunny’s eyes.

“Life is not always about thrills, taking risks and accepting silly challenges to prove who is more deserving, Sunny. I don’t want to live my life just to prove to others that I am superior to them. I want to live life with purpose, with a vision, and do what I love, not play pointless challenges and pick up juvenile catfights.”

I am stunned to hear the exact words I had told Ishika once when we were returning from the pub and she wanted to chase another car. Her reply stuns Sunny too, but she doesn’t stop there and continues to vent her feelings.

“I was hurt when you cheated on me and when we broke up, Sunny. I always wondered how I could have been so foolish to fall for someone like you. But now I understand that it wasn’t love. We were just mad about racing, and that was what drew me to you. I was infatuated and thought it to be love. You took advantage of my love for racing. But today, I want to thank you for leaving me and teaching me that real-life lesson. If you hadn’t shown me the bitterness of betrayal, I would have never appreciated the sweetness of real love. It was only after I reconnected with Rohan that I finally accepted that he had

always been my true love. I was unable to see him in that light as I stupidly thought that friends couldn't become lovers."

"Ishika, you are getting confused. I am the one you love, not him. I have changed Ishika. I have realised your worth." Sunny tries to hold her again, but she shoves his hand off her, letting out a sarcastic chuckle.

"I may have been deceived by your charm back then, Sunny, but the Ishika that stands before you now is more astute when reading the truth in someone's eyes. You are not here because you love me or feel guilty about what happened between us. You want me by your side only for the race. You can't bear to see me happy and in love with someone else. You are still the same egoistical person you were then, whose pride can't take it when a woman leaves him of her own accord. You used to sever ties with women you wanted to leave, but in our case, I was the one who left you. That's why you can't stand to see me living a good life with someone else. I hope that someday you will understand that real love is much purer than the kind of emotions you've faked for your own benefit."

She then turns to me with a smile and palms my cheek. We both look at each other with tears in our eyes. Our love is special, and no one else can come between us.

"I've already won the biggest trophy of my life, and that's my Rohan," she proudly claims. My heart swells with pride knowing how much she loves me, and no matter what anti-force tries to separate us again, they will always lose as our love is eternal and everlasting.

Suddenly, Ishika grabs my face and kisses me.

Sunny gapes at us with wide eyes, not expecting this answer from Ishika. He had thought she would accept his challenge, but my Ishq had a much bigger and better plan for her life. She doesn't need to prove her worth and her love for me to anyone anymore. That mere thought makes me tug her closer to my body and kiss her back wantonly.

"I love you, Roh. I love you so damn much." She keeps murmuring in between the kisses.

I slide my fingers into her thick hair and tilt her head to kiss her better. When we both pull away for air, Sunny is no longer around. He had left. He had to. He stood no chance with Ishika again, and he never will.

“You look smoking hot when you stake your claim on me like that before the world,” I whisper, pulling her to me and sliding my arms around her tiny waist.

“You looked scared at first,” she murmurs.

“A bit,” I accept.

“Why?” She strokes away the tears from the corner of my eyes.

“Because that idiot Sunny ruined our plans for tonight,” I complain. “But I’m proud of you, Ishq. You handled this so well. Right from finding the root cause of why Sunny was suddenly chasing you to telling him off, iterating that he had no chance in your life again. You nailed it, baby.”

Ishika is thrilled with my praise. Now that Sunny has gone, I couldn’t wait to reveal the surprise I had for her. I couldn’t hold it on for later. Without delay, I hold her left hand and bring it to my mouth. Ishika looks at me in confusion, and then a moan escapes her lips when I put her ring finger into my mouth and suck it fully before pulling it out again.

“What are you doing?” she lets out a soft chuckle.

Before she can ask me more questions, I take out the diamond ring from my pant pocket.

“Roh, this is...” her voice trails off when she sees the ring.

“Ishq, I love you so damn much, and I never want us to be apart. You make me feel alive, as though I can do anything and everything with you beside me. I want to spend my life with you, baby. Will you marry me and become my lawfully wedded wife?” I ask her, looking into her eyes tenderly. “I’m not asking you to marry me right away. You can take your time, but—”

“Just shut your mouth and put the ring on my finger. I’m dying to be Mrs. Rohan Oberoi,” Ishika interrupts me.

