



The Royal
CONTRACT

P . G . V A N

The Royal Contract

By

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The Royal Contract

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Blurb

He made her an offer she could not refuse...

Sanjana was not ready to get married, but when the handsome prince offered her a marriage contract that would last a year in return for the freedom to do anything she wanted after the year, she was game.

What she could not figure out was why her?

A year with a handsome prince as his wife, and the only thing she had to do was not fall for him. Not an easy task, especially with a guy who seemed to be getting hotter by the minute. The kisses in public were necessary, but when she starts to secretly hope for them behind closed doors, she knows she is in trouble.

Prologue

Jai looked at his mother sitting by herself on the balcony and knew something was off. The view of the palace gardens was beautiful, and it was one of her usual spots for tea. It was more of how she looked lost that was very telling. He slowly walked up from behind and leaned down to gently kiss her on the cheek before sitting next to her.

He wasn't the kind to beat around the bush. "What are you not telling me, Ma?" He looked at his mother, his eyes trained on her face, and she wouldn't even make eye contact. He knew she was hiding tears behind her lowered lids.

Knowing his mother, he knew she needed time to open up. But whatever it was, he knew it had to be something bad for his mother to look so dejected. He slowly slid off the chair to kneel next to her, his eyes on her beautiful face that no longer glowed with joy.

"Ma, you know I'm not leaving until you tell me what's bothering you. And whatever it is, I will find a way to fix it. I will do what it—" His words were lost when his mother let out a sob.

His chest tightened at the sight of his mother looking weak, a woman who was the pillar of strength for the entire family. He slowly wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "Ma, whatever you are dealing with all by yourself, you don't need to." He paused as she continued to weep.

Jai kissed the top of her head and added, "If you don't want to tell me, it's okay. Tell someone else, and I'll get it out

of them.” He smiled when she let out a laugh. His mother was known to keep secrets like she was the best vault in the world.

She pulled back to look at the youngest of her three children, wiping away the tears. “What I’m about to tell you, I don’t want you sharing with anyone, not even your brother and sister. Bharath would not take this well, and Aishwarya would be distraught.”

When he heard his mother’s words, he felt a lump form in his throat. “Is this about Papa? Did the doctor say something?” His father had been seen by the doctors more than a few times in the last couple of months for various reasons but nothing serious.

His mother slowly met his eyes. “The diagnosis is still not complete, but the doctor suspects it to be a rare disease that I didn’t even register the details.” She let out a sigh and added, “Your father is such an optimist he thinks he can walk it off, but I’m... I’m worried.”

“Ma...” He cupped his mother’s face in his hands. “Don’t be sad. Whatever the diagnosis is, we will find the right doctors and get the necessary treatment.” He wiped away the moisture on her face. “We will do whatever it takes... do you hear me? *Whatever it takes.*”

His mother sniffled and nodded. “I know we will pull through this. Your father is a strong man, but if it is really something serious, I don’t want him to miss out on his children’s life events. I want him to meet his grandchildren.”

Jai’s mother has always had a positive attitude toward life, and the woman in front of him had her resolve weakened with fear. He hugged her, rubbing her back to soothe her. “I

was hoping Bharath would be married by now, but that boy does not like any of the girls he has met, and now he thinks it's best to stay single to serve the people." She sniffled and looked at Jai. "Aishwarya would marry anyone if it is for your Papa, but I don't want her to feel compelled to get married now. And you—"

He interjected. "I have someone in mind I'd like to marry, Ma. She is still finishing her education, so I wanted to wait." His tone stayed steady.

His mother's eyes widened. "Really? You love someone, and you didn't tell me?" He could see the shift in her manner.

He shook his head. "I... I saw her at her friend's wedding a few months back, and I really like her. We haven't known each other for long, but I know she is the one."

His mother let out a laugh. "This is surreal. A wedding in the family... I didn't expect it to be yours, but I'm thrilled." She planted a kiss on Jai's cheek. "When do we get to meet her?"

He shook his head. "Her family is traditional, and she has promised her father that she will marry the man of his choice. So, you'll need to formally ask her parents for her hand."

Jai's mother was ecstatic. "We get to go ask for her hand? I'm going to enjoy this process so much." He was glad to see his mother's mood had shifted as she started talking about wedding arrangements. She was so caught up in the planning she left Jai on the balcony to plan the meeting with the girl's family.

He looked out into the open gardens of the palace and took in a deep breath. Sanjana Bhargava was indeed the piece of the puzzle that had been missing all along. Everything will fall into place now.

Chapter 1

A few weeks later...

Sanjana pulled the hoodie over her head closer to her face. She never thought she would pull such a stunt, but she had no choice but to run away. No one wanted to listen to anything she had to say.

Instead of giving her a chance to explain why she wasn't ready to get married, she was weighed down by such emotions that she could not say no to her father. She had to agree to marry the man her father had chosen for her, the Prince of Devaraya.

When she came home a few days ago for her older sister, Deepika's wedding, the bombshell of her alliance with the royals was dropped on her. As the fact sunk in, she realized how miserable her life was going to be. Her father's intentions were good—a marriage alliance from the royal family was not only good for his daughter, but it would also strengthen his connections in the region.

Her father retired from the Indian Administrative Service, and wanting to do good for the people of the region, he started a non-government organization that helped underprivileged families. Did her father agree to her marriage to relieve himself of all parental responsibilities, or did he think he could use the support of the Devaraya Royals and hence, agreed to the alliance?

When the entire family was on their way to the hotel close to the event center where the two weddings—her sister's

and hers—were scheduled to happen, she slipped out of the car when the family stopped for a break. She hoped they would not notice her missing as she placed her scarf on one of her cousins, who was sleeping next to her in the car.

Her marriage to the royal was supposed to be low-key for some reason, which annoyed her further. She had dreams about her wedding events, and what was planned for her sister was not what she wanted for herself.

Guilt twisted her inside when she thought of how shocked, disappointed, and embarrassed her parents would be, but she had no choice. She was not ready to get married and definitely not to the snobbish prince whose pictures surfaced online from time to time with actresses and models. Hopefully, her parents would be able to come up with a story about why she was not attending her older sister's wedding. Would her standing up the prince at the altar impact her father's work? Hopefully not.

Her family and other relatives would still have wonderful wedding fun and get a good vacation out of it while she headed to the city on a bus. As she thought through various options for the next steps, she wondered what her family would do if they discovered she was missing.

When they did, the first place they would check would be the vehicles traveling to the city. Panic gripped her at the thought of being spotted and taken back for the wedding scheduled for the following evening.

“Stop,” she called out even before she realized what she was doing. Like her body had a mind of its own, she stood from her seat and waved to the bus's conductor.

“No more stops till we reach the city,” the man called out from the very first row.

In her frenzy, Sanjana held her bag close to her body and said, “Sir, please let me off to the side. I have an emergency, and I must get off this bus now.”

“There are no other bus stops around here,” the elderly conductor said, genuinely concerned about her safety in a rather remote area, as it was late afternoon.

“I have someone picking me up,” the lie came out naturally. “It’s an emergency, please.” She hoped her plea would get the man to make an exception.

The man hesitated for a moment and called out to the bus driver. “Stop at the next highway restaurant.”

“Thank you so much, sir.” Her plan was to head back to the city where she was training to take the Indian Administrative Services exam. What she didn’t think about was that nothing was stopping her family from finding her in her apartment and forcing her to come back to marry the prince.

She was grateful the bus stopped at a highway restaurant where people were around. She saw from the bus that there were families who had stopped for a break, and that gave her the comfort that she was getting off at a safe place. She held her bag close to her as she stepped out of the bus and coolly walked toward the restrooms.

Sanjana had switched off her cell phone so she couldn’t be reached or tracked. She spent a few minutes in the restroom before stepping out and chanting *act cool* in her mind.

She walked past the empty restaurant tables to the billing counter where a woman was seated. “Hi, my phone died. Can I please make a phone call?”

“Yes, you can use this phone.” The woman pushed a landline toward her and added, “If you have a charger, I can plug it in for you.”

“Thank you,” she said, quickly grabbing the phone and conveniently ignoring the second part of what the woman said. Her phone was fully charged, just not turned on.

She tried to reach one of her classmates at the training center to ask if she could stay at her place for a few days. It had been a while since she had gone to the coaching center, especially after she didn’t pass the entrance exam for the Indian Administrative Services. There was no way she would go back to her apartment, especially if her parents had sent someone to look for her.

As guilt started to settle in again, her classmate’s voice interrupted her thoughts about her parents. “Hi, Diya, this is Sanjana,” she said, holding the receiver close to her mouth.

“Hey, Sanjana. How are you? Are your sister’s wedding preparations going well?” Diya asked, and Sanjana bit her tongue before she said anything further. She could not go back to the city where she had been attending the exam coaching, especially since she had announced to everyone she knew in that city about her sister’s wedding over the weekend.

“It’s going very well. I called to check on the class schedule for next week. I was planning to start training again.” Sanjana had to make up a lie yet again. If only she had enough time to think through an escape plan. “Can you please email it

to me? I'm planning to extend my stay and want to make sure I'm not missing anything important."

Diya laughed. "Don't worry. We just started the revision. Take your time. Enjoy the wedding."

Sanjana spoke for a few more minutes to calm herself and think of her next steps. She suddenly had nowhere to go but still did not regret her decision to run away from an unwanted marriage. She needed a place to stay for the night, and she needed to find it fast.

She ended the call and smiled in the direction of the woman behind the counter, who was thankfully busy with a customer. She felt weak in the knees as she walked to an empty table and sat on the bench. She could not risk turning on her phone to call a cab or find the nearest hotel where she could stay the night to think about what to do next. She needed to stay under the radar until her sister's wedding was over.

She felt a twist in her stomach that she was missing out on her sister's wedding. The most anticipated family event was ruined by these random royals who approached her father for her hand in marriage. Why? She still had no idea, and she didn't care. The day was supposed to be her sister's special day, not hers.

Sanjana was so lost in thought that she didn't notice the man who sat at the table across from her. She raised her eyes to meet mysterious dark eyes trained on her. She held his gaze, half-annoyed and the rest in amazement.

She took in the intense eyes and the stunning face of the man still staring at her. "Can I help you, sir?" she asked, hoping her voice didn't sound as shaky as she felt.

He looked at her for a long moment before one end of his mouth twisted up. “A dozen empty tables around you, and you sit at my table?”

“What?” She looked around. “No one was at the table when...” her voice trailed off when her eyes fell on a bottle of water and a small plate with a local delicacy.

She stood up, somewhat embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t paying attention.” She was losing it, and she needed to think fast. She needed a place to stay for two days and needed it fast.

He shook his head. “Not a problem. Please sit. I’m not bothered by you sitting across from me.” A slight smile played on his handsome face, and she felt heat creep up her cheeks.

“Okay,” she said, sitting back down but at the end of the bench. It was better to be with someone than be by herself.

“Where are you headed?” The man’s question made her gasp, but she hoped it wasn’t too loud.

Stop being so jumpy! Act cool.

“I... I’m traveling through the region visiting places.” An idea flashed in her mind as her heart raced as if in response to the man’s intense eyes. “Is there a hotel nearby? A good one? And a way for me to get there?”

He looked around as if thinking and then said, “Not close by. About an hour and a half away there is a new resort. I heard it’s nice.”

Are they going to charge an arm and a leg for a night’s stay?

She had no other choice. “Oh, I’ve not heard about it. I should check it out while on my trip.” She tried to pull off the persona of a tourist, her favorite role to play as she loved to travel and hadn’t done enough of it.

“You should when you get a chance. In fact, I’m headed over there for the weekend.” He looked away as he took a sip of water, and another idea flashed in her mind.

Should she ask the handsome stranger for a ride?

The resort sounded like a safe place to while away the time. “I’m intrigued,” she said with a calm tone. “Would you be able to give me a ride to the resort?”

The extra-long moment of silence worried her. “Sure.” He shrugged, making her beam at him.

“Great. I appreciate it very much,” she insisted.

“Are you here on holiday?” he asked, standing up and gesturing for her to walk to the right toward his car.

“Yes,” she managed as he held open the door of his Jeep. *Sweet guy.* But she needed a good story for the next few days. Thank goodness she had her identification and cash in her backpack.

Just as she was thinking of a good cover story, he asked, “What have you seen so far in this area? I didn’t think there was much of a tourist attraction around here.”

Oh shit! He was right.

For centuries, the entire province was cut off from the rest of the country due to its geographic location. It was a

shame the rest of the country, let alone the world, had no idea about the culture or the rich heritage of the princely state.

She bit her lip, suppressing the sadness that the place she grew up in was not on the map despite what the region had to offer. “That’s the unfortunate part. The rest of the country has no idea of the amazing things around here.” She looked out the window, not wanting to show her emotions to a stranger.

“I still don’t get why you’re wasting your time in such a remote place,” he said, a bit of sarcasm in his voice.

She didn’t want to pick a fight with him, not when he was her only way to get away from the mess she had created for herself. Would it have been easier to trust her parents and go with what they had decided for her?

The rebellious side of her warned, *don’t do anything crazy. You can’t give up on your dream when you are so close.*

“So, where are you from?” he asked as she kept looking out the window.

She had no energy to make up a story for a random stranger. “I’m from around here but haven’t been back for the past few years.”

“Oh, so you’re visiting family?” His question made a lump form in her throat. She fought back tears when the smiling faces of her mom, dad, and sister flashed in front of her.

Big mistake! You should go back and beg them to not force you to get married, but don’t do this to them.

You can't go yet, another voice chimed in. *This is not the time for weakness.*

Torn by the conflicting thoughts and overwhelming emotions, a sob escaped her inadvertently.

“Hey, you okay?” She heard the man ask, but she did not respond.

She nodded as she fought back tears, still looking out the window. Shortly after, the man pulled the car to the side of the road and let the engine idle. She suppressed her sobs, embarrassed by losing control of her emotions.

Sanjana took a couple of minutes to gather herself before slowly turning to the guy silently looking ahead at the road. “I... I'm okay. I was just reminded of my family.” She thought it was nice of him to not look her way because that would have been awkward.

He nodded and without another word, he steered the car back on the road. Sanjana was glad the man didn't probe for more details. He seemed like a decent guy and knew not to pry into others' private lives.

She took the time to settle her internal conflict. She told herself she wasn't going to steal her sister's wedding day with her impromptu marriage to a royal—a random one at that.

Her parents were overjoyed by the fact that the royal family reached out for her hand in marriage and agreed to every will and wish of theirs. Granted, every one of her sister's wedding wishes were fulfilled because the royals were paying for both weddings, but Sanjana didn't care.

What kind of a guy agrees to marry the girl his parents choose and has not even met the person?

Sanjana let out a sigh as a mark to move on. She would stay under the radar until after her sister's wedding and until the royal henchmen stopped looking for her.

She slowly turned to look at the man behind the wheel. "Are you going to the resort for the entire weekend?" She couldn't help but admire the man's beautifully chiseled profile.

"Yes, a family event." He shrugged and kept his eyes on the road.

Sanjana felt another twist in her stomach at the mention of family but ignored it. "A family reunion at a resort. That sounds like fun."

He chuckled. "I guess."

"Hope you have fun, and thank you for giving me a ride." She smiled, her eyes not shifting from his chiseled profile. She wondered how the guy could be so stunning and gorgeous-looking in a t-shirt and shorts.

I wonder how he would look in a suit, with his broad shoulders and muscles filling every inch of it.

Chapter 2

“Sanjana, open the door,” her mother said, followed by a soft knock.

Sanjana was still in a state of slumber and knew her mind was playing a trick on her. Her mother was hours away from the resort in a different town on the other side of the region. She opened her eyes to the dimly lit room that luckily didn't cost her a body organ. She was thankful for the helpful stranger who offered her to use his membership at the resort to get the room at a deeply discounted price.

“Sanjana,” her mother's voice played in her ears again. This time there was a bang on the door. *That cannot be a dream.*

She was wide awake, and a shiver passed through her. How did her mother make it to the resort by herself, and why was she here instead of being at the hotel in a different town to help her sister get ready for the morning event?

“Ma,” she called out, as she walked to the entrance of the large suite she was staying in. She still was not convinced it was her mother on the other side of the double doors.

“Yes, it's me. Open the door.” Her mother's voice was calm when she would have expected her to be pissed, especially after the stunt she pulled the previous evening.

Still in shock, Sanjana opened the door with her shaky hands. Her mom stood outside, a smile on her face. “Really? You leave us even before you get married?” Her mother

walked past her holding a tray with what looked like bridal attire and jewelry. “Ma, what are you doing here?”

*And why was she being so cool about everything?
Shouldn't she be yelling at her?*

Her mother placed the tray on the bed and started laying things on the table next to it. “Stop asking me questions and go take a quick shower.”

Sanjana was about to lose it. Was she hallucinating? If she wasn't, her mother should be outraged that she ran away the previous evening. She walked over to where her mother stood. “Ma, please let me explain.”

Her mother turned and held up her hand. “You can tell me everything later. You go take a shower, and I will go check on your sister. That girl takes forever to get dressed.” She shook her head while laying out the jewelry.

Sanjana had to be dreaming. “Deepika is here?” She was having a tough time piecing it all together.

What in the world was happening?

Her mother was almost out the door. “Where else would she be? Stop asking silly questions and get dressed. We have a small ceremony for both couples. Shower and wear a robe, and I will send the makeup artist.”

“Ma... can you please—” The door closed behind her mom as she hurried out.

Sanjana scrambled as she pulled her phone out of her bag and turned it on. Her head was about to explode with all the questions. She called her sister, hoping she could get some explanation.

“Look who finally decided to turn on their phone.” The sarcasm in her sister’s voice made the guilt surface again.

“Deepika, what is going on?” Sanjana had way too many questions, but she started with one.

“What is going on?” Deepika let out a laugh. “You and I are getting married to our prince charmings, except yours is a real prince.” A few giggles followed in the background.

How did they find her location? “How did everyone make it to this resort?” She modified her question even as her mind raced trying to figure out the situation.

“What do you mean, make it? We were all traveling together to the resort until you decided to abscond to meet your charming prince?” Deepika sounded calm.

Sanjana was shocked. “The resort is the wedding location?” *How did that happen?*

Deepika laughed. “You and your fiancée got drunk all night and could not wait till the wedding night?” her sister teased, and more laughter was heard in the background.

“The wedding was supposed to be at a different location,” Sanjana managed to say as her voice wobbled. It was supposed to be in a town on the opposite side. Did they change locations, and she had no idea?

“Have you paid any attention to what we all have been talking about? I guess you were too lost in your dreamland,” her sister taunted. “Now get up and get ready. Don’t keep me from seeing my fiancé.”

“But I... so, is this the location of the wedding?” she asked, almost to make sure she wasn’t imagining things.

“Will you please stop asking such stupid questions and get ready?” Deepika’s voice was elevated with annoyance. “They won’t let me see my fiancé until you are ready. Go get dressed fast,” her sister ordered before ending the call.

Sanjana was in a trance as she walked into the bathroom to shower. None of it made any sense to her. Her mother wasn’t pissed, and her sister was acting like nothing had happened when she had run away and put her family in a very precarious position. Even if she showed up at the marriage venue, they should be mad at her for leaving without telling anyone.

Even as she dried her hair, she muddled through the options she was left with—none. There was no running away from the resort. She saw the security at the entrance and the tall walls that were built around it.

Did she have to give in to a forced arranged marriage? Give up her hopes of doing what she wanted to do?

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts, and as if resigned to the fact that she had no choice but to get married, she walked to the door absentmindedly.

She opened the door fully expecting to see a group of people to help her to get dressed for a wedding she didn’t agree to, but to her surprise, it was the guy who gave her the ride to the resort.

Sanjana gasped at the sight in front of her, and her heart thudded like she had been running for miles. The guy stood tall in a navy pinstriped suit and looked like he walked out of a menswear fashion catalog. “Oh... hi, good morning.” *What is his name?*

She realized at that moment that they had not exchanged names despite the two-hour car ride. Was he there to rescue her again? Could she ask him for help again?

“Good morning. Can we talk for a few minutes?” His tone was matter of fact, and he was dressed like he was there for a business meeting. Maybe he would give her a few more coupons for her stay?

As if she had known him all her life and not questioning what a stranger who gave her a ride had to say to her, she stepped back, opening the door wider for him to enter the room.

He took a few steps into the space, and she yet again realized how much taller he was than her. She closed the door behind her softly and stood by it, suddenly aware of the robe she had on over a pair of panties and a bra. She pulled the fabric at her neck closer and raised her eyes to his, as her body strummed as if processing how close the man was to her.

“Thank you for giving me a ride here.”

He didn’t acknowledge her statement. “I suggest you don’t pull the same stunt again. It won’t be good for our families,” his voice was stern as he addressed her.

“What—” She lost her voice when something flashed in her mind. Her head started to reel when she connected the dots. Her sister’s comments and her mother’s attitude played in her head. They weren’t angry because they didn’t know she ran away and was brought to the resort by her fiancé. “Who are you?” Her eyes narrowed at him.

He let out a chuckle in response to her question. He held his hand out. “I’m Jai, Jaidhev Devaraya. We are getting

married tonight.”

Her eyes widened in sheer shock. How the heck did all this happen? How in the world did she end up in the same guy’s car she was running from? She thought she was running away from a marriage with his brother, Bharath Devaraya. She wondered if she would have run if she knew it was the younger of the two brothers she was to marry. No wonder she didn’t recognize him and felt outraged at being tricked by him.

“I don’t want to marry you,” she blurted as angry tears burned her eyes. *How dare he fool her?*

“I’m not asking. You will marry me tonight according to the plan. Don’t even attempt another run because I have security all around. There is no escape from my resort.” He was outright rude.

Her eyes widened in response to the threat in his voice, and she stood staring at him, trying to think of a kick-ass response. Did he own the resort? It explained how he was readily able to get a fancy suite for her at such short notice.

“How will you stop me from running away after the marriage?” she fired back.

He took a slow yet intimidating step toward her. “If you care about your family and your father’s respect in the community, you will.” *She somehow knew he wouldn’t hurt her family. It was only an intimidating trick.*

“You can’t threaten me.” She hoped her voice didn’t shake as much as she did on the inside. How was she not supposed to be squirming all over when he stood so close to her?

“Try me.” He clenched his jaw for just a moment before a cocky smile played on his face. “You’ll see how quickly I can mess up *everything* and... still get married to you tonight.”

Such an asshole!

She remained silent, knowing her sister’s wedding was on the line too. She lowered her eyes, unable to come up with something to combat his threats. “The Devaraya Royals are known for their kindness and generosity. I don’t think you would do anything like what you are saying.”

“Good. Let’s just keep up the reputation then,” he said rather bluntly.

“Why me?” she blurted as if she had no control over her thoughts, and it was one that had been bothering her since her parents informed her of the marriage with the Prince of Devaraya.

His brow furrowed slightly. “Why marry you?” He took another step closer and into her personal space. His stature was no longer intimidating but admirable, and the muskiness of his cologne filled the air making her jittery.

She nodded, unable to find the words to express her annoyance over the situation.

“Why not you?” His voice was an octave lower as his eyes fixated on her face. “You are a smart, caring, and...” his eyes scanned her face and added, “... a very beautiful woman. Why wouldn’t I want to marry you?” The way he said those words caused a zap of energy to pass through her. His words made her body arch, her breasts sticking out inadvertently like it wanted to show him her curves.

She let out a gasp. “What?” She knew he was messing with her head, but the crazy side of her wanted to bask in the glory of his compliments, even if they were sarcastic. “I just don’t get it.”

He stayed silent for a long moment. “What if you could do anything you wish with your life after one year?”

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she was sure she had misheard him. Maybe he meant she would get used to her misery in a year’s time? “What?” she asked as if she wanted him to say it again for confirmation.

“You heard me.” Like he wasn’t close enough, he leaned closer, his mouth to her ear, his breath warm on her cheek. “Agree to this marriage, stay put for a year, and you are free to do what you wish. I might even throw in a recommendation for any kind of job or offer financial investment for a business of your choice.”

Just as she was processing his words along with her bodily reaction to his proximity, the door to her room opened rather loudly, startling her. She turned to look in the direction of the door, only to run her lips along the side of his face as he stepped back.

Her mother and a bunch of older women who were there to get her dressed stood frozen at the sight of her and the unwanted fiancé standing too close to each other. And from that angle it may have looked like they were kissing.

Her mother was the first to react. “Oh, Jai, we didn’t know you were coming.”

He flashed the group a charming smile. “Just stopped by to see Sanjana.” He stepped further away from her. “She is all yours.” He made sure to greet each of the women before he left the room.

Sanjana was still reeling from the sensations she had felt in such a short time, even as he glanced her way before leaving her trembling inside. Her lips still tingled from the roughness of his stubble, and her breath was trapped by his scent.

“Sanjana, you, naughty girl,” one of her aunts tsked and added, “You couldn’t wait until tonight to get married and then be with your prince?”

There was laughter around her as she got dressed for the morning’s first event—a breakfast meet and greet for the families. Would that be an opportunity for her to ask him what he meant when he said she could be free after a year?

Did he not want her around after one year? But why that timeframe? She now had another million new questions.

Chapter 3

“Sanjana, slow down,” her sister hissed with a broad smile as she looked at the camera. “Your prince will not run away if you show up a minute late.”

Sanjana had no interest in the captures by the photographers. She needed to talk to the guy who offered her something she could only dream of. Growing up in a traditional family, only certain things were approved, and she had to promise many things to leave home and study in a different town.

Especially because of how stringent her grandmother was about an unmarried girl leaving home, she had to make a promise she would stay a virgin until marriage and would marry the man of her father’s choice. She didn’t care what commitments she was being asked to make at that time as she wanted to get away from home and be independent, live on her own, and do what she had always loved to do—train to be an airline pilot so she can travel the world.

She had never expected her father to arrange her marriage alliance before she got her flying hours logged in to get her commercial pilot license. Spending most her life in one town, she would obsessively read travel magazines and watch the shows and had decided while in high school that she would travel when she was grown up.

When it came to making a career choice, she realized there was a recommended path for her for education based on what her father pursued in the Indian Administrative Services.

Her sister followed that path, and she found herself doing the same.

It wasn't until she failed to pass the IAS entrance exam that she started to question if she was passionate enough to be in civil services. It felt like something she went along with to not disappoint her parents, especially her father.

As a distraction from the sadness and embarrassment of not passing the exam, she went along with a friend to a flying club and that's when she got hooked on flying. Her dreams of traveling as an adult all converged at one job—being a pilot.

Fly to a new city with every trip!

For the past few months, she had been away from home under the pretext of preparing for next year's entrance exam, but she had spent more time on her pilot training than studying. It was something she had not shared with anyone, not even her sister, and she didn't know how to break the news to her family.

The prince's proposal was actually a win-win. She would blame the lack of preparation time on the fact that she had to get married and perform wifely duties. And after a year, she would be free to take up a pilot job. Maybe that's the job she would ask her fake husband for a recommendation or even better, employment.

A year was not a long time for her to wait for that freedom. But she needed to make sure the guy was not joking or, worse, setting a trap to get her into trouble with her father. She told herself she had to keep her guard up and make sure he didn't take her for a ride. Although he had not shown any indication of doing so, she told herself to be careful.

Why did he need to lead her on? What would he get out of marrying her when he could possibly have any woman swooning at his feet with his stunning good looks? And to top it off, he was *the* Prince of Devaraya and hot as hell.

In the short time she spent online researching him, she found hardly anything on him. Most was about his older brother. There was some family history and family portraits, but there was nothing else, not even on social media. She thought it was strange, but it aligned with how the current events were being organized—a highly secure resort with close family and no announcements anywhere about the royal wedding.

Sanjana shook away the thoughts as she, along with her sister, approached the banquet hall where the family meet and greet was set up. She and her sister had a transparent veil over their head, covering their faces according to tradition until the marriage.

She raised her eyes slowly and scanned the room, and it took her a split second to spot him. He was tall, and it was hard to miss him, even in a room full of people. He was turned away from her as he spoke to her father, and as if he sensed her eyes on him, he turned slowly, his eyes locking with hers through the transparent veil.

A low gasp escaped her as her heart started to thud when he began to walk toward her. She could not get herself to avert her eyes from his, even as he walked through the family, standing and looking at the two brides in awe.

In her peripheral view, she saw her sister's fiancé, Surya, approach his bride-to-be to lead her to where his family

was gathered for the meet and greet. A sudden panic gripped her when she realized there was more to what she was about to get into with this marriage.

The handsome man seemed to be promising her a new world after a year of being married to him, but she wondered what her life would be like. She was going to be a part of the region's royal family, and she had no idea what that meant.

And why her? Why did this guy want to marry a girl out of the royal family like every other royal?

Something was way off, and she needed to know what the guy was up to and why she was getting added to the mix.

Even as her thoughts reeled with doubts, the moment he smiled, her lips curved up as he approached her. He held his hand out, and as if she trusted him with everything, she placed her hand in his and followed him to the center of the room.

She was nervous as she followed him but smiled as they were greeted by the guests who had gathered that morning. Suddenly, there was no crowd, and her eyes fell on a couple seated on a couch set to one side of the banquet hall.

Her steps faltered when she saw the royal couple—his parents—dressed in traditional attire. She was suddenly overwhelmed that she was in the presence of the family who had been leading and governing the region and doing everything needed above and beyond what the government was providing.

As if he sensed her panic and apprehension, he squeezed her hand as he led her closer to the couple. As if

starstruck, she looked at the older couple even as he bent to touch their feet for their blessings.

A moment later, she lowered herself to her knees and touched the royal couple's feet, and they seemed to be taken aback by the gesture. "God bless you both." His mother, the queen, let out a chuckle. "Jai, when did you get into the habit of touching our feet? You got the poor girl to bend too."

"Traditions, Ma," he said and looked at her. "Sanjana, this is my mother and father."

Sanjana was in a daze as she pressed her palms together in a traditional greeting. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness and Queen of Devaraya."

His mother smiled, taking Sanjana's hand in hers. "We are going to be one family. Please don't be so formal with us."

Sanjana nodded. "It'll take me some time."

The older woman let out a laugh. "Take all the time you want. I'm just glad this guy convinced you to marry him."

Convinced her? Like he would have trouble convincing anyone to marry him. Did the queen know about the deal? What was the entire family up to?

"We finally get to meet her," an enthusiastic woman's voice cut through Sanjana's thoughts. She looked in the direction of the voice to find a woman clad in a beautiful yet modern saree approaching them. "Sanjana, I'm Aishwarya."

Sanjana shook hands, wondering who she was, and a moment later, she placed her. The Princess of Devaraya. The adopted daughter of the royal couple. "It is my pleasure to meet you, Your Highness."

The young woman wagged her finger, a smile on her face. “Aish, please. I insist. You are going to be my sister soon.”

“Sure.” Sanjana flashed her a smile.

“You are so pretty. No wonder my brother fell for you when he saw you at your friend’s wedding.

What?

Sanjana was stunned to hear what Aish said, but before she could ask what she meant, she was whisked away by her fiancé to meet the extended family. She was introduced to many others, but none of the names or relationships registered as she processed his sister’s statement.

Where the heck did he see her, and what wedding was it? And he fell for me? What crap!

As they moved around the room with all his introductions and her smiling, she was becoming increasingly impatient. She took the moment when she was supposed to take him to her family to introduce him, and dragged him toward one of the open patio doors. “We need to talk.”

She needed answers before it was too late. No matter what he had said, if she didn’t feel like she could trust the guy, she had to make another attempt at escaping the marriage.

“What is your sister talking about?” Sanjana chose to ask that first before any other question because that was bothering her the most.

The handsome face did not falter. “What are you talking about?”

“A wedding? You saw me and—” The end of his mouth twisted up, a crooked smile on his face, and she knew it was a made-up story. “Why are you doing this?” she hissed and looked around to make sure no one was around. “I need to know what the deal is, or I’m going to run away, and no one can stop me this time. Not even your threats.”

He pressed his lips together. “One year, be my wife, play the role of a royal family member, and you are free to go with a promised job in hand.”

She narrowed her eyes like she knew there had to be more to what he was saying. “Why do you need a wife? Why me?”

“Didn’t I already tell you why I want to marry you?” His voice was too calm for comfort. “And I feel a year is a good amount of time for any couple to figure out if they still want to be married.”

She scrunched her nose. “What the heck is this? Some kind of a social experiment or...” Her eyes widened when something else came to mind. “Are you marrying me for an inheritance or to have me bear a child for you?”

He let out a chuckle before he shook his head. “I have no such interest unless that’s what *you* want.”

“What?” She shook her head. “Why would I want a child?”

“Do you not want children ever?” His question caught her by surprise. She had not thought about that aspect of her life. Not until that moment when she was asked by a stranger what she wanted from life.

She pressed her fingers to her temple. “Stop. This is madness. I need to know why you are marrying me when so many other women would be willing to marry you and do what you want.”

He did not respond immediately. “Sanjana, there are many other women, but they are not you. I want to marry you. And if you choose to end the marriage after a year, you are free to go.”

Was he a psycho who was going to torture her?

“What if you misbehave with me?” She shot a glare his way.

“Define misbehave.” He folded his arms in front of him, his eyes locked with hers.

She was intimidated by his good looks, stature, and now his stance, but she held his gaze through the veil for which she was grateful. She felt somewhat protected by the sheer cloth. “I don’t want a physical relationship if this is some kind of an arrangement for a short time.”

He nodded. “We can have that included in the contract.”

Did she hear that right? “A contract?” Her voice wobbled.

He reached into his pocket and took out his phone. He held up his screen. “A copy of this document is in your email. You and I will be the only people who will know about this contract. It will go into effect once we are officially married. The contract is void, and you are eligible for compensation if I break any of the conditions.”

Shocked that this man had gone to such lengths of writing up a contract meant he had a plan. But what in the world did she have to offer that any other woman did not?

“What if I break any of the rules?” she challenged and saw amusement pass through his eyes.

“I think you value your independence a lot more than anything else, and hence, I don’t expect you to be the one to do anything that would compromise your situation,” he said it with a high amount of confidence.

The cockiness in his voice annoyed her and made her want to retaliate. “What if I want to continue being your wife after a year?” She fully expected him to be taken aback, but nothing seemed to falter his expression.

“Please read the contract. You will see that you’ll be required to mate with me to produce an heir if you decide to continue to be my wife at that point.” His tone was flat like he was discussing a property deal while playing Monopoly.

“What the heck?” Her trap fired back, and a shiver passed through her as she wondered how things had come to that point.

“I suggest you read the contract and ask for any amendments before we get married tonight.” His tone was insistent. “If you make no changes, the contract will stay as written.”

There was no way she was going to be able to read the contract because she would be surrounded by many people that day. And at that point, she knew there wasn’t much she

could really do even if she didn't agree to the contract. "What are the highlights?"

His brow furrowed. "Of the contract?" His expression did not falter, though. The arrogance was perpetual.

She nodded. "Is there a clause that says there will be no physical contact?"

He looked at her for a long moment. "The contract states that the relationship behind closed doors is defined by you, and when we are in public, by me."

"What does that mean?" She knew it was best to read the contract, but it would be impossible to process it all.

"It means you will do what it takes to ensure we are in a happy relationship in the eyes of the public and my family." He had his eyes trained on her all along.

"Okay," she said, wondering what he meant by the public eye. There was nothing online about the personal lives of the Royals. "And behind closed doors, I can do whatever?"

"Yes, you will share the space with me and accompany me in my travels and some of the meetings." It was like an edict, and his tone annoyed her further.

She took a small step toward him and whispered, "And if I choose to be butt naked in the shared space, that's acceptable?"

Something passed in his eyes, and she knew she had finally managed to surprise him. He leaned in, his mouth to her ear, and said, "Very much acceptable, and I will enjoy it too. By no means will it be an invitation for intimacy unless you ask for it."

She gasped as a shudder passed through her. She quickly stepped away from him and, in the process, stepped on the skirt behind her, causing her to lose her footing. She threw her hand out and grabbed onto his jacket for support just as he wrapped his arm around her waist, her body pressed against his. “A stunt like this will in no form or shape be considered an open invitation for intimacy.” He scoffed.

She let out a growl, annoyed by her body going into overdrive with his proximity. New sensations swarmed as she stepped away from him, her chin held high. “I don’t need any attention from you.”

“Good. Let’s get married then!”

“I guess.” She rolled her eyes, knowing she had no choice.

“Be sure to remember that you and I met at your friend’s wedding and fell for each other.” He winked, making her jittery all over. It wasn’t just his words but everything about him that made her high strung. How did he have such an effect on her?

What the heck did she just get into? A royal friggin’ contract?

Chapter 4

Later that evening, she sat next to the guy who would soon be her husband according to traditional ceremony. To her utter surprise, she enjoyed getting dressed in the beautiful outfit the royal family had gifted her. She had worn one of her mom's sarees for her sister's ceremony, which was an hour before she tied the knot, and soon after, she changed for hers.

“What if I want to travel to another city by myself?” she asked, leaning close to him as he followed the ritual.

He didn't respond immediately, but before he could, her sister gently tugged her elbow and growled, “Cut the chatter. Be a bit bride-like, will you?”

Sanjana looked up to find her mother glaring at her. It was not the first time she was warned not to disturb the groom as he performed the rituals. But she was getting antsy by the minute. She wanted her questions answered sooner rather than later.

She sat quietly, sulking when he patted her hand and said, “Later, I will answer all your questions.”

Somewhat satisfied by his words, she put on the shy-bride act for her mother's sake. She was so close to achieving her goal of becoming an airline pilot and wondered if she could get away from time to time to log in her hours over the next year.

If only she had had enough time to read the contract. And another question popped into her head. “When did you create the contract? Before or after I ran away? What if I was a

willing bride?” Her voice was a whisper and hoped it would not be heard over the priest’s voice.

“Sanjana... shut up,” her sister hissed in the background. Not wanting to get into trouble, she silenced her uncontrollable need to know everything in his head.

A short while later, he leaned closer and whispered, “Tonight, I promise to answer all your questions.”

“Hey, there you are... what would you like to drink?” His voice was casual as he walked toward the balcony, where she was slumped on the lounge chair overlooking the private pool. It was a couple of hours after they were married, and she still didn’t know how she made it to their suite with her dress weighing her down.

“Nothing. I want to get out of this dress, and I was told only my new husband could help me take it off,” she grumbled. She had begged the women who accompanied her to the suite to help her with the dress but only got giggles in response before they left her alone.

She heard him chuckle before he sat on the chair across from her. “I guess that’s me.” He was still wearing part of his traditional outfit but without the turban, and he looked stunning. His messy hair only added to his sex appeal.

“I still don’t get why I’m here, but I’m too tired to even ask you the questions I want to.” It felt like she was on the inside of a punching bag. “I can’t even move with this dress.”

“I can help, but you need to ask according to the contract.” He had a wicked smile on his face like he knew she had no choice but to ask him for help.

“Fine, you can help me with the dress, and while you’re at it, please help me to the bathroom so I can shower. I had no idea what I was thinking when I decided to enjoy this view,” she said, looking at the swimming pool below, which was only accessible from their suite.

He stood up and stretched, letting out a grunt. The feral sound made her tremble inside, and she ignored it as a bodily reaction to being around such a handsome man. The fact that she had not been on a single date with a guy didn’t help her nerves. But what surprised her was the deep attraction she felt toward her new husband.

“You should get some sleep.” With those famous words, before she realized what was happening, he scooped her into his arms and lifted her off the lounge as if she weighed nothing, even with the heavy dress she had on.

A squeal escaped her as her mind scrambled to adjust to the situation and act accordingly. She wrapped one arm around his neck for an anchor as he walked to the large bathroom. However casual of a front she was putting on, she was a mess inside, just from the man’s proximity. “Great! I didn’t need to walk because I would have crawled instead.”

She heard his laughter deep inside. “Can’t let my new wife crawl on the floor.”

Sanjana did not miss the mischief in his eyes. “Not in this beautiful heirloom outfit.” She slowly and hesitantly turned to stand in front of him. The back of her blouse was in

place by knotting what seemed like a million strings together.
“There is no way I can get all these knots out.”

She took a deep breath and braced herself for his touch. There is no way he was going to relieve her of her fitted blouse without his fingertips grazing over her skin. She held her breath, bracing for the chaos that would come the moment he touched her.

*You just need to get used to him being so close to you.
That's it.*

Lost in thought, she hadn't realized he had left the bathroom when she heard him approach her. “Stay still, and I'll get you out of this outfit.”

She let out a sigh, her palms gently pressed on her chest, preparing her mind and body to stay calm when he was so close. Hopefully, things would settle down in a few days, and she wouldn't feel so jumpy around him. “Just be careful with the—”

Her voice was lost when she felt the ice-cold metal against her skin, followed by the sound of fabric being sliced. The next moment, her blouse was falling open in front, and she was glad she had her hands on her chest to hold it in place. “There you go, that should feel better, and the skirt...”

She took a step away from him, turning to face him. Her eyes widened when she saw him hold a sword in his hand. He had used the ceremonial family heirloom he carried at the wedding to rip open her blouse. “Wait! Don't ruin the skirt. I can take it off myself.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, and she nodded vigorously. He chuckled as he slipped the dagger back into its case. “There was some benefit to carrying this around, I guess.”

“Yes.” She let out a sheepish laugh as she walked backward toward the bathroom, not wanting to show her bare back to him. “I’ll go and... I need to shower.” She rushed away from him, feeling super conscious about being in the room when her outfit was compromised.

He shrugged. “Okay, enjoy your shower. I’ll have some food brought to the suite.” The unreadable expression in his eyes messed with her head, and she looked away.

At the mention of food, she realized she hadn’t eaten much all day. Her stomach rumbled as if it remembered the delicacies that were served that day for every meal, which, unfortunately, Sanjana had no appetite for. Not when a million questions plagued her every thought.

She made sure the sliding door to the bathroom was locked before she slowly slid the heavy blouse off and hung it on the side. With her chest completely bare, she felt insecure so she slipped on the plain t-shirt that was set aside as she slowly took off the jewelry and placed it in the trays that were set out with labels on them. She was sure her mother had someone tasked to set it all up.

She let her long hair loose and out of her tight hairdo and shook her head. Now the last thing to take off before stepping under the warm water was the heavy skirt. There was no way she, alone, could carry the heavily adorned skirt. She had three people help her put it on and at least two held the skirt’s hem as she walked to the wedding pavilion.

Her only option was to climb out of the skirt as it stood around her like a fort made of silk and millions of embellishments. She formulated her plan and moved close to the vanity in hopes of pulling herself out of the puddle of her skirt once she got it undone at the waist.

She let out a sign of relief when the knot at the waist easily came undone, and she pushed the band below her hips as a way to get out of the skirt. One last thing she had to do was kick off the floor with her feet and pull herself out of the skirt she could not lift to get out from under it.

After moments of her staring at herself in the mirror, contemplating her next move, she was left with no other option but to ask her husband to lift her out of the skirt. He had done that once before, and she knew he could do it one more time, but the problem was, she had nothing but her panties on under the heavy skirt.

“Why, Sanjana, why?” She shook her head at the image in front of her. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and, in this case, it required her husband. Maybe he could get someone from the team to help her if he cannot. “Jai,” she called out only to realize she had locked the bathroom door, and she had no energy left to even drag the skirt to the door.

Maybe she could slip through the waistband and sleep under the skirt that night as it was tented in the middle of the bathroom? Someone would get to her in the morning.

Moments later, she heard him and saw him through the frosted glass panel on the door. “Sanjana, are you okay?”

She let out a sigh. “I’m stuck in my skirt and can’t get out. Can you get my mother or someone to help me, please?”

“It’s too late for anyone to come up here now. They all must be tired and resting. Open the door, and let me help.” His consideration for other people and the conflict of wanting help badly made her want to cry.

“I can’t move another inch,” she said, suppressing a sob. Moments of silence later, she heard something click, and to her amazement, the door opened, and Jai stepped in with the dagger in his hand. She looked at the knife in horror. “Please don’t cut the skirt,” she almost yelled.

He laughed as he placed it on the vanity in front of her. “Relax, I used it to open the door.” He stepped back to look at the dress tented around her, the apex at her waist. “What would you like me to do?”

She looked up as she leaned on the marble counter, her hands firmly placed on the vanity for support. “You need to lift this dress over my head or…” Like he knew there was no way she could even stand straight while he lifted the dress over her head, he wrapped one arm around her and hauled her over his shoulder.

Her body froze for a moment before becoming aware of him—his touch and the way he held and carried her toward the bed. Her legs were bare to him, but that didn’t matter to her as she was focused on how her body went into overdrive at his proximity.

If the marriage weren’t fake, everything about the dress and the setting that night was to make the couple consummate the marriage. He slowly put her down, her back to the mattress as he pulled the sheets over her legs. “You probably don’t even

have the energy to stand in the shower. I say you get some rest.”

With those famous words, he turned off the lamp on her side and left, leaving her quivering inside. Every inch of her wanted to pull him to her and let him conquer every one of her desires that surfaced out of nowhere.

How the heck was she supposed to keep her hands to herself and not want to do things to that hot husband of hers?

Chapter 5

The next morning, Sanjana woke to a distant sound of water splashing. She slowly moved in bed, taking in the novel scent that filled the air. It was a light yet masculine scent and everything that happened in the last forty-eight hours reeled in front of her, especially the torturous few minutes when her new husband worked on getting her out of the tangled web of her skirt.

She slowly sat up, reaching for the silk robe on the bed-end stool. The curtains were closed, but she could tell the sun was not entirely up so it could not be that late in the morning.

Slipping on the luxurious robe over her nightshirt, she walked toward the patio doors. The sound of water splashing had to be from there. Still unsure why she was so curious about the sound, she peeked outside through the sheer curtains. The sight before her caused a low gasp to escape her.

The private space for the suite she was in came with a private pool and garden, and it looked like a mini paradise, but what made it exotic was the man who was in the water. Her instinct was to look away and give him his space, but like her body had a mind of its own, she pushed aside the curtain and the doors leading to the deck and then to the pool and garden below.

She had never seen anything so fancy, not even in those vacation magazines or online posts. It had to be a one-of-a-kind resort or was it special for their suite?

Their suite? When did that happen?

Sanjana knew she still had a chance to go back inside before he caught her gawking at him, but she could not move as if she was in a trance. She couldn't help but admire how smooth his strokes were as he swam from one side of the pool to the other. She had noticed how fit he was when she saw him in the t-shirt a couple of days back, but with his body on display, she could see he was well-built like a professional athlete.

Her eyes were still trained on him when he reached one end of the pool, and just when she thought he would turn and continue with his laps, he stopped. Her lips parted when she saw him back against the wall in the water, a hand pushing his thick dark hair back as his eyes locked with hers.

Her mouth went dry when he held the quickly heating gaze until she broke it. Her stomach clenched in weird anticipation, and she kept her eyes lowered.

“Good morning,” he called out, making her jittery deep inside.

She slowly raised her eyes to find him lifting himself out of the pool, his chiseled back on display. She managed to smile and nod in response to his greeting, even as her eyes wanted to follow the flow of water down his body.

Like the universe knew what she was thinking, he walked straight to an outdoor shower and turned it on. The steady stream of water made him look away as his eyes closed shut, and she unabashedly took in his beautiful body and the bulge at the apex of his thighs as it was displayed in all its glory.

How was the man so perfect?

Even as she continued to gawk at his Greek god-like body, she had her timing right and looked away just as he opened his eyes to look in her direction.

As she stood on the deck, she watched him almost as if she wanted to prove she was not intimidated by his looks. She felt the need to show she was not swooning every second over his good looks, especially after how she jittered at his mere touch the night before.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, walking toward her with a white, fluffy towel wrapped around his waist.

She nodded in response.

Why couldn't she find her voice?

He stopped a couple of feet from her, his lazy gaze sweeping over her face like he was trying to get a read on her. “We need to head back soon. Are there any other questions you have about the contract or anything else you'd like to add?”

Oh, the contract!

She hadn't really processed all of the legal language in the document, even though she read through it numerous times. The only thing she cared about was being able to do something freely after one year. What would have been shot down by her family as being non-traditional or unsafe, she could pursue it.

Maybe she could even do most of the groundwork, like applying for a job as a pilot even before the year is up. She needed to log in more hours to get her commercial license. “I need to go back to finish... continue my training.”

There was a long moment of silence as he looked at her like he was assessing her request. Just the way he looked at her, she was beginning to feel hot all over. “That is negotiable. Not right now. Let’s go. We need to meet the family for breakfast and head out for our honeymoon.”

“What?” She let out a shriek. “A honeymoon?” *Did he forget it was a fake marriage?*

He stopped at the entrance of the suite. “Did you not read the contract?”

She hadn’t, but his tone irked her. Her eyes blazed with anger and annoyance. “I already told you I’m not sleeping with you.” She started to panic.

His brow furrowed. “I don’t want to sleep with you either. But the contract requires you to accompany me to a romantic destination for our honeymoon.” He seemed as annoyed as she was.

His tone made her gasp a bit. “Oh, but I... I didn’t pack.”

“Not required. Be ready for breakfast in fifteen minutes.” With those orders, he disappeared into the suite, and moments later, she heard the sound of running water.

She had no time to mull over what it meant to go away with him to an unknown destination. What if he seduced her? Maybe this drama was for an heir after all, but he wasn’t telling her.

No. She could not let anything like that happen.

Sanjana scrambled to find her phone and called her sister. Her sister’s phone rang for a long time before she

answered. “Why the heck are you calling me this early? I just got married. Let me sleep.”

“Deepika, wait.” Sanjana paused to look over her shoulder. “Do you have any birth control with you? Monthly pills or even the emergency ones.”

She heard her sister laugh. “First, you say you don’t want to get married, then you run away to meet your fiancé, and now, are you doing it so much that you want birth control already?” Her sister was hysterical, and Sanjana could only roll her eyes. “So, is your prince so hot and eager for you to stop and roll on some protection?” There would be no end to the teasing, and Sanjana knew it.

“Yes, we are humping like gorillas, and I don’t like the feel of anything other than his skin on me or him inside me, so just answer the question,” Sanjana almost spat the last few words.

That suppressed the laughter, and a moment later, her sister cleared her throat. “You’ll need to get your pills from a doctor. I have some emergency ones I can give you later today.” Her sister yawned.

“No. No. I want it now. We are going on our honeymoon right after the breakfast event,” Sanjana spoke in a hushed voice. “Send them to my room now. Like now, now.”

Her sister let out a laugh. “Yeah, I will. Looks like someone had way too much fun all night.”

“Deepika, stop it,” Sanjana warned.

“Wait, what breakfast event are you talking about?” Her sister sounded surprised. “I have no energy to dress up for

another month, but it might be a royal family thing, so you have fun.”

Sanjana looked over her shoulder, suddenly her awareness growing just at the mention of the royal. “I don’t know. I need to go get ready. I’ll tell you more after,” she said before ending the call and throwing her phone on the bed.

What the heck did she get into? A contract with a stranger. A royal one at that.

She ran into the bathroom she had claimed as hers the night before and rushed to shower and get ready. She put on the only dress that was hanging in the closet of the suite on her side of the bathroom. All her clothes were packed by her sister and mother for the wedding but not for the honeymoon. Or did they?

Her cheeks turned red just at the thought of her mother packing for the honeymoon. Why did everything have to be so weird?

Shortly after, she stepped out of the shower and froze when she felt movement outside the bathroom. A moment later, she heard a woman’s voice, “Ma’am, I’m Radha, your personal stylist. My team and I are here to help you get dressed for the event.”

What the heck? Why did she need a team?

“Oh... okay, give me a few minutes to dry off and get dressed.” She pulled the towel tighter around her as she balanced her hair in another towel knotted over her head.

“Ma’am, please wear only the robe, and we will take care of the rest.” The woman’s voice was insistent while being

respectful. That didn't stop Sanjana from rolling her eyes.
How could she walk out only wrapped in a thin material?

“Okay, just a minute.” She scrambled as she pulled up a pair of panties and managed to slip on a bra under the luxurious robe. “I... I'm ready,” she called out, her voice unsteady.

Sanjana heard the click on the door, and a woman in her late twenties peeked through the opening, a broad smile on her face. “Please come, Your Highness. The team is ready for you.”

My Highness? What in the world?

Sanjana nodded before following the woman to the bedroom, where a few more people stood as frozen as she felt on the inside. Radha, with a quick clap of her hands, got her team, who seemed to be in awe of her, even when she was clad in a plain robe.

She settled into the chair she was directed to and immediately felt a few hands on her. Women were working on her hair, body, and face, all at the same time. As the team of stylists worked on her, her eyes fell on something that was placed on a small tray covered with a velvet cloth.

A tiara! Was she supposed to wear that?

A sudden excitement swarmed through her as memories of her wanting to marry a prince charming like in all the Disney movies she had watched. She realized she was living a fairy tale, only there was no guarantee of a happily ever after with hers. Just a contract end date.

She averted her eyes away from the tiara, and they landed on the dress hanging to one side of the room in a rolling closet. It was a silk corset blouse in shades of fuchsia and a beautifully draped saree in matching colors that looked like a dress she could wear with the soft net sash.

Why was she wearing such an elaborate outfit for breakfast?

She sat lost in thought until she was instructed to stand, and moments later, the saree drape-like dress slipped over her, the net sash covering a part of her head, and then the tiara made an entrance.

As Radha held the beautiful and sparkly tiara in her hands, blood rushed through her. She was terrified and excited at the same time. She heard the people in the room let out an endearment in unison when her stylist stepped away after pinning the headpiece.

“You are beautiful, Your Highness.” Radha smiled, and Sanjana gave her an embarrassed smile. “The prince is waiting for you outside. Whenever you are ready.” Sanjana nodded and looked around the room for her phone, and as if Radha knew exactly what she was looking for, a clutch was handed to her. “Your phone and some essentials are in this clutch. Please enjoy your morning.”

“Thank you.” Sanjana’s voice was weak as she slowly stood up, unsure of what she was getting into, but something deep inside her was enjoying the whole process of being treated like a queen.

Don’t get too excited. It’s all part of a contract, the pragmatic side of her voiced loudly. She pressed her fingertips

into the clutch while one person held her hand as she slipped into what looked like three-inch heels.

She took a moment to steady herself, and as she walked to the door, she had never felt so elegant. She had not seen herself in the mirror, but the admiring looks she got from the team who was present told her they were proud of their work.

She usually did not prefer heels as she was taller than all her friends and had not considered wearing them after a bad experience with a pair of shoes, but the ones she had on felt like a cushion was wrapped around her foot. The beautiful sound of the silk ruffling made her feel like she was walking down a fashion ramp, and she felt the automatic sway in her hips.

As if they knew she was arriving, the double doors to the suite opened, and her new husband stood in the hallway, turned away from her, speaking on the phone. Even in her heels, she had to raise her eyes to look at the back of his head. Even with the tiara and the heels, the guy was taller than her.

He turned like he sensed her presence, and their eyes met, making her weak in the knees. There was a spark in his eyes as he approached her, and as if the anxiety of the situation hit her suddenly, she could not move. She stood, staring at him as he got closer to her. A lot closer.

Sanjana was in a daze as he wrapped his arm around her before brushing his lips over her temple. *Did he just kiss her?*

“Relax,” he whispered as he took her hand in his with his other one placed gently on the small of her back.

“Remember to breathe and keep smiling.”

Sanjana was confused. “Where are we going?” She remembered to plaster a smile on her face.

He walked them down the long-carpeted hallway to the elevator before leading her to a different side of the resort. She had not been to this side since all the wedding events were held at another area of the resort—a private section where no other resort guests were allowed.

The few others who joined them when they got off the elevator were all strangers, and she was in no state to even ask questions. Overwhelmed by the unknown, she found relief at seeing the royal couple and his sister. This time she noticed that the family was accompanied by another man.

The man had a polished appearance paired with an air of arrogance, and a moment later, she recognized him to be the royal couple’s oldest son.

Bharath Devaraya!

He was the face of the royal family and the stark opposite of her new husband. His older brother was nowhere as tall and bulky while the guy next to her was lean and fit. They shared their mother’s eyes, but everything else was different.

As they approached the royal couple, his sister approached her, smiling. “You two look so stunning. The media will have a field day. You two may break the internet.”

What? Media? Break the internet?

In her mind, she was yelling at the top of her voice, but no sound came from her as they moved with the group into a

large room. Immediately, she was blinded by the flashes from what seemed like a million cameras.

She felt like a deer in front of the brightest headlights as she was swept toward the podium. Everyone else stopped. It was only her and the man holding her from collapsing to the floor with the sudden shock of facing so many people with cameras, and they were the only ones to ascend the stage.

She was again blinded by the flashes, deafened by everyone talking at the same time. What kept her steady, looking ahead with a smile were the last few words he had whispered in her ear.

Breathe and smile.

And that's all she did even as she heard their names called out together.

Sanjana and Jaidhev Devaraya!

It felt like a long time standing next to each other and posing for the cameras. She was surprisingly thankful when she only had to do was look in the direction whispered in her ear.

Why were they in front of so many media people when the Devarayas were not big on being in the public eye?

After a billion flashes, the group seemed to have settled a bit, and then the questions started. All she could do was maintain a smile and look at everyone while the reporters talked to her new husband. Most of the questions were about the wedding and details of the events, but one reporter's question piqued her interest a bit more than the others.

“Prince Jaidhev, congrats on your marriage. Can you please tell us why you chose a bride outside the royal family when there were so many other eligible royals?” It was a female reporter, but Sanjana could not see her face in the lights.

Jai tightened his hold on Sanjana just a tad bit. “Thank you for asking that question, and the response is love knows no bloodlines or status. We are two individuals who fell in love and decided to spend our life together.”

The man was a good actor and could pursue the field, especially with his good looks.

Another question followed. “Prince of Devaraya, how come you got married before your older brother and sister? Is this a play to produce an heir before your other siblings so your child gets the right to the throne?”

The second part of the question caused a shiver to pass through her. *She called it!*

She heard his chuckle before he spoke, “This is not about who gets the throne. This is about us as two individuals wanting to start our life together. I’m happy to be part of a progressive family that does not discriminate based on gender or family background. Regarding the throne, whoever is named king or...” he paused to look at his sister and added, “... queen by our parents, our entire family is committed and responsible to the people of the province and their well-being and growth.”

Sanjana swore she heard the room gasp in unison before they broke into a clamor. It hit her in that moment that her

husband was not really after anything, or at least what she thought he was interested in—an heir.

Feeling ashamed of how her thoughts had swirled down the wrong path, she processed his words. What he had just said meant even his sister, who was adopted, could be the Queen of Devaraya, and that just blew her mind.

She turned to look at him just as he turned to face her, and all she could do was look at him and smile. Not the pained one she had previously, but the one that made her eyes sparkle and her skin glow with the relief that she wasn't going to be used as a baby-maker and that she entered into a contract with a guy who believed women could lead too and not need to be protected by men.

Not bad, Prince of Devaraya. Not bad at all.

Chapter 6

Hours later, after spending time with both their families and the crazy media meeting, they were on their way to someplace she didn't know. She was yet again assisted by Radha and her team to change out of the fancy outfit and into something *relaxed yet chic*, according to the stylist.

The coordinated silk shirt and pleated skirt combo were still a bit too fancy for her to wear for travel, but she told herself she had to go with the flow. And with the huge relief she got from hearing Jai address the media's questions earlier that morning, she was a bit more relaxed.

She slowly turned to look at him as he sat a foot away from her in the back of the car. She attempted to speak but could not find her voice at first and finally had to clear her throat before speaking. "Why did we need to make an appearance before the media?"

He turned his attention to her. "Why wouldn't we? The world needs to know we are married." His response was matter-of-fact, like it was a normal thing for the royals to do when they had not made an appearance like this, ever.

It was still puzzling to her that there was so much of a public show about their marriage, especially a fake one. "But the family is usually not in the public eye."

A long moment of silence passed as he scanned her face and nodded. "Good observation, but times have changed. Our presence in the media is required, and the people in the region need to know we are there for them. Don't you think so?"

She only nodded in response. “And... what you said about Devaraya having a queen and not just a king, that was very classy of you.” She smiled.

Another long look her way, and he smirked before averting his eyes. It felt like he was making a point to the entire world that his sister may have been adopted, but she still had a right to the throne. Did he put her in front of the media to show that marrying out of the royal community was his way of saying his family was progressive?

“Where are we going?” she asked after another long silence. She did not fail to notice the couple of suitcases loaded into the vehicle before they left the resort. What was in the luggage, she had no idea.

“On our honeymoon.” His tone was matter of fact like it was the most obvious thing to do even for the contract marriage they had. “We will be back in a few days.”

Sanjana nodded. “Where are we going?” She didn’t feel nervous anymore, but the question of why the man chose for her to be part of the contract marriage was still a burning one.

“You’ll see.” He smiled, revealing a deep dimple she had not noticed before, and it was because he had never given her that kind of a smile. Why did the guy have to be so perfect? How was she not supposed to be attracted to him even when she knew it was all a show for whatever was on his mind?

Moments later, she saw signs for an airport, and she didn’t think there was one anywhere in the vicinity. “There is an airstrip here?” She was suddenly excited. There was only

one major airport for the entire region, and she was pleasantly surprised there was another one.

“A small and private one.” His tone was the exact opposite of how ecstatic she was feeling.

A million thoughts were going through her mind. Could she use the airstrip for practice? If there is a private airport, was there a private plane she could convince her new husband to let her use? Suddenly, the arrangement was starting to make sense. *Did he know she was training to be an airline pilot?* Was he looking for a personal pilot? Then why marry someone?

Don't be silly, Sanjana!

The excitement of the potential possibilities was clearly driving her nuts. She could not handle it anymore when her eyes fell on the Rolls-Royce of all private planes.

A Bombardier Global 8000! The longest-range and most luxurious international travel plane. Every pilot's dream to fly one.

It was a distant dream even to get to see one, let alone get a job to be a pilot on such a plane. For her to see the family logo on the plane indicated it was owned by them and not a rental. She wanted to keep screaming, *holy crap*, every second, but she bit back her lip.

“I'll take it you like our ride.” His tone was yet again the composed statement while all she could think about was to roll down the window, stick her head out, and scream at the top of her lungs.

She had no words to express her thrill and excitement at seeing the plane that stood majestically on the airstrip. “This is... crazy!”

“Crazy good, I hope.” The car stopped a short distance from the plane. She didn’t wait for the person by the car to open the door for her. She stepped out of the vehicle and started walking toward the plane, her eyes gathering moisture. She never knew what it would feel like just to be looking at the plane she had obsessively used during her simulation hours. It was overwhelming to see the plane in person, waiting for her to board.

She was still awestruck when she felt him next to her, his hand gently taking hers in his as he led her toward the plane. She had to be dreaming. No way all this happened in the last few days. When did her life suddenly get so crazy?

Crazy good!

Sanjana was on cloud nine as she ascended the steps to the plane. She beamed at the pilot and first officer and told herself she wanted to do what they were doing one day, sooner than later. It was hard for her to stay composed and have a pleasant smile when all she could think about was running into the cockpit, screaming with joy and feeling the control panel.

Instead, all she could do was keep calm. She could not let her secret out about her wanting to be a pilot, especially when most of their family had served in the Indian Administrative Services, working for the betterment of their region and its people and continuing to do so, even after retirement. Her father continued to be of service to the people in the form of his non-government organization called *Lok*

Shakthi. Her sister followed in the same path, but Sanjana did not pass the entrance examination in her first attempt, tried flying as a distraction, and was hooked.

“This is nice,” she managed to say as she sat in one of the luxurious seats next to her new husband, one whom she was becoming impressed by with every passing minute. “I didn’t realize there was an airport so close by.”

He nodded knowingly. “You’re not the first one. This is family-owned land, and we were able to convert some of it to an airstrip so guests who will be staying at the resort can use for their convenience.

Too fancy for her!

What she was most interested in was the cockpit and all the fun that was happening there. She leaned to her side slightly to catch a glimpse of the cockpit, and she swore she felt goosebumps when she saw the lit-up panel as the pilots ran through the pre-flight procedures.

“We could get the captain to give you a tour of the cockpit once we are cruising if you’d like.” The words were music to her ears, and all she could think of was to hug him and give him a tight kiss. It was a thought, but before she knew it, her arm had gone around his, and she hugged his side, blinking away tears of joy.

What was the guy doing to her? How well did he know her or worse, was he reading her mind? There was no other explanation.

He chuckled, patting her arm before she pulled back to look at him. “Thank you.” Her voice came out as a whisper as

she managed an array of emotions.

“You’re welcome,” he said, followed by a slight wink, and that did something else to her. Her stomach knotted as her heartbeat picked up, and she looked away, not wanting to do anything stupid like hugging or, worse, kissing him. Thank goodness she stopped at hugging him and didn’t go further.

“So, we are going somewhere international, I suppose,” she asked, not caring that she had not packed her passport. Somehow, she knew it would be taken care of, especially with how things were happening the past couple of days.

“You got that right, but where do you think we are headed?” he retorted with a spark of challenge in his tone.

Her lips broadened with sheer joy as she thought through the possible international destinations that were most visited during that time of the year. “Based on the time of the year and we only have a bag each for clothes with no sweaters or jackets, it has to be somewhere warm with a Mediterranean climate.”

He pressed his lips together and nodded. “Name the country.”

“Hmm,” she said, unable to stop smiling like a fool. “Since this is technically a romantic trip, it has to be...” Her words drifted as she felt her cheeks heat up under his gaze.

“Has to be,” he prompted, and all she could do was keep grinning.

How did he have that effect on her?

“How many guesses do I have?” She was enjoying his company already as he was feeding into her competitive side.

He only chuckled. “How many do you think is fair?”

He is good.

“Okay, how about I get five chances, and I get to ask you five questions for each guess, and you tell me if I’m close or far off?” She was having fun with the exercise. When he nodded in agreement, she let out a squeal of joy and started, “Is this a beach destination?”

His mouth twisted mischievously. “You could say that.”

Her eyes lit up, thinking of the possible countries. “My first guess is Greece.”

“Nope...” he said, shaking his head and adding, “... but not far off.”

Sanjana was no longer interested in the flight procedures the pilots were going through and announced as the man sitting next to her had invoked the vagabond in her. “Okay, is our destination east or west of Greece?”

After a round of playing the do-you-know-your-countries type of game, he revealed to her that they were headed to Monaco and would be visiting the surrounding islands. The marriage may have been fake, but she was already starting to enjoy the perks.

Sanjana lay in bed feeling the waves under her, which only made her stomach twist. After a beautiful morning in Monaco and having breakfast outdoors, enjoying the beautiful

weather, they made their way to the port. She had no idea they were staying on a boat for the next few days—a yacht, he had clarified.

At first sight of it, she was excited, but fifteen minutes in, she emptied her stomach's contents due to the boat's bobbing on the water. She had no idea she was seasick and had crawled into bed to get her body used to the movement.

A couple of the crew members had come by to offer her medications for the sea sickness, but she declined. As a future pilot, she felt determined to have her body learn to adjust to various scenarios. The turbulence in an aircraft was different from the bobbing of a boat, but she wanted her body to take the time to adjust.

To her disappointment, hours passed, and her stomach could not even keep water down. She sat on her bed contemplating when the door to the suite opened, and she held her hand up, without the energy to even look at the crew member who was there again to offer her medication. "I'm okay. I don't need the—"

"Have you looked at yourself?" A male voice cut through her words, and that made her look up. "You could pass out any minute, do you realize that?" His harsh tone made her wince.

She lowered her eyes, fighting the need to run to the bathroom again, but she fought it. She was not willing to take any medications that would compromise her body or her thinking. She knew she could train it. "I'll be fine," she managed to say, and it came out as a whisper.

He picked up one of the chairs set to the side and placed it next to the bed, sitting close to her. “Sanjana, don’t be so adamant. Just take the medication.”

She shook her head as she looked up. “Did you take the medication?” It was a challenge.

“No, that’s because my body is not affected by motion sickness. The rest of my family takes the medication before they go on a cruise or any bumpy ride.” He sounded frustrated. “And it takes someone months to get used to it, and we only have days in this area. “Take the medication, or else—”

“Or else what?” she demanded, meeting his eyes. “I don’t like taking medication, and I won’t.” As if that was his cue, he stood up, kicking the chair back before scooping her off the edge of the bed to make her lie down. “Jai, what are you doing?” Her fight response kicked in, and even though she knew he would not harm her, she tried to wiggle away from him.

He wasn’t paying any attention to her or how hard she was trying to get away. He held her down on the bed with his weight, and she let out a gasp. The weight of his body on hers did something strange inside her, and all coherent thought left her. She stopped fighting him and was focused on her bodily reaction as he peeled off what looked like a small band-aid and stuck it behind her ear.

He held the little tab pressed behind her ear and leaned closer. “If you act smart and even think about removing this medication patch, I will have you tied to the bed. No crew member will come to your rescue.”

The very sight of her tied to his bed while he watched her made her hot inside. Holy crap!

“Do you understand?” he demanded, pulling her out of her bondage dreams, and she frantically nodded. He let go of her hands and his restraints on her body and stepped away. “It will take eight to ten hours for the medicine to kick-in, and you better not take it out. Tomorrow morning, we are hosting our first guests, and we must look like a couple who is enjoying their honeymoon.”

Guests? Who invites people on their honeymoon? There, in itself, it's all sounding fake—the marriage and everything else.

She only nodded and decided it was not worth the fight. She was also at a point where there was no such a thing as training her body, so she let go of that idea. “Okay,” her voice was weak.

“Rest up. It's going to be a long day tomorrow.” With those words, he left the room. She wondered if that was supposed to be a warning, but she was glad to be left alone.

Sleep came to her quickly, and she was glad none of those crazy thoughts of her being tied up came back to haunt her.

Why were her mind and body so hyper around him?

The following morning, she woke to what seemed like a normal day. She slowly sat up and looked around the room, and it took her a moment to remember she was on a boat.

Unlike the previous day, she was not compelled to run to the bathroom to throw up.

She ran her fingers over the small patch her husband forcibly stuck on her neck. “Huh... it actually works.”

With the newfound freedom of being able to move around without feeling like vomiting, she went to the small bathroom for a much-needed shower.

Shortly after, she made her way up to the deck where she knew she would find her husband. Hopefully, he wasn't as grumpy as he was last night. She slowly climbed the spiral stairs and found him standing at one end of the deck, his back to her.

She took in a deep breath, her hands nervously going to the pleats of the summer dress she had on for the morning. As she walked slowly toward him, she could not help but admire his structure and could not believe how sculpted he looked without the bulky muscles.

If whatever he did for a living didn't work out, he could make a lot of money being a model. She didn't know how long she stood staring at him before moving toward him as he started to turn, still keeping her eyes on him.

“Good morning,” he said, flashing her a gorgeous smile that made her stomach twitch.

She smiled back and stopped walking as he came up to her, his eyes holding her gaze. As he got into her space, his hand went up her ear and into her hair as his lips descended to hers.

Was he going to kiss her? That's right, they are technically in public even if there was no human in sight.

As if she was following a script, she tilted her chin up and closed the gap between them, sliding her trembling lips over his.

She felt his fingers tighten in her hair, and a moan escaped her, parting her lips against his. She took in the taste of fresh coffee and his musky cedarwood scent that filled her lungs. Not even attempting to process what was happening, she ran her hand up to his face, feeling the sweet burn from his stubble on her palm.

She felt his hold on her tighten, her chest mashed against his as their tongues tangled, igniting something deep inside. She shuddered in response to him deepening the kiss and fisted the fabric of his t-shirt with her hand, pulling him closer.

In response, he groaned against her lips before pulling back to look at her. Her eyes lowered, unable to figure out what just happened. Did fake kisses make people feel like they were going to be launched into space at any minute? Her first ever kiss was a fake one? So sad!

“Did you sleep well?” His voice was a whisper, and she nodded as her breath was coming fast. “Looks like the patch is working to treat your sea sickness. Let me check if it is still intact.” With those words, he used the hand on her cheek to tilt her face to look behind her ear.

Reality hit her hard when she realized that was what he intended to do before she threw her lips at his. *What the heck did she do?*

“Yeah, it’s working well, I guess.” She tried to sound chirpy when all she could think of was the ocean opening up and swallowing her to spare the embarrassment. Like she couldn’t let it go, she looked around and laughed. “No one is here. I thought there were people, and that’s why I kissed you.”

He smiled, his eyes holding an unreadable expression. “That’s quite all right. I didn’t mind it.”

“Oh, good. Me neither,” she said and bit her tongue.

Shut up, Sanjana. Don’t say anything. Stop trying to act too cool.

As if she had forgotten something in the room below, she mumbled an excuse and bolted from the deck, her heart pounding in her ears. Stay away from him, she told herself. The guy was capable of taking everything she had with just that smile of his.

Despite of all the chaos in her mind, she still could not help but wonder how it would be to be kissed for real when the fake one was so earth-shattering?

Chapter 7

After a week of island hopping and meeting many people, she was glad to be back at the Devaraya Palace, her new home. The people they met were folks who were from the same region as them but migrated for jobs or businesses in other countries. It was early in the morning when they arrived at the palace, and after all the travel, all she could think about was to sleep, and without another word to the man she had grown accustomed to being around, she crashed on the bed.

It was hours later when she woke to the sound of running water, something that had been a cue for her to wake up and get dressed through their trip. She was annoyed that he would not tell her what time they had to leave every day and when she asked for the plan, he shrugged and said, “No, plan. We head out when you are ready to.”

Sanjana didn't mind his subtle way of telling her it was about time to leave when he went into the shower each day. And she preferred that, too, to be able to wake up alone and have some space to gather herself and be properly awake.

It was weird sleeping in the same bed with him the first night of their honeymoon, but she wasn't as jittery as she was earlier. She got through one week of the year without a hitch, with only fifty-one weeks to go. Then she could travel the world with her dream job as a pilot.

With that thought, she sat up, slowly lowering her feet to the soft rug under the massive canopy bed in one of the

largest bedrooms she had ever seen, not even in those fancy magazines.

Although her upbringing was in a comfortable setting, it felt way too humble compared to how the entire palace was laid out. An entire section seemed to be dedicated to the two of them, with many rooms and space for hosting and entertaining their guests. She made a note to explore the space and, eventually, the rest of the palace.

Sanjana was only half awake as she sat wondering what she was supposed to do all day. A week of exploring new places was amazing, but she didn't know what she was supposed to do for the rest of her time as the prince's wife.

Look pretty, smile, and be bored out of her mind?

She had to find something to keep her busy and her mind occupied between the social and public appearances she might have to make with the prince and the rest of the family.

Oh, the family! How could she forget that she had to keep up the image of a good daughter-in-law, a temporary one? Was the prince not worried about a divorce, or would the separation be kept under the radar?

It was too far out to think about everything. With that, she slid off the bed and walked toward the open patio doors at the far end of the suite. She picked up the smell of coffee as she made her way through what seemed to be a private multi-level suite.

There were multiple rooms on the top level with various seating areas, and from what she could see by peeking through the open loft space on the upper level, there was an open

layout on the lower level. The space had the bare bones of the design relying on traditional style but was layered with a contemporary touch. Modern sculptures co-existed with traditional wall art. She was in awe of the place, and the space was only for two people.

Was she supposed to host parties in the space? She had no enthusiasm or experience hosting any parties, let alone the fancy royal ones, and was wondering if she could get professional help when she heard footsteps behind her. She pulled on her sleep shirt slightly on impulse as if she could pull it closer like a robe.

“Good morning,” he said casually, and she turned to find him rubbing a towel in his hair. He was casually dressed in a t-shirt and a pair of shorts. “Whenever you are ready, we should go eat.” He stepped into the balcony under the sun, a few feet from her.

She nodded, mulling over her new set of questions and when to ask him. “I’ll need fifteen minutes, and... I... I need to know what I’m supposed to be doing in the palace for the next twelve months.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “You are free to do whatever you please. This is *your* home too.” With those words, he left her standing by herself on the balcony.

A palace? Nope, not her home.

She was lost in thought when she heard her name being called from a distance. She looked around and finally saw it was Aish calling her from under a large gazebo. She could see the rest of the family was enjoying the cool weather.

Sanjana waved back and held up her ten fingers when Aish gestured for her to join them. She smiled as she walked to the bathroom, happy to know there was someone excited for her to be there, unlike the snobbish older brother.

Although the royal couple was polite and warm, the man she was married to seemed to be made of stone, and his older brother looked at her like she was dirt. It was his sister who made her feel welcome and comfortable despite she was a few years older than her.

Sanjana was excited to see Aish again and hoped she would make her stay at the palace and her time with the family go by fast. If only she knew what the stone man of a husband was expecting her to do. Pushing away her concerns, she quickly showered and picked one of the long dresses she didn't get to wear on her honeymoon. It was a dress that seemed too simple to wear to meet the people they were meeting day after day, but it was perfect for that morning. It felt more like a meet and greet for everyone who was from the Devaraya region and had moved to other countries. She had no idea why people wanted her and the prince at their homes.

Fascination with the royals was real.

The families they met were second and third-generation immigrants who had moved to Europe, and yet, she could see the spark in their eyes, the joy of meeting *their* prince. That is probably how she would have been if she weren't married to one and in a fake marriage with him.