I stare at her with wide eyes. Did I hear her correctly?

“Umm... Is that a ‘Yes’ then?” I reconfirm.

Ishika softly punches my chest, and fresh tears well up in her eyes as she nods her head vigorously and continues.

“It’s a Yes! Yes! Yes! Roh. A million times, yes!”

Damn! I slide the ring on her finger that I just sucked minutes ago while she gazes at me with so much love and hugs me tight, burying her face in my chest.

We stay in the same position for a few moments, just lost in each other’s embrace, with the diamond ring on her finger and our love binding us tightly together. This is how I wanted to remember and cherish the moment I proposed to my beautiful Ishika; amidst the silence and the peace of the night.

I can’t keep my wandering hands under control anymore when Ishika keeps kissing me all over my chest, starting from the exposed V of my neck. I swear she can hear my heart beating fast just for her and feel the throb of my thickening length against her stomach. When she pushes her hand down to hold me in her palm and strokes it in desperation, I tear her red dress while she fiddles with the zipper of my pant. Grabbing her butt, I raise Ishika off her feet and take her straight to the bedroom. We could have done this on the couch, but I’m not going to stop with a quickie tonight.

As soon as we hit the bed, Ishika fumbles with my fly again. Every molecule in my body urges me to bury myself deep inside her that very minute. But I take my own sweet time, licking and nipping her neck as her desperate fingers push my pants down. She is desperate to strip me of my clothing. I make it easy for her and quickly get rid of our remaining clothes. Our clothes lie in a puddle under the bed as Ishika rolls over me. I can read on her face that she wants to go down on me, the need to pleasure me foremost on her mind.

“I might explode before we can even start the real action,” I warn her.

She grins at my remark, smoothing her hands down my body.

“You know exactly when to throttle and change the gears, Roh. So, relax and let me handle this.”

How can I relax when she has her head between my legs? It's going to be a long night. Reaching for her, I tug her hair, guiding her exactly the way I like it. Ishika licks, sucks and squeezes, worshipping my body like never before. F*ck! She looks damn sexy when she moans in pleasure, her eyes dilated with lust and love. She's mine. All mine. And I'm hers. I close my eyes in bliss as she continues to work me closer to my end. My pulse rings in my ears as she continues to bring me to the edge. I let her have this ultimate bliss which she is so eager to draw out from me. She gives one final squeeze, and my body shudders with need, as I pull Ishika up, roll her on the bed and look into her hazy eyes. This is how I had pictured my life with Ishika. She's my lifeline for a lifetime and is the only one I need for my happily ever after.

My Ishq. I want to cherish her, worship her and savour her the entire night, until dawn, until the birds chirp outside our window, until the sun rises, until dusk, until the stars shine again at night and until our hearts and souls unite in eternity.

And that's how we seal the deal between us.

EPILOGUE

Rohan

Few Months Later

Time flies, and all you can do is reminisce about the beautiful moments you have created on the way. After my proposal to Ishika, we waited for a few months and got married two weeks ago. The wedding was a small and private affair, with selected people invited from both families, yet it left us with countless beautiful memories to cherish. Our close friend circle was also present, who, along with our fathers, were our biggest cheerleaders and well-wishers.

Ishika and I are finally living our dream of being together forever. It's been a long journey since I first met Ishika, befriended her, fell in love with her, lost her and reconnected again. I felt truly blessed to have her back in my life. We still have miles to go and I'm geared up to take on the world with my soul mate, my Ishika.

I'm so in love with Ishika that I always want to be with her. We can't keep our hands off each other, and sometimes, when I'm alone in the office, I keep dreaming about the things we can do together. Even today, seeing Ishika pack our bags for the honeymoon, I can't keep my hands to myself. Though I am supposed to be helping her, I can't resist spooning her from behind and showering feathery light kisses on her neck.

"Roh, behave." Ishika nudges me away with her elbow as I tighten my hold on her. "We don't have time for this now."