Shortly after, she walked next to him, her hand gently placed in his as they were about to meet his family. And like it finally hit her that she was part of *the* royal family, her anxiety

shot up again, and she squeezed his hand, inadvertently moving closer to him like it comforted her.

“Welcome back, you guys!” His sister was the first to approach them, and Sanjana threw an arm around the excited woman but did not let go of his hand. “So good to have you back.”

“Good to be back,” Jai said as the three of them came together for a group hug while he held her hand in his. To Sanjana, it felt surprisingly natural.

“Glad you could join us this morning,” his mother said with a soft smile, and it was at that point Sanjana let her hand free to greet the older couple the traditional way by joining her hands. “Sanjana, don’t be so formal. Come, sit.” The older woman patted the empty seat next to her.

Sanjana was still nervous in the presence of the entire family, and it was only her fake husband who seemed to make her feel at ease. She cast a look in his direction as he spoke to his sister, hoping he would come sit next to her so she was not by herself with the king and queen.

When did she become so clingy?

To her relief, the prince came to sit next to her. She continued her conversation with the older couple, sharing the details of their visits to meet people who migrated from their region and have become successful in their fields.

Soon after, her nervousness was under control as she ate the yummy food and participated in the conversations. They were mid-conversation when the queen let out a small laugh and said, “Look who’s decided to join us too.”

Sanjana looked in the direction of the queen's gaze and saw it was the older brother walking toward them—the face of the family when it came to social media and the future king who was well-loved and respected by the people in the region. Whether it was performing the royal duties to the welfare programs or running the family businesses, it was all Bharath Devaraya.

Bharath was nowhere as tall as his younger brother, but he was built like a bodybuilder, and his stone-like muscles made him look broad and somewhat shorter, whereas his younger brother was all lean muscle and tall like a warrior who had the strength to defend his empire, like a king. How could someone with a small stature hold so much arrogance in just the way he walked?

In the few times they had met, Sanjana did not get positive vibes from the older brother, and she always got the feeling he didn't approve of the alliance. The one time she caught him looking at her family during one of the wedding rituals, she swore she saw annoyance in his eyes like he couldn't stand the very sight of them.

It had made her angry at the time, but she brushed away the unwarranted thoughts. Why did she care about what he thought of her and her family when it was all going to come to an end in one year?

“Bharath, come join us,” Aish said cheerfully, gesturing to the seat next to her.

Instead of sitting next to his sister, Bharath gestured Aish to give up her seat next to their father, and to Sanjana's utter surprise, she complied. Sanjana didn't catch any

unhappiness in Aish's eyes as she moved to the chair next to him, away from their father.

What Sanjana thought was not nice didn't seem to bother anyone at the table. As if curious, she turned to look at the guy next to her to find him glaring at his older brother, but he did not say anything.

Shortly after, the older couple left the canopy to go back indoors, and she could see a sudden shift in the older brother's body language. Like he had been waiting for the royal couple to leave.

"We need to talk," Bharath's words came out as an order as he glared at his younger brother. A strange silence fell over the table as if everyone expected the conversation. Sanjana picked up anger in the older brother's eyes and wondered why.

"What do we need to talk about this early in the morning when I'm still jet-lagged?" Sanjana was surprised at the overly casual tone of the younger of the two brothers—*your husband*. She didn't know how much longer she needed to register that.

The silence was awkward as the brothers looked at each other until the older one said, "What was the need to address the media?"

"What do you mean *need*?" Jai fired back like he was expecting the question. "We, as a family, decided to open up to the public. We need to be approachable."

"No. We don't. There are boundaries." Bharath grit his teeth, but there was surprise in his voice, like he didn't expect

his younger brother to speak up.

Jai seemed to be in no mood to back down. “Not anymore. Social media opens up the opportunity for us to be connected with the people of our region. We don’t want to be the family who only performs our roles as royals but does something for the people.”

Bharath let out a chuckle. “What the palace does... are you saying that’s not enough?”

“No.” It was a curt response. “I’m saying we can do more if we knew what people wanted.” He paused to look at Sanjana, and the way he held her gaze for a moment made her breath trap in her throat. “Like what Sanjana’s father is doing. We need to reach out to our people to find out what really matters.”

Sanjana’s heart went on a rampage as she stared at her husband in awe. For him to acknowledge what her father had started was huge, at least she thought it was awesome. Especially when the rest of the family at the table nodded in agreement to the NGO her father initiated with a few of his retired colleagues was in no way a huge effort. She lowered her eyes, processing the moment that had suddenly turned intense as the brothers continued to engage with their words.

“What was the need to show off how much you and your wife are enjoying each other to the entire world?” Bharath’s voice was gruff, and his comment made her eyes fly up to Jai.

Did she hear it right?

“Bharath, what are you talking about?” Aish intervened as if unable to bear the way her brothers were glaring at each other.

Bharath cast a glare at Aish. “You stay out of this. I want Jai to respond.” His words were harsh, but yet again, Aish did not say anything, and it bothered Sanjana. Why was the man being so rude to his sister?

Was it because she was adopted?

Horrified at the potential reason for his bad behavior, she kept her eyes on Aish. In the short time she had known Jai’s sister, she somehow felt protective of her.

She raised her eyes to look at Jai, and to her amazement, he was looking at Aish, too, like he didn’t like what his brother said. Instead of addressing his brother’s question, he responded to his sister. “Aish, did you not see the pictures online?”

Sanjana secretly smiled when she saw Bharath roll his eyes in annoyance as the oldest and youngest siblings chatted about a photographer who managed to catch Sanjana and Jai kissing on the boat.

It was Sanjana’s turn to be shocked. She realized then that the kiss she thought was a spur of attraction from him was a staged one, knowing there was someone capturing pictures of them? She noted how much of an actor her husband was, fooling her that it was a moment of passion they shared. She should have known better.

“Jai, that’s enough,” Bharath ordered as Jai had quickly transitioned the topic from what her older brother wanted to

talk about. “I need you and your wife to watch your surroundings when you are together. The royal family’s private matters are to stay out of the public eye.”

Jai didn’t seem even a tiny bit intimidated by the commanding nature of his brother. “Bharath, I’m aware of what our responsibilities are... and if I’m in the public eye, I am with my wife, not just anyone. How can this be hurtful to the image?”

Sanjana wanted to whistle and clap at the comeback from Jai since it was the older brother in the news spotted with beautiful actresses and models with the standard caption of, *‘The prince says he was there to meet a friend for coffee.’*

Bharath shook his head disapprovingly while Aish bit back a smile. “I know what you’re getting at, but just don’t do anything stupid... again. Like the announcement you made about Devaraya having a queen.”

Sanjana should have guessed that’s where the conversation was going. Back to the day after their wedding at the press conference where Jai announced anyone could lead the royal duties.

To his brother’s comment, the situation got a bit more intense, but Jai, like a champion of all arguments and conversations, shrugged. “When you get married, there will be a queen, or if Aish decides to take on the responsibilities, she could too.” He winked at his sister, and she burst out laughing.

“Bharath, looks like Ma appointed Jai to get you to marry and bring us a queen.” Aish made the awkwardness of the moment go away.

Bharath stood up like he had enough. “That’s enough. I told you I will serve the people with no distractions. I will not marry so I can dedicate my entire time to perform my duties.” He turned to look at Jai. “You may decide to make your wife the government officer for our region but stay out of the royal business.”

With those words, he left the siblings smiling at each other.

“Jai, you pissed him off royally. You better go apologize.” Aish laughed. “Especially, when *you get married*... that was a hard blow.”

Jai shook his head. “Don’t celebrate your brother’s misery. Go console him.” He let out a chuckle, and Aish, being the dedicated sister, followed the older brother across the garden.

Sanjana was still in shock when Jai gestured for her to go with him. The way Bharath mentioned her, a shiver passed through her. Did Jai marry her because she would become part of the Indian Administrative Services? When should she break the news to him that she was no longer pursuing that career?

If the job he had offered at the end of the contract was a government one, then she had some clarifying to do, and soon.

Chapter 8

The next morning, she woke up to his footsteps and scent filling the air around her. She sat up, a sudden realization passing through her mind. What was she supposed to do from that point on? What did it mean to be his fake wife according to the contract?

She adjusted her sleep shirt and slipped off the bed to walk toward him. She stopped short when she caught him stepping out of the closet in a button-down shirt and dark wash jeans.

“Good morning,” he said, looking up at her for a moment before looking at his arm as he rolled up his sleeve.

She stood frozen as he walked toward her, adjusting his sleeves. A long pause later, she looked into his eyes, a strange tingle passing through her. Why did the man have to be so stunning?

“What... what am I supposed to do?” her voice wobbled in response to his proximity. *Will she ever get used to it and calm down?*

He held her gaze for a long moment. “Why are you asking me? You are free to do what you wish to do as long as you follow the palace protocol.”

Her eyes widened. “Protocol?” Was she in some kind of a fancy prison life now?

Jai nodded. “You will have your own staff assigned to help out with that. Whenever you are ready, you will meet

your team, and you'll know what to do next.”

She lowered her eyes, still processing what he said. “I don't understand why I need a team to tell me what to do.”

There was no response immediately, but she felt him move toward her, and her eyes rose to meet his. He stopped less than a foot from her in lazy perusal, like he was assessing her. “No one will tell you what to do... ever. It's for you to know how you can go about with everything.” He paused, and she found herself nodding, even though she didn't process any of it. “Being a part of the family, you will be in the public eye, and it's not always pleasant, so you will have to follow some guidelines for your safety and to hold up what people expect from the Devaraya family.”

“Okay.” There wasn't really more to say, even if she was in a daze because of the way he explained this plus how much she was affected by the sheer magnetism she felt toward him.

Just a bodily reaction to his stunning good looks. Deep breaths!

“And sometime this week, you'll join me for a gathering with my friends.” His tone was the usual calm and composed one, but the way he stated it like it was an order, there was no way she could decline even if the last thing she wanted to do was get to know his friends.

“Okay,” the word escaped her before she could comprehend what it meant. He had emphasized the fact that no one but his lawyer knew about their deal, so she had to put on the show as his new wife.

What did that mean?

“I’ll have my staff share the details with your team so they can plan accordingly.” He gave her a nod and walked away before disappearing into the large closet.

She stood in the middle of the large bedroom, wondering if that was how the next year of her life was going to be. What she wanted was to be able to go to a nearby fly club and get in some flying hours. Maybe the team he was referring to could help her.

Sanjana was lost in her thoughts until he emerged back from the closet dressed with a suit jacket over the shirt. Until that moment, she didn’t even wonder what the guy did for a living.

They are royals. Don’t they have money to sit and chill?

“What do you do?” She didn’t sound like herself when she blurted the question, and that made him chuckle. Why did she care what he did? She debated if she should backtrack and say she meant to ask something else not so invasive. What else could she make that sound like?

A long moment of silence passed, and he said, “You’re probably the first person to asked me that question.” A small smile formed on his lips. “I’m an aeronautics engineer by education and a businessman by profession. I have a company I started after college with a friend, which makes specialized parts for commercial and cargo planes.”

Aeronautics? What are the odds?

“How cool!” She suddenly wondered if he knew what she was up to. If he married her because it would be nice to

have a government official in the palace, he is definitely in for a surprise. Or was she just a prop?

She knew she could not be just a prop, but she could not figure out why the royal family approached her parents. He could have very easily found anyone, a much prettier actress or model to play the part, but why her?

“What about you?” he asked, pulling her out of her thoughts and sending shockwaves through her. He didn’t know anything about her and still proposed the contract?

He was messing with her head, and she knew it.

She held his gaze in a challenge. “I find it hard to believe that you proposed the deal without knowing anything about me.”

“You’re right about that,” he scoffed. “But I’d like to hear it from you.”

She contemplated whether coming clean with him or keeping everything under wraps. It was too soon to trust him with her secrets. Even if he somehow knew already, she did not confirm it for him. “I graduated with a degree in political science and pursued a master’s in business administration. I’m currently... or was preparing for the IAS exam.”

Well, what she said was not a lie. She just left out the details about her not necessarily still preparing for the exam.

He nodded. “Good. And please feel free to continue your preparation. Our region could use more representation in the government sector.” His words made her heart twist. Why did everyone have to say that and put pressure on her she

didn't need? Was there no other way for her to serve the community?

Wasn't being a pilot considered serving the public for their transportation needs?

She could only nod in response to his comment. She told herself in one year she would be a pilot, and her fake husband would give her the job according to the contract.

“Tonight is family dinner night. I will be back home by five, and we will head over to my parents' place for dinner.” He moved around the space briskly like he had something he had to do before he left that morning. “Your team will meet you in the living room when you are ready to talk to them. Buzz them on the intercom.”

“Okay,” was all she could say when he was shooting words like bullets. He left, and she suddenly felt a peace settle in. She slumped on the sofa for a good five minutes before placing an order for food using the system he had shown her earlier and going into the shower to make herself presentable for *her team*.

Boy, was she glad to have a team or what? Her first impression was that it was excessive to have a team for one person, but when she met with them, she realized she needed the help.

She was amazed at how she had a calendar set up with family events, outings, and even date nights. She was thankful

for the nutritionist who would plan the meals for her and communicate to the kitchen, and a wardrobe assistant who would have everything planned for her outings with her husband so she didn't have to do any guesswork.

She smiled in the middle of the meeting, realizing how even before that, she had a team that consisted of her sister, mother, and for some tasks, her father. She made a mental note to call her family later that day and realized she could actually have her assistant, Anjali, add a reminder.

I don't need a brain anymore. Awesome!

“Ma'am, for tonight's dinner, I set out a co-ord set in navy blue. Carrying this clutch will add a pop of color to your overall look,” Radha, her designer, said enthusiastically.

Sanjana looked at the woman, who was probably her age, and scrunched her nose. “I'm eating dinner with my family, and I'm going to be walking over to the other side of the palace. Why do I need a clutch?”

Radha shook her head. “They are your family, yes, but they are the king and queen.”

Sanjana couldn't disagree. She remembered what her father had once told her when she was a kid and had refused to change out of her jammies to go to a friend's place for dinner.

Dressing well when going to someone's home is a way of showing them respect. Like the occasion is important for you, and you make an effort to be presentable.

Later that evening, Sanjana was with her team, her hair being curled in the dressing area by her closet, when she heard movement in the living room. “That's the *Yuvraj*, let's wrap it

up soon.” She looked up at the clock, and it was a minute before five.

Very punctual, she noted.

A few moments later, footsteps sounded through the bedroom. The team hurried like an animal would attack them at any time and relaxed a bit when they heard the sound of water running.

“We have less than ten minutes,” Radha called out as she brought out the bright pink clutch and a pair of heels for her to wear for the evening. “Ma’am, these are in your size and have been stretched for a comfortable fit. Let me know how this pair works for tonight.”

“Sure, thank you!” Sanjana smiled at her through the mirror as the team gathered their things and left quietly. She sat on the small stool admiring her hair and how it was curled. She loved the waves her sister had, and her hair was done that way for the evening.

She liked how she looked, and that brought a smile to her lips. She was shaken out of the self-admiration mode when she heard the water stop. She had an hour before they had to be at the main dining hall and didn’t know what she was going to do all dressed up.

Minutes later, she heard him call out to her. Was there another procedure she had to follow for an hour before they showed up for dinner? She reached for the clutch, and from the weight of it, her phone was already placed inside. Slipping on the heels that were a bit taller than what she was used to, she went out of her dressing area. She noticed that was one

area he never walked into, so she assumed it was her private space.

“Ready to go?” he asked, making her glance at the large clock on the wall. As if he read the puzzled expression, he added, “I thought I’d give you a little tour of the palace grounds before we go to dinner.”

A tour sounded good, that too by the Yuvraj himself. “That sounds good.” She smiled and followed him out of their space, wondering if the shoes she had on were appropriate for her to walk. She hesitated for a moment and decided to go barefoot if they got difficult to walk in.

She followed him to the lower level of the residence, where the formal living and dining spaces were set up to entertain their guests. They stepped out of the main entrance, and she saw a golf cart waiting for them. One of the staff members handed Jai what looked like a key and smiled at them.

She had only seen a golf cart, never having been on one, and she found it fascinating to see Jai get behind the wheel of the vehicle. She bit back a smile as she slid in next to him. “Do you know how to drive?”

He let out a laugh looking out of the gardens. “Nice. Just because I don’t do it anymore doesn’t mean I don’t know how.” The smile lingered on his face, and that got her excited. She liked to see that gorgeous face light up, and it felt good to do that.

Why are you trying to impress him? Stay away from that stuff.

She had to remind herself she had a task at hand to achieve her dream job at the end of one year. Be nice to the family, let him kiss her, and that's about it. A year will go by quickly.

The tour of the gardens had her eyes widening at every turn at how ecologically friendly everything was set up. From solar panels to recycled water, he had her impressed with everything he had implemented around the palace. If she thought she made him smile when they started, he had her impressed by the end of it.

Don't be, a voice warned her.

The dinner was a very casual affair, and she didn't feel overdressed. It was fun because everyone in the family showed up in their best outfits paired with smiles.

His brother was quiet and only listened for the short time he was with them. Surprisingly, all the talking was done by Aish and her father, the king. Sanjana never realized the king was so easy to talk to.

Amidst the chatter, Jai's father leaned to his side and asked, "Sanjana, how is your preparation for the Civils coming along? She was shocked to be hearing the inquiry from him and to top it off, he added, "You know I secretly took the examination to see if I would get selected to the Indian Police Service?"

The rest of the family laughed like they had heard that story a million times, but for Sanjana, it was a blow. It was becoming more and more evident that the reason the alliance

was made for her to marry the prince was because she was pursuing the civil services.

She needed to break the news about her no longer pursuing civil services to Jai. But what if he terminates the contract sooner because that was the reason for the alliance? She didn't know what it meant to end their contract before the full year had elapsed. At that thought, she decided to give it time before she broke the news to anyone.

Sanjana was so lost in thought she didn't notice Jai getting up and walking over to where she sat. He bent down and kissed her on her cheek, making her jump and look up at him, shock in her eyes.

“Baby, it's just me.” He winked and looked at the rest of the group, and added, “Only I get to kiss my wife. No one else does.” His words got a good laugh out of the rest of the family. Like he wanted to probe her, he leaned forward and kissed her on her cheek again, making her blush.

And for the rest of the night, she felt his lips where he had kissed her and could only wonder what it would be like to be kissed on the lips again.

Chapter 9

“Wow.” Her voice was a low gasp when she looked at herself in the full-length mirror after her personal makeup artist turned her around. She looked at the image in front of her in awe and shock. She had never dressed up the way she had that evening, to the point she didn’t recognize herself.

It was the night she was going out with her husband to meet his friends. The apprehension she had about attending the event where she would have to meet and greet strangers heightened, and her flight response kicked in.

“I can’t do this,” she mumbled to herself as she ran her hands on the soft silk of the ruffled pants of the jumpsuit she had on for the evening. The bottle-green dress with a wraparound bodice and the long cutouts at the waist made her skin glow as the embellishments along the V-neck made her eyes sparkle.

“I knew it would be perfect,” a woman’s voice interrupted her state of frenzy, and she turned to find Aish walking toward her, a broad smile on her face. “You look stunning!”

Oh shit! There is no getting out of the dress now.

It wasn’t like she didn’t like the dress. It just wasn’t what she was used to wearing and attending an event with a man—a husband. Less than ten days ago, she was still figuring out ways to tell her family she didn’t want to pursue a career in civil services, and now, she was dealing with something she didn’t imagine would happen even in her wildest dreams.

“Thank you,” she managed to say as Aish gave additional instructions to the makeup artist about fixing a lock of hair in the back. Sanjana stole another glance at the image in front of her, and as if Aish’s excitement rubbed off on her, she wasn’t panicking anymore. She felt confident about her look for a change.

“And here is the clutch Mamma sent for you. She wants you to have it.” There was a spark in Aish’s eyes as she handed Sanjana a small bag that could only carry a few things. “I hope my brother remembers to wear the matching tie as instructed,” Aish said as she squatted in front of Sanjana to adjust the flowy pleats over the lower part of the jumpsuit.

Matching tie? Really?

Panic started to settle in again as the idea of going out with Jai popped into her head. She was intimidated by the idea of being with him in a public setting, especially with his friends.

What was she supposed to say to people? Will they talk to her or ignore her?

This time the frenzy hit hard, and she was about to hyperventilate when her back stiffened in response to a movement in the corner of her eye.

“Aish, can I have my wife back?” Surprisingly, his voice calmed her. Something about the guy, even if he was issuing orders, they were comforting. Maybe because she knew she didn’t need to put on an act with him?

“Yes, yes... in a minute,” Aish said, standing up before stepping back to scan Sanjana from top to bottom. Her smile

broadened before she turned to look at her brother. “You did well, Jai. Can’t believe you got her to agree to marry you.”

Sanjana wanted to roll her eyes. If only Aish knew the circumstances.

“I won’t deny it took some coaxing.” Jai came to stand next to her, and despite the towers of heels under her feet, the man still towered over her.

“Aww, you two look stellar. I need a picture for my social media post.” Aish gestured for the rest of the staff to move away as she pulled out her phone. “Move closer, you two.”

With those words, he not only moved closer to her but wrapped his arm around her. His fingers grazed her skin as they slid right through the cutout at the waist. She jumped slightly and let out a low squeal that she knew he had heard.

Her breath hitched, and her knees turned to jelly in response to his touch, and as if he sensed the turmoil, he tightened his hold on her, his fingertips denting her soft skin as he firmly held her to him for the picture.

“Amazing!” Aish flipped her phone to show the picture, and all Sanjana could focus on was how his fingers disappeared into her dress as the rough pad of his palm teased her soft skin. “Can I please post this online? Just one, please.”

“Fine.” His response was curt like he didn’t fully approve but could not say no to his sister. “We have to go.”

“Thank you,” Sanjana smiled and mumbled as she was whisked away by her husband.

“Have fun, you two!” Aish called out, and Sanjana dreaded the idea of being at the party with him surrounded by complete strangers. She hoped that after the initial attention they would get, she could find a quiet corner and make herself invisible.

The authoritative click of his shoes against the marble floor got the staff to be in attendance as they walked down the long hallway to what was one of the side exits of the palace. She was yet to memorize the map of the palace, but she knew the side entrance was what they used when they got back from the trip.

Her anxiety grew as they approached the car, his hand firmly placed on the small of her back. She wanted to know what to expect that night but was it too late to ask? Did it matter where they were headed?

He slid into the seat next to her in the back of the large SUV. “We’re headed to a party in the city. Might end up spending the night there.”

What? Now he tells me? Does he expect me to sleep in this dress?

“I... I don’t have a change of clothes.” Her voice wobbled for reasons she didn’t know just at the mere glance his way.

He nodded knowingly. “You’ll have everything you need for our stay.”

Everything? Where?

She didn’t pack an overnight bag so there is no way she would have everything. She dug her fingers into the clutch she

carried and hoped there were extra sheets of makeup remover in it. She was instructed to take off her lipstick completely if she had to touch it up. She did not plan on doing so but was glad she had something to wipe off the heavy eye makeup and everything else on her face for their *stay*.

Why couldn't he tell her that before?

She let out an internal scoff and told herself this was not too much crap to take on, especially for the dream job that was promised to her. Not much trouble at all. She just needed to figure out how not to be jittery around him, no matter how hot he looked.

The drive to the airstrip and the quick plane ride was a blur, and at some point, she had started to expect that lifestyle. The prince seemed to commute to work or whatever he did via air, and she didn't mind being with him, especially when she could interact with the pilots.

Soon, she told herself she would be a pilot and grow her own wings of freedom. She could almost taste it.

The city lights shone brightly as the private plane touched down, and her nervousness was back. She wasn't sure what kind of party it was and who was going to be there. For a person who didn't mind such social events, maybe it wasn't too bad, but for her, it was too much to handle. Any gathering of more than a handful of people was overwhelming to her. Even as a child, she remembered sneaking a book to every outing and finding a quiet corner to read and not talk to anyone.

Her sister, on the other hand, was the public relations person for the family, and Sanjana was happy she didn't need

to be the face of the family. With the deal the prince made with her, she knew she had to play the part of his wife in public, and she only hoped that the party she was accompanying him to was the only one for maybe the next nine months or more.

Just as she was thinking about how she could make excuses not to go to any future parties, she was suddenly blinded by a million lights. It dawned on her a moment later that they were the flashes from the numerous cameras waiting for them outside the airport's private terminal.

She felt his grip on her tighten as they walked toward the car, ignoring every call the paparazzi made to the prince. It took her a moment to realize they were addressing her as the *princess*.

She was still processing what had happened when she heard the prince bark into his phone. "How did they get here? You had one job to do, and you failed."

She didn't know who he was talking to but felt bad for the person on the receiving end.

"They better not follow us to the event. If they do, we will be skipping the party altogether." The threats and instructions continued while she took the time to gather herself, secretly hoping the reporters would show up at the event so they could skip attending the party.

Maybe she should tip the reporters about their plans so they can be ambushed and skip the parties.

Good thinking, Sanjana!

She gave herself a virtual pat on the back for being so resourceful and stared out the car window as they moved

through the slow city traffic.

“Sanjana, we need to switch out your phone and your number.” His words interrupted her meddling thoughts about how to get out of attending parties. She was surprised his tone was soft, unlike the harsh tones he used a few moments ago. She cast him a perplexed glance, and he smiled, handing her a new and what looked like a fancy phone. “Please use this going forward. All your contacts and data have been transferred.”

She was in no mood to ask for details, and so she opened her clutch and handed him her phone. He looked at it for a moment and asked, “Hope it’s okay to shut off this phone. I’ve notified your immediate family of your new number.”

Sanjana didn’t know why she had to change the number. “Is there a reason why I cannot use my old number?”

She saw him clench his teeth. “Someone managed to get a hold of your number, and we want to keep that detail secure.” He played around with her old phone and saw him turn it off. “Be sure to keep your phone secure at all times.” She could only nod as she looked at the device in her hands. “The new phone is secured, and even if you lose the device, our privacy will not be compromised.”

Why did he think she would lose her phone? Did he think she was sloppy? Whatever! I’m not going out with him again.

“Sanjana, look at me.” Suddenly, his tone shifted, and she looked into his eyes, wondering why he had to have that animosity in his voice. She had no idea why her voice sounded

so feeble every single time. “My team tells me that the only way the reporters knew our whereabouts is that someone hacked into your old phone, and that’s why the change.” His words made a shiver pass through her.

What did people want from her phone? The prince’s location, like he is joined at the hip with her?

“Oh, I will be careful.” She got a nod in response before he looked away to reply to messages on his phone.

A thick silence fell between them until his phone started to ring. Since she was still processing the idea of someone getting to know where she was through her phone, she listened to the conversation in case she had caused more trouble.

“Yeah, we are about ten minutes away... that’s not happening.” He paused as the other person spoke and finally said, “First and last time. Not going to give in to this melodrama ever again.” With those words, he ended the call and looked at her. “Expect to see some reporters at our destination. We’ll need to pose for a few pictures.”

“Oh, I thought—”

He didn’t let her finish. “I know, but we’re doing this as a favor for a friend.” He sounded unhappy about the idea.

“Okay.” How his friend would benefit from them posing for some pictures, she had no idea. “Where will the pictures be used?”

He shrugged. “We can decide where they get to be posted. My team will take care of that.”

Interesting. That is how the royal family has managed to stay with limited exposure on social media. “Okay.”

“The one person we cannot control with their social media posts is Aish, so be mindful of the pictures she is clicking.” There was finally a chuckle to his voice, and she picked up on the affection he had for his older sister.

“I don’t mind the posts. I don’t have any social media presence anyway. They won’t know who I am.” Sanjana had never taken the time to create an account of her own, instead had her sister’s profile on her phone and was a lurker online.

He scoffed before pointing toward the bright light that their car was approaching. “Everyone online will know who you are after tonight. Let’s go.”

Before she could say anything else, the car stopped, and he got out, leaving her confused for a bit. *What was she supposed to do again?*

Her confusion was cleared when she heard her side of the door open, and she looked up to find her gorgeous husband smiling at her with all the charm there was in the world.

“Showtime!”

“Princess Sanjana, this way, please.”

“Yuvraj, give us a pose. To your right.”

“Here, sir. Look.”

“Prince, hold her close.”

“Sanjana, ma’am, what is your online handle, please... for a collab.”

If the flashes from the cameras had overwhelmed her at the airport, the constant call for attention by the much smaller

group of reporters gathered outside the venue was crazier.

“Thank you! Princess Sanjana and I are here to enjoy my friend’s new restaurant opening,” Jai called out over the chaotic calls of the photographers before leading her away from the noise and blinding lights.

She blinked to wipe away the spots that played in front of her eyes. “What was that about?”

He laughed in response as they approached the main entrance of the restaurant, which looked like a home—a large one at that. She could hear loud cheering from the inside that could be heard over the thudding music that seemed to be playing.

The cheers got louder when the double doors of the restaurant opened, and Sanjana could only smile in response to the enthusiasm from the group gathered.

Jai fist-bumped some of the men who were cheering for him, but Sanjana was in a star-struck daze. For her to find herself in the company of top cricket players, movie actors, and some prominent models was surreal.

She gripped her clutch to suppress her need to squeal and call her sister to tell her. She remembered her royal training and smiled back at everyone as they moved around the space, her arm tucked firmly into his elbow.

Sanjana met so many people, and she was glad most of them were prominent public figures and knew their names already. There was no way for her to memorize everyone’s name if she had met them that night for the first time. She ate when he offered her food and took sips of his drink every time

he offered it to her. It was if he knew what she needed to keep going that evening.

It was hours into the party when she excused herself to make a trip to the ladies' room. For whatever reason, she felt his eyes following her even as she walked away from him.

Did he think she was going to run away?

Lost in thought, she placed her phone and clutch on the counter by the sink and stepped into one of the stalls inside the restaurant's luxurious bathroom.

She heard voices moments later, and the two women who stepped into the bathroom fell silent suddenly, followed by loud gasps.

"Oh my God! Is there water?" one woman asked, her voice under duress.

"Lord, please no." The other woman sounded like she was going to burst into tears.

Sanjana was confused and hurried out of the stall to find the two women staring at the clutch she had left next to the sink like it was an animal. "Sorry, I hope my clutch was not in your way."

Both girls shook their heads vigorously. "Absolutely not, Your Highness. We were admiring your clutch and hoping there was no water on the counter when you placed—" The woman Sanjana recognized as a famous actress let out a squeal before jumping in front of her to stop her from turning on the faucet to wash her hands. "The clutch is vintage and very susceptible to water damage, if I may."

Sanjana stared at the girl blankly as she gingerly picked up her clutch and held it like it was a newborn. “Oh my, I never thought I would see one of these in real life. They stopped making them twenty years ago.”

“Look at it. It looks as good as if it was made thirty or so years ago,” the woman continued to chat as Sanjana washed her hands and adjusted her dress. She caught a glimpse of the two women who looked starry-eyed just looking at the bag.

The woman holding the clutch tsked. “Last year, I almost found one of these in Japan, and I was ready to pay any price the seller quoted, but I could not get it.”

Sanjana was suddenly curious about the clutch Aish had given her to carry some essentials and wondered why the two women seemed to talk about it like it was a living thing.

The two women looked up when Sanjana turned and stepped toward them. “Your Highness, would you mind taking a picture of us with this masterpiece?” The woman held up the clutch, a dreamy smile on her face.

Stumped by the woman’s strange reaction, she nodded and took the phone that was given to her and clicked a few pictures. All along, she wondered what it was about that small bag that made it a big deal.

“Thank you so much, Princess Sanjana. It’s a pleasure to meet you and your treasured jewel.”

The woman handed her the clutch holding it ever so gently, and Sanjana had no option but to mimic that hold. The two women rushed into the open stalls like they suddenly

remembered they had to pee, leaving Sanjana staring at the clutch.

Her curiosity got the better of her, and she started searching online. She put in some of the words the two women used to describe the small bag. She kept her eyes on her phone as she made her way back to the party and nearly dropped her brand-new phone when her search results popped up on the screen.

A-Rare-Vintage-Hard-To-Find-French-Made-Designer-Bag?

Her eyes bugged out when she then caught the discrete engraving of the designer's name on the small buckle of the clutch. And it was worth a ton.

Why the heck did the queen give her such an expensive bag to carry to a somewhat casual party? Funny enough, one of the searches did mention that the *Maharani of Devaraya* owned one, and that it had not been spotted on her yet.

Her palms started to sweat, and she frantically tried to blow on them, worried the moisture might damage the bag. What in the world did she get herself into?

“Hey, you okay?” The familiar voice made her look up, and as always, she was relieved to see him. In her frenzy to not ruin the clutch, she had no idea where she was headed.

She swallowed nervously. “I... I don't want to ruin this.” She held the bag out to him.

His eyes went to the small bag, and she saw his brow furrowed before he looked back at her and shrugged. “Why will you ruin it, and even if you did, what is the big deal?”

“This is rare and costs a lot of money, and I’m scared —” She lost her voice when he stepped into her space, hushing her gently, his breath warm on her cheek.

“Not a big deal. Just relax.” He stepped back, flashing one of his charming smiles at her before leading her back to join the others at the party.

Somewhat relieved, she joined in on the conversations. She could not get over the fact the small bag was worth so much and her husband didn’t care that his fake wife could ruin something so valuable and unique.

Chapter 10

The following morning, Sanjana woke up to the sound of continuous pings from the corner of her room. It took her a while to realize it was her new phone crying for attention.

The room was dimly lit, and she was all alone with no sight of her husband. She walked to the dresser where she had left her phone and saw her sister had been calling nonstop.

A sudden worry gripped her as she answered the call. “Deepika, is everything okay?”

She heard her sister laugh and let out a sigh. “No. Not okay. My little sister is India’s hottest celebrity now.”

Sanjana rolled her eyes. “Seriously? First thing in the morning?”

Her sister let out another laugh. “First off, it’s almost afternoon, and I’m not kidding. You and your husband broke the internet this morning.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Sanjana pressed two fingers into her temple, trying to push away the dull headache that threatened to ruin her day.

“Just go to any of the social media sites. The hashtag SanJai is trending like crazy. People have never been so crazy about a royal couple in India. Now, after social media came into existence, people want to know about the royals.” Her sister sounded ecstatic. “And the dress, just stunning, and the clutch, that shook the fashion world. There were only a

hundred such clutches ever made, and you held one of them. I should have been there with you to take more pictures.”

Sanjana was overwhelmed and sat in one of the chairs set to one side of the large bedroom. “You got to slow down. I’m still not fully awake.”

Her sister tsked. “Poor you. Must be hard to party with celebrities.”

“You have no idea.” Sanjana shook her head.

“Anyway, where are you now? Back in the palace like a good girl after partying all night?” her sister teased.

“No,” Sanjana said, looking around at the modern setting she was in that morning. “We are in his apartment in the city. We will head back later today, I guess.”

“What?” her sister barked. “*His* apartment? Really, not yours? Anyway, you are in my city and didn’t call?”

Sanjana could only roll her eyes. If only her sister knew about the contract. Nothing was hers, not even the husband. “I had no idea what the plan was, and I was told we might stay back in the city if we get delayed.”

“We should catch up before you head back.” Her sister was insistent, and she wanted to meet her sister too, but she wasn’t sure how it would fare with the man she was married to.

What did the contract say about impromptu plans to meet her family?

“Yes, we should...” she said and added, “... how about I call you back and confirm?”

“Okay, call me back fast. We have so much to talk about, but it has to be in person.” Her sister’s excitement was amplified.

“Yes, yes,” Sanjana said with a smile forming on her face at the idea of seeing her. She ended the call and pulled on a robe over the sleep shirt she had on.

It was pretty late by the time they ended up at his multi-level penthouse after the long night at his friend’s new restaurant. After the initial daze of seeing all the celebrities, she only realized the man in tow was a celebrity for those prominent folks.

As he had stated, the massive apartment had everything she needed in the closet, including the specific hair ties that she used to keep her thick locks under control at night. She made a quick run to the bathroom to brush and fix her hair before stepping out into the bright loft area at the top level of the penthouse.

She paused outside the room to get a feel for her surroundings before heading down the spiral stairs. There were hushed voices on the lower level, but her husband was nowhere in sight.

She walked through the empty house, admiring the simplicity of the style in the entire space. It had some unique pieces that tied the space back to the palace, but there was a warm yet eclectic style to the décor.

A few minutes into her exploration, she still did not come across anyone. She looked at her phone, wondering if the best way to reach him was to call him. Just as she was about to type a message, she heard the low rumble from his

deep voice. She looked in the direction and found him talking on the phone on the patio, a grim expression on his face.

What was bothering him?

She turned away not to disturb him and saw her sister was calling again. She let out a sigh and told herself she had to ask him if she could meet her sister. Ask or tell him?

Pushing her thoughts aside, she walked to the closed sliding doors and slowly inched it open.

“Sid, why are you so worked up about this? Focus on the match for today.” She heard his calm voice as he spoke on the phone, his back to her. As if he sensed her presence, he turned, and a smile flashed in his eyes when they met hers. “Dude, I got to go. Have fun at the game today.”

She stepped into the warm outdoor air and smiled sheepishly as he ended the call. “Sorry to interrupt your call.”

“That’s okay.” He nodded. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, I slept for too long.” She had no idea why she was so nervous around him.

“It’s all good. We have no plans for today. We can head back home whenever you are ready.” He gestured for her to take one of the sofas set up for outdoor seating.

No Plans. Good, maybe she can sneak away and meet her sister.

“I... I’m hoping to meet my sister before we go back.” Why she felt so unsure of herself when she was around him, she was yet to figure out.

“Sure. We should invite them over to spend some time with us before we go. Let me call her husband and invite them for a meal.” He was already scrolling through his phone while Sanjana sat shell-shocked.

One, she didn’t even think of inviting her sister over, and second, she didn’t expect her contract husband to want to spend time with her sister *and* her husband. “Okay.”

“Hey, Surya, how are you?” There was a pause before he spoke. “Did I catch you at a bad time?” Even as Jai spoke calmly, she could hear the squeals from her sister in the background. “Good. Sanjana and I had an unplanned stay in the city, and we are hoping to meet you for a meal before we head back. Hope you have some time for us today?”

She almost chuckled, imagining her sister’s expression hearing the grand invite from her new brother-in-law.

“That sounds good. I’ll have a car pick you guys up in an hour. See you soon.” Jai ended the call and looked at her. “It’s nice of them to be flexible to come meet us. They should be here in the next hour and a half,” he said as he typed a message on his phone, and she wondered if he was making meal arrangements.

Like he read her mind, he looked up at her and said, “I’ve asked the staff to have lunch ready for us, and they want to know if you’d like your breakfast and coffee to be sent here along with mine?”

Taken aback by how quickly things fell into place, she nodded. “Yes, here is good.” She didn’t realize how hungry she was until the mention of food.

“Cool.” With that, a silence fell between them, and she was torn between breaking it or letting it be as he seemed to be enjoying the weather while browsing through the numerous newspapers spread in front of him.

Did their picture get posted on page three?

She cleared her throat, and that made him look up. “Did they write about us in the papers too? My sister was saying there are pictures of us on the internet.”

He slowly turned one of the newspapers. There were no images but an article with the headline *The Royal Storm*. She blinked as she read the summary of them storming the city. “There will be no pictures in the papers without our permission, and the social media posts will be sanitized very quickly.”

“Oh, okay.” She kept her eyes on the article and was curious as to what they said about her. If she looked lost and confused.

“If any of these bother you, we can make it go away and —” His voice was lost when he heard the ever-so-gentle knock on the glass of the patio door. “Come in...” he said and added, “... we can chat later. Our breakfast is here, along with a special guest.”

“Good morning.” Sanjana heard the voice of an elderly woman. To her surprise, the prince got up to greet the person, and that made her stand up too.

“Jaya aunty, so good to see you.” Sanjana smiled as she saw her husband put his arm around her. “Meet Sanjana, my wife.”

The older woman beamed at her. “No wonder your mother was gloating about her new daughter-in-law. She is beautiful.”

“Sanjana, this is Jaya aunty, Mamma’s friend from school who lives in the city and is my mother’s designated spy.” He laughed as the woman narrowed her eyes at him at the mention of the word spy.

The older woman shook hands with Sanjana. “So good to meet you, dear.”

“Likewise.” Sanjana smiled warmly, feeling at ease in the presence of the older woman. “Please join us for breakfast.” She looked at the large spread the staff lay in front of them.

Jaya aunty laughed, shaking her head. “Your husband here refused to eat without you, so you two should enjoy your meal while I make sure these fancy chefs this boy has hired don’t mess up the food for lunch.”

Jai only laughed as he hugged his mother’s friend. “I’ll see you, aunty.”

Jaya aunty left, and the staff member who waited on the other side of the glass doors quietly shut the doors again. Sanjana sat and noticed a cold breeze she hadn’t felt earlier, only to realize an air cooler was set up close to where she sat.

“Let’s dig in and get dressed to receive your sister.” She nodded in response to his words and went on to take a bite of her food, letting out a moan that was louder than she had expected. She heard him scoff. “Glad to hear you like the food.”

“Yes, I do,” she said, feeling embarrassed. “It would have been nice if Jaya aunty could join us for lunch too.”

He shook his head. “She’s too busy to hang out with us. I’m sure Mamma told her about our visit, and she stopped by to check on us. She is also my best friend’s mother.”

“Oh, how sweet.” She chewed her food slowly, enjoying every bit of the flavors of what seemed to be a traditional dish with a variation—a classic *jalebi* with a hint of rose and the shredded coconut adding a bite to the flaky dish.

“Indeed.” He paused before adding, “About the social media posts, most of the trolling or overly dramatized ones will be sanitized or brought down, and, in the future, if something bothers you, let me know.”

“Okay.” She wasn’t bothered since she didn’t check social media as much as the folks around her.

“Also, we have a major event that I’d like for you to attend with me. There will be a lot of coverage for that function as well, so don’t be surprised.”

She nodded. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll be prepared.”

“Good.” The man was brief with his responses, but she appreciated his concern for his fake wife. Maybe because he didn’t want a record of his fake marriage for when he tied the knot for real. Better for her, too, so she could go back to being a nobody, no—a pilot.

Good thinking, Yuvraj!

“What the fudge?” Her sister was in awe of the setup in the closet and bathroom. “You have a duplicate setup of everything you use here as well. Why can’t you just be here, then? Close to me?”

“No. The idea is to be close to his family.” Sanjana was giving her sister a tour of the multi-level penthouse after lunch. The guys decided to settle into the media room to watch the cricket match.

“So,” Deepika asked, rubbing her palms together. “Tell me everything about the party. I heard the town’s top celebrities were in attendance. Siddhant Vastav showed up to greet you despite the big match today?”

A blush crept up her cheeks at the thought of her being star-struck when she saw Jai’s friends. “It was fun. You would have totally screamed, and I had such a tough time not squealing.”

Deepika wiggled her shoulders and clapped her hands. “I so badly want to go to such a party. Ask Jai for me, please. He’ll do anything for you.” Her sister winked.

“Please...” Sanjana rolled her eyes, letting out a laugh. He took her to the party only because he needed to show a wife for reasons she had no idea. He made no attempt to breach the contract of their physical boundaries except as needed in public. That, too, she was in such a daze in public, it didn’t register how he was holding her or how close he was. She was just glad he was there.

“No kidding. Have you seen the pictures of you two online? #VraVir.” Deepika was busy pulling up her social media feed. “You need to create your own handle now. C’mon.”

“What pictures? I haven’t seen any of them.” For the way they always rushed away from the photographers, she was sure they always got them captured in motion. The only time they posed was for Aish and then a few moments in front of Jai’s friend’s restaurant.

“Oh my God, I must say, of all the hundreds of pictures online, these are my favorites.” Deepika flipped her phone to show her the first one, and Sanjana’s breath hitched at seeing the beautiful couple.

The picture was stunning, not to mention how Jai was looking at her while she looked into the camera, a look that was unfamiliar to her—one of admiration. And then her eyes slid down to where his hand wrapped around her bare waist, his palm grazing over her bare skin.

Her skin tingled at the memory of his touch but looking at how he held her was making her hot inside. A blush painted her cheeks, making her sister chuckle.

“See, you guys look so hot as a couple,” she said, flipping to another photo where they were both looking at the camera. She could not take her eyes away from his face. Why did such a handsome guy pick her to be a part of the contract? Maybe she was the most desperate and would not reveal the deal at any cost?

“And my favorite of all is this.” Deepika flipped to the next picture, and that made her heart leap. She blinked,

looking at the picture of her smiling and him brushing his lips over her temple, a smile on his face.

When the crap was that picture taken? She had no recollection of the moment.

“Give me that.” Sanjana dragged her sister’s phone and zoomed the image to look closer at her. She ignored her sister’s teasing comments about how much the prince was in love with her and only focused on his lips.

She let out a gasp when she realized he had, in fact, kissed her, but she was in no state to even notice. She was busy smiling and posing for the million cameras.

Sanjana could not believe how realistic the pictures were. Even she wanted to believe they were in love, but it was a contract marriage that would come to an end in due time. She let out a sigh and told herself it was almost a month since their wedding.

Eleven months to go for her dream job.

Chapter 11

A few weeks rolled by with her barely seeing her husband, and she was okay with that, except for the part where she was bored out of her mind not doing anything. She wandered along the palace hallways, taking many tours of the grounds to the point she knew every nook and corner of the property.

Not that what she did was not enjoyable, but it was not what she was used to. It felt like she was wasting time not getting in some flying hours so she could cut down on the training time.

Unlike the first few weeks, where they met as a family for at least a meal, these days, it was mostly hanging out with Aish, whom she had grown fond of. The queen was a lovely woman who showered her with expensive gifts, and she only felt guilty every time she received one. The worst part was she knew they all cost a lot, and she didn't want to be the one to be taking care of them for the entire year.

After *The Royal Storm* night, yes, the media was referring to their first outing by that name, she had taken the clutch back to the queen as she freaked out about being anywhere near it. The older woman gently shook her head and said, "It's an heirloom. I told myself I would give it to my daughter-in-law, and that's that."

It was still a pretty formal conversation with the king and queen, as it should be. There was zero conversation with the older brother who only looked at her like she was dirt, but

the dynamic with Aish was like the one she had with her sister. She started spending time with her in her design studio on the palace premises and enjoyed the time she spent listening to her thoughts on how she designed her clothing line, exclusively for men. The dress she had designed for Sanjana for The Royal Storm night was one of the few she had designed for women.

One evening as she was on her usual walks, her phone went off, and she saw it was her sister calling. “Hello, princess, what are you up to? Do you have a butler waiting on you all the time?”

Although that was true, Sanjana did not like the sound of it. “Can you please stop and refer to them as caretakers or helpers?”

Deepika laughed. “Whatever, I don’t need to be politically correct every time.” Her sister was pretty casual about speaking her mind and not thinking twice about the repercussions. “I do enough of that at work. The moment I step away from the government office, I will speak my mind.”

“Let’s see if we can get you to say that in front of Papa,” Sanjana taunted, knowing such comments would not fly when he was around.

Her sister snickered. “That’s why I said, when I’m away from the government office. Papa is still considered a part of it, even if he is retired.”

“This is true.” Sanjana laughed and asked, “So, what have you been up to?”

“Nothing much, planning a trip to Grandpa’s village, somewhat impromptu, and hoping you can make it too with Jai.” Deepika sounded a bit guilty, knowing how much he had been away lately.

Sanjana thought for a moment. This may be the best opportunity for her to get away after the event and sneak in some hours at the flying club. While her husband was away on business, she didn’t have to feel guilty about not being around her new family. Also, what it was that kept him away from the palace, no one seemed to know.

“So, what do you think of the plan? Do you think you and Jai can make it?” Her sister’s question pulled her out of her wandering thoughts.

“Yeah, he might join for some time, if not for the entire time, but I will definitely come. I can’t miss this trip.” Sanjana’s plan was falling into place. A few days at her grandparents’ place, and she could head to the flying club for a few days and get in some flying hours, and if she made the trip to her parents regularly, she could get more time added to her flying time with every visit.

“Great! I will send you all the event details. Papa wants to host some of his counseling sessions and a dinner for the people from our village and the neighboring ones since they could not make it to our wedding.” It was not the first time her father was hosting dinner for thousands of people, and she absolutely loved the chaos and fun.

It was one meal, but the preparations started days in advance with many people working to provide a wonderful experience for everyone. It was also the time her father met

with the youth in the region and talked to them along with his colleagues to provide educational and career guidance.

What her father and colleagues had done as a once-a-year gathering was now their retirement plan. She smiled at the thought of spending time in the village. “I’m so excited. I want to go right now.”

Her sister let out a cry of joy. “I wish I could, but my leave won’t start for another few days so I plan to get there by Thursday. Do insist with Jai that he join us so Surya and he can hang out.”

Sanjana rolled her eyes, knowing for sure her husband won’t be able to join her for the events, especially since she hadn’t seen him in three days. “Okay, I’ll message him.”

“Oh, right, you use all the time to talk dirty so everything else is only via texts,” Deepika teased, and Sanjana could only slap her palm to her forehead.

“Deepika, what are we, teenagers?” Sanjana snickered.

“We are not in our nineties either,” Deepika said, continuing to laugh. She and her sister never talked about each other’s love lives, mainly because she never had one, and her sister was always studying. Her sister probably felt it was okay to tease each other since they were both married.

Unfortunately, only one was married for real.

“Okay, I’m gonna hang up.” Sanjana couldn’t help but smile and add, “Can’t wait for all the fun.”

“Bye, love you. See you soon.” Deepika was definitely pumped up, and she got Sanjana all excited too.

She ended the call and immediately texted Anjali to make arrangements for the trip. She only shared the details for the one-way trip and said nothing about the return. When she saw her head of staff acknowledge her message, she started walking back to their chambers to pack. Her travel was not for another two days, but she was ready to go now.

Sanjana texted her team to have a couple of bags packed for her, one with traditional clothes and another with casual ones. She had to execute her return seamlessly. She had to go to the flying club in the same city as their parents' house. She added a reminder to call and schedule the flight times with the club.

What if her husband wanted to know? Would he care where she was as long as she was around for the events he added to her calendars?

She paused for a moment and realized she was yet to inform Jai about her travel.

Sanjana: *Hi Jai, I need to visit my grandparents' village for an event, and I'm planning to spend some time with my parents after that. Anjali is taking care of my travel. Hope everything is going well with whatever you are working on.*

She hit send on a message that was as long as an email and stared at it like she expected an instant response. A moment later, she put her phone away, knowing he must be neck-deep in his work, so she had to get on with the things she had to do.

This arrangement was turning out to be a perfect one for her!

The day of her travel finally arrived. She had truly hoped for Aish to join even when the king and queen declined her invitation to her grandparents' village due to a prior commitment. Aish took a rain check as she was in the middle of designing a wedding outfit for a client abroad.

She held her bag in her lap and quietly looked out the window when all she could think about was sticking her head out and crying out with joy. It felt good to get out on her own. She was glad she had the palace guards accompanying her to the airport because of the paparazzi. She hoped to quickly get out of the car and slip into the terminal.

More than looking forward to seeing her parents and attending the event, she was stoked about being able to fly again after almost a month. She only hoped her skills hadn't gotten rusty in a month.

Even as the car approached the terminal, the excitement had a strain of concern. What it was, she had no idea. Was it the fact that she was secretly planning to go to the flying club? She wondered why she was keeping it a secret, even from the man who understood her goals most. She made a mental note to text him about her plans once she left her grandparents' village and arrived at her parents' house.

Her heart dropped to her stomach when she saw a large group of reporters gathered at the terminal where she was supposed to go. Was it going to become national news that she

was traveling alone without the Yuvraj? What if they spin a controversy out of nothing?

She started to breathe heavily and was so lost in what the media would say about what she wore that day and what bag she carried that she started to panic. A month ago, it didn't matter to her what they said about her but now, whatever it was about her tied back to the palace. She only hoped she wouldn't create any drama that Jai would have to deal with later, not when he was so busy.

Sanjana was panicking and stared out of the window at the reporters as the car approached them. She braced herself for the unpleasant experience of being blinded by the camera flashes, but the car slowly drove past the group. She looked at the man behind the wheel and then toward the back and saw the confusion swarm the paparazzi.

A moment later, the car stopped, and the door on her side opened before she was ready to go.

“Let's go.” The all-too-familiar voice made her look up, and she froze when she saw the prince standing in front of her, his hand held out. “Don't look so shocked. Your husband just gave you a huge surprise.”

A laugh escaped her as he pulled her to him, and the worry that was lingering in her head melted away. She wrapped her arms around him as he slid her off the back seat.

Her breath hitched when she felt his lips on her temple, just like they had in that picture. The sizzle she felt was a familiar one, like her body remembered his touch, even if her mind didn't register it the last time. “What are you doing

here?” she asked as he briskly walked her toward the private terminal.

“Where do you think I’m going? Wherever you are headed.” He nuzzled her ear before waving at the reporters who had managed to run down to where they were.

Was this all a show for the cameras? Showing up unannounced after ignoring her for days? Whatever it was for, it made her heart flutter, and she felt good with the attention from the Yuvraj. “Are you really going with me to my grandparents’ village?”

“Wherever you’re going.” He chuckled as he led her to the waiting plane.

Minutes after they had settled into their seats, her heart was still thudding. Something about the man heightened her awareness, but she pushed that away as the excitement of the upcoming events took over.

Chapter 12

The next morning was crazy as it was the day of packing and heading to the village for the big event. Loads of groceries were being transported to their grandparents' house for the big event. Everyone in the Bhargava residence was in a mad rush to get the festivities started.

Sanjana stepped out of the bathroom and let out a laugh when she saw that all her luggage, except for her tote, was taken to the vehicles to be loaded for travel. Thankfully, someone thought about leaving her clothes to wear to her grandparents' village.

She dried off, and with the towel wrapped around her, she held up the clothing and realized it was not a tunic or top but a cropped, fitted blouse and a saree.

“Oh no, not a saree. Please be a skirt,” she said to herself as she opened the fabric and her heart sank. “Shit!”

And the worst part was the blouse had a back opening, and she needed someone to help her with everything. It was at that point she realized she was doomed as there was no one around to help her with the back opening or to tie the saree like at the palace or his penthouse in the city.

The saree was something she had to stand for, and her mom or sister would drape it for her, but at that moment, there was no one around. She anxiously dialed her sister's and mom's phones, but none of them answered. She dialed her parents' housekeeper, and thankfully she answered.

The voice of the older woman was music to her ears.
“Sanjana, are you ready to go?”

“Seetabai, I need help with my saree. My blouse is also —” She lost her voice when she heard the bedroom door open, and Jai stepped in. He was fully dressed and ready to head out. She let out a gasp and held her towel closer, but she was loud enough for Seetabai to hear her.

“What happened, Sanjana? Did another lizard show up in your room?” Seetabai poked fun, knowing how much reptiles freaked her out.

“Stop it,” she whispered into the phone as she rushed back into the bathroom, ignoring what Jai was saying to her, but decided to take advantage of his voice in the background. “That was my husband. He wants me to hurry up. Come quickly and help me.”

“Sanjana, I need to finish... hang on, your mother wants to talk to you.” And before Sanjana could plead with the older woman, her mother was on the line. “Sanjana, you are the last one to get dressed. Come out in ten minutes. Papa already asked about you twice.”

“Ma, please, I will be ready in five minutes if you come help with the saree or send me my bag so I can wear a dress instead,” Sanjana was begging at that point.

“No.” Her mother was firm. “We are going to your grandparents for the first time after the wedding. That is the saree your grandma got for you, and that is what you will wear. Now figure out how to drape the saree and come out quickly. Don’t try to look for other clothes in your closet. I got them all put away.”

“But, Ma—” There was no one on the other line, but she called out, “I need help with this saree.”

She stood with her back to the bathroom door staring at herself in the large fogged-up mirror, not knowing what to do. A moment later, a knock on the bathroom door made her step away.

“Sanjana, are you okay in there?” It was Jai. “What do you need help with?”

Oh no! Did he hear her?

“No,” was the knee-jerk response, and the next moment she realized she had no other option but to take his help.

Great! I’m going to ask a guy to drape my saree. Just not any guy but her fake husband and the Prince of Devaraya.

Panic hit her that she might be losing her last option to get ready on time and opened the door slightly. “Jai, wait... don’t go. I need help.”

She heard footsteps before he spoke. “Yeah, what’s up?”

She was embarrassed about what she was going to ask him. “Either you find someone in the house to help me drape the saree, or you need to help.”

He chuckled. “It’s a morning rush outside. I guess if you tell me how I can help, I will.”

Sanjana looked up at the ceiling. How did she even think he would be of any help? A guy. That too, a prince. “Well, I don’t know how to drape a saree, and I...”

Why was she even asking him? If she didn’t know how to wear a saree, how the heck would he?

“Looks like there are tutorials online. Let’s figure this out.” He laughed and added, “If you step out of the bathroom, I might be able to help.”

Sanjana looked down at her towel-clad body and the blouse in her hand. She had to bite the bullet and let her husband help. “Okay, I’m coming out in a minute. Can you please bring me the underskirt from the bed? It’s the one that doesn’t look like a saree.”

In the meantime, she unwrapped the towel and tied it around her waist. She slipped on the blouse that did not allow for a bra to be worn under it with the back open. She opened the door, clenching the wrapped towel to her, and took the inner skirt for the saree from Jai before quickly closing the door again. “I’ll be out in a second.”

“Take your time.”

She couldn’t tell if he was being genuine or sarcastic. If she were in his place, no way that would not be a snarky remark.

After taking a few quick breaths, she opened the bathroom door, blouse halfway on, towel across her torso, and the underskirt tied tightly so it didn’t fall off, it was digging into her skin.

“Ready?” he asked without looking up from his phone, where he seemed to be watching a saree draping tutorial.

“Um... yes. Would you please fasten the hooks on this blouse?” She couldn’t make eye contact with him and quickly turned away.

“Sure,” he said. She held her breath as the air she breathed was filled with the toasty smell of his cologne. Her mind reeled as her senses went on high alert. She felt the gentle tug on her chest before she felt his knuckles on her bare skin.

She stood still, hyperaware of how close he was to her as he clipped on what seemed to be an endless number of hooks. She felt a small bead of moisture roll down her spine, and it was a torturous moment. The heat from her body was so high that she was worried he would feel it.

Sanjana let out a low sigh of relief when he stepped away from her. She slowly turned to face him, her cheeks flushed red. Thankfully, he was still looking at his phone like he was memorizing the steps to follow for the drape.

Those few moments gave her time to somewhat settle her raging heart. She looked up at him when he put his phone away. “I think it’s pretty simple. Here, look.”

Sanjana stared at the video, looking through the steps. She finally nodded. “Okay, that’s not too bad.” She reached for the saree, encouraged by the simplified steps, and started wrapping the saree around. “Hold this chunk of the saree.” She handed the bunched fabric that was to be used for the pleats, finished draping the upper part, and pinned it securely. She looked at the fabric he held bunched in his hand and said, “I don’t know what to do with the pleats.”

He looked at her for a long moment and then at the fabric in his hands. “Can I pleat it like how a Dhoti is worn?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You know how to do that?”

“Why are you so surprised?” He scoffed. “I may not have done it, but I watched my mom pleat my outfit for traditional events.”

If only she had paid attention when her sister and mother were helping her dress up in the past. “Just do something. We need to go.”

He let the fabric drop to the floor, and to her amazement, in a few swift moves, he had the saree somewhat organized. Before she knew it, he was tucking the fabric into the waistband of the inner skirt. Her body jolted with the energy from his touch as the back of his hand grazed over her belly.

She let out a gasp, and her mind went into overdrive as her body trembled with his touch. She sucked in a breath as she felt every inch of her turn raw. Her inner folds throbbed while her nipples hardened under her blouse. She was grateful for the loose material that draped her body hiding her reactions.

“I guess that’s it.” He let out a victorious laugh and picked up his phone like he wanted to confirm his steps. For him, it may have been a task to help her, but for her, it was sensory overload as her body still reeled from his touch.

“Yes,” her voice came out a hiss. “I think I can manage from here. I’ll be out in a few minutes. Thank you.”

“Sure. Glad to be of help. I’ll see you outside.”

The moment the door closed, she let out a breath, held on to the footboard of the canopy bed, and slowly sat down. Her heart was still banging away in her chest, and her knees

had turned to jelly. He had not realized what he had done, but he had set her body on fire with that single graze over her soft skin, and it only craved for more of him.

No. You can't have him. You're in a contract. It's not a real marriage.

Later that evening, Sanjana walked through the outdoor kitchen area that was being set up to start cooking meals for the folks coming to the event the following day. She had gone to meet one of her friends she had spent summers with when she visited her grandparents' village.

Her friend was a teacher at the local school and one of the few people who was content with her life in the village and didn't crave for the comforts of urban living. Sanjana approached the main entrance of the house, only to find a few folks busy polishing the main door and was asked to use the side door. She walked around the house, wondering what everyone was doing, especially her husband. She saw him a few hours ago when they sat down for a meal, and since then, she hadn't bothered checking in on him.

Why do you have to check on him? He is not a child, one voice demanded. Another one tsked. He is new to the village and doesn't really know anyone. He must be stuck in the room, bored out of his mind since there is no good internet coverage in the village.

Even as she walked around the house, lost in thought, she did not hear the commotion coming from the open space

on the side of the house. She turned the corner and stopped short at the sight in front of her. A group of boys ranging in their teens were all spread out playing cricket, and right at the center of the commotion, holding the bat, was her husband.

Just as she watched, he hit the ball toward the boundary, and the kids broke into a loud clamor. “Yay! Jai, we won,” one of the boys cheered.

“Not fair, you have Jai on your team. He plays well,” another one argued.

Sanjana was not paying attention to the commotion or the argument, her eyes trained on the well-built man who looked sexy as hell in a plain white t-shirt and basketball shorts, playing cricket in the dirt.

Who would ever guess the Prince of Devaraya to be so simplistic?

Lost in thought, it took her a bit to realize the man she was gawking at was now looking right back at her. Her cheeks heated up as she looked away, and as if she could not face him anymore, she quickly walked into the house, unable to bite back the smile on her face.

“Sanjana, where have you been?” She heard the distressed voice of her sister and stopped at the foot of the stairs.

“I was just at Dhanisha’s place,” she said, trying to wipe her cheeks so her sister didn’t see how flushed they were.

“Really?” Deepika laughed. “I have a feeling you just made out with your husband somewhere in the fields.”

Sanjana's eyes widened. "What the crap are you talking about?"

"I'm kidding. In fact, that was my plan, but I can't get my husband out of the friggin' room. He says there are too many bugs or it's too hot or there's water on the bathroom floor."

"What?" Sanjana was surprised to hear her sister complain about her new husband.

"Yes, I know. I am just realizing he is high maintenance and a snob." Deepika laughed.

"Where is he now? We should probably give him a tour of the village before it gets too dark." Sanjana knew her sister was feeling bad about not being with her husband. "Is he still in your room?"

"Maybe on the topmost floor, hunting for a cell phone signal." Deepika laughed and added, "I'll go get him. Where is Jai? We should take him too."

She had to give him a tour too?

"Oh! I don't know if he'll want to go." She had to avoid him that evening at any cost so she didn't have to face him after being caught staring at him.

"Ask him first," Deepika was insistent. "We can't leave him with the crazies here and go. Where is he?"

"Um... I don't know." Sanjana knew her sister would be even more upset about her husband being indoors while Jai was enjoying his time.

“Let me ask Surya to come down here, and then we can go find Jai.” Deepika walked to the intercom unit and spoke to Surya. Sanjana hoped Jai was not playing street cricket by the time they stepped outside, so she didn’t have to take him on the tour.

Please don’t be there, she chanted in her mind as they walked to the side door with Deepika and Surya. “We should look for Jai before we—” Deepika’s voice was lost in a squeal when she spotted Jai at the far end of the open space in his fielding position.

“I can’t believe it. He is playing cricket with the kids!” She started waving her arms at him until he excused himself and jogged over to where they stood.

“Hey, you guys. How’s it going?” Jai was casual.

Deepika seemed to still be processing her surprise. “I can’t believe you are playing cricket.”

Jai chuckled. “I played all through school and college.”

“Oh yeah, is that how you know the cricket star, Siddhant Vastav?” Surya asked.

“That’s right, he is a childhood friend.” Jai smiled and added, “You guys headed out?”

“Yes, we are going to walk through the village. Come join us.” Sanjana secretly hoped he would want to go back to playing the game, but to her utter disappointment, he nodded and excused himself to talk to his team.

Moments later, he joined them, and Sanjana clung to her sister, who walked next to Surya. Minutes into the tour, Deepika leaned closer and said, “*Do you mind giving my*

husband and I some space? Go hang out with your cool cricket-playing prince.” She winked.

“Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes and cutting in front of her sister and brother-in-law to walk close to Jai. “Happy? Is this enough space?”

Deepika laughed, getting a kick out of Sanjana’s annoyed expression. The next thing she knew, her hand was being slipped into a large one even as he walked a foot away. The heat crept right back up like it never left, and she bit back a smile.

Why was she smiling like a fool?

They walked hand in hand toward the village center, where a group was gathered, and Sanjana spotted her father and his colleagues. They seemed to be in deep discussion with the village heads, and as if they sensed the presence of newcomers, they all looked up.

The four walked toward the group when they were gestured to join them. After the congratulatory messages, the village president looked at Jai and Surya. “Our daughters are lucky to have you as their husbands. Please take care of them as they only intend to do good to our region.” The older man looked at Deepika and smiled, “One girl is already serving us through the government, and our little Sanjana will start soon.”

The man’s words gripped Sanjana with guilt, and she stood silently fighting back tears. This was betrayal in a way, getting people’s hopes up that she would join civil services while all she could think about was getting her flight hours logged in.

Comfort swept over her when she felt the gentle squeeze of her hand before Jai spoke up. “Mr. President, there are many ways we can all help and not necessarily through the government. Sanjana is always talking about different projects that would help our region. Rest assured that we are always looking to do good in one way or the other.”

She looked up at him, and all she could think of saying was, *Thank you, I love you for saying that*, but she could not. She said that with a smile as her heart fluttered for the prince who threatened to rule her heart.

Chapter 13

Sanjana slowly averted her eyes from the car window to look at the man who was frantically typing on his phone. They were on their way back from her grandparents' village and headed to her parents' place. Not knowing what to say to him for the two-hour journey, she had pretended to fall asleep.

Soon after, he got a phone call which he ended and had only been messaging like he didn't want to talk because she was asleep in the car. He was also on phone calls at night after all the festivities the past couple of days and would take them from the balcony. *So considerate!*

Sanjana knew he was working on something important, and it was hard for him to step away from it all. But she was happy he had joined her, not only because her family was thrilled, but it felt good to be with him.

"Jai..." she said tentatively. He looked up at her and stopped typing. His sudden shift startled her, and she fell silent for an extra moment. She managed to smile and add, "I know you've been very busy the past few weeks, and I'm very happy you were able to make it."

He smiled with so much charm it made her heart race again. "I couldn't miss all the fun for anything."

"You've been working at night the last few days. You should get some rest." She couldn't believe what she had said.

He nodded. "Yes, we are on the last leg of the project, and I'm sorry for being away and ignoring your messages."

She shook her head, her smile broadening. “That’s okay.”

He held her gaze for a long moment. “I’m going home tomorrow morning. I’ll send the plane back for you whenever you are ready to return to the palace.”

Guilt gripped her when she realized she had not told him about her plan to get in some flying time while she was at her parents’ home. At that moment, she no longer cared about the hours she wanted to record. “No. I’d like to go back with you.”

One end of his mouth twisted up wickedly like he was a tad bit surprised. “Okay. We’ll go whenever you are ready then.”

“Oh, I can wake up early if we need to go by a certain time.” She no longer looked forward to going to the flight club.

He gently shook his head. “No rush. Whenever you are ready.”

She blushed, knowing he was referring to the time she took each morning to drape the saree while at the village and pressed her lips together. “Okay, but it won’t take that long as I won’t be wearing a saree tomorrow.”

He let out a chuckle. “Got it.”

The smile on her face widened. “And, thank you for all the nice things you said about my papa’s work with his colleagues. It’s great that their small organization got all the coverage from the reporters who came to see you at the village event.”

He nodded. “For all the good work they are doing, it’s what they need. Now they have inspired so many retired government officials to join them.”

She nodded, batting away tears of joy and guilt. Joy for her father getting the recognition and guilt that she was not going to be doing what her family was hoping for her to do—pursue a career in the IAS.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he asked like he knew there was more to the tears of joy.

She lowered her eyes and shook her head, not wanting to say anything. Next thing she heard was the click of the seat belt, and he inched closer to her. A tentative finger went to her chin to raise her hazy eyes to his. “What’s going on?”

The tone and caress in his voice caused her to let out a cry, and she crashed her face into his chest. She didn’t know why she was being so emotional with him, yet it felt like he was the only one she could speak her mind with. “I... after my failed attempt to pass the IAS entrance exam, I was disappointed. As a way to distract myself, I went to a flight club and... I want to be a pilot. I’m not interested in pursuing that path anymore.” She let out a sob, hiding deeper into his chest.

Even as she cried, she felt a strange relief pass through her. Like the weight of keeping the secret lifted just by sharing it with him. And she had no qualms about him knowing at that point.

“Sanjana, calm down.” His voice resonated against her ear as she stayed close to him.”

“I feel extremely guilty about giving up on my family’s dream. Am I a bad person for wanting to do what I want to do?” Her voice was a whisper that was almost lost in the sounds of the engine and ambient noises.

He wrapped an arm around her and held her close to him but did not say anything until she calmed down a bit. One hand went to her cheek, his thumb gently wiping away the moisture as he held her. “There is nothing wrong with chasing your dreams.”

She pulled back slowly, her eyes going up to his. “I know, but I cannot bear the disappointment they will have when I tell them I’m not pursuing what my papa and Deepika are doing.”

The hand on her cheek cupped her face. “Sanjana, you don’t need to be in the same exact job to do good and give back to our region. You could be inspiring many girls in our region to pursue a career as a pilot when you take up that job. Isn’t that doing good for the region in your own way?”

She nodded. “Thank you.” *And I love you for saying that* was what she wanted to say, but she stopped at that. “And what you said to the village president, I wanted to give you a tight hug,” she said, laughing.

He chuckled. “You can give it to me now,” he teased as he moved back and put his seat belt back on. His words caused a tingle to pass through her, and she smiled softly.

“I’ve already ruined your shirt with the guilt-and-crying hug, I doubt if you want another one.” She laughed, wiping away the residual moisture in her eyes.

“I won’t mind it if you want to hug me. Who wouldn’t want one from a beautiful woman?” His tone was so casual, but he set her being on fire.

A hot guy like him thought she was beautiful.

She looked away, not wanting him to see how red her cheeks would turn, and hoped he could not hear the rapid pounding in her chest.

The next morning, she stepped out of the car and smiled at Jai as he walked around to take her hand in his. What had made her jump and feel awkward the first week was now natural. She knew to wave at the cameras as they walked into the terminal, knowing when to stop to give the photographers one last pose and the signature one—the one where he holds her close and brushes his lips over her temple ever so gently.

The somewhat of a kiss only got better every time. She relished it even more by reading the comments on every post on the various social media sites. The romantic and filmy comments people posted online definitely made her smile. Posts that said the prince was too good for her and ones that called her a gold digger quickly disappeared as Jai’s team made sure to sanitize the comments.

Her smile broadened when her eyes fell on the jet waiting for them. Such a delight it was for her to see it every time, and she just could not wait to fly it. As always, she went up the stairs and greeted the pilot and co-pilot.

She was about to take her seat when the pilot called out to her. "I'm delighted to hear you are one of us." The older man smiled at Sanjana. "We need more pilots, especially women."

"Thank you," she said, grinning ear to ear, looking at Jai, knowing it had to be him who had told the pilot. "I just got my license as a private pilot and am working toward some experience hours." She left out the part about needing the hours for a job in a commercial airline. She knew they might wonder why she would want a job as a wife of a royal who owned a private jet.

"Great!" The pilot clapped. "We have a clear morning, an hour's ride to the palace. Would you like to fly with me today?"

She felt her jaw hit the floor. "I'm sorry, what?"

The pilot smiled. "Only if you'd like to."

She shook herself out of the delirious state. "Yes. I... I would..." She looked at Jai and then back at the pilot. "Are you sure?"

The pilot let out a laugh. "The passenger, a.k.a. your husband, seems to have no concerns. We've cleared for you to perform the take-off and landing from air traffic control as my co-pilot." The words were music to her ears.

"Oh my God! Yes, I would like to join you. Thank you." Sanjana could not believe her ears. It was crazy to be offered a chance to fly, and that too, one of the most luxurious planes.

God help her! Now she hoped she remembered the steps and tasks.

A short while later, her heart thudded, and as the ringing continued in her ears, she held on as she focused on her landing. She had very quickly learned the landing when most of her classmates struggled during training.

Her palms were sweaty, and she was shaking all over as the flight stopped, and the pilot started the shutdown procedure. “That landing was smooth for a newbie. Well done, Mrs. Devaraya.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was weak as she got up from the co-pilot’s seat so the real co-pilot could take over. She felt weak in her bones as she walked back to the cabin where Jai was seated, a sexy smile on his face.

“Looks like someone had fun. Nice landing, I didn’t even notice it.” He stood up, and she approached him. She was overwhelmed by so many emotions that all she could think of doing was throwing her arms around him and burying her face into his chest, yet again.

Two days in a row, she stained his shirts with her tears. “Jai...” she said, her voice weak as she pulled back to look at him. “Thank you for being so awesome.”

He let out a low chuckle. “Glad you had fun.”

She nodded. “I was going to stay back at my parents’ and get in some hours at the flying club. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you when I texted you.”

He leaned in, his warmth seeping in. “You don’t need to tell or ask me. You are free to do what you wish.”

She nodded. “I know, and you are the only one who knows... not even Deepika and—” He hushed her gently and

gestured that they had to get off the plane.

“We can talk later. Let’s go.” And as if by habit, he leaned in and kissed her forehead, and she fisted her fingers in his shirt, not letting him move away from her just for a tad bit longer.

Their eyes met, and something sizzled between them, and just as she thought her lungs were going to be deprived of oxygen, he looked away, making her gasp, taking in the much-needed breath of air.

What was that?

Chapter 14

The following evening, Sanjana was in Aish's design studio at the palace as she watched her work on a new cut for a semi-traditional outfit for a man. "What do you think of the color combination, Sanjana?" Aish asked without averting her eyes from the fabric she was shearing.

Sanjana looked at the linen sports coat and the somewhat traditional pattern and nodded. "I like it. It's very trendy with a classic touch." She could not believe the ideas that just came to Aish's mind. "How do you even come up with such ideas? It's brilliant."

Aish scoffed. "You're kidding. Don't call this brilliance, it's just my weird mind at work."

"You are too humble." Sanjana let out a laugh. "You are famous now that your brand has global customers."

Aish laughed. "You are too sweet. I need to make your dress for the upcoming event extra special. Do you know how many people wanted me to make that bottle-green dress for them, and I said I wouldn't?"

"What? Why? You should." Sanjana was taken aback that Aish had refused for no reason.

"Nope. That one was for you and only you." She winked and added, "I might make something similar, but that design is only yours."

"Thank you, and I can't wait to see my outfit for the event." The details of the actual event she had no idea. She

knew it had to do something with the project Jai had been working on for weeks.

“You two will set the internet on fire again.” Aish laughed and asked, “Do you see all the posts and the comments below?”

Sanjana wanted to say no, but she could not get herself to lie to Aish. “I do.” She let out a small giggle. “I even read them.”

Aish laughed. “I knew it. You are a lurker.” She was about to say something when her phone started to ring loudly. “Oh, let me take this call.”

Sanjana nodded and was about to leave the studio when Aish gestured for her to stay. “Hey, Atul... good to hear from you.”

She sat in one of the chairs in Aish’s studio and slowly looked back at her sister-in-law seeming awfully quiet. Sanjana was surprised to see that Aish was still on the call with a shocked expression, and blood drained from her face.

After a prolonged silence, Aish said, “Okay, I understand.” With those words, she ended the call and closed her eyes, and that look on her face told Sanjana she was fighting back tears.

Sanjana was by Aish in a flash, an arm around her. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

She took a deep breath before opening her eyes. “I just lost the top model for my upcoming show, and many more may pull out.” She sounded dejected rather than angry.

“What? How can they do that? They were in contract.” Sanjana was taken aback and angry on Aish’s behalf.

“It’s no good. Looks like the media is making them heroes for dropping my show.” Aish was in tears at those words, and Sanjana put her arms around her.

“What happened, Aish?” Sanjana asked after a few minutes of silence, and Aish stepped back, wiping away her eyes.

“The outfits I designed last month were for a wedding of two men. All these so-called models think I design for gay men, and they do not want to be associated with my brand.” Aish’s voice shook as she spoke. “They are trolling me online for sharing the picture of my client’s wedding.”