"What's the point of packing so many clothes when all we are going to do is take them off?" I purr in her ears, biting her earlobe naughtily.

She giggles as I continue to roam my hands all over her waist and pull her by her hips, making her aware of my rock-hard erection. We do have time for a quickie, don't we?

“Keep something for your honeymoon too, Rohan.” Vansh’s voice forces me to pull away from my wife, Ishika. *Wife*. I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that my Ishq is my wife now.

And here goes my opportunity for a quickie! I turn around to see my entire gang of friends. Vansh, Vidhi, Sameer and Taani are here to meet us before we fly to Seychelles for our honeymoon. And from there, we will fly to Paris, Ishika’s favourite place on earth, the city of love.

“And if you need any tips and pointers, don’t hesitate to call us from there,” Sameer adds.

Ishika immediately rushes to Vidhi and Taani to hug them while I go and meet the boys.

“Tips? And from you two? Who had me on their speed dial on their honeymoon?” I mock.

“Really?” Taani cocks her eyebrows, looking at the three of us. “Was it your idea to make Vidhi and me jealous by telling our hubbies to flirt with random chicks in Bali?”

Ah yes! I proudly agree.

“It was not my fault. They desperately needed help to deal with you two as you both were more interested in shopping rather than making babies with your husbands,” I argue.

Taani and Vidhi’s cheeks flush in anger and embarrassment.

“You know what, girls,” Ishika interrupts. “Don’t worry, I’ll ensure he pays for all his mischief during our honeymoon.”

F*ck! Whose side is she on? The three girls laugh heartily on seeing my annoyed expression. Vansh pats my back.

“Poor, Rohan. Looks like his chance of getting a ride is blown away by the wind,” Vansh teases.

Everyone bursts into laughter except me. I pull Ishika to me, looking into her eyes.

“Don’t be overconfident. You and I both know I can make you go on your knees, begging for me without even touching you.”

I can sense Ishika squeezing her thighs together at my words, though she coolly masks her expressions.

“This time, the tables can turn, Roh. You never know,” she winks.

I curl my fingers to control myself from kissing that sexy mouth of hers. I love it when she talks dirty and challenges me. Her smart and sassy mouth has given me immense pleasure, driving me into the throes of euphoria every time it comes in contact with my body.

Someone clears their throat. I look around to see it's Vidhi. She is the only one who hasn't spoken to me yet.

“If you two are done with giving us a demo of what to expect from your honeymoon, can we come to the gifting part?” Vidhi chirps.

Ishika comes near me and slides her arm around my waist as we both turn towards the rest of our friends.

“Gifts?” I ask curiously, seeing Vidhi and Taani holding a few shopping bags. “Didn't you give us gifts at our wedding?” I add.

“That was for the wedding. These gifts are for your honeymoon,” Taani replies, handing us a shopping bag. We open the gifts to see what they have given us, and while Ishika blushes prettily, I cannot help but smirk in excitement. Ishika has received a sexy red bikini, and I have got a foreplay card game to spice up our honeymoon.

“Who plays this on their honeymoon?” I roll my eyes but gladly accept the gift. I turn to Sameer, who is grinning at us. “Have you two played this game, or are we the first to experience it?”

“I'm not telling you that,” Sameer teases. “Taani and I have enough spice in our sex lives so far. But if this card thing works, let us know. We might try it as well.”

Taani punches Sameer gently in the chest, suppressing her sly smile. Vidhi is next in line. I know this little minx sister of mine is going to be one step ahead of Taani in her choice of gifts.

“Here... your first gift,” she says, handing me a dream honeymoon kit, which has everything from varieties in protection to exotic candles to naughty toys to liven up things in the bedroom for hours of intimacy.

“This is useful,” I chuckle, winking at Vansh, who winks back at me.

“These gifts were totally the girl’s ideas. We had nothing to do with it, but I’m sure you will love them...and use them,” Vansh adds mischievously.

“I will try and let you know, buddy.” I assure him and put the gift bag away.

When I turn, Vidhi is holding another small box in her hand.

“Another gift?” I ask curiously, accepting that too.