“Ridiculous!” Sanjana was angry. “What’s wrong with ___”

Before Sanjana could finish her sentence, the door to the studio opened loudly, and to her surprise, Bharath Devaraya stepped in, looking pissed. “Aish, do you need all this? Why even bother to do this kind of work?”

His voice was so elevated it triggered Sanjana. “Bharath, why are you yelling at your sister?”

His eyes shifted to her, level with her angry ones. “You. Stay out of this. This is a family matter.”

Aish gasped at her brother’s words but did not say anything, and that annoyed Sanjana even more. “I’m your brother’s wife and a member of this family. I will not stand around watching you yell at someone who is already under a lot of duress.”

As if their voices were heard by everyone in the entire palace, Jai walked in, looking equally pissed. Bharath looked at Jai. “Will you ask your wife to stay out of our family conversation?”

Jai looked taken aback but did not say anything in response. Instead, he went straight to his sister, put an arm around her, and planted a kiss on top of her head. “Don’t worry about what people say. You do you.”

“Jai, do not encourage her. This is enough drama with the gay community and all the trolling online.” Bharath’s voice was further agitated.

Sanjana could not look at the man who was being so mean to Aish, and she had not said a single word to him despite what he said about her work. “Why do you have a problem with her work? Do you think being gay is bad? Being a gay man does not make anyone any less masculine or human.”

She saw something flash in Bharath’s eyes, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he cast a scorching glare toward Aish before storming out.

Sanjana was still trembling from the anger that imploded inside her and turned to look at Jai, talking quietly to his sister. At the sight of the man talking to his older sister like she was a child, like a father calming his daughter, her heart melted, and her mind conjured the image of him holding a child—their daughter.

She jolted as she felt a quiver at the bottom of her womb. She looked away, overwhelmed by the sudden surge of

emotions. How did her mind go from being angry about what happened to Aish to having a baby with her fake husband.

She shook it all away and walked over to Aish shutting down her computer to get some rest. “Aish, promise me you won’t check your social media tonight.”

Aish smiled weakly. “I promise.” She smiled and turned to look at Sanjana. “I’ve always wondered what it was like to have a sister, especially when these two boys annoyed me. Now I know what it feels like to have a sister... a ferociously protective one.” Aish threw her arms around Sanjana, a sob escaping her.

Sanjana could only smile, fighting back the tears. How did she grow so fond of Aish in such a short time?

Shortly after, Jai and Sanjana walked back into their private chamber after seeing Aish to hers, ensuring she got a bite to eat before settling in for the night.

As they stepped into their private space, memories of the altercation fired back in her mind. “Jai, why didn’t you say something to Bharath? And why was he so mean to Aish? Poor thing was already devastated and...” Her voice trailed off when he took a few steps toward her.

For a private setting, it was too close for comfort, and she looked into his eyes, perplexed. He slowly cupped her face with his hand, and before she realized what was happening, he kissed her forehead, a gentle brush of his lips. “Thank you,” he murmured against her skin, and that sent thrills sailing through her entirety.

She felt his breath hiss as she caught hers, but he didn't step away. Another palm cupped her cheek, his hands framing her face and tilting it to meet his eyes. "Today is the first time ever that Bharath acknowledged Aish to be a part of the family. And for that, I know he cast you as an outsider."

"What are you talking about?" Sanjana was confused. She knew Aish was adopted, but she was *the* princess of her parents' hearts and ruled the palace with her sweet manner.

Jai shook his head. "Bharath was bitter about Aish's adoption for years and never really considered her a family member, but today, he showed concern for her. It may have sounded like he was accusing her of defaming the family, but with every word he said, he meant well."

Sanjana replayed his brother's words again in her mind.

"Aish, do you need all this? Why even bother to do this kind of work?"

"Jai, do not encourage her. This is enough drama with the gay community and all the trolling online."

Her eyes widened when she realized that Bharath was, in fact, concerned. "How did you—" Her voice was lost in a sob.

"I know my brother. He may be a snob, but he is a good man." He chuckled.

She let out a laugh. "I was ready to throw something at him if he hadn't stopped talking to her like that."

"Because he said you weren't part of the family?" His voice was soft, and she could not deny there may be some truth to it, but it was mostly because of how he spoke to Aish.

“Not really.” She tried to keep her tone nonchalant and added, “I just couldn’t stand that he was saying those things. I could not figure out if he was upset about her clothes being worn by a gay couple or how the social media comments were defaming the family.”

His hands slipped lower to gently cup her shoulders. “You are very much a part of this family, and it meant a lot to Aish for you to stand up for her.”

She blinked away tears as he leaned closer and yet again, planted a kiss on her forehead. “You should get some rest.” She nodded, her eyes downcast as he stepped away. She slowly raised her head, her heart brimming with joy at what her husband said to her—fake husband.

The joy from his words was short-lived when the harsh truth hit her. It didn’t feel fake anymore. The emotions were born out of the connection she had built with Aish, and the warmth from the family made her feel like a part of it when it was only to be short-lived, to fulfill whatever purpose the prince had for the year.

The way she argued with Jai’s older brother for Aish’s sake scared her, and how outraged she felt that her husband did not take her side when the brother implied she was not family.

She started to feel weak in her knees when she realized she was getting attached to the people, and worse, she may be developing feelings for the prince and couldn’t afford to do so. She had her goals to meet, and she could not get caught up in the dynamics of a family that was not hers.

Chapter 15

The following morning, she woke up to an empty bed, and from the looks of it, her husband had not slept at all the previous night. The last thing she remembered was sitting on the couch next to him as he spoke to his team and worked on getting things under control. And from how quiet their private space was, Jai had left for work and would not return until much later in the day.

Considering the royal family member was involved, there were people taking advantage of either gaining support or provoking an argument online. She remembered hearing him talk on the phone as she slowly dozed off.

The large clock told her it was too early for Aish to be awake, so she skipped the idea of messaging her. Instead, she rushed into the bathroom to shower so she could go spend time with Aish that morning.

The shower was the quick option, but the bathtub was calling to her, and a moment later, she gave in. There was so much tension from everything that transpired, she knew she would benefit from it. She had enjoyed a few such baths with just the hot water before washing off quickly in the shower. She didn't feel guilty about the water she used because filling up the tub, she knew the water would be recycled to be used in the gardens.

Shedding the last of her clothing, she slipped into the hot water and let out a sigh as she was enveloped in the warmth. Her eyes rolled shut, taking in the soothing effect of

the water, and rested her arms on the rim of the marble-lined tub. She felt the stiffness in her muscles ease away.

Barely any time had passed, and she was slowly slipping into a slumber, which was a sign for her to get out of the tub and wash off quickly. She was talking to herself about being a good person and getting out of the bathtub when she heard movement outside the bathroom.

It was not the time for the cleaning crew to be there, and it meant it was Jai. “Oh, shit.” She groaned when she realized her robe was not next to her but was hanging on the door instead of the counter space between the shower and the tub’s rim.

She hurried out of the tub, splashing water all over the floor, tiptoeing to the door. Just as she thought, she reached for the robe on the hook, her hand moved away, and her foot slipped. The next thing she knew, her bottom hit the floor and a cry escaped her.

“Sanjana, what’s wrong?” She heard Jai outside the door, and in her utter desire to not be discovered wet and naked, she gathered the strength to get up and reach for the robe. The toweling material was barely on her chest and hips when the bathroom door opened, and he stepped in, looking shocked at the sight in front of him.

He kneeled next to her, inspecting her shaking body. “Sanjana, are you hurt? Where is the pain?” He gently touched her as he continued to check for injuries. She was still too shaken to talk, but she managed to show him a thumbs-up. He pulled out his phone and spoke into it. “Send the doctor to our

private chambers. Quick.” He put his phone away and looked at her. “I’m going to pick you up. Tell me if anything hurts.”

She nodded. “I’m okay.” She wanted to tell him she could walk, but before that, he pulled her body off the water, his dress shirt getting wet as he stepped into the bedroom to gently place her on the bed. “Jai, I need clothes.” Her voice shook as she started to shiver from the cold.

He was gone for a second but came back with a couple of fresh towels. He paused to look at her. “I’m going to take your robe and wrap you in these towels.” He held her gaze. “I won’t look.”

She couldn’t help but smile as he looked away, taking off the robe partly before placing the towel over her chest, along her length, before dropping the damp fabric to the floor. He then draped the lower half of her body with another towel and let out a chuckle. “Fine, I looked, but only for a second.”

Heat crept up her cheeks at his confession, and her heart started to flutter as she smiled at him. “You are my husband, so I guess it’s okay.”

He shook his head. “What were you—” His voice was interrupted by a message on the intercom about the doctor’s arrival. “Stay put, please.” He left her side to go to the door, and she took a moment to adjust the towels over her body for maximum coverage.

Shortly after, she heard voices and let out a sigh of relief when she heard a woman talking to Jai. It wasn’t like it was going to be any less embarrassing explaining to the doctor how she fell but hoped it would be a bit more comfortable having a woman inspect her injury.

She felt fine for the most part, except for how her bottom jittered in pain. She looked in the direction of the double doors when one of them opened, and a woman who seemed to be in her fifties stepped in, a broad smile on her face. “What have you kids been up to?” She laughed, and Sanjana wanted to hide under the sheets.

What did the woman think they were doing?

“I was... I slipped and fell while getting out of the bathtub,” she managed to say as the doctor walked to her and smiled knowingly.

“Sanjana, this is Dr. Swaminath, and she is the chief doctor at the palace hospital. Sanjana nodded at the older woman, wondering how she had missed the fact that there was a hospital on the premises. It wasn’t on the map she was given when she arrived at her new home.

“It is good to finally meet you, Sanjana.” The woman smiled and added, “Will you tell me where it hurts most?”

She nodded and said, “On my bottom, mostly on the right.” Her eyes flew to Jai as he stood at the foot of the bed, his eyes on her, and his hand covering his mouth. His expression was unreadable, making her wonder if he was having a good laugh out of this or was he worried.

“I moved her from the bathroom onto the bed. I hope I didn’t make anything worse,” he said, and that made her warm in the chest. He was concerned about her—his fake wife.

“I don’t see any swelling from the sides, and based on how calm she is, chances of a fracture are slim.” The doctor

continued her inspection and added, “Sanjana, can you turn over and lay on your tummy?”

Sanjana stiffened. “I... I need to put on some clothes.” Her eyes flew from the doctor to Jai. She was suddenly conscious about being naked in the room with him.

The doctor smiled and stepped away. “Jai, she is feeling self-conscious. Why don’t you roll her over and cover her body except for her bottom.”

She heard his scoff as she let out a gasp. “I think I can roll over myself,” she said, but the doctor wagged her finger.

“Sanjana, no sudden movements. Jai will move you slowly according to my instructions,” the doctor insisted, and she nodded, looking at her husband. He had his eyes trained on hers, and she held his gaze as he slowly lifted the sheet and held it with one hand while turning her slowly as he slipped his hand under her back.

All along, he kept his eyes on hers, and her mouth went dry as her heart went crazy in her chest. He did not avert his eyes until she looked away when her body turned away from him. A smile formed on her face as she felt him adjust the towels over her body with the sheets covering her.

Once he had turned her over, she heard him excuse himself to make a phone call. Her eyes followed him through the sheer material that hung from the top of the canopy bed as he left the bedroom.

As if he felt her eyes on him, he stopped at the door, and turned to look her way, making her smile. “I’ll be right outside,” he said before closing the door behind him.

The doctor spent a few minutes and confirmed no broken or sprained anything. “You just had a bad fall, and it’s a good thing you landed on your bottom. The bruised area is still a bit tender and will be for a couple of days. Try some cold and hot packs alternatively.”

“Thank you, doctor.” She slowly rolled back and sat up, pulling her towel and the sheets to her neck. With some instructions on painkillers, the doctor also mentioned that she and a few other doctors are always stationed at the palace, making her wonder why so many doctors were employed to be on the premises.

Shortly after the doctor left, she was halfway through her plan to walk to the closet when the door opened, and she held the sheets to her chest. She saw it was Jai and smiled at him, even as she felt her heart thud. “I’m okay now,” she managed to say as he walked over to where she sat and looked down at her.

“I’m sorry I startled you.” He smiled as his palm cupped her cheek. “Can I help you with your clothes?” he asked almost tentatively.

She nodded and pointed to her closet. “I want a t-shirt and pajamas, and my underwear is in the chest to the right.” She fought back a blush at the last part of the instruction. “It’s okay if it’s just a t-shirt and pajamas... and...” He stopped walking when she started to talk and looked at her expectantly. “It’s not your fault I fell. I... was...” her voice trailed off when he scoffed.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he said before walking into her closet, making her blush again.

He was gone for a few moments before he appeared, holding her clothes in his hands. He silently placed the clothes on the bed and reached for her t-shirt and a pair of socks. The t-shirt slipped over her head without a bra, but it didn't matter. He had chosen a dark and thick fabric, and it instantly put her at ease. He then kneeled in front of her and took his hands to her feet. She froze, and her breath trapped in her throat as he slowly slipped on the socks like he was feeling the bottom of her feet. He then reached for her pajamas, slid them up her legs halfway, and looked up at her.

"It's best if you lay down on the bed," his voice was soft and unsure as he stood up. She scooted back onto the mattress, and with his steady hand on her back, she leaned her head back. "Tell me if it hurts when I lift your back." She nodded, and he gently lifted her lower back off the mattress and in a swift move, pulled her pajamas up to her waist.

His fingers grazed over her delicate skin, making her breath hiss, and he froze. "Did that hurt?" He held his position, the back of his hand grazing her delicate skin, and it was even more torturous.

"No, I'm okay. You can let go now." She smiled as he pulled his hand out from underneath her. She was a lot more comfortable with some clothes on and was especially thrilled that he thought of bringing her some socks.

When he excused himself to take a phone call, this time a real one, she pulled out the knot in her hair and let it hang loose. She hadn't even washed her face and wondered if she should risk walking to the bathroom to make herself look presentable.

He had seen her in her most vulnerable state, and she wanted to wipe out that image from his mind. How in the world was she supposed to be poised and composed when the mere sight of him was making her jittery?

Shortly after, she lay on her back, an ice pack right under her butt as the doctor instructed. She kept her eyes on him as he stood on the patio, taking what he had said was the last meeting of the day. She had insisted he go back to work, but he had only smiled and said, “My wife needs me here.”

And with those words, when he bent to plant a kiss on her forehead, she had to fight hard to stop her hands from grabbing him. Her eyes took in the broad shoulders that the silk shirt clung to, the tapered V of his back, and then her eyes stopped over his bottom, clad in dark jeans.

She had never admired anyone this thoroughly, and she was getting hot as wild thoughts invaded her. He had seen almost all of her that morning, but she wanted to know what it would be like to be under his perusal. The very idea caused a moan to escape her.

“God, help me,” she hissed out a prayer as she saw him open the patio doors and step into the bedroom. She noticed how busy he had been the past few weeks, and she had somewhere picked up that he was going to be out of town for a few days. “Jai, did I hear you say you were going out of town this week?” It was an important project from what she gathered, but she didn’t know what it was and never once asked.

He nodded as he placed his phone on the end table. “I was. Not going anymore.” He looked at his phone when a

message popped up that made him smile. “Aish wants to visit you. Is that okay?”

“Of course, she can come. She doesn’t have to ask, especially when I barge in her studio every day.” Sanjana laughed, suddenly uplifted by the fact that Aish was visiting. “How is she dealing with the media stuff?”

He smirked. “Nothing left to deal with anymore.”

Sanjana was relieved but still concerned about the upcoming photo shoot for her new line of clothing. “What about her campaign? Will the models hold up the terms of their contract?”

He pressed his lips like it was a mess, but Sanjana knew Jai had Aish’s back—he had everyone’s. He was the make-it-happen guy. “I’ve signed up my buddy, Vira, to be her model.”

Sanjana scrunched her nose, remembering meeting him at one of the parties and was introduced as a businessman. “Is he into modeling now?”

“He is now.” Jai winked and let out a laugh.

She felt her heart rate increase rapidly, and her breaths started coming fast. She looked away, taking a moment to calm herself. She needed to train herself to be accustomed to his charm.

“Did the doctor say you need to be seen again?” he asked, interrupting her thoughts about how not to be affected by him and could only shake her head. “Good. And if anything changes, they are only a phone call away.”

She smiled weakly as she debated if she should ask about the doctors who were on the premises twenty-four hours

a day. “Jai, why do we have a panel of doctors at the palace?” The fact that it was not on the map of the palace confirmed it was a recent development.

He held her gaze for a long moment as if debating with himself. “It’s for Baba, and no one other than Ma and some close staff know about it.” He paused, and his eyes were gloom-struck. “Keep this to yourself, not even Bharath or Aish know. They think he is being treated for early arthritis, but it is an early stage of a rare disease that requires a lot of care in the initial phases of treatment.”

Sanjana gasped and sat up in bed, ignoring the pain that shot through her back. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, and she threw her arms around him, letting out a sob. She was overwhelmed by the sadness she saw in his eyes. “He will be fine, Jai. Don’t worry.” She patted his back before pulling away to look at him, her eyes dewy.

He nodded. “For now, he is making good progress but keep this to yourself.”

“Yes, I promise.” Her heart swelled from him sharing such an intimate family detail with her when he didn’t need to. Not when his siblings didn’t know. “I want to help in every way possible. What can I do?”

He smiled before leaning forward to kiss her temple. “You already helped quite a bit by marrying Baba’s youngest son.” His voice was a whisper, and finally after months, she realized why he offered her the royal deal.

But how would it help if they went their own way after a year? Maybe he will be better by then.

Sanjana sent a silent prayer for the king's speedy recovery and pulled back from Jai, a smile on her face as she looked up at him. "You are a good son, Jai."

His brows furrowed. "Are you saying I'm a sucky husband?" he teased, and yet again, heat crept up her cheeks.

Just as she was thinking of a comeback that would bring the temperature in the room down to normal, she heard the beep of the main door opening. "Is that Aish?" she asked excitedly to see her new best friend.

"Must be her." Jai got up from the bed and started walking toward the door when she heard Aish call out to them.

"I'm here, and if you are in the middle of a private moment, I can come back." She laughed as Jai opened the bedroom door, laughing. She threw her arms around Jai and added, "And there is my least favorite brother," she taunted before letting go and walking over to where Sanjana sat, leaning on the headboard.

"So good to see you, Aish." She hugged Aish, glad to see the smile back on her face. She pulled back and asked, "Did you just say Jai is your least favorite?" Sanjana was sure he was Aish's most favorite.

"Yup, I said my least favorite. He was my favorite until he took away all the online fun I was having on social media, then he sent Bharath to apologize to me, and then most importantly, he made you fall in the bathroom." She winked, and Sanjana smiled as the siblings talked, and she looked at him as he smiled and ran his fingers through his hair.

Sanjana's heart yet again melted for the guy who was not only a good son, a protective brother, a caring husband to his fake wife, and most of all—the perfect man!

Chapter 16

Finally, it was the day of the event they had talked about and Jai had been working on for months, as she was told by the family. What it was, she had no idea, but she was excited for the day. Unlike a few weeks ago, she now looked forward to going out with her husband. She enjoyed all the attention they got—the way he held her, how his lips grazed her skin—every bit of it.

Aish was out of town on a photo shoot for the new season. Jai's parents decided to skip the event since his father was not feeling well from a recent change of medication, and she had no clue about his brother.

If it was such a huge event, why wasn't the rest of the family going?

Her team was busy at work on her look when she felt his presence in the other room. "Hurry up, please. Jai is here."

One of the women giggled. "Ma'am, that's what you say every time, and the prince says take all the time you need."

Sanjana glared at the girl through the mirror, who was working on curling her hair. "That's because he is a gentleman, and I cannot delay him because he is saying that."

She felt her team visibly stiffen, but she didn't say anything else. She didn't want him waiting for her or anyone, for that matter. "Make it quick, please."

Shortly after, she walked toward the living area of their private chambers, her heart thumping in her chest. She had

chosen to wear a saree instead of an easier-to-handle dress since she remembered his admiring looks when she wore sarees at her grandma's village. The looks could have been amusement or anything else, but the media and the people who commented on every one of their posts said he looked at her romantically.

The comments made her blush when she secretly read them, making her wonder if he really did look at her that way. The only way to find out was to keep looking into his eyes when they were not in front of dozens of cameras.

When the final touches were done, the team stepped away, and Sanjana stood up slowly, the pleats on the saree coming together as she looked at herself in the mirror. The saree was a simple yet elegant one, specially designed for the event by Aish.

Sanjana smiled into the camera as one of her team members took a picture of her for Aish's social media post. She nodded at the team and took a moment to thank them before slowly walking toward the living area where her husband was waiting for her. It was still very early in the morning, and the event was supposed to start later that morning.

All she knew was it was not the evening party studded with celebrities. Even as she took slow, tentative steps as she got comfortable with the outfit, she wondered why she didn't ask him what the big event was. The contract didn't restrict her from being curious.

Determined to know what the event was about, she dug her fingers nervously into the clutch she held in her hands. The

soft silk of the saree barely made a sound, and she saw him seated on one of the chairs, his focus on his phone as he typed a message.

The disappointment was settling in that he didn't look at her, and the moment the thought passed through her mind, he looked up, and she caught it—the spark in his eyes that the media talked about when he looked at her—but it was gone in the next moment, making her wonder if she imagined it.

She lowered her eyes as he slowly walked to her and stopped less than a foot away. “Sanjana, you look beautiful.” With those words, he slowly reached for her hand and raised it to his mouth. Her eyes rose to his as he kissed the back of her hand, a smile on his face. The simple gesture made her weak in the knees and jittery all over.

How did the man hold so much power over her?

Like he didn't throw her off with what he just did, he wrapped an arm around her waist, his warmth seeping through the thin fabric of the saree right to her core. She was too shaken to realize he was merely posing for the standard picture, but her senses were heightened.

She had no control over her senses and didn't look into the camera for the picture but held on to him. Her heart was on a rampage as she sorted out everything she was feeling. It was overwhelming, and she clung to him like she couldn't stand.

As if sensing the shift in her manner, he held her closer and whispered, “You okay?” His voice was so soft and full of care she wanted to hug him. Instead, she could only nod as he stood with her body plastered to his and her eyes downcast even as they posed for the camera. “Let's go,” he said

moments later, and she felt herself glide next to him, her mind in a state of confusion while her body, well, had a mind of its own and was blissful in his arms.

After a quick car ride to the other side of the palace grounds, she was surprised to find a helicopter waiting for her. Something was different about that day, sensing that the usually calm-natured man, Jai, seemed to be preoccupied.

Even as he helped her into the back seat of the helicopter, she sensed something about him was not normal, but she didn't know if she should ask or say something. Her internal turmoil only got deeper as the chopper lifted off the ground to an unknown destination.

She was in a daze as the chopper landed, casting a dust spell, and yet again, they got into the waiting cars. This time there seemed to be a bit more time for her to talk to him, and instead of asking the burning question of where they were headed, she asked, "Jai, is everything okay?"

He slowly turned to look at her, and for the first time ever, she saw surprise in his eyes, but it was gone as he smiled. "Why do you ask?"

Sanjana didn't know how to tell him, but even as he maintained a casual manner, she could sense some kind of apprehension. "You... you seem a bit tense today," she blurted.

Jai kept his eyes locked with hers before he chuckled. "It's a big day, and you'll see why."

A spark of joy returned to his eyes, wiping away the strain she had seen earlier. She smiled with ease. "I can't wait

to see what this is all about.”

“You will...” he said, looking out the window and pointing to a large sign that was mounted over tall poles. “Look up there.”

She leaned closer to him, and when she processed the words and recognized the pictures of the people on the banner, she let out a gasp. “A new airport?”

He smiled like he was enjoying her delirious state. “An international airport,” he emphasized.

She was still looking up at the signs with her father’s pictures on them. “Why is Papa’s banner here?”

“The chief guest who is going to inaugurate the airport has to be welcomed warmly.” He winked.

Her chest started to heave as she processed the news. A first-ever international airport in their region, and her father was the one who was inaugurating it? “Why?” The word escaped her before she knew it.

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean why? Didn’t we say that was the only way we could have more people come to our region, so we can go through a change and increase the visibility and revenue at the same time?”

It struck her that he was referring to their first conversation when he was just a handsome stranger giving her a ride. *How did he even remember that?*

Later that day, she took in the greenery surrounding her inside the new airport terminal. She was in one of the quiet corners of the large construction miraculously built in a few

months. She took in a deep breath of the fresh air, replaying some of the moments from a short while ago.

The joy and thrill in her father's eyes when he arrived at the airport entrance and was requested to inaugurate the new structure. The words her husband used to describe the work her father was doing for the betterment of the region. The beautiful eco-friendly airport that was built like a sanctuary and that Jai told the reporters it was something they shared as a vision for their people.

It felt surreal.

What was overwhelming was her need to hug and hold him to her and never wanting to leave his side. The idea of being with him forever didn't scare her anymore. As she sat in the silent corner, the loudest sound she could hear was her raging heart.

She raised her eyes, her every sense signaling his presence. Her almond eyes met the deep eyes of the man who looked stunning in the sports jacket and dark-wash jeans.

A smile formed as he walked over to where she was and sat across from her at the wooden center table like he wanted to be close to her. "Bored of everyone?"

She smiled as she shook her head before looking around the space. "I never thought it could be so peaceful inside an airport."

One end of his mouth twisted up. "You like it?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "I love it. It's just beautiful." She was thrilled about the employment opportunities the airport would create and how tourism would

be boosted in the region. She held his gaze for a long moment and said, “Thank you.” Her voice wobbled as she leaned closer to him and whispered, “Can I give you a hug?”

He smiled, making her heart somersault, and he slowly stood up, giving his hand out to her. She placed her hand in his and stepped close to him to wrap an arm around him. She pressed her cheek closer to his chest and stayed still, taking in the warmth that cocooned her.

Like he did every time they were close, he kissed the top of her head, sending tremors to her core. Butterflies took off from the pit of her stomach as she clung to him, never wanting to let go of the man who was her fake husband.

Moments passed, and she slowly pulled back to look into his eyes that held an unreadable expression, but she did not avert her stare. “I... I want...” She could not find her words as she looked into his eyes. A moment passed before she went up on her toes to gently reach his cheek with her lips.

Sanjana felt him stiffen, but he only pulled her closer again. Her breath hissed against his skin as she trailed her lips lower. Just as she was wondering if she crossed a line with her behavior, she angled her face, and she felt his lips against hers.

She felt the ground under her shudder as her eyes rolled shut, and time froze. Her heart was on a rampage, and she held her breath, unable to move. She didn’t know how much time passed before there were the sounds of fireworks. Her eyes snapped open, and she pulled back on impulse, her eyes lowering as embarrassment swept over her.

Her breath was coming fast, and she couldn’t even utter the word sorry or something to save herself from the

awkwardness. Like he sensed her state of mind, he leaned forward, planting a gentle kiss on her temple before stepping back from her. “Let’s go,” he said, his voice soft as he led her back to where everyone else was, his hand holding hers firmly.

What the heck just happened? Why did she have to kiss him? On his lips!

Chapter 17

For days after the inauguration, Sanjana avoided him after she kissed him at the airport. What was even more frustrating was that one of the reporters managed to capture the private moment from afar, making it worse for her. The pictures of them looking like they were in a liplock and the posted comments made her stomach churn.

They were being portrayed as the epitome of an arranged marriage, a fairy tale where the prince swept her off her feet. If only they knew he had hit her with a contract and a deal she could not refuse.

Despite everything that was being said on the internet, she knew what the reality was and what a stupid move it was on her part to kiss him. She could not get over how she did not stop at the cheek. Unable to face him, she avoided him from that point on. No matter what time of the day when he was in their private quarters, she pretended to be fast asleep. When there was a family meal, she made sure to sit by Aish and away from him as much as possible.

The few days he was away helped with her not being on edge all the time. That evening she was spending time with Aish, who seemed pretty nervous. Aish had a lightweight velvet maxi dress on, and the wine-colored dress brought out the glow in her skin, but her eyes did not sparkle like they did when she was happy.

“Aish, who are we meeting for dinner?” Sanjana asked as she walked into one of the smaller dining spaces in the

palace. “The special outfit for a secret guest?”

Aish rolled her eyes. “Not such a secret. Jai asked me to meet this guy to see if I like him.” She bit her lip nervously.

Sanjana scrunched her nose. “To model for your clothes? Didn’t you just have a photo shoot with Jai’s friend?”

To those words, Sanjana noticed Aish tense for a bit but recovered. “No. It’s a royal family member from down south.”

Sanjana still didn’t get why Aish seemed so worried. “So what? It’s not like you are—” She lost her voice when a thought occurred to her. “Is this a marriage alliance?”

Aish shook her head. “Yes. Apparently, this guy’s father, the King of Patola, reached out to Papa. Jai said the guy is a sleazeball, but I should at least meet the him just so Papa can keep his word.”

Sanjana tsked. “If he knows he is an ass, why is he asking you to meet him? Such a waste of time.”

“It’s okay. I’ll do it for Papa, and Jai said I could take you along, so I didn’t mind.” Aish winked and added, “I had the kitchen make our favorites. Who cares about that guy?”

Sanjana was at ease and looked forward to being the third wheel in what seemed like an annoying yet promising evening. They both discussed how they could scare the guy off and make him leave early so they could enjoy the rest of the evening chatting.

They were in the middle of their chit-chat when one of the staff members notified them of the arrival of the Prince of Patola. Aish asked him to show the prince in, and added,

“Since this guy’s father is Papa’s friend, we entertain him for an hour and then scare him away.”

“Deal,” Sanjana said, winking, and sat in the typical prim posture, and Aish matched it too.

Moments later, she heard the loud clicking of shoe soles and picked up a waft of a heavy, nauseating men’s cologne before she heard a man’s voice who seemed to be saying something rude. Finally, when the man appeared at the entrance, Sanjana had to bite back her laughter when she saw the man show up in a traditional outfit fitted with a turban and a sword.

Did he think he was taking Aish as his bride after the first meeting?

As the man walked in and introduced himself, she could not help but compare how regal her husband looked in such a traditional outfit while the man talking to Aish had a comic factor to his overall dress.

“Princess of Devaraya, what a pleasant surprise. You are beautiful.” The man’s words made Sanjana’s eyes widen. “I was expecting a different kind of woman. Your skin is indeed fair.”

What the heck was the man talking about?

Sanjana looked at Aish to see if she was going to give out the SOS signal they had discussed prior to the man’s arrival, but she got nothing. She quietly sipped her wine, her eyes scanning for any level of distress signal from Aish. That was her job for the evening, to take Aish away if it got weird with the prince.

Despite the obnoxious statement the man had made initially about Aish's skin tone, he seemed to be capable of a normal conversation. Although the man was speaking intelligently, something Jai had told Aish about the guy stuck in her mind.

Why did Jai call this guy a sleazeball? He seems fine.

No, he is not. He must be an asshole if Jai said it, another voice contradicted.

And yet again, she was lost in her thoughts of how much he influenced her. She had avoided her husband all week, and maybe she had to continue to do so to be able to get through the rest of the year without another kissing episode.

"Excuse me," Aish's distressed words cut through Sanjana's haze, and she noticed the anger in her sister-in-law's eyes. Sanjana looked at the guy to find him shrugging.

"What is the big deal?" he said. "I just need to know for our future children."

Children? Was he talking about making babies already?

Aish did not respond but sat quietly like she needed to calm herself. Sanjana felt guilty for zoning out and needed a way to recover. "Sorry, Prince of Patola, what do you need to know for the future of your children?"

The man rolled his eyes like he was burning up energy by repeating the question. "I need to know if Aishwarya's birth parents were of the higher caste. I know she is adopted and is not of royal descent, but I want to make sure she has good blood in her."

Sanjana was so shocked to hear the words that she could not react immediately, and when she did, all she could think of was to haul the wine in her hands in his direction. And before she knew it, his traditional white outfit was splashed with the pink of her drink. She had accidentally tipped her glass sideways rapidly and ended up splashing her drink on him. And she didn't regret it.

“What the heck!” The man stood up, dusting off his outfit that had no hope of being salvaged. “Who let such people dine with a royal?” The man was busy dabbing his vest that had wine seeping through it, and as Sanjana processed what had happened, Aish ended up splashing her drink on him too. “Are you mad?” the man yelled, looking at Aish and then at Sanjana.

Sanjana was shaking with anger when she heard Aish say, “Prince of Patola, too bad I'm not royal enough for you. You are excused.”

“Me?” The man was livid. “How dare you insult me like this, and you don't get to excuse me. You are not a real royal,” he spat.

Sanjana had enough. “Mind your tongue. You were excused by the future Queen of Devaraya.”

Aish smiled at Sanjana before looking at the man, who stood in shock. She stood up and followed Sanjana out of the dining area, leaving the man grumbling to himself. They barely took ten steps away, and they burst into laughter and hugged each other.

No words were said, but Sanjana knew she had found another sister in Aish, and just like she wouldn't let anyone

trouble Deepika, she wouldn't let some prick hurt Aish.

Later that evening, Aish and Sanjana sat on the balcony off of the couple's private quarters. Her husband was still away, so they moved the party indoors and lost count of how many glasses of wine they had as they spoke and laughed.

They were mid-conversation when the doors to the private chamber opened, and Sanjana got up to get the additional wine and cheese they had asked to be sent. "I'll go get it." She sprinted toward the living room and stopped short when she saw the man she was least expecting to see.

"Hi, Jai," she said sheepishly, avoiding his eyes as he walked to her. Just as he did every time in public, he leaned in to brush his lips over her temple. *But they were indoors, so why kiss her?*

As if her body had a mind of its own, she tilted her face away, making his lips land much lower on his face. The brush of his lips made her quiver deep inside, and the roughness from his stubble made her jump and freeze. He stopped, his lips barely away from her skin. "All okay?"

She felt a jolt yet again, and she stepped away from him. "Yes. Yes. Everything is okay. Aish is here."

He chuckled as he pulled back. "I know, and I'm told you two are having a lot of fun."

Oh, that's why he kissed her. They were technically in public.

But Aish was somewhere where she could not see you. Does that count? Another voice challenged.

Still jittery from the fact he kissed her cheek, she pushed away her thoughts and followed him to the balcony, where Aish was pouring more wine into their empty glasses. She looked up to find her brother and let out a squeal. “Jai, thank you so much for marrying Sanjana.” She hugged him, laughing. “I’m having so much fun.”

Jai planted a kiss on top of his sister’s head and hugged her. “I heard you two were a riot this evening.” He shook his head disapprovingly, looking at his sister, and Sanjana was suddenly worried about her brash behavior.

That was definitely against the contract. Does that mean he won’t get her a job as promised? She should apologize. That was way out of line to get into the royal’s business.

“Mums, the word, brother,” Aish teased, and Sanjana wondered how much of the fiasco he knows about. She was relieved when he shrugged and walked away after bidding them goodbye.

Minutes later, Aish got up and stretched. “I should get going. I will see you tomorrow unless your husband wants you all for himself.” Aish’s words made her blush. “Look at that tint on your cheeks. It’s like you were married just yesterday.”

Sanjana was at a loss for words as Aish bid her goodnight and left her standing in the middle of the room, lost in thought. She wondered if she should quickly get into bed and pretend to be fast asleep. But how much longer could she avoid him? Maybe the time had come for her to apologize for what she did at the airport and everything that evening.

Clean slate!

Just as she made up her mind to go talk to him, she felt him behind her, and the jitters were back. Was he going to get close to her? Kiss her again? Truth be told, she didn't mind the kisses or the thrills that came with them. She waited, rooted to her spot, expecting him to get closer, but it felt like he had stopped at the doorway and was looking at her.

She took in a slow hissy breath as she turned to look at him, a weak smile on her face. "Hi... how was your trip?"

He nodded, his eyes locked with hers as he stood by the doorway in a t-shirt and a pair of lounge pants. His hair was damp from the shower, and even the smell of just his soap was so sexy. "I haven't talked to you in a few days."

"Yes, you were busy, and I..." Her voice trailed off when he started to walk toward her.

He stopped less than a foot from her, his eyes boring into hers. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

What was he asking about? The airport fiasco or the one with the sleazeball?

"He was mean to Aish, and I... it happened before we realized it," she confessed.

His brow furrowed. "Was that you who threw wine on him?"

Was he mad at her?

At that point, she didn't care if her fake husband was unhappy with her actions. Too bad. "Yes, and he asked for it."

He nodded, a slight smile surfacing on his face. "I'm glad you were with Aish." She was glad he didn't sound mad

about what had happened. A moment passed with them looking at each other before he slowly reached for her hand.

Her eyes went to their joined hands and followed them to his lips as he planted a kiss on the back of her hand, just like he had before they went to the airport inauguration. They were not in public, and she was confused as to why he was so close to her, but she welcomed it. The very gesture, combined with the intensity in his eyes, made her shudder. She looked away, unable to hold his gaze.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice a whisper as he moved closer to wrap an arm around her. His words threw her off yet again, and she looked up at him. Like he was amused with her puzzled look, he chuckled before leaning closer and whispering, “Can I hug you?”

Like those were the magic words, she smiled broadly, her eyes lighting up like stars. “Yes.” Her voice was a hiss as he pulled her to him and held her close. The jitters were gone, and she was suddenly at ease. “Why do I get a hug? And I’d like to bargain for more if I did something good,” she asked, pulling back to look at him.

He didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he slowly raised his hands to cup her face, tilting her it to meet his eyes. “You deserve anything you want, name it. I’ll make it happen.”

The moment was intense, and her heart leaped with joy in response. She managed to hold his gaze. “Not sure what I did, but I’ll take a rain check on naming what I want. Can you please tell me I’m not in trouble for... you know? I’m not proud of my actions, but—”

Her words were lost when he smiled, his eyes lighting up. "I'm glad you were with Aish."

She was suddenly embarrassed by how she behaved with a palace guest. "Jai, I may have taken it a bit too far. I have been..." she started to ramble. "I could have avoided what happened at the airport, then today—"

He hushed her gently. "What happened at the airport that you should have avoided?" His eyes held hers, and even as she fought her need to look away with embarrassment, she held his gaze.

Should she apologize for kissing him, even if deep in her heart, she was not sorry for what she did?

"The contract..." she whispered, and she saw something flash in his eyes before he started to move his hands away from her face. In her frenzy that he misunderstood what she was stating, she placed her hand over his and brought his palms back to her cheeks. "Hold me," she said. "I like it when you hold me close to you and when you let me hug you. The other day, I did something I should not have done under the terms of the contract."

His eyes searched hers for a long moment before his lips descended on hers for a slow kiss. Her eyes rolled shut, and she melted into his arms, her body arching as she moved closer. His hand moved down to cup her neck as he deepened the kiss.

She moaned when he angled her face, his tongue slipping past her quivering lips for a sweet exploration. The conflicting emotions were gone, and there was only one thing

she knew and felt his touch—the way his lips moved against hers and how he held her to him like she was a precious doll.

Her heart drummed in her chest as a range of thrills made her levitate in the warmth that encompassed her. She ran one hand along his neck before running her arm around him, closing the gap between them.

She was lost in a euphoric moment, and just as she felt her lungs fighting for air, he pulled back, making her gasp. The bliss of the moment lingered even as the confusion of what had happened seeped into her mind. She slowly opened her eyes to find him looking at her, his eyes dark as the night.

Did he just kiss her? It was a real and dangerous one.

“What just happened?” Before she knew it, she had blurted the words. “I shouldn’t have kissed you at the airport, and now—” An idea flashed through her mind. “And you kissed me.” She smiled, relief sweeping over her. “We are even. Is that why you kissed me?” She let out a nervous laugh.

One end of his mouth twisted up as if in amusement. “Is that right?”

She pulled back from him and hoped she sounded casual enough. “I kind of got carried away that day, and it’s good that you kissed me today. It’s not awkward anymore for both of us.”

“Oh, so if you kiss me and I kiss you back, we’re good?” he asked, a curious eyebrow raised high questioningly.

Sanjana nodded like she had that figured out in her mind eons ago. “Yeah, that’s it... you know... we balance it out.”

“Sounds fair.” He shrugged, and Sanjana could not believe her luck. She was just glad she got away with something she had no intention of starting but somewhere, a voice raised a flag.

Could there be another reason for him to kiss you?

She shushed that voice and said, “Well, if that’s the case, I don’t know whom you are supposed to throw wine at for making that even.” She bit back a smile. She liked where the conversation was going. She was moments away from having a clean slate after a week of irrational behavior.

“How about I take a rain check?” He winked, and that made her stomach roll into a knot. “I’ll figure out when to play that card.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Just don’t throw wine on any of the dresses Aish makes for me, okay? That would make me very angry.”

His smile softened. “I wouldn’t do that, not the dress that the future Queen of Devaraya designed for my beautiful wife.”

“That’s right! You don’t mess with the queen.” She laughed, the ease at which they were able to converse gave her a new high. She felt the jitters from the physical proximity, but she had a different kind of excitement just being able to talk to him. “Or her brother, who is doing such cool stuff for his region.”

He held her eyes locked with his. “Is that cool enough?” he taunted.

“It’s awesome! You have no idea. I can tell you why it is so awesome if you get me a glass of wine and some cheese to go with it.” She laughed, walking toward the balcony she had camped in all evening with Aish.

“You leave me no choice.” He scoffed, following her as he texted the staff to replenish the wine and snacks.

Sanjana was glad that evening went the way it did. It was as if that was the kiss her mind and body needed because the rest of the evening, she wasn’t as jittery as she usually was around him.

It was perfect! Less than ten months to go.

Chapter 18

Weeks passed in a comfort zone even as Sanjana continued to fight the internal turmoil. She liked the status quo of her dynamic with her fake husband but somewhere deep inside, she wanted more. And a way for her to pacify that longing was to go online and read the comments on the old pictures of her and Jai over and over again.

Sanjana spent time in the private chambers every morning until he left for the day. She had gotten into the habit of waking up before him just so she could scoot closer to him and go back to sleep. She conveniently set aside the body pillow she had initially used as a barrier. She was happy falling back asleep with his breath on her cheek and waking up to the sound of the water running in the shower.

She spent her day with an intense workout to keep fit to be a pilot and watched training videos online, then eventually wandered into Aish's studio just around the time they had tea in the afternoons. Her interaction with Jai's parents was limited as it was with his brother.

The past few weeks, she would promptly return to their private space just in time to have dinner with Jai. She enjoyed the evening spent with the rest of the family, especially because of the kisses he gave her. He had gotten into the habit of texting her before he headed home, and she looked forward to their chats on the balcony. They talked about everything under the sun. It had become their thing, and she didn't know when the streak would be broken.

And whenever that was, for whatever reason it was, she knew she would be disappointed. She knew he was not obligated to spend time with her, but she almost felt entitled to his time.

Bad place to be in. You could get attached to him, a voice called out from deep within.

“No, I won’t,” she said out loud to her reflection as she stood in front of the mirror inspecting her look for the night. They were heading out for what seemed like a party that started much later than usual. She was glad they did get their time together on the balcony with a glass of wine.

She adjusted the hem of the cocktail dress she had on for the night. It was a ruched dress made from stretchy silk, which hugged every inch of her curves. The neck was square with wide straps, and the way it contoured her body, she felt sexy. The black high-heel pumps gave her the much-needed height boost.

When she saw it was time to go, she picked up her clutch and left the room. She knew it would be a night where they’d end up staying at the penthouse, but she didn’t need anything else. She had gotten used to the ways of her new life rather quickly.

It’s going to take a long time to adjust back to the previous routine, a voice warned, and she paused for a moment.

She shook her head and smiled to herself as she stepped into the living room. She was not going back to the old lifestyle. She was going to be a pilot and travel the world.

“What did I miss?” His question made her look at him, only to realize she was grinning broadly.

“What?” she asked, biting back the smile that wouldn’t go away, overjoyed at the thought of being a pilot.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Let’s go. You can tell me on the way.” She pressed her lips together and wondered if she should tell him what she was so excited about. It should be no news to him what she intended to do after their one-year contract. No point making a big deal out of it.

“How come we’re going to the party so late?” she asked in hopes of diverting the topic. She found it weird to be talking about what she would do after their year of marriage. It would make her sound like she wasn’t enjoying her time at the palace.

She heard his chuckle as he got into the car right behind her. “It’s an event we need to attend but not the kind you’d enjoy.”

Sanjana’s heart leaped with joy. He actually cared about what she would enjoy unless it was a party he wouldn’t be thrilled to attend and was just making her an excuse to be late.

Later that night, she thought her eyes would get stuck in the back of her head at the rate at which she was rolling them in her mind. The people at the party were all strangers, and she had no idea what they were talking about.

Conversations moved from people who were in the market to buy an island to folks planning a birthday party in mid-air. She realized how many people swarmed around Jai to

talk to him, and at one point, she was happy to find a quiet corner to sit back and observe people.

The gathering was not a normal party, and maybe that's why he thought she would not enjoy it. It felt like people were there to talk business, show how successful their companies were running, and get more investors. She had enough of the people-watching and was busy figuring out how to catch a nap in that cozy corner when she saw Jai walk toward her with a beautiful woman looking in her direction, a broad smile on her face.

Finally, a friendly face. She didn't seem to be the kind who was there to talk shop. Did Jai finally find someone normal to keep her company? *How sweet.*

Jai smiled broadly at Sanjana before he wrapped an arm around her. "Sanjana, this is Disha Bijli. She is visiting from London."

The woman smiled politely and shook hands with Sanjana. "It is so good to meet you. I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor." The woman spoke with a crisp British accent.

Sanjana nodded. "Sure. How can I help?" If she could chat with this woman for the rest of the evening, she need not figure out how to sleep with her eyes half open.

The woman looked at Jai and back at Sanjana. "Your man here is hot, and he is a fucking royal. It's been a thing on my list to sleep with one, and this one's extra yummy too." She ran her eyes hungrily over Jai before looking at Sanjana and added, "I was hoping to borrow him for the night, but he tells me he doesn't spend the night without you."

What the heck was the woman talking about?

Sanjana kept staring at the woman as she continued in that accent of hers. “He not only can’t be without you, and he says I need to ask you for permission for a quickie. You won’t even know it.” Her head started to spin, and her brain was rejecting every scene that flashed in her mind at the situations the woman was describing. “But he wants you too.”

The woman went on, oblivious of Sanjana’s state of mind. “Would you be a sport and agree to a fun three-way, and I don’t need him to fuck me? I just want a taste of him.” She scanned Jai like she was stripping him with her eyes, and that made her want to hurl. “He is such a hottie.”

Sanjana was in a daze, too shocked to react initially and wondered if the woman was pulling a prank on her. The event they were attending was supposed to be purely social but people had been talking business all along. Never in a million years had she expected to be faced with such a situation. Indecent proposals were limited only to movies, or so she thought. She watched in horror as the woman eyed him like he was a delicious dessert and saw the longing in the woman’s eyes for him—her husband.

Sanjana had seen and heard enough, and she didn’t know from where but a deep rage surfaced. “Back off.” She took an intimidating step toward the woman. “He is my husband. He is off-limits, and only I get to sleep with him.” She could not believe the words that came out of her mouth. Her voice even sounded different. “He is mine.”

The woman was unfazed. She only rolled her eyes, ignoring everything Sanjana said. “Don’t be a prude. I’ll make

it worth your time. I could suck you off too... you're pretty hot yourself." The woman was not willing to back down, and Sanjana could not believe her ears.

As if Jai realized Sanjana was about to attack the woman, he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. "Let's go, baby." His voice was husky, and something about the way he said it made her core twitch.

She was in a fog, even as he led her out of the large space where the crazy party was happening and walked her to the car in the underground parking. Her breathing was coming fast even as she clenched her jaw.

Sanjana was livid and didn't know why—the way the woman expressed her intent or the fact that he brought her to get permission. She tried to suppress her anger as they silently rode to the penthouse. Even though no words were exchanged, something was brewing in the air. Tension was building up that threatened to engulf them.

A dangerous yet exciting urge started to erupt from within, and she realized the anger had transformed into something she had never felt before. The woman's words set off a new want, and it took her a moment to comprehend that she was enveloped with lust.

Her nerves were high-strung as they made their way into the quiet penthouse. Just like the other time they visited, there was no one around, and as she went up the stairs slowly, every word she said resonated in her head, and the undying need that had spurted was now an uncontrollable demand from within.

Just the memory of the whole incident was making her angry, but that was further fueling the unbound lust. She wanted him, and as if her mind and body believed every word she said earlier that night, they were suddenly on the same side.

Halfway up the stairs, she turned abruptly and looked into his eyes from the higher step. “Why did you do that?” Her voice shook with outrage, and her eyes flashed with need.

A slow smile formed on his face like he expected that reaction from her. That only set her off even more, and she looked away and rushed up the rest of the stairs even as he called out to her. He was messing with her head and was enjoying it too. Why? That ticked her off, and she stepped into the bedroom about to slam the door shut when he pushed past the door to pull her into his arms.

“Sanjana...” his voice was husky as he whispered her name. “Why are you so upset?”

She froze in his arms, his proximity setting off something deep inside but what was more prominent was her anger. “Yes, I’m upset and not with that woman, but with you.” She tried to wiggle out of his hold, and he only tightened it further, her body plastered to his. “Let me go.”

He held her angry gaze. “I will, once we are done talking.”

She looked away from him. “I don’t want to talk to you.” In reality, she was embarrassed by her own behavior, and the mixed pot of emotions only made it worse for her.

“Why not?” he insisted, pulling her closer to him and slowly running his lips along her cheek as she kept her eyes away from him. The moment she felt the roughness of his stubble on her skin, she stiffened but did not try to move away.

His breath was hot on her skin as his lips descended along her neck, laying a trail of gentle kisses. Every time he moved his lips away only to run them over her skin, she jumped, every touch having an amplified effect on her senses.

“Jai...” she murmured as she opened up her neck for him, an arm going around his neck. Her yearning breasts pressed into his chest as she burned with a combination of anger and want.

“Don’t be mad at me, baby.” Everything he said was scintillating, and she wanted to enjoy every bit of the attention she was getting, but the dull ache between her legs distracted her.

Like her body knew what had to be done, her hips rolled against him in pursuit of some relief. His lips moved further down her neck, tracing the square of her neckline as her body pressed into his further. “Are you still mad at me?” he asked against the column of her neck, sending vibrations down to the apex of her thighs, making things worse.

Her chest heaved, and her breath was coming fast as she longed for something she didn’t recognize or know how to handle. Anger and another dark emotion had morphed into something potent and demanded all of her. The turmoil continued as she relished the butterfly kisses he planted on her skin while she tried to process her sensations.

As if he picked up on that chaos in her head, he slid his hand over her back, squeezing her bottom while his teeth sunk into the soft skin right over her deep neckline. A feral cry escaped her, and the ache between her legs seemed to be satiated.

It was a zap of relief that sizzled through her body, but it was not enough, and as if that was a tease, the longing came back with a throbbing vengeance. She wanted to cry out in frustration, unable to process the overwhelming emotions and the call for something she had no clue about.

“What do you want, baby?” he asked, his lips against the bare skin on her chest. “Let me make it up to you.” The intensity in his voice made her stomach twist into knots.

“I... I...” She let out a cry when she could not form a coherent sentence, and instead of finding her words, she mashed her lips with his for a hungry kiss. The language of lust and longing came to her much easier than what she had known all her life. She heard him groan before he sucked on her lips, making her sensations amplify.

The kiss was nothing like the one they shared back at the palace or at any other time. It was the complete opposite. His fingers dented the curves at her waist before rounding around her bottom and picking her off the floor.

She clung to him as he walked them to the bed, her lips never wanting to leave his as she kicked off her shoes before wrapping her legs around him. It felt natural to be in his arms, hungrily exploring each other’s mouths and the only way for her to feel any hope of relief from the dull and throbbing ache.

Like her body was on a mission to find the ultimate release, she once again started rolling her hips against him, her core sliding along his tight body. Her nipples were hard as stone and only the heat from his mouth could melt them. She moaned against his mouth as something started to build from within.

Their lips came apart when he dropped their bodies on the bed, and she gasped. As if that was an unfortunate interruption, they closed the gap between them, and the kiss was at another level of intensity.

“Baby,” he said against her lips as he sucked in her lower lip. “What do you want?”

Her heart leaped before returning to beating rapidly, no thinking involved. “Touch me.” It was a plea as she reached for his hand at her waist to run it over her breast, enjoying the squeeze he gave it. Her body was running hot as she grabbed his hand to her thighs before sliding it over her throbbing core. “I want you to... touch me,” she managed between the kisses.

The kisses slowed down, and she felt the need for the touch. Just when she thought she was going to scream with frustration, she felt the back of his hand pressing over her dress, just over her weeping folds. A shudder passed through her, and she arched her body toward him as she lay on her side.

When his lips moved, she hugged his head, not wanting him to stop, and to her delight, he buried his face into her neck as one hand pulled up the hem of her silk dress.

If she thought her heart was beating rapidly, she was sure it would leap out of her chest when she felt his hand on

her bare skin. She further arched her body, angling his face deeper into her chest. If she thought the throbbing between her legs was the only thing to be dealt with, she was mistaken.

Her entire body went into overdrive when she felt his hot breath over her cleavage. The beautiful dress she had on, all she could think about was ripping it off her body so she could feel his touch all over at every level.

Images of his slick skin rubbing over her hot body flashed in front of her eyes, causing her core to throb like that was what she craved. “Jai, I want you.” Her voice wavered as she opened up further, welcoming his sweet invasion.

“Sanjana, you are—” She didn’t let him finish when she sensed apprehension in his voice. She wasn’t going to take no for an answer, and as if in desperation, she pulled him to her, engaging their lips again for another hot kiss. She didn’t know what fueled her confidence, but she took charge and felt him shudder when she trailed her lips down his neck.

His fingers closed around the soft flesh on her chest, and that set off new thrills for her. As she lay a trail of kisses along his neck, she fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, wanting to get more of him. She had seen the rippled muscles on his chest many times and wondered how they would feel under her soft palm. She didn’t want to wait to find out. She wanted to feel the heat from him all over her.

Halfway through her unbuttoning his shirt, she heard him groan against her lips before pulling away. He looked at her flushed face for a brief moment before reaching for the zipper on her dress. She tightened her hold on him and went for his neck again like she wanted to drink him in.

Buttons started to fly, and the silk of her outfit slipped off her skin, leaving her in nothing but her innerwear. Their heated bodies melded together, and his hands roamed her curves.

She threw her head back when he buried his face into her chest just before scooping out her breasts to suck on her hardened nipples. She was hit with such intense energy that she would have fallen back on the mattress if he didn't hold her against him as he kneeled on the bed.

She had no idea how they got to such a passionate moment from what was a shocking and angry encounter, but she was not ready to back down at that point. What it meant for their contractual relationship did not matter to her anymore.

She let out a sob when he let go of one nipple to suckle on the other one, his hand finding her molten folds that were weeping wet. He stroked her core over her panties, and she thought she was going to turn into a pile of mush. Her body leaped with newfound thrills as he continued to stroke her as his lips roamed her exposed skin.

She clung to him, wanting more of him and his touch. As if he read her mind, he pressed his hand on her core, his mouth closing in again on her nipple, as his teeth induced a sweet pain that clashed with the thrills deep inside her. She felt a seismic shudder ripple through her, making her gasp.

It was something she had never felt before and had no idea how she imploded from his mere touch. Her body went stiff before it became limp, and she lay powerless in his arms, never wanting to let go of him.

She couldn't face him for days after a kiss. Now what?

Chapter 19

Sanjana woke the next morning to the beautiful smell of coffee and rolled over in bed, stretching her arms. She felt a bit of soreness in her muscles, but it felt good that morning, and a smile formed on her face as she opened her eyes.

“Good morning,” the all-too-familiar voice said from not far away, and everything that happened the night before came crashing back. It was a raunchy night she had never expected it to be. Her cheeks started to turn red just at a memory of where the night started and how she passed out in his arms.

Now what? When the daylight hit, the reality seemed drastically different from the euphoric night, and she didn't know how to move forward from that point. If she avoided him for a week for kissing him, was she now supposed to run away and hide?

Like he saw her slide under the sheets as she contemplated her next steps, he pulled the fabric off her, making her squeal. He ran his hand under her, scooping her body off the mattress as he pulled her closer. “Good morning,” he said, planting a kiss on her temple, making her jitter like always.

After all the scrumptious activity the previous night, shouldn't a kiss be business as usual? Why did it still make her so high-strung?

“Good morning,” she said, avoiding his eyes. She was unsure of what was going on in his head and somewhat taken

aback by the casual manner.

Was that all a dream?

“Did you sleep well?” His voice was husky, yet he was talking to her like nothing had happened the night before. Was it not a big deal for him? Has he done this with other women? Stung by jealousy, she murmured a yes and quickly went to the bathroom.

The thoughts that swarmed her and the sensations that still tantalized her were conflicting. She spent more time than necessary in the bathroom to clear her head. She remembered how it all started, and she was caught in the act of questioning herself when the door to the bathroom opened. She still could not figure out why she had reacted so irrationally when the woman approached her with her so-called request.

She looked up and met his eyes through the mirror as she stood in front of it. She stayed rooted to her spot as he walked over to where she was, all the while holding her gaze. With their eyes locked, he slowly lowered his lips to her cheek. She closed her eyes, unable to handle the maddening emotions.

Sanjana stood still, and just when she thought he was going to pull away, she felt his hands on her shoulders. Before she knew it, she was being flipped, lifted off the floor, and seated on the vanity facing him. Shaken up by his invasive stance, she asked in a rather weak voice, “Jai, what are you doing?”

One end of his mouth twisted up and a wicked grin formed. “Making sure you don’t avoid me again just because we kissed last night.” There was a lot more than kissing that

happened. She lowered her eyes, heat creeping up her cheeks, her mind fighting hard to find a way out of the awkward situation.

Think, Sanjana. Think hard. You cannot avoid him for another nine months.

Something went off in her head, and she couldn't think of anything else to say. She managed to look up into his eyes. "I wasn't trying to avoid you. I was just... and we kissed last night and... other things too and..." Her voice faded as she wondered where they would proceed with the contract from there.

She didn't know what to convey. Should she tell him they should stop with the kisses and other things? There was no denying she totally enjoyed every bit of the previous night, but it was a bad idea.

He stepped back before she could finish her thoughts. "Let's talk after breakfast. Come join me when you're ready." With those words, he disappeared behind the door, leaving her lost.

He was acting extremely cool like nothing happened. So maybe, she should play along.

Shortly after, she stepped out of the bathroom, pulling her messy hair into a ponytail. He wasn't in the large dining room where she had a view from the loft from the top level. The only other place left was the patio, and she headed straight there, telling herself not to bring up her stupid idea that had

popped in her head earlier, one where they would settle on a way to even the kissing score.

A score of kisses or the other things that she experienced?

A judgmental voice from deep within told her she was being sneaky because she really wanted to be kissed again. Don't do anything stupid was the warning. But she was convinced they had to continue with the kisses so it became less awkward when they had to kiss in public.

She loudly pushed open the patio door, causing him to look up from the magazine he was skimming through. "Jai, we need to talk." She couldn't understand why was she being so desperate to return the favor.

He closed the magazine he was reading and set it on the coffee table in front of him. "Come. Sit." He gestured for her to take a seat across from him.

She quickly sat, unsure of how much time they would have before the staff showed up with their breakfast. She lowered her voice and said, "Jai, the party last night, I overreacted and ruined your evening, and I want to make it up to you. We should go out again tonight."

Stop trying to kiss him. Forget what happened. The pragmatic voice was insistent.

After a long stare, he nodded. "How do you think going out to a party would be making it up to me if I didn't enjoy being there?" He chuckled and added, "I was glad you said you wanted to leave."

Her heart dropped when she realized she had no way to recreate the previous night and told herself it was acting purely out of guilt and nothing else. “I guess I... I do agree the people were different.” She shrugged like she was not affected by what happened the night before when her body strummed just at the thought of it. “I thought the location of the party was nice.” She didn’t really remember anything about the club that was reserved for the private party.

He kept their gaze locked and leaned forward, a flicker of something new in his eyes. “Okay, if you say so.” He smirked.

Heat swept over her cheeks, and she looked away. “Okay.” Something else came to mind as it raced. “I could tell you were having a lot of fun with my encounter with the woman last night.”

He nodded, his lips pressed together. “I will say I was amused.”

She threw him a mock glare and debated if she should drop the conversation and continue to pretend that what happened the night before didn’t affect her, especially when he was making it sound like it was not a big deal.

“Well, maybe if you insist we go back to the same club, we could.” She could not believe the words he said. She would go out with him, play the role of a good wife, maybe kiss him a little and call it a night. It would free herself of the guilt of ruining his evening and show that she can be casual about what happened between them. At least, that’s how she rationalized it.

“That would...” Her voice trailed off when she heard the knock on the patio door before the staff stepped in with the food. She was relieved she’d have more time to think through what she wanted by going out with him again. There was no denying the excitement at the thought of repeating what they did the previous night, *sans* the woman with the indecent proposal.

Sanjana did not raise her eyes as if she had to inspect every bite of her food. She didn’t want to continue the conversation and hoped he wouldn’t bring it up.

“We are good now. You may leave.” It was an instruction to the staff on the patio, and that made a shiver pass through her that she would be left alone with him again. She slowly looked up to say thank you to the staff before lowering her eyes again. A few moments later, he cleared his throat. “Let me know when you’d like to go.” Her eyes flew up to him, and he held her gaze for a long moment. “I look forward to another night of fun.”

What did he mean by that? At the club or their after-party at the penthouse?

Her breath was trapped in her throat as she looked at him, unable to respond immediately. Her mind was reeling with the conflict, and before she got into the trenches with the thoughts, she said, “Yes, it was.”

He shrugged. “You let me know if you change your mind.” His statement was casual, but she wondered if he meant something else. Nevertheless, she was somewhat convinced she had to return the fun favor for him. It was her own compulsion to somehow even out physical activity. Was it

because she secretly wanted more of him? Didn't she get enough the night before?

"Last night was... I don't know how it happened and..." Her voice trailed off, and she couldn't get her words out. It was as if her every thought was fighting her, forcing her to give in to her need to have one more night of fun and call it even.

Once and done! A voice urged from deep within, and she accepted. It was futile putting up a fight she was not winning.

"We should enjoy the place. It was good," she said, looking at him. She was shaking all over, and it took her a few moments to realize it was the sheer excitement of going out alone with him again.

"Good, we can stop at the restaurant you like for a quick bite and then go to the club," he said, his tone casual as if it was no big deal what happened between them while she shuddered with anticipation at the chance they could make out again.

It's just making out, and remember it was a lot of fun for you.

"Okay, I'll go shower." She got up and left as if she was worried she would say or do something she'd regret. As she eagerly ran up the stairs, excited about what was about to happen, part of her chastised herself for what she wanted to do. She was still rationalizing her plan to seduce her husband as a way to even out the score in her mind.

As she stepped into the bathroom, she stopped when she caught the image of her cheeks flushed and a wide grin on her face. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s not wrong to want to make out with my husband, and you know he is hot,” she said to her reflection before stepping into the shower.

The water felt warm against her heated body as she washed off the soreness in her muscles. She was halfway through washing her body when she felt movement outside the shower. Looking through the foggy glass, she knew it was Jai, and for a strange reason, she wasn’t alarmed.

In all the months they were married, he never once walked into the bathroom while she was in the shower. She smiled at the thought that there was a possibility he wanted her as much as she wanted him, and it was perfectly reasonable for her to want to kiss him.

Why did he come into the bathroom? Was he going to walk into the shower to join her? The thought was terrifying and exciting at the same time. When she didn’t see or feel movement again, she quickly washed off and wrapped a toweling robe around her before opening the shower door.

She stepped out to find him leaning against the vanity, sipping coffee, as if in wait for her. Just the memory of his lips on her made her want more. Her hair was up in a knot, her skin slightly damp as she walked toward him, fully intending to take every opportunity to settle the score in her mind. But it was her body that was driving her.

His eyes swept over her lazily as he sipped on his coffee, and when she got closer, he placed the mug on the marble counter next to him. She surprised herself when she

walked up to him, no words exchanged, and went directly for the kill with a kiss to his lips.

She snaked her fingers into his hair, pulling his head lower as she went on her toes to meet his mouth. Initially, his lips were a bit tentative, but she coaxed them into engaging with hers. The thrills she felt only intensified with every kiss and how he touched her. His mouth was warm, and she tasted delicious coffee on his lips.

She moaned when he cupped her bottom and brought her body against his, and she swore she felt him hard against her belly. Unless she imagined it, she knew he was excited too. The kiss was so intense she thought she was going to lose herself in it with just the way their lips melded in a hot engagement.

Her body shuddered with the now-familiar need, and just as she was hoping he would touch her the way he did, he pulled back, making her eyes flutter open. Their breathing was faster, but he shook his head. “Sorry, I... I got to take this phone call.”

What call? Did his phone ring?

She was too shaken up to say anything but blankly stared at him as he rushed to get his phone. “We have reservations for dinner at seven tonight,” he called out as he took the call.

She leaned on the vanity for support, catching her breath. What was that? Was he there to take a shower as soon as she was done, and she straight-up kissed him? Embarrassment hit her, and she slapped her forehead with her

palm. She had no idea why she was still breathless minutes after he pulled away from her.

How the heck was she supposed to face him when she tried to seduce him when he was just there finishing his coffee? Especially when every inch of her body demanded his touch.

Chapter 20

“Sanjana, can you be a bit more present at my pre-engagement party?” her cousin, Vanita, asked, laughing. She was shaken out of her delirious state, lost in her thoughts. It had been a week since the hungry-explorations night at his penthouse.

Why the heck was she thinking about him?

“She’s been checked out since the time she left the palace,” Deepika teased as she helped their cousin with her makeup for the girls’ night out. “I think she misses her prince and the fierce moments of passion they share.

The group of women broke into a burst of loud laughter, but Sanjana could only smile and continued with the task of making a garland. Her sister and cousins were not wrong in saying she was checked out—she had been since the night at the penthouse.

The night she had hoped to settle the score by kissing him back, maybe attempting to make it fun for him, it just did not happen. The following night they spent at the penthouse with her hurling her stomach out because she drank a bit too much. She took an extra shot of tequila in hopes of having a bold night, and she ended up going to bed hugging a bowl. The night was filled with disappointment of not settling the score, the embarrassment of her puking in front of him, and yet she saw the sweetest side of the man she was married to. Fake married, but there was nothing fake about how well he

took care of her when he could have easily had one of the staff members do so.

Back at the palace, it was business as usual like nothing ever happened. He kissed her temple every day but nothing else, and it drove her nuts.

“Sanjana, stop looking so sad. Isn’t your husband coming tomorrow morning to the engagement party?” Deepika was not letting her get away easily, and she felt guilty about being checked out.

She shook away her delirious and random thoughts and said, “Who said I was thinking about Jai? I was thinking of what drinking games we could play at the club tonight.”

“Nice try,” one of her cousins teased, but Sanjana was glad the topic moved on from her and her prince. However, her thoughts went back to him. She felt guilty about not being fully present in the room, but she could not help it.

Everything the group talked about, her mind went back to him. The talk about tequila shots reminded her of how patient he was with her as she threw up. The time when she slipped and fell in the bathroom, she was a complete stranger, and yet, instead of letting the hired help take care of her, he was the one who took care of her.

With that finesse and care combined with how explosive it was when they gave into their attraction, she saw no hope for her. How could she not think about him and secretly want to be with him all the time?

Shortly after, they headed to the club, where a specific area had been reserved for her cousin’s party. The party bus

was loud with cheers, and the music blasted her ears, but she was still zoned out. She looked out the window, debating if she should head back to the palace. She knew her security was following the vehicle, and she could hitch a ride back to him.

How can you do that to your cousin?

Feeling guilty about her random thoughts, she killed them. She shook away the strumming she was feeling and tried to immerse herself into party mode. A short ride later, the bus pulled up in front of the hotel, where the club took up a couple of the top levels of the building. The plan was to stay over at the hotel after the party, so there was no shuttling around late at night.

Just as the doors to the party bus opened, she saw a sudden flow of people holding cameras. *Paparazzi? Even without Jai being here?*

Her heart leaped with joy at the thought her prince was around, but soon she realized the reporters were there for her. How in the world did they know she was there? She was thankful for the security and knew they would keep the photographers away from her.

Most of her cousins were out of the bus before she stepped out, and then a gazillion flashes went off. She suddenly didn't know what to do and raised her hand to her face to block her eyes from the blinding lights. She didn't think anyone cared for pictures of her without Jai, so she didn't stop or pose for them in spite of the calls.

The security kept the people taking pictures at a distance, but at some point, one of her cousins was suddenly pushed to the carpeted floor outside the hotel lobby. Sanjana

saw it was one of the reporters trying to get a picture of her and had pushed her cousin out of the way.

Outraged at the man's behavior, she stepped closer to him. "Why did you push my cousin? Apologize to her."

Instead of doing what she asked, the man kept clicking pictures of her, and that set her off even more. Annoyed and in an effort to stop the person from clicking pictures that were blinding her, she waved her hand in front of the camera, causing it to fall on the ground. The person who dropped their camera let out a loud cry.

Shocked by what happened, everyone seemed to be stunned for a moment before the cameras went off again, capturing videos and pictures of that reporter as she continued to reprimand him.

She was still pissed even as her security moved the group indoors. She apologized to her cousin, who laughed it off, but Sanjana could not accept her relative's treatment because of her. She was no longer in the mood to have fun and decided to take some time away to calm herself.

As all her cousins headed to the club, she headed to one of the rooms reserved for the night. She quickly headed there and stepped into the dark room, her chest heaving with anger. She was not proud of her behavior, but when the person continued to click pictures, it ticked her off.

She took some time to gather herself and was about to join her cousins when a notification beeped on her phone. It was her assistant, and as she was opening the message, more were coming in.

Sanjana shocked when she saw the title of the first article and the picture of her with her hand on the camera as she pushed it away.

Not so regal, after all.

Her heart sank, and she slowly walked to the bed to sit down. She started to shake all over as she read the comments on the posts. What should have been an enjoyable thing to read was very upsetting. It felt like the entire social media was raining down on her with their harsh comments on her behavior, chastising her for preventing passionate photographers from doing their job was what they were portraying online.

Sanjana fought back tears as she read the messages about how she was a disgrace to the royal family and that the prince had made a mistake in choosing to marry her. She threw the phone away and stared into the room, sorting out her emotions. A few minutes later, she decided not to let what had happened earlier ruin her evening. She left her phone in the room and headed to the club.

For the next couple of hours, she tried hard to keep her thoughts and concerns at bay about what had happened. She didn't know how this would impact everyone around her, especially when the media had decided to go rogue on her.

Will they take this opportunity to take a dig at the entire royal family?

She was on the dance floor, smiling even as she felt a hammer beating inside her head. The internet posts had ruined her evening, but she was glad she was able to spend some fun time with her cousin.

When she stepped away from the dance floor to take a sip of water, one of the security staff approached her. “Ma’am, we have a call for you.” The man pointed to another man who stood by the door, holding a phone.

It must be Jai. Was he mad at her for her behavior? He had every right to be upset about how things transpired.

Sanjana approached the man, and instead of handing a phone to her, he opened the door of the club, gesturing for her to step outside. She walked out of the noisy space and was about to ask who had called when she caught sight of a tall figure in her peripheral view.

Her head jerked in that direction, and she let out a cry of joy when her eyes met with those of the man she could not stop thinking about all evening. “Jai.” She ran to him, throwing her arms around him. She didn’t know what it was about being in his arms, but the weight she felt was burdening her all evening seemed to melt away. She sobbed into his chest like she had pent-up emotions.

“Baby, stop,” he whispered as he held her head in his hands, planting a kiss on her head. “I’m here. I got you.”

“I’m sorry, Jai. I was the reason for all the mess...” She pulled back to look at him, and he placed a finger on her lips and hushed her.

“Let’s go,” he said before looking at the security and giving them a nod. “Security will make sure everyone gets to their rooms after the party.”

She held his hand and stopped walking. “Jai, I can’t leave. My cousin will be upset if I leave before the

engagement party tomorrow.”

He smiled, taking a step closer to her, his lips yet again running over her temple. “Would it be okay if you spent the night with your husband?”

Sanjana let out a sob, followed by a smile. “I think she’ll be okay with that.” She hugged him as he walked her toward the elevator and hit the button for a floor different from the one where they had the rooms reserved. “That’s not where my room—”

He silenced her with his lips, pulling her to him as the elevator moved. She sighed against his mouth, her body melting in his arms. The movement of the elevator and the euphoria of the moment made her feel like she was floating, and her body jerked away when she heard the ding of the elevators with the doors opening slowly.

The elevator doors remained open as he pulled her back to him, brushing his lips to hers as he swept her feet off the floor. “I can’t let Deepika be mad at me for kicking her out of your room. We’ll spend the night here and then head to the engagement ceremony in the morning.” He purposefully walked down the long hallway carrying her like she weighed nothing.

She smiled at the thought of being with him and spending time with him that night, but the incident that happened earlier in the evening still bothered her. “Jai, I’m sorry for what happened. I promise never to do something like that again.”

Jai didn’t say anything immediately, confirming her concerns about the incident that transpired online. She clung to

him as he stepped into the dimly lit room. He gently placed her feet on the floor before closing the door behind them. She lowered her eyes, unable to look into his, even in the low light that streamed from one side of the room. “Sanjana, look at me.”

She slowly raised her eyes, guilt twisting her heart painfully. “It all happened...” Her voice was lost again when he pecked her lips with his before stepping back, a wicked grin on his face. Confused and somewhat annoyed by his undeniably delectable interrupting kisses, she narrowed her eyes at him. “I like being kissed by you, but you need to let me explain what happened.”

Jai chuckled. “Explain what? What happened?” He looked at her like nothing had happened. “I’m here to see my wife because I had a feeling she was missing me.”

Heat crept to her cheeks, and a smile formed on her lips. She shook away the thrills and looked into his eyes. “Jai, I saw the posts and articles and read all the comments.”

He shrugged. “What posts?” he asked as if nothing had happened.

She suddenly realized her phone was in the room assigned to her and Deepika. “I need to go get my phone. I will show you what I’m talking about.” She started to move toward the door when he caught her from behind, her back going to his chest. “Jai, what are you doing?”

“Giving my wife her phone.” He pulled out her phone from his pocket and held it in front of her. She snatched it from him, wiggling herself away as he walked to the wall to turn on a few lights. “The paparazzi went ballistic on...” Her

voice was lost when she clicked on the link she was sent earlier but did not work now.

Page not found.

Unable to find the post you are looking for.

Everything she had seen and read online, the media calling her names, all of it was gone, wiped clean. She looked up from her phone to find him sitting on one of the couches, looking at her. “They are gone.” She slowly walked toward him and slid next to him, resting her cheek on his chest.

She heard him scoff. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He pulled her closer into his arms.

Sanjana hugged him for a few moments before she pulled back to slowly take her lips to his jawline. “Thank you,” she whispered, knowing he was the one to have taken care of the chaos.

It was then she felt him shudder at her touch, and his eyes lowered to hers as she planted soft yet deliberate kisses. She saw darkness creep into his eyes, causing an electrifying shudder to run down her spine. Her breathing was ragged and she was quivering inside, but she did not move.

Jai ran his arm around her waist, pulling her onto his lap. Surprised by his sudden move, she involuntarily slid her arm around his neck as if to stop herself from falling off the couch.

Awareness heightened when she heard his heavy breathing and looked into his eyes with a puzzled expression. His eyes were dark and unreadable. She sat, unable to move, holding his gaze as she felt the burn on her waist from his

grasp. Her heart thumped uncontrollably in her chest, and the heavy breathing was the only sound she could hear as her heartbeat deafened her.

Almost in slow motion, he reached out and touched her cheek with his fingertips before running his fingers through her dark, silky hair. He gently ran his thumb on her now-trembling lower lip as his palm caressed her jawbone. He looked at her for a long moment before leaning forward and gently brushing his lips on hers.

She tightened the hold around his neck and pulled him closer. Everything moved at such a slow pace, the night a stark opposite of the lust and passion they had shared over a week ago.

He held her lips hostage in a sweet toe-curling kiss before trailing his lips lower to bring them to her neck. He planted light kisses along the width of her neck while moving slowly. He set fire to her collarbone with his stubble while he drew a cooling track with his tongue along the way.

Her body went into overdrive and arched toward him, her head falling backward, giving him room to move his lips along the length of her neck. She reached out to run her fingers through his hair in response to the thrust she felt from his tongue on her delicate spot. He took in a deep breath against her neck and as he reached her earlobe, he whispered in a very hoarse voice, “I wanted to do that the moment I saw you at the club.”

“Jai!!” she said, her voice barely audible.

Reacting to the enticement in her voice, he gasped and buried his face deeper into her neck, pulling her tightly to him.

As their breathing stabilized, she gently pushed away from him to look at his face. Slowly, she ran her thumb over his stubble and smiled at him, fighting the need to look away. He looked at her, his dark eyes filled with lust as he slowly reached up and brushed her lips with his in a slow and sensual movement.