“This one has nothing to do with your honeymoon.”

“What is it?” I unwrap the box to find a customised miniature of my red sports car. Why has she gifted me this?

“It’s battery operated. Press that black button on the right,” Vidhi tells me. I place the car on the table to see what happens when I press the button.

The moment I press the button, a miniature doll comes out from the front passenger seat of that toy car, and she’s holding a baby in her arms. The moment she comes out, she kicks the car door close with her heels and goes back inside, just the way Vidhi does to my car when she’s annoyed at me. Wow, that’s cute!

“What is this?” I laugh, loving the toy and look at Vidhi, who is waiting for me to read between the lines. Hold on! Did I miss something? I hit the button again, and it repeats the action of the doll coming out, holding the baby in her hand and kicking the car door shut with her heels. Damn hell!

I look at Vidhi to understand if what I am thinking is correct.

“Are you... are you going to have a baby?” I ask, containing my joy.

Vidhi chuckles, nodding in excitement and pinches my nose.

“Yes, duffer. You are going to be a Maamu (maternal uncle) seven months from now.”

Wow! Everyone cheers while Vidhi waits for my reaction.

“Whoa!” I exhale, speechless.

“What? You are not happy?” She snaps. “Why are you sweating?”

“Performance pressure,” I reply, pouring some water from the jug into a glass and gulping it down my throat.

“What?” Vidhi shouts again.

“Performance pressure of being an uncle, dumbo. I’m worried about the future of my sexy cars. I know how you have damaged my babies all these years, and now, I can well imagine how my niece or nephew will handle them.”

Ishika punches my arm as everyone laughs at my worry.

“Stop worrying about your cars all the time,” Ishika frowns at me before giving Vidhi a hug and wishing her. “I am so happy for you, Vidhi. Congratulations, soon-to-be, Mumma.”

“Soon-to-be, Mumma!” I repeat, mimicking my wife’s tone before pulling Vidhi to me. “*You* are pregnant, and it’s giving *me* the chills. Are you sure you are pregnant?” I tease.

Vidhi now punches my tummy.

“Ouch. Alright, I believe you. Your pregnancy hormones are surely kicking in, and this glow on your face suits you.”

I cuddle her to me.

“You’ll be the best mommy, Vidhi.”

Her face beams with another bright smile.

“And you’ll be the best Maamu (maternal uncle). You have always been my go-to person, Rohan, and I want you to be my baby’s go-to person too. I want my baby to know that apart from us, he/she has someone who will always love him/her unconditionally and be there for them, come what may.”

Oh my! I...*go-to person*...for my niece/nephew! Wow. My eyes well up in tears at the trust and responsibility showered on me, but I happily accept it. I kiss Vidhi on her forehead, ecstatic for her. Then I turn to Vansh and congratulate him.

“All the best, mate. If it’s a girl, you are going to deal with double the fun. Handling a miniature Vidhi is not going to be easy, Vanshy.”

“Don’t call him Vanshy,” Vidhi argues. “Only I’ve the right to call him that.”

Vansh laughs before giving her a hug.

“Yes, baby. Only you have that right.” He kisses Vidhi on her forehead while Ishika and I look at each other. Love is contagious. Seeing Vansh and Vidhi like this, we, too, cannot wait to be in each other’s arms again.

“Well,” Taani coughs and drags Sameer forward. “We, too, have news for everyone.”

“No...” I shout. “Not you, Taani. Not you, too, I mean. Not so soon. I can be Maamu (maternal uncle) to only one baby at a time till the baby grows up. Handling two of them together will make me crazy.

Ishika bursts out laughing on seeing me freak out. Sameer and Taani roll their eyes, grinning from ear to ear.

“Our news is a step closer to Vansh-Vidhi’s,” Sameer replies. “Taani is not pregnant yet, but we are working on it, and hopefully, it will happen soon. We just wanted to keep you guys in the loop so you are ready to welcome the news of another baby in the coming months.”

“Oh damn!” I am about to drink some more water when Ishika interrupts.

“Actually, I have some news, too,” she says.

“WHATTTT” I gasp in utter shock. “Ishq? You too?”