The hold in his hair tightened as he planted very light kisses along the edge of her mouth. The flurry of kisses set her heart throbbing harder against her rib cage, and all she could think of was to stay in his arms forever.

Gone was the urgency to explore each other's bodies, replaced with something stronger. "I want to be with you, like this... all night." It wasn't a plea but a demand to which he smiled before running his lips over her temples.

After the explosive night a week ago, they settled for something more intimate. He helped her change out of her cocktail dress before laying her on the bed. He pulled the sheets over her just as he slid in next to her, holding her to him, her back deep into his chest and his breath warm on her cheek.

I want this forever! a voice demanded, but all she could do was sigh and accept that she could not. She will take whatever she can get from him for the rest of the time she has him as her husband. It no longer felt like he was her fake husband, not when he knew what she wanted every moment like they were one soul.

Chapter 21

Sanjana woke up with the warmth and the caress that accompanied his proximity, just like it had every morning for the past couple of weeks. She no longer woke up to the sound of running water but to his steady breathing in her ear.

She slowly moved her back against his chest and heard him groan. The very sound made shudders pass through her, causing her to pool between her legs. Moments of sweet intimacy very quickly turned into a hunger for her, but she didn't know what it was like for him.

After every kiss or a sweet exploration over the past few weeks, they were able to go back to being casual around each other, but it was becoming difficult for her with every passing moment. The need to be consumed by her desires unified with him as he was buried deep inside her was overwhelming.

She wanted more than what she had and knew very well it was not meant to last. She didn't want to think about the fact they were bound by a contract, and everything would be coming to an end soon. Somewhere in her delusional side, she hoped for the time to stop so she could be his forever.

At that thought, she slowly turned in his arms, careful not to wake him up. He was fast asleep, and it was his day off. However much she wanted to spend time with him, she couldn't get herself to disturb his sleep.

Sanjana didn't know how long she lay in his arms, taking in his gorgeous face and the deep eyes that were lined with the thickest lashes she had ever seen. A sudden urge to

touch him made her move her hand up to cup his cheek ever so gently.

She froze when his breathing hitched and stayed still until it was rhythmic again. She wanted to be closer to him, more than she was in the moment, and slowly inched closer, close enough for her face to be only inches away as she looked at him. She took in every feature of his face as he slept peacefully before her eyes fixated on his lips.

The very lips that had kissed her made her heart go haywire, and most of all, they comforted her. It was utterly insane of her to think she could keep count of everything they did physically to even it out. *Crazy!*

And just at the thought of him kissing her, she suddenly needed to mash their lips together. Pushing away the pragmatic thoughts, she closed the gap between them and gently placed her lips against his for a light kiss. The feeling of his warm, soft lips made her stomach flutter.

A moan escaped her, and just as she told herself she was going to pull back after one kiss so as not to disturb his sleep, his eyes fluttered open. She jerked back only to be pulled back into a sweet kiss that made her entirety explode with joy. It was perfect—the kiss, the hold, and most of all, the man.

Later that day, Sanjana looked at Jai, perplexed by what was happening. They were at a private airstrip, and she watched their overnight bags being loaded into a Jeep. The

plan was for them to attend an event at the resort that Jai owned. The same one they were married at a few months ago. But looking at the staff take away their luggage confused her.

She was excited to be with him where they first met but what was happening was adding confusion. Finally, after a lot of instructions to the team, Jai walked back to her and winked, “Time to go, and I promise no paparazzi this time.”

Her heart did a somersault when she realized he had taken extra measures so she would not be hounded for photographs after what was an annoyingly embarrassing episode with them. “You’re kidding? For real?”

He gently brushed his lips on her cheek as that had become the midpoint from the temple to the lips. “Let’s go.” He took her hand in his and walked her toward a motorbike and handed her a helmet. “Our transportation. I hope you don’t mind it.”

A broad smile formed at the thought of hugging him as they rode on the bike. “Absolutely not.” She slipped on the motorcycle jacket, unable to contain her excitement. “This is so exciting.”

Jai laughed as he mounted the bike, kicking off the parking stand, and balancing the bike as she climbed on. As she settled on the seat, she felt like her legs were going to be dangling. As she wondered what to do, Jai turned to guide her foot to one of the pegs on the side. After her feet were planted on the pegs, her legs angled in a way that automatically made her bend forward and lean on him. She was still unsure if it was okay to hold him from behind since she would have her body plastered to his.

As if he read her mind again, he quickly reached for her wrists to wrap her arms around him. “Hold on to me tightly,” Jai said, his muffled voice coming through his helmet visor. She managed to nod since it was hard to find her voice with the raging thrills.

As they pulled out of the airstrip, she could feel the sheer power of the bike engine, and it matched her heart uncontrollably pounding inside her. She hoped he couldn't feel the thumping in her chest through the motorcycle jacket, and she took slow breaths to calm herself so he didn't think she was scared to ride and stop the bike.

A few seconds later, she became fully aware of how close she was to him, transforming her to yet another foreign zone where she felt nothing and lost all awareness of her surroundings. She barely breathed as they rode through the narrow roads with thick shrubbery lined on both sides.

It was late afternoon, and she had no idea how much longer it would take for them to get to the resort. She wasn't too familiar with the region they were in, making her guess they might be an hour or so away from their destination.

Soon after, he pulled off the main road and down a small slope to a mud road that was wide enough for just one four-wheeler to fit. Is that why he brought a bike? But the road to the resort could not be that narrow unless it was a back route where no one would be waiting to take pictures.

Her heart fluttered with joy at how thoughtful he was, and it only amplified her euphoric moment. Moments passed with her heart drumming in her ears, followed by another surprise. As they rode along the narrow road, she started to see

signs for a farm. There was no name on the boards, making her wonder where they were headed.

Before she could ask him where they were headed, they pulled up to a security post. As if the guards recognized them or the license plate on the motorbike, the gates were promptly opened.

She looked around with fascination as they drove up a small hill, where grapevines lined both sides of the road. It was a vineyard? She had never been to one and was excited to be there. She figured he had something he wanted to check on before they headed to the event at the resort. Maybe she could coax him into giving her a tour.

Entice him with a kiss on the tour?

A sizzle passed through her at the thought of being alone with him in the middle of the vineyard. She put an end to her thoughts when she caught sight of a small cottage on the top of the hill. It was nowhere extravagant like the palace and the other homes the family owned, but it looked cozy.

Jai stopped the motorbike in front of the cottage to see a cute porch with a bench looking out into the open farmland. Unlike the other places they visited or stayed at, they weren't received by anyone, and that was suddenly a novel thing for her.

He waited for her to hop off the bike before putting on the parking stand and taking off his helmet. He took her helmet from her and placed it on the bike before running his fingers through his hair. "Come, let's go in."

“Jai, what is this place? It’s so beautiful.” She followed him up the few stairs to the porch, went straight to the bench, and sat down. “I could spend all day looking at this view. It is so awesome.”

He chuckled as he opened the main door with a key. Yet again a novel sight for her to see him do something like that, and it fascinated her. “Want to check out the inside?”

“Yes, can’t wait.” She stepped ahead of him as he pushed open the heavy door for her. In her excitement, she mis-stepped and ended up falling back onto him. She froze when her back hit his chest and his arm tightened around her.

Jai’s breathing was haphazard as he held her to him, neither of them moving. She had her own parade drumming in her chest as she turned around slowly to look at him. His eyes were dark, and his lips were slightly apart as he was taking in slow breaths.

Sanjana mustered up some courage and took both her hands to his cheeks and gently kissed him. “This place is really nice,” she said as he looked at her with a primitive hunger but did not move a muscle. Overcome by a sudden sense of shyness, she hid her face in his chest as she hugged him. “I don’t know what time we need to be at the resort, but I’d like a tour of this place.”

When he didn’t respond, she slowly pulled back, wondering if she had overstepped her bounds, and looked at him tentatively. “Or not. I was just—”

He silenced her with a sweet kiss that made a new set of butterflies take off from the pit of her stomach. “We can

absolutely go, but before that, I'm hoping to take care of some business," he said, pulling back.

"Oh, I can wait. Finish your work." She smiled, taking a few steps away to look out the kitchen window.

Moments passed, and she expected him to disappear into one of the rooms with his computer. Instead, she saw him rummage through the bags set to one side of the counter. It wasn't a normal sight to see him in such a setting, but she found it to be fascinating. She stepped closer to take a better look and saw that he was handling groceries. "Jai, what are all these for?"

He chuckled, looking up briefly and then setting up a cutting board. "I'm working on a meal for my wife. I'll be ready to go in a half hour."

His words made her blush, but she mustered courage to play along. "What does your wife like to eat?" She stood to one side of the kitchen, her eyes on his chiseled profile as he sliced the tomatoes.

"My intelligence report tells me that she loves a good homemade biryani. I've seen her attack the dish back at the palace too." He winked, making her stomach flutter.

"No, I did not," she objected, although he was on point about her love for biryani. Meat and flavored rice, she was set.

He shook his head. "I wasn't talking about you. My wife loves the biryani, so I'm going to make it tonight and pair it with the wine from our vineyard." He looked at her for a long moment. "Maybe you can help me pick the wine from the wine cellar."

“Sure, I’ll help if I get a tour after,” she teased, enjoying the banter. Their conversations have been borderline formal and involved topics around the development of the region, an international crisis, or a national topic. Never a casual chit-chat, nothing as playful.

For the next half-hour or so, they worked side by side as he prepped for their dinner. The late afternoon transitioned to a cool evening, and it was beautiful with the cool breeze coming in through the windows. She got to know a lot more about him in the time they spent in the kitchen than she did in the last few months.

He talked about how he went abroad to study and gave up the professional cricket he was playing with one of his best friends, Siddhant Vastav. He mentioned his other friend, Viransh Dharma, a businessman, who had recently modeled for Aish’s catalog since the models quit her show after the social-media fiasco.

She was happy hearing about him, his childhood, and some of the sweet family moments they shared in their many travels. She learned that the vineyard had been something the family owned for many years. It started as a project to see if the weather and soil would permit mass production and create jobs, but it didn’t work out. Instead of selling it as it wasn’t profitable, Jai had converted it into a place for the family to step away and unwind, and she could see herself enjoying it with his company.

Not for long, remember! That treacherous voice spoke up again, causing her annoyance.

Shortly after, she followed him down a muddy path with grapevines on both sides toward what looked like a building where wine would be made and stored. She could see the huge barrels that held the drink while the grape juice turned into exotic wines.

She looked around the place, surprised that she didn't see anyone else around. "Jai, who takes care of the place when you aren't visiting?"

"We have people," he turned to look at her. "I just ask them to give me some space when I'm here. Cook something, get some field work done, and chill."

"I didn't know you enjoyed cooking. I would never have pictured you as someone who liked to cook." The words blurted before she could add a filter.

He smiled, leading her down a flight of metal stairs, and pointed at the huge containers she had spotted from afar. "One has red, and the other is white wine." She followed him to what seemed like another level lower, and that's where she saw rooms with large barrels.

"Wow, who drinks so much wine?" Another no-filter moment and that made him chuckle. "Sorry, that's not what I meant. Do you sell this wine?"

He let out a laugh, shaking his head. "Have you not seen how much wine gets consumed at the palace? Between Ma and Aish, we'll need a vineyard for each of them and the gatherings they host."

She smiled, thinking of a few social events she had attended at the palace. In the few months of hanging out with

Aish's clients and the queen's friends, she had somewhat developed a liking and appreciation for wine. "If all the wine we have at the palace is from here, I'm never leaving this place." She laughed, and he joined in.

"Let's go find a bottle of wine and a hiding spot for it." He winked again, making her shudder.

She nodded, unable to speak, and walked past him to the wine racks and started reading the labels. "This is an amazing collection, Jai." She pulled out a couple of bottles of wine and held them out. "My choice to be paired with the yummy biryani that is cooking."

He walked over to her, read the labels, and nodded. "Good choice. Both reds are fruity enough and are rounded to cut through the fat from the biryani."

"Wow, you sound like a pro when you talk like that." She giggled, suddenly at ease. It felt like the air was intoxicated with the wines, but she knew it was her nervousness that was making her be extra enthusiastic.

"Want to try a few before we take them back?" he asked, reaching for a decanter and a couple of wine glasses. She nodded, the extra enthusiasm still running high, excited that she was in a very different setting than usual.

Somehow, it felt special that he brought her to a place only he visited, and no other family members had. "Thank you," she said, her eyes on him as he handed her a small pour of the red wine she had chosen.

She was too nervous to be in a small space with him and hoped the alcohol would calm her. She took a sip of the wine

and swirled it in her mouth just as Aish had shown her. “This is really good.” She looked at the glass in her hand, enjoying the fruity flavor of the drink. “What is it?”

He stepped closer to her and took a sniff of her drink before taking a sip. “It’s a sangiovese, perfect for the highly-spiced food we have cooking back at the cottage.”

She nodded, smiled, and held her glass. “Keep it coming. My husband finished my drink.” He scoffed at her comment and poured her a big drink.

“I poured you enough to last an hour, I hope,” he taunted before setting the bottle down.

She shook her head and stepped close to him to stop him from pouring another glass. “Jai, I was kidding about the drink. It’s too much for me. We can share this. Don’t pour another one for yourself.”

He looked at her for a long moment and smiled. “We’ll both need a drink because there is something we need to celebrate. Also, you can see how much wine we have.” He looked around the wine cellar.

She was suddenly curious about the celebration. “What are we cheering for?” she asked, watching him pour himself a glass of the same wine.

Jai silently walked close to her and held his glass close to hers, his eyes locked with hers. “Cheers to new beginnings for our region with Vayu Airlines, exclusive to our state.” He clinked his glass with hers and smiled as she processed his words.

A new airline? Is that what he said?

She still could not believe her ears. “A new... airline?” Infrastructure suffered in their home state, one due to misuse of funds by corrupt politicians, and also the terrain constraints made it hard to build and develop the area leaving it decades behind neighboring states.

He chuckled at her shocked expression. “Breathe, Sanjana.” He took a sip of his drink and gestured for her to do the same, even as she still seemed to process the news. “Yes, a new airline that will not only have large planes but private ones and helicopters people can use to move between the smaller towns with ease. More airports will be funded over the next few years, and this should create the economic boost we have been waiting for for years.”

She let out a cry of joy before taking a big sip of her wine. “This is great news! How come I didn’t see anything about it on TV or in the newspapers.” She placed her wine glass on the table next to her, worried she would spill it as she was still shaking from the news.

He leaned closer, a smile on his face. “Other than the teams who have been working on the project for over a year, no one knows. You are the first one to know, and I expected you to have this reaction.”

Thrilled to hear that she was one of the first to hear about the awesome news, she let out a cry of joy before throwing her arms around him. “Thank you so much. This is wonderful news. It’s going to do so much good for everyone, just like the new airports.”

Somewhat taken aback by her sudden burst of emotion, he lost balance just for a moment, and he held her to him as his

back crashed into the wall while he held his wine glass away from them. His arm wrapped around her and held her to him, and that's when she heard the haphazard beating in his chest that matched hers. She slowly looked up at him, and their eyes locked in a heated gaze. Her lips longed for his touch, and just as she anticipated the kiss she had been waiting for, an alarm started beeping in his pocket.

“That's the timer. We should head back.” He nodded and stepped away to gather the wine bottles.

She followed him out of the wine cellar, jittery from the news he shared and the way she heard his heart thump. Did that mean he had matching emotions like her or was she reading too much into his excitement to share the news with her?

There was no denying an intense attraction fed to the lust they felt the night at the penthouse and the sweet moments they shared, but she didn't know if he felt anything more.

Was what she felt pure attraction? What about the sadness she felt just at the thought of everything they shared coming to an end in seven months?

Chapter 22

A few minutes later, they made their way back to the cottage, and she was still lost in thought, processing his reaction when she hugged him, breaking down every sensation she felt to see if he had anything that matched how she felt. The one thing she could not do was fall for him, but over the past few months, she had done just that.

“Sanjana, Vayu Airlines will be looking for pilots of all experience levels. Will you be interested?” he asked as they walked next to each other back to the cottage.

Oh right! They will need pilots, and that’s the job she was looking for, but why was there no excitement from her? She wasn’t even thinking about that potential job opportunity as she was so focused on understanding her emotions. She cleared her throat when she realized she had lost her voice and said, “I... yes, I think so.”

“Good,” he said, his eyes forward on the path, and added, “I’ll let the recruiting team reach out to you.” His tone was casual, but she heard her heart crack a bit.

Despite the sweet and passionate moments they shared, it seemed like his intention was to stick to the contract. What had seemed like the dream job just a few months ago didn’t excite her anymore. Being with him was what she wanted. She could not explain the anxiety and sadness about her leaving at the end of the contract period. She should be excited about her new life with the job she had been looking forward to, but she wasn’t.

She took in a deep, hissy breath when she realized she only had a limited time with him, but she wanted to live her life with him. She knew no one else would make her feel the way he did, and she wanted everything about him etched in her mind and heart.

In her school days, she thought she was in love with her crush only to realize it was infatuation, and in college, she didn't really connect with anyone to the point where she felt the need to get to know them or spend time with them. From their conversations, it surprised her how many common interests they shared, and she needed to have more. She wanted to be alive for every moment she had with him and not be bogged down by sadness.

“Jai, it's so beautiful here. How much longer before we need to head out?” she asked, managing to keep her voice steady despite the turmoil.

A wicked twist appeared at the edge of his mouth as he turned to look at her as he went up the small flight of stairs. “I take it that you are enjoying yourself here. Maybe we should hang out here tonight and head over to the resort tomorrow.”

“What?” She was ecstatic. “Really?” When he nodded, she let out a joyous laugh and threw her arms around him. “Thank you!” She pulled back to look at him. “I can't wait to eat dinner. Maybe we can sit outside?” She pointed to the small metal table and two chairs on the patio.

“Sure.” He shrugged. “We should be good to eat in about forty-five minutes.

“Cool. How can I help?” She looked around the kitchen where the oven was running, and both stoves were lit with

what looked like a saute and a curry. He was diligently slicing onions for another dish.

“I’m all set. All I need you to do is eat.” He smiled, and she nodded suddenly, feeling liberated that she wasn’t going to be sad about what would happen in the months to come but spend joyous moments with the guy she couldn’t get over.

“Okay, how about I go shower and change while you wrap up cooking, and I can set up the table for us?” She took a few steps down the hallway and stopped to ask about their bags.

“Your bag is in the bedroom to the right. There is an attached bath in that room. I’ll use the other bathroom once I’m done here, so no rush,” he called out from the kitchen as if he read her mind.

“Okay,” she said, smiling like a fool, looking forward to what would be a romantic dinner outside. She was so focused on studying for her IAS exam she didn’t have time to date, and she thought it was dramatic when her friends talked about a romantic evening with their boyfriends. She knew then what made her friends so excited about going on a date.

Was that evening a date?

With that thought in mind, she set aside a casual yet cute dress that hit her at the knees for their evening together. One day at a time from that point is what she told herself. Don’t overthink!

Shortly after, she stepped out of the bathroom after a refreshing shower. She had a towel wrapped around her hair and a soft toweling robe. She looked around the room, and her

eyes fell on the bed that was smaller than what they had at the palace, and she smiled, wondering how cozy it would be to be with him.

With those thoughts that took her to la-la-land, she took her time to get dressed. She had not packed any makeup as her team was supposed to meet her at the resort for the event the following day, but she wanted to look good for him. She rummaged through her bag and found an eye pencil, lipstick with gloss, and blush.

With how her cheeks turned red when she was around him, she knew she didn't need a cheek tint. She decided to make her eyes a bit smokey and add extra gloss to her lips. Focused on putting on her eyeliner, she noticed something move on the window behind her when she looked in the mirror.

She shifted her focus to the small object on the window. Looking through the mirror, a squeal escaped her when she realized it was a lizard on the glass pane. To top it off, the small reptile started crawling, and that made her scream even louder.

It was a creature she could not stand the sight of and one she hadn't had to deal with for years since her father made sure to put a screen over the exhaust fan in the bathroom. "Jai," she called out, and before even she knew it, she was running out of the room, holding the towel around her body, close to her.

The towel around her head came loose and fell to the floor when she ran into the closed door in a frenzy. She

couldn't get herself to look in the direction of the creature to see where it was as she swung the door open.

She wanted to run down the hallway, away from the room infested with the reptile, and let out a gasp when she ran into the wall. A moment later, a strong arm wrapped around her, and she realized she had run into him.

He held her to him, his chest bare and heaving as she looked up into his eyes. "Jai... I... we can't be there, that thing..." Her voice was lost in yet another squeal at the thought of the little reptile on the window. In her frenzy, she started pushing against him in an effort to get out of the cottage without any thought of what clothes they were wearing.

"Sanjana." His voice was gruff as he held her to him, her flailing arms squeezed to her sides by his arm and her head against his chest. "You need to calm down." His somewhat firm tone cut through her jitteriness, and she took a quick breather, but it did not help.

She slowly looked up into his eyes. "I can't go..." Her voice trailed off when she suddenly became aware they were both barely clothed. He had a towel wrapped around his waist, and just as she was about to pull away in embarrassment, she felt something against her belly. His hardness dented into her, and that did something to her core. She had been close to him before but never at such an angle where their bodies were plastered together, and she could feel his desire.

Jai held her gaze as clouds of desire darkened his deep eyes. His hand went up to gently run his fingers through her damp hair while the other was burning into her waist as his

fingers dug into her skin. He pulled her closer to him and planted a gentle kiss on her lips, and whispered, looking into her eyes, “You don’t need to go anywhere, you can be here... with me.”

She winced from her reaction to the intensity in his voice. She could only nod, unable to respond as she felt like she was under a spell. The hand that gently gripped her hair slowly moved down, his fingertips grazing her skin, the gentle stroke setting her body ablaze.

Everything seemed to slow down, and her body relaxed, forgetting everything about her frenzied state of mind as all her senses focused on one thing—his touch. His fingers trailed along the neck of the robe and deep down her chest. He stopped at the tip of the V-neck formed by the robe as if asking permission for more, and her breath hissed further. Reacting to his tantalizing touch, her body arched toward him, the towel around her loosening, but she didn’t care. She was focused on getting anything and everything from him.

As she ran her hand up to his neck before wrapping her arm around him, he ran his arm behind her back, further arching her body. The way her body was held, it opened up her shoulders, and the flesh of her breast peeked out. She heard him groan before he pushed the robe’s fabric with his mouth and brought his lips to her hardened nipple, digging his teeth into it. As a deep, sharp pleasure hit her, she let out a loud cry of joy, her nails digging into his flesh.

“Jai, I want... want you.” A half-plea, half-demand escaped her, and she snaked her fingers into his hair, holding him as he switched to tasting her other peak. His mouth was

torturous and amazing at the same time, making her want more of him.

She felt the thrills triggered by his warm mouth and her deep longing for him. She let out a loud moan when he gave her breast a hard suck before letting go as if to urge him to keep going and not stop. Next thing she knew, his hand squeezed her soft breast and his lips found hers in a hungry kiss that robbed her of air, but she had no option but to match the intensity.

A moan escaped her, and she rolled her hips against him, like her body wanted to feel his hardness, and that made him shudder. Fueled by his reaction, she pressed her body closer to his as she poured everything into the kiss. Like he caught on to her body language, his hand let go of her nipple and trailed south.

Very soon, she felt his fingers trailing up her inner thigh as he pushed aside the robe. She pulled away from his lips for breath as his hand found her damp folds, and she let out a satisfied moan. She had wondered how it would be if he touched her in her deepest spot, and it was nothing like she had ever imagined. She buried her face into his neck, breathing hard as he drew the smallest circles possible over her throbbing core. He kept the circles going as he very slowly kept increasing the pressure on her swollen nub.

The motion created waves of pleasure throughout her, and she felt herself float. And just as she was about to be washed out by the tsunami of desires, he grabbed her hair to pull her to him, biting down on her lower lip. The combination of the pleasure sweeping through her body and the pain cutting

through it sent her levitating as a novel feeling hit her, making her moan deeply.

As she regained her sense of reality and heard the pounding of her heart in her ears, she became aware of his heaving chest. She slowly raised her eyes to his, not feeling an ounce of embarrassment like she had the other times, and, in that moment, she knew she wanted more. She wanted it all.

He kept his eyes locked with hers, steadying his breathing and slowly bringing his fingers to his mouth. A gasp escaped her when his lips closed around his fingers, tasting her release. Unable to handle the intensity of the moment, her eyes rolled shut as her head fell to his chest.

She placed her lips on his chest and kissed him, his heart pounding just like hers. His breath hitched, and that brought a smile to her lips. Knowing she wasn't the only one affected by the attraction and that *Mr. Cool* could also be shaken up, she sucked in the skin on his chest between her teeth and felt his hold on her tighten.

“Sanjana...” His voice was a whisper, and it held a lot of restraint as if he was fighting his need. Refusing to let the moment die a sudden death, she pressed her breasts harder into his body and let her tongue lay a trail of fire on his skin.

His hold on her tightened with every one of her moves as she fought to keep the moment alive. She wasn't going to deny herself the beautiful moments they could share, knowing how much he was attracted to her. The validation that a gorgeous guy was affected by her made her all the bolder.

Using the arm around his neck as an anchor, she pulled herself up to mash her lips against his and again felt him

shudder. “Jai,” she moaned against his lips. “I can’t wait any longer.”

With those words, his lips moved over hers, his hands running over her bottom, lifting her feet off the floor and walking them to the bedroom. Like a dam broke, his hands and lips were suddenly aggressive. She moaned at the sweet pain and felt her core get dewy.

Jai continued to engage her mouth even as her back hit the mattress. He tugged on the robe’s belt, pushing the fabric from her body. His hand came up to cup her breast before trailing it down along the length of her body until his fingers found her epicenter. He stroked her slowly, teasing her as waves of delight swept her away. She called out his name when a sudden peak consumed her, and her moans were lost in a hard kiss. She shuddered and felt like she was going to explode as he planted light kisses along her neck and jawline.

Her body inadvertently generated another moan as he placed his weight partially over her. He gently slid his arm around her waist and slowly and steadily started to stroke his hardness through her folds. The initial sense of entry was tantalizing, and she arched further, opening for him.

Just as he was halfway in, he reached for her lips and started to suck, and pleasure started undermining the burn building around his shaft. Jai inched into her depths, and the final shove sent a quick pang of pain, and she gasped. He came down hot and tight on her, consuming her with the demanding kiss.

Before she knew it, he had built up a rhythmic movement that caused immense pain and discomfort. But the

sensations were overshadowed by the overbearing sense of desire ignited by his touch and the way he held her. She slowly started to feel her body move to match his movements, and as she matched them, the cold waves of pain subsided by the warmth of their pleasure.

They peaked and moaned in unison, and as he collapsed, putting his weight on her, she held him tightly like she didn't want to let him go. Her body was still shuddering from the new experience as he propped up on his elbows to look into her eyes, his eyes pools of desire.

She smiled as he leaned forward to kiss her. "I hope I didn't hurt you." He pulled the sheets over their body, pulling her to him.

She hugged him, fighting back tears of joy. "No, you did not." She snuggled into him, nothing in the world bothering her, not even the fact they were both naked under the sheets.

Moments of bliss and quiet passed, and he kissed her on her forehead. "Why did you run out of the room?" His question made her wince, and her eyes fell on the window and saw the slimy thing still there, but it didn't bother her. He followed her gaze and chuckled. "I forgot you didn't enjoy the little creature's company... good thing it is on the outside."

She didn't care for anything but the fact that she was in his arms—with her husband.

Chapter 23

The day had arrived for Jai to announce the new airline launch to the media. The press meeting was scheduled for later in the day, and she was so nervous she barely got any sleep. In spite of however much her husband tried to distract her with his various ways of making her implode with pleasure, she was only starting to learn to handle it.

Vayu Airlines!

She smiled as she showered, excited for the news that would be shared with the region and the world. And the thought of how many opportunities would open up for pilots just like her, it made her proud. She felt a warmth from within to be associated with a man of such a vision and love for his land.

What surprised her was the joy of knowing how much the new airline would open up the region to the rest of the world. She didn't have the same excitement because the airline was her ticket to achieving her goals. Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice the movement in the bathroom on the other side of the shower wall.

She jumped, a squeal escaping her when the shower door opened suddenly. The joyful laughter that followed annoyed her, but she could not help smiling, looking at the sexy face of the man who set her body on fire night after night and kissed her like she was his precious possession day in and day out.

“Jai, you scared me,” she said, splashing some water in his direction as he continued to laugh. “It’s not that funny.” She rolled her eyes, standing under the warm stream of water.

“You should’ve seen the look on your face,” he said between laughter, and that did it for her. She reached for the hand shower and held it to him, drenching him in seconds.

A laugh escaped her in response to the surprise in his eyes. “I got you, now—” Her voice was lost in a squeal when he stepped into the shower, fully clothed, his hand wrapped around her hand that held the water spray. “Jai...” It was all she could say as he pulled her wet, naked body to his.

“Let’s play, baby,” he said, his voice gruff, sparking something dark inside her. He reached for her waist to pull her closer as his palms caressed her face. The water ran down their faces as he kissed her quivering lips.

“You are so beautiful, Sanjana,” he murmured against her lips. He slowly teased her lips apart with his tongue. As his mouth worshiped hers, he gently let his palm slide to the back of her neck as if to support her head as his lips came down on hers with wet passion. Lust surged, and she responded by pushing her tongue into his mouth to find his.

As the water trickled down their steaming bodies, she felt his desire for her against her belly through his shorts. With newfound confidence from their raunchy moments together, she reached for the waistband of his shorts before cupping his hardness with her hand. In a swift yet gentle motion, she slid her fingers past the elastic waistband, reaching for the throbbing molten rod.

He groaned against her lips as she pushed down his shorts to wrap her fingers around his firmness, tantalizing him with irregular and unpredictable movements of her fingertips.

“Sanjana,” he said against her lips, his voice filled with agony as she stroked him from the base to the head in a twisting motion. Encouraged by his reaction, she repeated the motion by slowly increasing the pressure with every stroke. She felt powerful, and she continued to pleasure him with her steady strokes. Jai had his eyes locked on her even as the water dripped down his face, his breathing turning ragged with every stroke.

He groaned and pulled her closer to him even as she tugged and pulled on him with different variations of strokes and pressure until he exploded. The pulsation against her palm as he peaked set off her throbbing deep inside.

Jai groaned her name, his breath hot in her ear, and his voice trailed off as he gasped for air under the running shower. She clung to him as he shuddered, her lips nibbling the soaked skin on his chest. Fueled by her need to please him, she followed the signals her body gave her, and she closed her mouth over the taut muscle on his chest, digging her teeth into his flesh.

He let out a feral cry, and she felt his fingers grip her hair, angling her head to consume her mouth hungrily as his hand squeezed the globe of her bottom. She was wet from the shower, but deep inside, she had another reason for the surge. He pushed her back into the shower’s glass wall, making it vibrate. The cold surface didn’t bother her as the man who held her possessively set her ablaze.

The sweet pain his lips inflicted on hers was the only matching force to the dull ache that demanded to be satiated. His fingertips dented her soft skin as he lifted her feet off the shower floor, opening her up for his invasion. “Hold on, baby!”

With those words, he started a riot in the shower. She cried out in pleasure every time he drove in and gasped when he pulled back to only ram into her for the ultimate peak. When she felt her release sizzle through her, she groaned his name, her mouth going to his neck, and as if to dissipate the power of her explosion, she sank her teeth into his skin, making him groan. Hearing him cry with pleasure set her off on another peak as she clung to him.

Later that morning, Sanjana sat in one of the front rows, her eyes on the man who made her body jitter from just the way he looked at her. They were at the press conference, where the new airline was announced. He yet again surprised her with her father’s presence at the event.

She looked at her husband with pride as her father praised him for involving people from their region who were settled outside India to be involved as well. She narrowed her eyes at him like she understood why they traveled through so many countries and met all the people on their so-called honeymoon.

He held her gaze from the stage where he was seated and gently ran his finger over his collar. A threat that he would reveal the hickey she had left on him from their rendezvous in the shower that morning.

Heat crept to her cheeks, and she looked away, unable to hold his gaze. It was an exciting day for the region and the country, and it was all because of the man she was married to.

How could anyone not love him?

Don't you dare fall for him! The pragmatic voice raged from deep inside. *You can't afford to be thinking about him even after the contract term expires.*

It was delightful to be with him, and she knew, just like anything good, it had to come to an end. She raised her eyes to look at him and found his eyes trained on her like he was picking up on the strain she was experiencing.

His eyebrow went up as if questioning what was going on, and she smiled, gently shaking her head. The man was on a mission to keep his family happy and to give his extended family of the region the opportunities they deserved. She was part of the mission, and just because he indulged her in their lust for each other, it didn't mean she could have him all to herself.

The idea of not being with him brought tears to her eyes, even as her father praised him in front of the entire world through the lens of a reporter. How would they end the contract? Announcement on social media? What would that do to the royal family image?

Or maybe she would be expected to silently leave, and everyone would be told she was away at work? Initially, she didn't care enough about him or the marriage to have thought through all these scenarios. It all felt entwined at that point, and she had no brain power to unravel it all.

What if she made a scene and refused to leave the palace?

Sanjana was in her parents' backyard, looking into the night sky, lost in thought. After the announcement of the new airline, they went to her parents' place for dinner. All day, her thoughts circled around the what-ifs with the hope of an outcome that would allow her to be with him.

What if he doesn't want this to go beyond a year according to the contract?

"Sanjana, are you out here?" It was her sister calling out into the dark. She knew it was a matter of time before someone came looking for her. She secretly hoped for it to be her husband, and the disappointment was hopefully not something Deepika would notice. "Why are you hiding in the dark?" Deepika turned on one of the lights and walked over to where Sanjana was seated on a bench.

Deepika handed her a small bowl with her favorite dessert and sat next to her on the bench. Moments passed in silence, and finally, her sister asked, "What's going on, Sanjana?"

Sanjana was shaken out of her spiraling thoughts and looked at her sister. “What do you mean, what’s going on?” She scoffed. “I’m just chilling here.” She hoped her sister would not pick up on the turmoil she was harnessing internally.

Deepika placed the bowl on a small side table and cleared her throat. “You need to stop BS-ing me.” She placed her hand on Sanjana’s shoulder. “Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

She slowly looked up at her sister, debating what to say next to deflect her from the topic at hand. “Deepika, what’s there to hide? I just needed some alone time, and I miss the backyard so... I can’t hang out here?”

Deepika let out a sigh. “You can keep saying what you want, but we are not leaving here until you tell me what’s really bothering you.” Her sister was smart and also adamant by nature and combined with the protective older-sister trait, Sanjana knew she didn’t have much wiggle room.

How can she tell her sister about the contract? That would be a breach of his trust.

“If you don’t start talking in the next ten seconds, I’m calling Papa. Then you and I both know there will only be the truth that will come out of your mouth,” Deepika threatened, her eyes narrowing at Sanjana.

Sanjana knew it was time to come clean with her sister. About everything, not just the contract but also the fact that she had abandoned her IAS exam training and had been pursuing a career as a pilot. She took a deep breath and held Deepika’s hand in hers. “Promise me...” she said, her voice

weak, and added, "... you will not repeat what I'm telling you to anyone. Not even Surya. You cannot tell anyone."

Tears started to form in Sanjana's eyes, and that alarmed Deepika. "I promise only if you are not in trouble or being..." her voice trailed off when Sanjana shook her head.

Sanjana took a deep breath, dreading the outcome of her sharing the truth with her sister. What if her sister confronts Jai or, worse, tells her father everything that happened in the past few months? It would break her father's heart if his daughter not only made him believe she was still pursuing the career she was supposed to, and to top it off, entered a marriage contract as a way to get out of being an IAS officer to become a pilot. When the gravity of the situation hit her, she decided not to tell her sister.

She had to make up another story. No way can she tell her sister all of it. Not yet.

"Deepika..." Her voice wavered when she realized she was piling on more lies. "Jai and I are... we are trying for a baby. It's been months, and it's just not happening. I'm worried that—"

Deepika's sudden burst of laughter eased Sanjana's mind a bit, but her heart was wretched with guilt. "Oh my God, you had me worried." She let out a sigh of relief and threw her arms around Sanjana. "Silly Sanjana. I was concerned you were in an abusive relationship and was about to go bash up Jai. Thank goodness that's not the case."

"Don't be silly," Sanjana said, batting away tears, glad she decided not to share what she was about to. "I was just

wondering if I should go get checked or not. Please don't tell Mamma or Papa... not yet. You promised."

Deepika hugged her sister one more time and kissed her on the cheek. "I promise, and you have to swear that you will tell me as soon as you know I'm going to be an aunt."

There was no holding back the tears anymore. Sadness overflowed, and she covered it with unbound joy as she held her sister. "I promise. You'll be the first to know." She was disappointed with herself for not telling her sister the truth, but she knew she would be burdening Deepika with something she could not help with.

If there was anyone who could address the situation she was in, it was her. Only she could, and it meant she had to talk to her husband and tell him what she wanted. No other way to deal with it.

Chapter 24

Days passed with Sanjana fighting her thoughts. Every worry or concern she had about the future would vanish the moment she was with him. It didn't matter when they were talking, sharing a meal, or even attending a party, she was focused on the moments they shared as if to memorize all of it.

Her father was hosting a rally to share ideas for growth and how people could take charge of their own development, and she was to leave in a day to join her sister. She lay in bed, his arms wrapped around her when reality hit her. She was hurting to leave him for a couple of days and could not imagine her state of mind when the contract ended.

A crude voice reminded her from time to time that it was all a façade and wouldn't last. Even her emotions were downplayed by the pragmatic voice, claiming it was pure lust, a phase that would wear out soon for them both.

Silent tears rolled down her cheeks as she could not contain her sorrow. She had to tell him how she felt, but she didn't know if she had the courage to accept his denial. He was very clear about the contract, and for her to want more is a breach of the agreement. *What if he asked her to leave immediately?* That would only deprive her of a few more months with him.

She has to learn to live with the memories of him for the rest of her life. There would be no one else who would come anywhere close to what she felt for him and who he was. She

could have a life of luxury, the career she wanted but not the love of her life. What was the point in having the rest?

Sanjana moved her face to run her lips over his arm, which held her close to him. “I love you, Jai.” The words rolled off her lips, her voice a whisper, and that made her jerk inadvertently, a sob escaping her.

“Sanjana...” he said, his breath warm in her ear, and she froze in hopes he would fall back to sleep. Moments passed, and she felt him move slowly. She lay motionless, her eyes closed, pretending to be asleep.

Just a few seconds later, her eyes fluttered open when the light came on, and Jai turned her, so she faced him. “Baby, what’s wrong?” he asked, and the concern she saw in his eyes made her heart melt and the sadness break at the same time.