Before she can say anything, I continue to rant.

“God! It’s raining babies everywhere. Are we pregnant, Ishq?” I pull her closer to me, touching her belly, and she

shoves away my arm.

“No, I am not!” She confirms. “You think I can handle another baby when I’m already dealing with one, Roh?”

I grin. She is talking about me. And thank God she is not pregnant...yet. Though I would love to be a father, I still want some alone time with my Ishika. We have just begun our journey as a couple, and I need her all to myself for a few more years.

“So, what’s the news that you want to share?” I ask her quizzically.

She shows me her phone screen. “Our flight is delayed by five hours. That’s the news.”

“What?” I scream. “That’s not good. I can’t wait to start my honeymoon.”

Everyone laughs. Generally, I am not such a whiner, but I have been dreaming about our honeymoon for years, and this delay is wearing out my patience. Ishika snuggles closer to me and whispers. “Look at the bright side, baby. Now we have enough time for more than just a quickie before we board the flight.”

My face lights up with joy as I respond in the same whispering tone, only for her ears.

“Now you are talking.” I hug her tight in excitement.

With Ishika as my wife and my gang of friends as my support and strength, my life is finally complete and filled with joy, love and happiness.

Ishika

Seychelles Beach Resort

My lips curve in a smile while reading a swoony scene from a romantic novel I bought at the airport. I am lying down, swinging on the hammock, a long-netted swing hanging between two palm trees on the beach, enjoying the sun and sipping on a margarita while Rohan looks at me intensely. The hammock is extremely comfortable and big enough for a couple to lie down and swing together. It's the third day of our honeymoon, and what bliss it is to spend time like this, doing nothing but relaxing, boozing, eating your favourite food and spending the rest of the evening and night making mad passionate love. I can be here forever.

Rohan pulls the book away from my hand.

“Roh?” I groan.

“What, Roh! You came here to read a book?”

I know what he means. Last night we exhausted each other, trying out the naughty gifts that Taani and Vidhi gifted us. So since morning, I have kept my distance from Rohan, preferring to spend time relaxing instead.

“Well...” I turn towards him, brushing my fingers over his handsome face. Rohan assumes I'm back in the mood to romance him and squeezes my butt. I continue, “I was just giving a break to your teeny weeny.”

Rohan glares at me, his fingers still lingering on the small piece of fabric covering my butt in the name of a bikini.

“You again insulted the most important organ of my body. Have you forgotten where you derive your pleasure from?”

I bite my lip, curbing my laughter. He is not going to leave me now. I know. Before I can do anything about it, Rohan starts opening the strings of my bikini bottom, and I burst into peals of laughter, wriggling hard to get away from him. The next instant, we hear a snap and both of us land hard on the sand as the hammock string breaks open. For a second, we are

both speechless, wondering what just happened, and the next instant, we both roar with laughter.

Rohan pins me down and looks into my eyes. His pupils are dilated, and he takes a breath before saying, “I don’t care if we do anything or not. Being with you is all I want...all I need. As long as we are together, I am happy,” he whispers in my ear.

I smile at him with love, feeling blessed to have him in my life...back again. We stay like that for a few minutes.

“This is the best honeymoon ever,” I kiss his lips.

We finally get up after a few minutes. Rohan takes my hand, and together, we start walking along the beach, admiring the beauty of nature. We talk about anything and everything, swinging our hands and occasionally stealing a few kisses. By the time we reach the end of the beach, the sun is about to set. Hand in hand, Rohan and I stand side by side at the edge of the shore, watching the sun slowly go down, sinking towards the horizon, taking away the last few moments of this beautiful day. Life with my best friend, lover and now my husband, Rohan, feels like a dream that I never want to wake up from.

THE END

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Upcoming Books

1. A political romance trilogy. (First Book releasing in April 2023)
2. Killer in the Dark (A psychological suspense thriller and sequel to my short story – Stranger in the Dark)

And many more..

For more updates/teasers/trailers/Blurbs on these books and to know their behind the stories, don't forget to follow me on my Instagram handle [@madhuritamse](https://www.instagram.com/madhuritamse)

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