She shook her head, quickly wiping away the tears. “I... I had a bad dream.” She was piling on the lies, too scared to speak the truth. “Let’s go back... to sleep.” She pulled the sheet over her body and started to turn away when he pulled her to him.

He kissed the top of her head before holding her face in his palms. “Baby, these beautiful eyes, they never lie to me. What are you not telling me?” He was insistent in his tone and the way he held her face, his eyes on her.

“Jai, it’s really nothing,” she managed a weak smile, but the concern in his eyes didn’t falter. “I’ll be fine if I go back to sleep.”

He ran his thumbs under her eyes, wiping away the moisture that had gathered despite her fighting the tears from

surfacing. A sob escaped her yet again with the way he looked at her, and she closed her eyes, unable to lie to him any longer. Without another word, he hugged her, kissing her gently as if he was coaxing her to talk, but he didn't press her to speak.

She held onto him, thankful for the warmth of his embrace as she wondered how she could get away with not telling him about what had been on her mind for almost a week. He had caught on to her turmoil and had asked a couple of times if everything was okay, and she was able to make up some excuse. But that night, he caught her with tears, and knowing how he was, she knew whatever she told him had to be convincing.

Isn't the truth convincing enough? Tell him everything!
A bold voice pushed her.

No, don't. What if he asks you to leave? Another one countered.

"Baby, look at me." His soft voice made her slowly open her eyes, blinking away the tears. "What's bothering you? Did anyone hurt you in any way? Did I—" She didn't let him finish. Instead, she placed her hand on his mouth. She couldn't let him even for a second think he was the reason for what she was going through.

It was not his fault she fell for him. She knew what she was getting into, and she wasn't going to blame him for changing her mind. She finally mustered up the courage to look into his eyes.

She cleared her throat and said, "I... I love you, Jai, and I can't imagine my life without you after our contract ends. I know we agreed to part ways amicably, but I... I don't know

when... but I've fallen in love with you. I want to be with you always, and I'm sad to even go away for a couple of days to Papa's rally. I will be devastated when it is time to leave, but please, don't ask me to leave." The last words were a sob as she hugged him and cried her heart out. The pent-up sadness flowed out uncontrollably.

Sanjana felt his arms fall from her body, and her heart sank. Was she going to lose him forever? And just as the panic began, she felt his hands on her shoulders and slip up to cup her face with his palms as she wept, her eyes closed. He didn't say anything to her, but the one kiss he planted on her forehead said it all.

Her sobs subsided, and her eyes opened slowly to look at him through the salt screen. He gently wiped away her tears, a small smile on his face. And without another word, he brushed her lips with his, his hold on her tightening. She gasped at the sudden shift in her emotions, and without uttering a single word, he was alleviating her pain. Or was that her imagination?

"Sanjana Bhargava Devaraya..." he said against her lips before pulling back slightly. He had a spark in his eyes that made her heart leap with joy. "You are the one for me, and your wish is my command. I'm yours forever if that's what you want because you deserve everything you ever wish for."

"Jai." She let out a cry of joy, this time fighting back tears of happiness.

He smiled, kissing her gently. "I love you too, Sanjana." He pulled her into his arms, running his hand on her back, soothing her. "I'm yours, love."

She buried her face deeper into his chest. “I’ve been dreading telling you how I feel, and now...” she pulled back to look at him, “...I want to sleep. Will you hold me and put me to bed?”

He smiled, his dimples deepening, and without another word, he pulled the sheets over their bodies and turned off the light. And for the first time in days, she went to sleep, snoring, knowing her heart was secure with the king who would rule it forever!

It was the day of the big event Sanjana’s father was hosting with his partners in the movement to develop the state. It was his first rally in the region to propagate ideas of empowerment and development to the people. Initially, only Sanjana and Deepika would join their father, but Jai and Surya ended up going as well. She was thrilled that her husband made it a priority to be with her.

“Jai, we’re going to be late,” she cried out onto the pillow. Her fingers were in his thick hair as he sucked the delicate skin on her neck while his fingers stroked between her legs.

“You look nervous, and I can’t let you go like that,” he mumbled against the pulse in her neck, making her folds wet as the vibrations from his words made her body quiver.

There was no denying how nervous she was to go back and face the paparazzi at an event so big, and her husband was doing what it took to alleviate it. She gasped into the pillow

when his fingers dipped past her folds in search of the rough patch that held the promise of an ultimate release. She called out his name, her voice dampened by the pillow as he worked up a peak by rubbing her swollen nub.

“You smell so good, I can’t wait to eat you tonight,” he groaned, his words making her stomach twist with need.

She sucked in the air to keep herself afloat in the waves of pleasure. “I dare you to taste me now. Take me, Jai. Don’t just tease me like this.”

Jai growled in response to her demand and brought his lips to hers while his fingers stroked her depths, igniting sparks of excitement within, causing her pleasure to surge. She let out a moan when he took his fingers away to tease her inner thighs as he drew small circles with his fingertips, amplifying her sensations.

She threw her head back as she arched her body in anticipation, just as he slipped his fingers back into her smooth-as-silk hair.

“You are so wet, baby. I love it,” he said, running his lips along her jawline while he continued his fingers’ exploration for her ultimate pleasure. He brought his hungry lips to hers as his fingers continued to sink deeper.

She shuddered when it hit her, an unsurpassable eruption of pure pleasure from within that took over her entire being. She experienced a sense of liberation in her core as she came undone as she peaked from her inner depths.

She threw her arms around Jai and clung to him, digging her teeth into his chest. Her body continued to tremble

uncontrollably as he introduced her to a new dimension of bliss.

Slowly, she opened her eyes to look into Jai's deep desire-driven eyes, and all she could do was gasp for air and pull him to her. "I can't believe what just happened. I thought my heart was going to stop." Her breathing was still strained.

Jai groaned in response to the raw intensity in her voice before giving her a hard kiss. "You look pretty relaxed now. Time to go. We can't keep everyone waiting to see your father."

He got off the bed, adjusting his clothes while giving her a hand to get up. She was adjusting her dress when he kissed her gently on her cheek. "I promise to pick up where we left off when we are back, unless... you want an encore of what just happened. We could start there."

His words made her tremble all over but also excited her. Her heart was on a rampage again while her knees turned to mush. She clung to him, not trusting her legs as they walked toward the car to join her father's rally.

On their way to the event, Jai looked up at her from his phone and asked, "Sanjana, why was Deepika asking me to be patient last night after dinner?" He looked puzzled, and when she realized what her sister was hinting at, her cheeks turned red.

Her sister was still riding on the lie that she was upset about not being able to conceive a baby. She bit her lip, debating if she should tell him, but anything else, he would call her bluff. "So... on one of my melancholy days about having to leave you after a year, she caught me being super

sad and demanded I tell her what was really happening. I was so miserable I wanted to get some weight off my chest, but I couldn't. I could not get myself to break the trust you had in me, so I told her that we were trying for a baby and that... you know... it wasn't happening."

He looked at her for a long moment, and a sizzle passed through his eyes before he leaned over to kiss her hard on her lips. "If you want our baby, say it, love. We can make it happen pretty fast," he whispered against her lips, and she pulled back, laughing.

"Stop it, Jai." Her eyes flashed to the person behind the wheel of the SUV they were in as they rode to the event location. She smiled at the thought of their baby and said, "As soon as I'm ready."

Her heart fluttered with joy. Nothing else in the world mattered anymore. Just being with him was all she wanted, and not even having the career she dreamed of mattered.

Not anymore!

Chapter 25

In the weeks that followed, Sanjana joined her father at many of the rallies he organized to meet with the people to understand their needs and to submit the request for development efforts to the government. To help the system prioritize the right measures for the betterment of the region and, ultimately, work on projects that will address people's immediate needs.

Jai made guest appearances at some of the events, and she felt an immense amount of joy seeing him there. Not only because she could be with him but for him to show his support for her father's cause.

No matter which town she was in, she made sure to be back at the palace for her husband. Even after a long day at the events and talking to people in various villages, she still wanted her husband to set her body on fire before crashing for the night.

The time she spent alongside her father made her realize the need for more representation from the region. The more time she spent understanding the problems, she knew why her father chose the career he had and why it was important to serve the community even if it was not part of being in the Indian Administrative Service.

Being a pilot fascinated her, but taking on a role to serve the people of her region filled her with pride. Somewhere during that time, she had decided to give the IAS examination

one more shot. What she had thought was an expectation from her family had turned into a duty as a citizen.

It was still very early in the morning when she stepped out of the shower to find Jai walking into the bathroom. Her heart leaped just at the mere sight of him and had made peace with the fact that it would never change. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

He responded with a sweet kiss on her lips. “I woke up to say goodbye to my wife I will miss seeing all day.”

“You are silly, Jai.” She walked to her closet lost in thought. She had been debating about her career choices amidst the events she was attending with her father. She was so lost in thought she didn’t realize she had spent a few minutes staring into her closet.

She winced slightly when she heard his footsteps and smiled when he held her from behind. He laid a trail of kisses on her neck and asked against her skin, “What’s bothering my beautiful wife?”

She smiled, throwing her head back onto his chest, opening up for his invasion. “I... I...” She pulled back to face him. “You know I can’t talk when you are kissing me like that.”

He chuckled, pulling her to him and planting a hard kiss on her lips. “What’s going on?”

She took in a deep breath. “I... I don’t know if I want to be a pilot anymore, and I think I want to give the IAS exam one more shot. If I don’t pass it, I don’t know if I can face my parents, especially Papa.”

Jai tightened his hold on her. “It doesn’t matter how you serve the people, the want to do good is what matters. What you have been doing the past few weeks, working with your father, helping with the management of his events, and providing input to his plans, that’s work that will still help people.”

Sanjana fought back tears as she kissed him on his cheek. “Thank you. And what I’m doing with Papa, I enjoy it very much. A lot of the work done between the events is all online, so I can do it from the palace too.”

“Indeed,” he said, smiling into her eyes. “You should talk to your father about it.”

She nodded. “I will one of these days. It’s going to be a tough conversation to have and—”

He didn’t let her finish as he swallowed her words in a kiss. “Don’t be nervous, baby,” he said, his hand trailing down to the apex of her thighs as she pushed away the robe’s material.

Her knees felt weak on initial contact, and she felt her body being pushed against the closet wall as he opened the knot on the belt that kept the robe in place. “Jai, I need to go.” It was a plea against his lips.

He groaned against her lips. “I need to calm you down before you go.” His voice was gruff, and it made her body sizzle with need. He had gotten her rattled so hard that she wanted him to take her there on the carpeted floor of the closet.

She hugged his head, never wanting him to stop what he was doing, but he escaped her hands as he pushed her further against the wall. She called out his name as a complaint and lost anything else she was going to say when she felt his warm breath on her thighs as he slowly kissed the inner walls.

Explosions set off in her when his mouth closed in on her yearning nub waiting for the ultimate release. She sunk her fingers into his thick hair, biting down on her lip to stop herself from crying out as pleasure gripped her. She let out a cry when he gave her core a hard suck before tantalizing every nerve ending with his tongue.

She was somewhere over the moon, feeling his mouth worship her, hands holding her steady, and most of all, he was satiating her in every way, and mostly the need to be conquered by him—mind, body, and soul—forever.

Later that day, Sanjana returned to their private quarters after an event with her father that ended sooner than planned. She was able to tell her father she would like to take responsibility for managing the events and administration for the NGO and saw pride in his eyes.

She knew Jai wouldn't be back for a couple more hours, and she could not wait to tell him what she shared with her father. She wanted to take a quick nap so they could spend time together well into the night if he was up for it. He had

ample energy when it came to setting the sheets on fire, and just at the thought, her body jittered in anticipation.

Her footsteps slowed down when she heard voices coming from the living room of their private space. Annoyed that her team was yet again watching the news from their living room as they waited for her arrival, she could only shake her head. She had a sweet group of people who worked hard for her to make her look her best anywhere she went but didn't dig the loud television noises.

She pushed open the door and let out a laugh. "Guys, I could hear the—" She froze, and her words were lost when she saw it was Jai and his brother, Bharath, in the room. The loud voices were theirs? She could not imagine Jai raising his voice, ever. "Oh, sorry, I thought..."

Her voice trailed off when she saw the angry look on Jai's face and a matching one on his brother's. "Jai, is everything okay?"

Jai didn't look at her but nodded. "Give us a few minutes, please."

She nodded and was about to step away when Bharath spoke up. "Sanjana, you need to listen to this. You are very much a part of this family." She picked up something vicious in Jai's brother's tone.

"Bharath, not right now," Jai warned, setting off alarms in her head. Why was her sweet husband talking in that manner?

Stunned by the nature of the exchange between them, she stood rooted to her spot. She wanted to walk over to where

Jai stood to one side of the room, but something was off about him. He had a look in his eyes that she could not decipher.

Bharath let out a sigh. “You can do whatever you want with your life, but if you proceed with the plan, you will be disowned by the Devaraya family. We are royals, not politicians.” He shook his head and walked toward the door, and added, looking at Sanjana, “Please knock some sense into your husband.”

A strange silence fell over them as he walked over to where she stood, still processing Bharath’s words. “Jai, what’s going on? What is Bharath talking about?” She had never seen Jai look so upset, and it got her worried sick.

He took her into his arms. “We can talk later about this. Why don’t you freshen up, and I will get some food brought here?”

“Jai, what was that he said about politicians? And why was he so agitated? What happened?” She hated the look on his face as she could not decipher it, but that made her heart twist painfully like it knew it was something her mind could not process.

“I promise to tell you everything. It’s—” he started to say, and she suddenly stepped away from him, fighting back the skepticism forming in her mind.

“Jai, I have a bad feeling about this, and I want to know what this was all about. And why am I hearing about it now when we talk about everything every day?” She was disappointed that he kept something from her.

“Sanjana, it had to be kept under wraps for your protection.” His voice was soft, and she wanted to believe everything he said, but her mind revolted and demanded an explanation.

He took in a deep breath and said, “Earlier today, a political party by the name of ‘Lok Shakthi’ was formed in our state. The members will contest in the upcoming elections and form a government that will work for the people.”

Her heart dropped when she heard the name of the political party. It was the exact same name as her father’s non-government organization he started with his friends to do good for the people. “Why does it...” As she asked the first of the million questions, everything fell into place in her mind.

The question she had been asking herself—why was it she was the one who was offered the marriage contract—she had her answer in front of her, crystal clear. She was a means to an end, and that was to gain political power. She could not process the fact that he not only used her but her father’s reputation to gain the leverage to establish the political party. “Oh my God. I don’t believe this.”

Sanjana started to shake uncontrollably as she thought about the last few months. Everything he had done from marrying her with such an urgency, showing up at her grandparents’ village, attending family events with her family, showing up at rallies, and most of all, drugging her with his charm, she had not realized what she was getting into. “You are sick,” she yelled and wiggled her hand away when he held it. “Don’t you dare touch me.” She sobbed as tears rolled down her eyes. “Like you didn’t get enough, you had to make

me believe you loved me while all along you have been using me in every possible way,” she gritted out the last few words.

“Baby, please, give me some time, and I will explain everything.” The look in his eyes wanted her to believe what he was saying, but she was too hurt to take a chance.

“You are a good actor, and you had me fooled, Jaidhev Devaraya, and politics will suit you well,” she barked. She turned to leave, and he stepped in front of her, holding her to him.

“Sanjana, I love you, and I would die for you, but I cannot give up the mission I am on. You’ll know soon why this is so important.” His voice was weak, his words deliberate, but it didn’t change anything for Sanjana. She could see that he was a good actor.

“Stop. Stop with the lies. I’ve had enough, and I don’t care for any fucking contract. Do what you want to do. I’m leaving tomorrow morning. If you try to talk to me, I’ll leave in the middle of the night.” With those words and no other thought, she walked past him straight into the bathroom and collapsed to the floor, tears rolling down her cheeks.

How did she end up in such a mess? How did she not see the façade?

Chapter 26

Sanjana woke up sometime in the middle of the night with painful drilling in her head and feeling cold. The man who had held her and enveloped her in warmth not only broke her heart but left her pining for what she could never have. She wiped away the tears that welled as she sat up slowly. It was the third night in a row she was spending at her parents' place under the pretext of wanting to plan her father's events ahead of time.

The night she found out about his master scheme—his grand plan to get into politics by leveraging her father's hard work—she went to bed not wanting to see or talk to him. It was disgusting to even think about how he played everyone and used her in every possible way. She felt manipulated and chastised herself for falling for his charm and believing the words he said.

“Lies,” she spat as she looked at their picture taken at the wedding on the side table. The clock on the bedside table showed it was three in the morning. She had a restless night just at the thought of seeing him at the event planned for that day. She had managed to ignore his calls and shut him out for a few days, but that morning, everything was going to come to a head.

Sanjana was the main speaker at the event announcing the plan for the rest of the year, including where her father would be meeting and what topics would be discussed with the people.

She had detailed notes written down for the announcements so she wasn't relying on her memory when she had to deal with his presence in the room. She told herself she needed to learn to get over him, shut him out of her life, and focus on making her father successful as that would be the best way to give back to the people.

Unable to fall back asleep, she headed to the kitchen to make herself some tea and give her notes one last read. She stepped out of her room and saw her father was at the dining table sipping his tea. She smiled when he looked up and walked over to hug him. "You couldn't sleep either?"

"Have some tea with me." Her father patted the seat next to him, reached for the kettle, and poured a mug of hot water for her. She reached for her favorite tea bag and settled next to him, facing him.

She took a few sips of the warm liquid and let out a sigh. She was glad her headache seemed to respond to the tea. "Why are you up so early, Papa?" She managed to keep her voice cheerful when all she could think of doing was crying her heart out and telling her father everything.

"I'm a bit nervous and a lot more excited about the event today. We will be giving our people a huge commitment." Her father's words made her stomach twist further. The betrayal coming his way would be hard to deal with when he was so invested in what he was doing, but she couldn't figure out when would be a good time to tell him everything.

She didn't know for sure if and when the political party would be announced by her fake husband. Maybe his brother

talked him out of it as it is against their family rules to be involved in politics. She decided not to let that worry her. Instead, she had gotten in touch with a lawyer through her friend to file lawsuit when the political party announcement happened, with the same name of her father's organization. All she could do was prepare not to let her fake husband take away what her father had poured his blood, sweat, and tears into over the last couple of years.

She leaned her head on her father's head. "You'll do great, Papa. We are doing what needs to be done for the people." She was glad her face was turned away, giving her a chance to bat away the tears that surfaced, and her father nodded. "It's great that you are able to spend time on our events but make sure you don't ignore your husband and his family. You've been away from them for almost a week now."

Her heart dropped, wondering if her father picked up on anything that happened between her and Jai. She quickly wiped away the moisture and looked at her father. "Papa, don't worry about it. Jai and I both talked about it, and he is very supportive of what you are doing. He won't mind me staying here at all." *He had turned her into a liar too.*

Her father laughed. "I'm lucky that way. My daughters both have supportive husbands." She couldn't take it anymore. She quickly drank her tea and went into the kitchen to hide her tears. She was shivering all over, controlling her sobs from escaping when she excused herself and ran into the bathroom.

She leaned against the bathroom door, crying silently. Not just at the heartbreak he caused her but how he would do the same to her family. She could not let him do that. She had

to stop him, even if it meant she had to work with Bharath to stop Jai.

Her breath started to come fast as her mind started to race. She should talk to him when she sees him at the event, and take the opportunity to tell him that she will fight him if she needs to.

With that plan in mind, she walked into the shower, ready to take on the day and the tough conversation she would have with the heartless man who stole her heart and tainted her soul.

Later that morning, she held her laptop in her hand as she went to the back of the stage looking for him. The large auditorium was undergoing final touchups as she stopped to check with one of the event planning staff for the attendee list.

When she saw that Jai was checked in as arrived, she went to one of the many staging rooms set up for *Lok Shakthi* NGO members and volunteers. He was neither but was there solely because she married him. If only she had kept running and not fallen for his stupid deal.

She slowed down her footsteps when she saw his security stationed by a door. They greeted her when they saw her. “Good morning, is Jai in the room? Is he meeting with someone?”

The security nodded. “Ma’am, the Yuvraj is in a meeting with your father.”

With her father? Was he telling on her? No one should find out about what happened.

“Oh, I need to be in that meeting too,” she managed to say, and just as the security guard was reaching for his walkie-talkie to ask if she could be sent in, the door flew open.

She let out a gasp when her eyes met his, and her heart nosedived into her stomach. He looked angry, and his eyes were red. “Sanjana, we were just talking about you.” Her father’s words made her look away from Jai and smile.

“Papa, I need to talk to Jai for a few minutes. I’ll meet you backstage.” She spoke fast as she stepped into the room with the man her heart still beat for. It twisted painfully at the reminder of the betrayal but also seemed to be leaping with joy at the very sight of him.

“Okay, I will see you later, dear.” Her father left, and she noticed Jai’s security followed him and did not stay back. Jai shut the door and stood by it, his eyes trained on her.

She took a few moments to gather herself as she processed her overwhelmingly conflicted emotions she was feeling in that moment. Something told her she would not have fallen for a guy if he was bad, but she brushed that away and looked up at him. “Jai, I don’t know what your plan is going forward, but I have a proposition.”

A curious eyebrow flew up as he held her gaze. “And why would I be interested in your proposal?”

She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice like she didn’t want anyone to hear. “I know your plan and how you plan to gain popularity by using the name of my father’s

NGO for your political party.” She paused when his expression did not falter. “You’ve used me in every way possible, and it’s my fault I fell for your friggin’ charm and the beautiful act you put on.” Her chest was heaving, but she continued, “I don’t care if you start your own party, but if you use the association with my father, I want you to give him credit for what he has done.”

He stayed silent for a long moment. “And why would I do that? What’s in it for me?”

“Me. I will remain your wife for however long you want to leverage my father’s hard work and name but promise me you won’t sideline him or stop him from doing the right thing.” Her voice shook as she suppressed a sob.

“Are you making me a new deal?” His voice was gruff.

“Yes, I will do anything you want me to, just don’t kill my father’s spirit by taking away what he built.” She blinked away angry tears.

“Anything?” He stepped closer, and her chin tilted up to hold his gaze.

“Yes.” Her voice was a hiss as she contemplated what she had gotten herself into. If she got into a deeper hold with him, it would still be worth it as her father’s vision would be protected. She might even be able to know if he was going to do anything to undermine her father, even in the future.

Keep friends close, enemies closer.

“How can I trust you to not do what you did a few days ago? Leave without a word.” He sounded angry, but the

underlying tone triggered something else inside her. Was he sad she left?

No. You fool. Don't let your weak heart tell you what to hear.

“I... I was upset, and I couldn't be in the same room with you.” She fought back tears as sadness around leaving him gripped her. “I felt cheated because I believed in everything you said, and I fell in love with you...” Her voice trailed off when he placed his hand on her cheek.

“Sanjana, believe me when I say I love you, and I didn't mean to hurt you.” His words made her wince, and she stepped away from him and placed her hand on the doorknob.

“I'm done here. You let me know what you decide to do, and we will take it from there.” She opened the door and stopped when he called out to her.

He stepped closer to her and whispered, “You will be the one to tell me and everyone what the decision is about the political party.”

She looked at him perplexed, and knowing she was running out of time, she walked away to meet her father and the other key members backstage.

What the heck did he mean by his words? Convolutd, but she didn't have time to decipher his statement. She had a job to do—make Lok Shakthi work for its people.

Chapter 27

Shortly after, Sanjana stepped on the stage, holding the stack of papers her father had handed her just before the event commenced. He had told her he made some slight edits to the version they had created for the speech. She maintained her smile as she adjusted the microphone.

Accordingly, she walked through what the plan was for the next few months, problems that would be prioritized to act on, and the next set of topics to have the NGO focus on for the upcoming year.

As her speech came to an end, she noticed there was an extra paragraph added toward the end, and she kept reading it as she knew it was what her father had added.

“Lok Shakthi, the power of the people, started as an idea, a collaboration between friends with the one goal to serve the people of our region, and we have evolved over the past couple of years. With the plan we have laid out, we also recognize that we need to elevate ourselves to have a bigger impact with what we are doing.” Sanjana faltered a bit when her eyes sped forward and saw words that shocked her, but she did not stop. “For us as a group, we are proud to announce that *Lok Shakthi* NGO is now going to be *Lok Shakthi People’s Party!*”

Sanjana paused when the auditorium broke into a clamor, and she was dreading to read the rest of the passage. Was she too late in making the deal with him? Had he already taken everything from her father?

She went back to rereading the last statement as people settled down and continued, “The members of the Lok Shakthi People’s Party are thrilled to announce Mr. Pratap Bhargava, who was elected unanimously as the president of the party, and we will contest in the upcoming elections at the state and national level. And now I invite the president and founder of *Lok Shakthi* to address the audience.”

Sanjana’s voice shook at the last part, realizing that the political party was established, and her father and his friends were the core party members. Nowhere was Jai’s name mentioned, which surprised her.

Was this a bigger plan than what she expected? Announce her father as the president and then move him aside after winning the elections next year? She was horrified at that thought and didn’t know how he got her father to fall for the trap. How can she save her father’s vision from the selfish agenda?

Why would he make your father the president if he wanted the limelight? Jai’s name was nowhere mentioned in the announcement. Is it possible he never once intended to take anything away from your father and, in fact, worked to elevate him? A pragmatic voice spoke loud and clear, making a shudder pass through her.

If he meant well, why didn’t he tell you? Why keep it a secret? Another voice disagreed.

Sanjana watched as her father approached the microphone, his eyes sparkled with pride and joy as he looked at the people gathered in the auditorium. Before he started his speech, which she had no idea what he was going to say as the

prepared material was no longer valid, he turned to look at Sanjana. “I want to take a moment to thank my younger daughter for doing the honor of announcing the formation of the *Lok Shakthi People’s Party*,” he paused to let out a laugh. “And I commend her for reading the announcement as-is and maintain the poise like she was not shocked with what she was reading.”

The crowd cheered, and she looked at her mother’s and sister’s expressions and realized she wasn’t the only one who didn’t know about the news. Her eyes shifted to the man sitting next to her mother, and her heart jumped when she clashed eyes with her husband.

He was smiling at her knowingly, and she winced and looked away when he winked at her. The words he said just before she left the room where she talked to him played in her mind.

“You will be the one to tell me and everyone what the decision is about the political party.”

Sanjana slowly lifted her eyes and looked at her father, pushing away all thoughts as her mind raced to find the answers and real intentions. Her father looked in the direction of where her mother and sister were seated and said, “No one except for the core members of the organization and some very close well-wishers who do not want to be named were aware of this decision. Not even my family knew because we wanted to be sure about the direction we were taking, and I can proudly say we know we will serve at another level when we run the state the way it should be run while we influence the national leaders to do the right thing for our region.”

Her father continued to address the audience, but for Sanjana, the beating of her heart deafened her. Tears started to gather when she realized how much she had misunderstood Jai. She remembered the words he said the night Bharath confronted him about the news he had heard about the political party formation.

“Sanjana, I love you, and I would die for you, but I cannot give up the mission I am on. You’ll know soon why this is so important.”

Her knees started to turn weak, and she took a few steps away from the stage and stepped out of the auditorium as her breathing started to come fast. She leaned on the wall feeling weak when things started to fall into place.

It was his mission to do good for the people of this region, and if that was the reason he married her, how could that be wrong? He respected her and took care of her like she was his while giving her father the platform and the visibility he deserved.

She realized she was wrong to think he wanted the limelight when, in fact, Jai had been the one putting her father in front of the people and the media. Starting with the wedding, the event her father hosted every year, to having the first international airport be inaugurated by him to now, convincing a man who was against politics to stand up as the leader the state and the country needed.

Jai had single-handedly laid out the plan to make their region, state, and eventually the country better. How could she even think he could be in the wrong and, worse, how could she not trust him and give him the time he asked for to explain? It

was a matter of a few days, and yet, he did not break her father's trust even if he was hurting.

The burning question of why he chose to marry her was clear in that moment. He did so for the sole purpose of giving the people a good leader and not for his gain as she had misunderstood a few days back. It was his way to influence her father, who was against politics, to take on that challenge in order to have a bigger impact.

She blinked away tears when she realized her husband was bound by duty to his people, and for that, he had offered up his personal life in return. Would she have married him if he had told her the truth? No. She would have declined his proposal, laughed at him for even thinking her father would consider getting into politics.

The door next to her opened, and she turned away, not wanting to be seen by anyone with tears in her eyes. She wiped her eyes and stayed still, expecting the person to walk away, but she heard no footsteps.

A moment passed, and on impulse, she turned to look at the person standing by the door. When her eyes met the ones of the man she would love forever, she sobbed. He swiftly closed the gap between them, wrapping his arms around her, his lips going to the top of her head as she buried her face into his chest. "Jai, I'm sorry. I should have trusted you, and..." Her voice was lost as she wept, guilt twisting her stomach.

The hold around her tightened, and he leaned closer and whispered, "We need to pick up where we left off with your proposition. I want to see what else you were going to offer up." He chuckled, making her laugh and cry at the same time.

Later that night, she held his heated gaze. “You said you would do anything, love,” he teased, holding the canister of whipped cream in his hand, a wicked look in his eyes.

She lay in bed next to him, not a thread on her body. “I didn’t realize what I was getting into,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him in warning as he got ready to spray the cream on her body.

“You’re mine tonight and forever, sweetness.” His voice was gruff as he shook the canister before slowly squirting the puffy cream on her. “I promise to wash you off even if I have licked you clean.”

Her breath hissed at his words, and her body fluttered in response to the cool foam on her heated body. She held his head to her as he kissed her before letting go to follow the trail of white that he had laid on her body. He ran his tongue in tantalizing strokes over her peaks, sucking them hard, making her feel a sizzle in her womb. She cried his name, and it was lost in the softness of the pillow.

“Baby, you taste so good,” he said between kisses that he laid on her belly before sucking in a chunk of flesh between his teeth, making her squirm.

“Jai, don’t tease me like this,” she ordered, and he chuckled against her soft skin before pulling off of her. He then scooped her from the bed and walked them to the bathroom.

“I can’t spend another second without you,” he said, giving her a hard kiss as he stepped into the shower holding her to him. “I promised I’d clean you up first before we do anything else,” he said, turning on the faucet, and a warm rain came down on their heated bodies. His mouth claimed hers in a slow and sensuous kiss as they let the water take away the last strand of soreness and sadness from the separation over the past few days.

Right after the event, her husband whisked her away to their special place—the cottage in the vineyard—and there was no other place she would want to be than in his arms.

Jai placed her feet on the shower floor, took some soap into his hands, and rubbed his palms together. “I missed waking up with you, baby.” She smiled as he brought his soapy hands to run over her body, igniting the need all over again.

She placed her cheek to his chest as he ran his hands on her back and shut her eyes. She took in his closeness, something she had missed the past few days.

His palms continued to work up the lather as he ran them over every dip and peak of her body, paying extra attention to her curves and depths. She dug her nails into his shoulders when his lips trailed south and stopped over her belly button.

“You are my everything, and I want more.” He planted butterfly kisses on her soft skin before going lower.

She let out a gasp when she felt his tongue tease her folds drenched in arousal. Her body wrenched as he traced every corner of her depths with the tip of his tongue as the

water trickled down her arched body. She placed one hand on the wall for support and held his thick, dark hair between her fingers with the other hand.

Jai took his time to explore every inch of her as hot water rolled down their steaming bodies.

“Jai.” His name rolled off her lips like it was a plea as he upped the seduction, and as if that was his cue, he pushed her back into the wall. He stood up and lifted one leg, opening her up. She gasped into his mouth as he claimed hers while delving his hardness into her depths and sending a surge of uncontrollable pleasure through her.

Her nerves were raw as he dove into her, building up a rhythm that made her want him more. The passion they shared was scintillating and only made her heart beat harder for him.

“Jai.” His name was a whisper as she peaked, and soon after, she felt the eruption deep inside against her inner walls. She clung to him feeling the blood pound in her ears and the rush of ecstasy through her body. She rested her head on his shoulder, knowing there was no other place she would rather be but in his arms.

Never once did she imagine what it would be like to be in a deal that changed her life!

Epilogue

One year later...

Sanjana walked next to her husband between the grapevines as the sun set over the hills. They were at their favorite and most private spot—the cottage in the vineyard. After her father won the general election by a landslide, the family had no bounds to their happiness. The king and queen made it to the party office to congratulate her father, and she was thrilled to see the pride in Jai's father's eyes. As if the hope the region was getting from the campaigns furling the king's energy, he recovered from the ailments he had been dealing with for months.

Soon after the announcement of the election results and the celebration, her husband whisked her away to the cottage for some alone time. She had been busy with the campaign until the day of the voting, and she couldn't wait to spend some relaxing time with him.

She bit back a smile when she remembered the heated night they shared and even with so much passion, she had to admit it was relaxing. "What are you thinking about?" he asked, making her wonder how he did that almost every time. *Like he could read her mind.*

She stopped walking and stretched her arm out as he took a step. "I still can't believe everything that happened." She could not wipe away the smile.

He chuckled. "Me either." He pulled her to him, his lips brushing over hers. "How I got so lucky with you."

She blushed at his statement, and it made her eyes sparkle every time he said that. She kissed the tip of his nose, smiling. “No, silly, I meant the elections, how Papa will be the Chief Minister in a few days.”

He shook his head. “Still, the biggest surprise for me is you.” He gently ran his palm over her cheek, pulling her to him, his eyes locked with hers. “I told you, you were the missing piece of the puzzle. Everything you did paid off!”

She rolled her eyes knowing it was his vision that would become a reality in a few days. “Jai, did you know Papa was deadset against politics? How did you even think you could influence him?”

Jai smiled knowingly. “I knew that before we got married. I had to take a chance, and it paid off. What I had thought to be a measure needed for the betterment of the people turned out to be good for me too.” He gave her a hard kiss on her lips as if to wipe away the puzzled look on her face.

Sanjana was further confused. “Did you actually think...” her voice trailed off as she pieced a few things in her head. Her eyes widened when it hit her. “You made him the Chief Minister of the state, and that’s what you had set out to do.”

He scoffed as he started walking along the dirt path. “Now you’re being silly.” He didn’t make eye contact, and she knew he was avoiding the topic. She took a few quick steps to walk ahead of him and stood in front of him. “Jai, Papa had no interest in politics. None. And all the media coverage started from the event at my grandpa’s village, the airport

inauguration, and all the rallies. Oh my God, it was all your planning. And this is your way of giving the people what they need, a leader who will care for them, and not just the leader but his entire team of people to work as the government.”

She was shaken by what came to light as he walked her to a nearby storage area, and they both sat down on a log outside. “Baby, you were the missing piece of the puzzle of my life. You are the one for me, even if our relationship didn’t start in the most conventional way.” He pulled her onto his lap as they sat on the large log, his lips mashing with hers. “And if you thought I was going to let you walk away after the contract ended, you were fooled, love.”

Something had crossed her mind. “What if I was going to leave at the end of the contract?” Her eyes held a taunt.

He tightened his hold on her his lips, coaxing hers. “I would have drugged you with my kisses and made sure you didn’t leave because I knew I hit the jackpot with a wonderful woman and couldn’t let her slip away.”

She smiled against his lips. “I was going to throw a fit and not leave the palace,” she confessed.

He let out a groan when she bit on his lower lip in a tease. “While we are confessing, I must tell you that I purposely got the woman to ask you about the threesome.” He winked.

She bit down harder on his lower lip. “You already told me that, and you know how angry I get when you mention that.” She pulled away to glare at him.

He smiled bringing his lips to hers. “And you have no idea how hot you are when you are angry. I’d love to spend this evening with you being mad at me.” His kisses trailed lower and straight to the deep V of the neck of the summer dress she had on.

She hugged his head as he nuzzled away the fabric off her chest to suck in a chunk of her breast between his teeth. Her breath hissed, and she threw her head back, taking in the euphoric moment. The vineyard was their safe haven, and she had no inhibitions about them being out in the open engaging in a hot moment of passion. “I want you, Jai. Here. Now.”

He let out another groan before his hand closed over her breast to take her hardened nub into his mouth to suck it hard. She arched her back as she sat on his lap and felt his fingers trail up her inner thigh. They drove deep into her depths and stopped when he hit her core.

He pulled back from her nipple and looked at her. “You got nothing under this dress.” It was a statement but sounded more like a surprise. She didn’t bother putting on a bra or panties knowing they would be taken off many a times during their stay at the vineyard.

“Unnecessary... don’t you think?” She winked before they brought their hungry mouths for an explosive kiss that soon ignited what would be yet another explosive night at the cabin.

A few days later...

Sanjana fought back tears as her father took the oath as the Chief Minister of their state. She felt pride fill her heart as he promised to do good for the people of his state and the country.

What had started off as a simple effort in the form of a non-government organization to help people of a small region amplify into something so impactful to bring a long-lasting change.

She slowly leaned on the man standing next to her, the one person who had determined to make that day possible over two years ago. “Now that my job is done here, I’m looking to take on a new one,” she said, looking at Jai, and that brought a smile to his face.

“A job well done and for that, you can have any job you want, love.” He chuckled. “You didn’t want to be the CEO of our airline business so not sure what is appealing to you now.”

She nodded. “I have something in mind, and I’ll tell you as soon as we are home.”

Later that day, she was in the bathroom washing her face when she heard him. She looked into the mirror and saw her handsome husband come up to her, and saw the spark in his eyes that burned for her.

She smiled, turning to face him as he wrapped his arms around her, his lips finding hers in a sweet kiss. “Has my wife decided what she wants to do?”

“Maybe,” she teased. “I’ve been thinking really hard about what you have been asking.”

He smiled, the dimples showing. “You will take on the airline business? You are the right person for it... education, experience and the—”

She silenced him with a kiss and smiled as she pulled back. “I want to be a mom.” Her cheeks flared when she saw the look in his eyes change.

“You, my love...make me the luckiest man in this world.”

“I love you, Jai,” she said as he pulled her into a devouring kiss, sending silent prayers for *The Royal Contract* of love she would be in forever!

The End

Author's Note

Thank you for reading *The Royal Contract*. I hope Jai and Sanjana's love story left you with a smile on your face.

Jai was a man on a mission, and through the contract he made with Sanjana, they both found the love of their lives. Sanjana fought her attraction to her handsome husband and, in spite of it ended up falling for him.

I'm happy to be the one to tell you Sanjana and Jai's story and look forward to writing his friend Sid, the Cricket star's story. And at some point, I will get back to telling another royal story.

Psst...this time the story of a Queen. ☐ Guess who that could be!

Thank You

P.G.Van

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